

# Other histories: photography and Australia

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Photography's history is constructed in varied public forums, including exhibitions and publications that range from magazine articles, monographs and scholarly essays to exhibition catalogues and books. This essay focuses on only one form of publication – the survey history book. It considers photography's doubled history, through its inclusion in broader histories of Australian art (three of which were published between 1997 and 2008) and its own specific histories (four have been published since 1955). It examines the writers' different methodological approaches and their concerns and considers recent paradigmatic shifts in thinking and writing about Australian photography's history.

Photography was not included in the first attempt to write a comprehensive history of Australian art, William Moore's two volume *The Story of Australian Art*, published in 1934. Nor did it receive any attention in Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (1945) or Robert Hughes' *The Art of Australia: A Critical Survey* (1966). It made its first appearance within a history of Australian art – albeit one based on a particular collection – in the book *Australian National Gallery: An Introduction*, published on the occasion of the Gallery's opening in 1982.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for this delayed incorporation are of course complex and numerous. Photographers had been producing self-conscious works of art in Australia since the late nineteenth century but their public profile waxed and waned during the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s contemporary photographic work, by Harold Cazneaux, Max Dupain and others, was regularly featured in art magazines but by the 1950s art photography was mostly confined to a medium specific realm, rarely penetrating the larger art world. A strict hierarchy operated in which the traditional art forms of painting, and to a lesser degree sculpture, were regarded as most important, followed by drawing and printmaking. This view prevailed in Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788-1960* (1962), which considered painting as the primary form of visual art. Furthermore, for much of the twentieth century a distinction was made between the fine arts and the applied arts which encompassed design, different branches of the decorative arts (ceramics, furniture, textiles), as well as photography.

The shift to a more inclusive understanding of Australian art, which began in the late 1960s, was dependent on a variety of inter-related developments in art, culture and politics. Of particular importance was the rise of conceptual art

<sup>1</sup> The Australian National Gallery is now the National Gallery of Australia (NGA).

(especially performance art), the women's art movement and other liberationist movements, and the popularisation of ideas about the democratisation and demystification of art. This backdrop was crucial for the art photography movement, as it is now understood, which began to cohere in Australia in the late 1960s. Within a few short years the institutionalization of photography had gathered pace: the first photography department in an Australian art museum was established at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1967<sup>2</sup>; the Australian Centre for Photography opened in Sydney in 1974 and commercial photography galleries were established in Melbourne and Sydney. While photography's presence and profile greatly increased in this period it found only limited favour within Australian art generally, being confined mainly to the contemporary sphere. This was exemplified in the inclusion of photographs for the first time in the Third Biennale of Sydney, *European Dialogue*, in 1979 (Bill Henson was the first Australian photographer to be represented in the Sydney Biennale in 1982).

Historical photography, especially from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, did not fare as well as contemporary practice. Its place within the history of Australian art was not secured until the opening of the Australian National Gallery and the introduction of integrated displays spearheaded by Daniel Thomas, the gallery's Head of Australian Art from 1978-84.<sup>3</sup> In his essay in *Australian National Gallery: An Introduction*, Thomas declared that the decision to display 'two hundred years of the full range of one country's visual arts is an innovation; though temporary exhibitions of the art of limited movements have sometimes embraced all media.'<sup>4</sup> He summed up the gallery's approach in the statement that 'the visual arts of Australia are presented as a cultural unity'.<sup>5</sup> Integrated displays are now commonplace within art museums around the country (although the presence of photographs within them varies greatly), underscoring the fact that they have exercised a crucial role in the development of art photography's historiography, particularly when accompanied by books and catalogues in which photographs receive the same attention as works in other media. Thomas's unified approach was consolidated in *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art 1788-1988*, a catalogue for an exhibition he co-curated with Ron Radford, Director of the Art Gallery of South

<sup>2</sup> For further information on the establishment of the National Gallery of Victoria's photography department see Isobel Crombie, 'Introduction', *2<sup>nd</sup> Sight: Australian Photography in the National Gallery of Victoria*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Thomas had previously introduced integrated displays when working as a curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. However, they were on a significantly lesser scale than the National Gallery of Australia's and were not accompanied by a publication that dealt with the full range of media. Ian North was the foundation Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Australia, serving from 1980-84. I began my training at the NGA in 1981 and was Curator of Photography from 1985-92.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Thomas, 'Australian Art' in James Mollison and Laura Murray, eds, *Australian National Gallery: An Introduction*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1982, 194.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, 'Australian Art', 194.

Australia, in 1988, the Bicentenary of European settlement. Thomas claimed that *Creating Australia* differed from most previous accounts of Australian art in its embrace of 'a variety of media'<sup>6</sup> (including photographs). He also pointedly noted that: 'before the 1960s, which saw the first widely accessible book, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, there was scarcely any general awareness of Australian art'.<sup>7</sup>

Photography found its way into integrated displays and exhibition related publications on Australian art many years before being included in published histories of Australian art. Only three have been published since Hughes' *The Art of Australia* forty-four years ago: Christopher Allen's *Art in Australia: From Colonization to Postmodernism* (1997) in the Thames and Hudson World of Art series; Andrew Sayers' *Australian Art* (2001) in the Oxford History of Art series and, most recently, John McDonald's *Art of Australia: Exploration to Federation*, volume one (2008) published by Pan MacMillan Australia.<sup>8</sup> Photography is included in all three books – Allen's and Sayers' have relatively short texts – but its treatment varies according to the writer's approach and emphasis. Allen, for instance, gives it cursory attention. Although his narrative extends from colonization he does not consider any photographs from the colonial period, despite the importance of photography within visual culture during the second half of the nineteenth century. Photography is introduced at three junctures: in relation to modernism (Max Dupain's now iconic image, *Sunbaker* is illustrated); feminism (with an illustration by Ponch Hawkes) and postmodernism that involved constructed imagery (represented by Anne Zahalka, Fiona Hall and Bill Henson). Although referring to postmodern photographic work in his discussion of art since the 1980s, Allen argued that photography's 'real, though modest vocation'<sup>9</sup> was observational, based on documenting the photographer's social environment. The fact that none of this kind of photography appears in his history is telling, underlining his view of its peripheral position in relation to mainstream art practice.

In contrast to Allen, Sayers incorporates photography into his historical account with illustrations from the colonial period onwards (plus photography is listed in the comprehensive index). He considers it both as an autonomous art form as well as one linked to painting. For example, Sayers claims that painting's history

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Thomas, 'Preface', Daniel Thomas, ed, *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art 1788-1988*, Sydney: International Cultural Corporation of Australia and Art Gallery of South Australia, 1988, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, 'Preface', 11.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Allen, *Art in Australia: From Colonization to Postmodernism*, London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997; Andrew Sayers, *Australian Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; John McDonald, *Art of Australia: Exploration to Federation*, Sydney: Pan MacMillan, 2008. McDonald's volume 2 will deal with the twentieth century. Sasha Grishin is presently working on a history of Australian art.

<sup>9</sup> Allen, *Art in Australia*, 197.

in Australia 'is inevitably linked to the histories of photography and printmaking, but the relationship is a complex one'.<sup>10</sup> He embeds photography within his discussion of colonial art and discusses its diverse uses – from the topographical (especially panoramic representations) to the ethnographic. Sayers builds his argument in part on documentation from the time and regards colonial photography as another art form, and photographers such as Charles Woolley as artists. He also highlights the prominence of photography in the late nineteenth century, the modernist period and the 1970s when photography enjoyed an unprecedented level of importance. Sayers argues that its centrality in the 1970s was due to the 'theoretical engagement with the nature of photography's visual language'.<sup>11</sup>

In *Art of Australia* McDonald discusses photographs in two main sections – in the chapter 'A Race of Heroes?', which deals with exploration, and in the epilogue. However, he does not develop an argument about the significance of photography or bring any new scholarship on colonial photography to light. As David Hansen argued in a cogent review of the book, McDonald 'is not a working art historian' and has been hugely reliant on secondary texts rather than original research.<sup>12</sup>

Photography may have gained a place within general art histories – commendably so in Sayers' case – but this does not diminish the need for photography specific histories. The volume and richness of photographic practice in Australia is such that it warrants sustained research, analysis and interpretation. Its relevance goes far beyond its interconnections with other media and other art practices, limited and limiting categories such as 'photography and painting' or 'photography and conceptual art'. Medium specific histories also provide a challenge to the media hierarchy I have mentioned. Even in integrated displays, a strategy I endorse, the attention given to works in different media is often far from equitable and remains highly variable. Former NGA photography curator Ian North described a situation of 'amnesiac ruin' in art museums around 2004, observing that:

In contradistinction to the situation a decade ago, you might find a few photographs in the colonial corner, in the contemporary area, or nowhere: this, in spite of widespread curatorial assent, intellectually, to the medium's importance.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of its own historiography photography has fared relatively well, better than histories of other areas of practice, such as drawing or printmaking (each

<sup>10</sup> Sayers, *Australian Art*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Sayers, *Australian Art*, 215.

<sup>12</sup> David Hansen, 'Bold claims and paradoxes: John McDonald, *The Art of Australia*' in *ABR*, no. 309, March 2009, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ian North, 'Spooked! Art Museums, Photography and the Problem of the Real', Daniel Palmer, ed, *Photogenic: Essays/Images/CCP 2000-2004*, Melbourne: Centre for Contemporary Photography, 2005, 79.

of which has only one historical account). Four photographic histories have been published so far – the first, Jack Cato's *The Story of the Camera in Australia*, appeared in 1955.<sup>14</sup> Thirty-three years later it was joined by Gael Newton's *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839-1988* (with essays by Helen Ennis and Chris Long) and Anne Marie-Willis's *Picturing Australia: A History of Photography*.<sup>15</sup> Their publication date of 1988, the bicentennial year of European settlement, was significant as interest in all matters relating to Australian identity was heightened and research into aspects of Australian art and culture was flourishing. *Shades of Light* was produced to accompany a bicentenary survey exhibition at the Australian National Gallery but is a book not an exhibition catalogue. In 2007 Reaktion Press published *Photography and Australia*, my contribution to the field.<sup>16</sup> It is part of a series entitled *Exposures* that deals with national histories; books on the photography of Africa, Egypt, Italy and the United States have already been published with more scheduled in the next few years.<sup>17</sup> It is worth emphasising that my *Photography and Australia* was initiated outside Australia because it signals a growing international interest in world photography (and indeed, world art).

Cato's *The Story of the Camera in Australia* grew out of an expanding historical consciousness that had found its first concerted expression in the groundbreaking work of Walter Burke, editor of *The Australasian Photo-Review: A Journal for Camera Workers* (established 1899). Over several decades Burke published numerous articles on photographers of the past; his son Keast Burke became editor of *A.P.R.* in 1948 and also made an important contribution to the field of photographic history.<sup>18</sup> While *The Story of the Camera in Australia* does not have a strong intellectual framework or academic rigour it is very accessible. Cato's approach was that of an enthusiast – he was a professional photographer not an historian – and he organised his account in terms of technological innovations and biographical information on the photographers he considered most important. Despite its obvious shortcomings Cato's book remains a useful resource for research on Australian photography. However, it was not until the 1980s that Australian photographic history moved to a firmer, more scholarly footing – through an unprecedented volume and quality of research by institutions and individuals alike. For example, Joan Kerr included photographers in her *Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, photographers and*

<sup>14</sup> Jack Cato, *The Story of the Camera in Australia*, Melbourne: Georgian House, 1955.

<sup>15</sup> Gael Newton, *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839-1988*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery and Collins Australia, 1988 and Anne-Marie Willis, *Picturing Australia: A History of Photography*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, London: Reaktion, 2007. The commission required a text of approximately 25,000 words.

<sup>17</sup> The series *Exposures* includes thematically based approaches to photography as well; see, for example, *Photography and Cinema*, *Photography and Mourning*, *Photography and Literature*.

<sup>18</sup> See Helen Ennis, 'A National Photographic Collection', Peter Cochrane, ed, *Remarkable Occurrences: The National Library of Australia's First 100 Years 1901-2001*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 199-213.

*engravers, 1770-1870s, Working Paper 1* (1984); Robert Holden dealt with a previously unresearched area in his *Photography in Colonial Australia: The Mechanical Eye and the Illustrated Book* (1988); Alan Davies, Peter Stanbury and Con Tanre published the results of their extensive investigation into nineteenth century photography in *The Mechanical Eye in Australia: Photography 1841-1900* (1985); and Barbara Hall and Jenni Mather's investigation of work by neglected or forgotten women photographers culminated in *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1960* (1986).<sup>19</sup> The latter two books brought invaluable new material into the public domain but their accompanying texts were more descriptive than analytical and interpretive. Also in the 1980s, the National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales and National Gallery of Australia (all of which had separate curatorial departments of photography), were pursuing active exhibition and publication programs. However, there is no doubt that Newton's *Shades of Light* and Willis's *Picturing Australia* have proven to be the most significant publications of the period.

By the time Newton and Willis began their photographic histories photography occupied a prominent place in the art world and contemporary visual culture. Photographic work, whether by those trained as art photographers in specialist tertiary courses or by 'artists using photography',<sup>20</sup> was routinely exhibited in art museums and galleries. Contemporary art photography was inextricably linked to burgeoning historical research and the desire to establish a history of self-conscious art practice – in other words, a lineage for newly emergent practitioners. Mainstream photographic history, or what Geoffrey Batchen has termed 'establishment History'<sup>21</sup>, built on an American model whose best known exponents were Beaumont Newhall, the foundational curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and his influential successor, John Szarkowski. Szarkowski was invited to Australia in 1974 by the newly established Australian Centre for Photography and undertook a lecture tour. The modernist, essentialist approach championed by Szarkowski and others was indebted to art history and its conventions including notions of artistic genius, an oeuvre, innovation, technical excellence, period style and rarity.

<sup>19</sup> Joan Kerr, ed, *Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, photographers and engravers, 1770-1870s, Working Paper 1*, Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1984; Robert Holden, *Photography in Colonial Australia: The Mechanical Eye and the Illustrated Book*, Potts Point, New South Wales: Horden House, 1988; Alan Davies and Peter Stanbury, with assistance from Con Tanre, *The Mechanical Eye in Australia: Photography 1841-1900*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985; Barbara Hall and Jenni Mather, *Australian Women Photographers 1840-1960*, Richmond, Victoria: Greenhouse Publications, 1986.

<sup>20</sup> 'Artists using photography' usually refers to those without a specialist photography background and who are often more conceptualist in orientation. Ian North proposes the two modes of photography be called 'self reflexive photography' and 'critical photography'; see his 'Spooked!', 71.

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, 'Australian made', *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 2002, 29.

In their publications Newton and Willis assembled a wealth of new material, though there was considerable overlap in the photographs they discussed and chose to illustrate. Regarding the issue of methodology, however, the differences are striking. Newton's methodological approach in *Shades of Light* is unstated and unquestioned. In his essay 'Australian made', which considers the two histories, Batchen concludes that in 'the absence of any clearer exposition of its own historical method' Newton's principal concerns appear to be with 'pictorial power' and 'artistic merit'.<sup>22</sup> The main thrust of her argument is that photography is a global phenomenon and she suggests that: 'this global context, in both its perceptual and economic-political aspects, is one of the most interesting possible impulses behind photography'.<sup>23</sup> What distinguishes *Picturing Australia* is Willis's self-reflexive methodology. She critiques the field of Australian photographic history and clearly articulates her own position within it, making a number of points that continue to be highly relevant.

Willis observed that the 'writing of photographic history has been neglected, sporadic and piecemeal'.<sup>24</sup> She mounted a convincing critique of the still ubiquitous 'celebratory monograph', which lacks critical distance and analysis,<sup>25</sup> and identified three main methodologies that were in use when she began her research. She defined these as art history ('establishment History' noted above), technological and social history (that is, where photographs are seen as transparent recorders of themes).<sup>26</sup> Willis gave an insightful assessment of the limitations of an art history approach, claiming that it:

... may have some value for the very small number of photographs that have been consciously produced as art, but is of little use beyond that. How can the conventional art historical approach account for imagery that does not have an "author" – the huge mass of snapshots of the daily bombardment of media images that always come to us anonymously?<sup>27</sup>

She also argued that both the art historical and technological methodologies 'play down the roles of photography in society', a situation she was keen to address in her account.<sup>28</sup> In addition, Willis highlighted an enduring issue for those involved in writing photographic history – the medium's enormous range of functions, spanning areas as diverse as art, science and government and usage by individuals, groups, institutions, advertising and the mass media, to name a few. The rationale

<sup>22</sup> Batchen, 'Australian made', 30.

<sup>23</sup> Newton, *Shades of Light*, 111.

<sup>24</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 266.

<sup>26</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 2.

Willis developed in *Picturing Australia* drew heavily on the work of American theorist Alan Sekula<sup>29</sup> and the poststructuralist approaches of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. She explained that:

Rather than only seeking out outstanding photographers or “great” single images that appeal to contemporary taste, this account attempts to look at photographs in their original context, to discover the ordinary and the typical and to come to an understanding of the dominant uses of photography in each historical period.<sup>30</sup>

Willis’s survey history aimed to be responsive to Australian photography’s ‘multiple conditions and contexts of production.’<sup>31</sup> Some of her decisions now seem unnecessarily hard line, even perverse. She chose, for example, not to reproduce photographs in colour or duotone and to deny the visual impact and pleasure of the originals, declaring that the book’s illustrations ‘are principally intended as reference rather than solely for aesthetic contemplation’.<sup>32</sup> Vital material differences between individual photographs are therefore lost in low quality, even-toned reproductions. She rejected art historical conventions for writing captions and did not provide details for image size and medium on the basis that, ‘most photographs can and do appear in a variety of sizes and forms and have multiple lives as originals and reproductions’.<sup>33</sup> This approach ignored not only the specific qualities of each individual photograph but also its materiality which is now a major theoretical and curatorial concern.

Since the publication of Newton and Willis’s histories more than twenty years ago a number of developments have impacted on photography’s historiography. One of the most important at the local level has been the consolidation of a scholarly approach by photography specialists; it was evident, for example, in the fourteen essays published in an Australian issue of the international journal *History of Photography* in 1999 (Michael Galimany was the issue’s editor).<sup>34</sup> Although I am concerned here with published works, it should also be noted that in the early 1990s significant research began to be undertaken by masters and doctoral candidates at Australian universities (this has been steadily increasing but surprisingly little finds

<sup>29</sup> She considers Sekula’s essay ‘Photography Between Labour and Capital’ to be exemplary. It is published in B. H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie, eds, *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948-1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton: Photographs by Leslie Shedden*, Halifax, Canada: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the University College of Cape Breton Press, 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Willis, *Picturing Australia*, 4. See also Willis’s discussion of illustrated histories in which photographs are simply used as historical evidence.

<sup>34</sup> *History of Photography*, vol. 23, no. 2, Summer 1999.



its way into book form, suggesting that the market for specialist scholarly work on photography remains small). Another important local development has been the emergence of writers with more diverse backgrounds and perspectives; their contributions have been anthologized on a number of occasions.<sup>35</sup> However, some of the observations made by Willis are still relevant, especially in regard to the intermittent and sometimes ad hoc writing of photographic history. There continues to be a dearth of deep, object-based research into photography from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a preoccupation with contemporary photographic practice. Very few scholars or writers have specialized in colonial photography, an area that remains dominated by institutional collection-based curators.<sup>36</sup> This reflects a broader situation referred to by art historian Terry Smith in 2002, when he remarked on the 'lack of theoretical, historical and cultural inquiry' in the field of colonial art.<sup>37</sup>

In broader terms one of the most significant developments that occurred in the interregnum between *Shades of Light, Picturing Australia* and my book *Photography and Australia* was the widespread impact of postmodern and postcolonial theories and a paradigmatic shift in the conception of history.<sup>38</sup> By the time I was commissioned to write *Photography and Australia* (in 2004) writing a history – any kind of history – had been well and truly problematised. This was flagged in my choice of an anonymous photograph titled *Floating into position: the last span of the Hawkesbury River Bridge, c.1889* as the metaphoric touchstone for the project.<sup>39</sup> The key is the first word of the title, the verb 'floating', for the event being depicted is ongoing, with the last span of the bridge yet to be secured. For me, this image is evocative of the process of writing history and the incompleteness of any historical narration.

*Photography and Australia* was written in a pessimistic era, one I saw as being characterized by hardness and a lack of compassion. This was manifest in the actions and attitudes of the conservative Liberal government led by Prime Minister John Howard, especially in the area of Indigenous affairs. The most pressing issue was

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Ewen McDonald and Judy Annear eds, *What is this Thing Called Photography? Australian Photography 1975-1985*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000; Palmer, ed, *Photogenic*.

<sup>36</sup> Non art museum scholars who have undertaken research on colonial photography include Ken Orchard on J. W. Lindt; Catherine De Lorenzo on Australian and Oceanic photographs held in French collections; and Anne Maxwell on colonial exhibitions and photography.

<sup>37</sup> Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian Art*, volume 1, St Leonards, New South Wales: Craftsman House, 2002, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Willis's choice of sub-title for her book *Picturing Australia* is pertinent; she chose to use the phrase 'a history' rather than 'the history'.

<sup>39</sup> The photograph is included in the Pictures collection at the National Library of Australia. I included it in the exhibition *In a New Light: Photography and Australia 1850s-1930s* and it was reproduced on the cover of the catalogue. See Helen Ennis, *In a New Light: Photography and Australia 1850s-1930s*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2003.

the failure to progress the cause of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the refusal to offer a formal apology for past actions and injustices.<sup>40</sup> At the time of my research, refugees who attempted to reach Australia by boat were also being subjected to harsh treatment and an often hostile reception. These contemporary events informed my perspective on Australia's history and its inter-relationship with photography. I did not regard the past and present as separate and closed categories but aimed to bring them into dialogue with each other and to identify common concerns and attitudes. Further, I attempted to create a space for the consideration of a diverse range of photographs – including a grainy colour image of refugees floundering in the sea – that may not have been conceived as art but which, due to their content and affect, nonetheless demanded attention.

But the key question *Photography and Australia* aimed to address was posed by Geoffrey Batchen in his essay 'Australian made' (2000), which deals with Australian photography's historiography. Arguing for the value of regional histories Batchen asked: 'What ... is Australian about Australian photography?'<sup>41</sup> Of course responses to such a question do – and will – vary considerably but in *Photography and Australia* I argue that it pivots on an inescapable historical reality – the imperialist and colonialist underpinnings of modernity. The interaction between Indigenous and settler Australians is therefore central to any understanding of specific local conditions and circumstances. This viewpoint is not original, owing a great deal to the work of Bernard Smith, especially his Boyer lectures, *The Spectre of Truganini*, published by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (1980). Andrew Sayers' argument in *Australian Art* is also pertinent for it positions Aboriginal art as an equal partner in the history of Australian art. Sayers described a 'duality', that is, 'of separate but shared and (partly) co-terminous histories' of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art.<sup>42</sup>

Other central and inter-related themes considered in *Photography and Australia* include land and its mythologizing as landscape, modernity and globalization, nation and national identity, migration and relations with the rest of the world. The unifying factor – what I see as the most distinctive feature in Australian photography – is the preoccupation with the physical, material aspects of life rather than its metaphysical or spiritual dimensions. This passionate identification with and investment in the physical world is played out time and again in photography in Australia until the 1960s.

To make the point about cultural specificity and difference clear I will give just one example.<sup>43</sup> In European histories of photography the 1850s are regarded as a

<sup>40</sup> In May 2000 more than 250,000 people walked across Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of Reconciliation. One of the first actions of Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, was to make a formal apology to Indigenous Australians; this occurred on 13 February 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Batchen, 'Australian made', 27.

<sup>42</sup> Sayers, *Australian Art*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> For a fuller discussion see Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, 16-7.

golden age because of the abundance of outstanding calotypes and albumen prints. International photographic historians generally agree that photography from this period is hugely desirable and it forms the backbone of major international collections. However, these circumstances do not apply to an Australian photographic history which has had to contend with different realities. Very small numbers of early paper-based photographs are extant and those in circulation have caused some discomfort or embarrassment because of what has been described as their 'indifferent' technical and aesthetic qualities. Colonial photography therefore calls for a different approach that admits the centrality of colonialism in determining the nature of photographic production, and colonization itself as the primary contextualizing factor. Only then can the significance of the local photographic industry's unique features be fully appreciated: its miniscule size, for example. During the 1840s a mere six professional photographers were active in Australia, rising to nearly 250 by the end of the next decade. And only within the context of colonialism can the idiosyncratic qualities of locally produced photography – especially its ordinariness and modesty – be appraised on its own terms.

Australian photography's historiography, like photographic practice in Australia, is the result of complex interactions and negotiations between international and local developments. I would now like to briefly consider these in relation to some recent theoretical shifts in thinking about photography that are being applied by photography historians, curators and writers working in Australia. It should be noted that more than any time previously local historiography is assuming an international role, with Australian specialists writing not only on Australian material but on photography from other countries as well and increasingly publishing their research in international forums.<sup>44</sup> In no order of importance the theoretical developments include the emergence of: a pluralized notion of photography, often termed 'photographies'; interdisciplinary approaches; an exploration of narrative, and a concern with image and object or 'materiality'.

Art photography has lost its exclusivity – not in art history so much as in photographic history where it has become only one of many areas receiving attention. The process can be visualized as the inversion of a triangle: art photography (or photography as 'self-expression') was once at the top of the triangle but the triangle was inverted when curators, photography historians and writers began to seriously engage with the varied photographic practices that were previously clumped together at its base. They include anthropological, medical,

<sup>44</sup> Examples of this trend include the following: Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire*, South Yarra, Vic: Macmillan, 2003, Martyn Jolly, *Faces of the Living Dead: The Belief in Spirit Photography*, London, British Library, 2006 and Melissa Miles, *The Burning Mirror: Photography in an Ambivalent Light*, North Melbourne, Vic: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008.

scientific, forensic,<sup>45</sup> fashion, press, domestic and vernacular photography, to name some of the most obvious. In keeping with a postmodern lexicon, photography singular has thus been recast as photographs plural.<sup>46</sup>

Vernacular photography has been one of the most prominent areas of research. It encompasses photographs made by non-professional photographers, amateurs and hobbyists, who are often unidentified or unknown. Snapshot and informal photography are included in the category.<sup>47</sup> Australian scholar Geoffrey Batchen is one of the key theoreticians in this area, especially through his book *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (2006). Vernacular photography throws into sharp relief the limitations of conventional photographic history flagged by Anne-Marie Willis over two decades ago; it underlines the protean nature of photography and the importance of the quotidian in photographic practices. Legitimizing the vernacular has gone hand-in-hand with research into public and private collections outside art museums and galleries, especially those held in libraries and other institutional archives.<sup>48</sup>

Interdisciplinary approaches have proved especially fruitful in the field of photographic history. The different methodologies and approaches that have been brought to bear are drawn from fields as diverse as anthropology, history, psychology, cultural studies and literature (whether fiction, biography or autobiography). The aim of the interdisciplinary enterprise is to illuminate photographs, to expand their meanings and to vitalize the readings of them. Recent examples that deal exclusively with Australian material include: Isobel Crombie's *Bodyculture: Max Dupain and Australian Photography 1919-1939* (2004), which examines the role of the eugenics movement and vitalism in interwar photography; and Ross Gibson's *The Summer Exercises* (2009), which offers an imaginative literary reading of an archive of police photographs. The intersection of photographic history and anthropology has been critically important, stimulated by the publication of *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920* (1992) and the groundbreaking work of Australian scholars such as Nicolas Peterson, Roslyn Poignant and most recently, Jane Lydon.<sup>49</sup> This area of interdisciplinary research

<sup>45</sup> See Peter Doyle with Caleb Williams, *City of Shadows: Sydney Police Photographs 1912-1948*, Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2005.

<sup>46</sup> The establishment of the British journal *Photographies* is a reflection of this state of affairs. Its declared aim is 'to construct a new agenda for theorising photography as a heterogeneous medium', <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/rpho>

<sup>47</sup> *Ghosts in the Machine*, shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2008, was comprised of amateur, mostly anonymous photographs from a private collection.

<sup>48</sup> See for example, Helen Ennis, *Intersections: Photography, History and the National Library of Australia*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> See Elizabeth Edwards, ed, *Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920*, New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1992; Nicolas Peterson and Christopher Pinney, eds, *Photography's Other Histories*, London, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and*

relates directly to a fundamental aspect of Australia's history – the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – and an extremely rich body of photographs generated since the mid 1840s.<sup>50</sup> Indigenous writers, including Michael Aird and Brenda L. Croft, have undertaken vital historical and interpretive research into ethnographic and anthropological archives.<sup>51</sup>

The consideration of the photograph as a two-dimensional image and as a three-dimensional object with specific physical properties has been theorized by English scholar Elizabeth Edwards and other writers. It requires taking into account the photograph's materiality, its scale, medium, surface and mode of presentation as well as the viewer's position in relation to it. While ideas about materiality grew out of research into nineteenth century photographs, which are incredibly tactile, they were concurrent with the dematerialization of the image that has come with the advent of digital photography and cyberspace. The engagement with materiality is underpinned by other contemporary concerns, for example, with phenomenology and the experiential and with ideas about the impact and affect of images. For example, Blair French and Daniel Palmer argue that the 'materiality of photo-based contemporary art is crucial to its experience and meaning'.<sup>52</sup> The viewer has been reintroduced as an embodied presence and mobilizing the senses has become important. Until the late twentieth century photography's sensory appeal had been greatly reduced due to the standardization of processes and the dominance of the photographic print, either as a graphic image in magazines or as a print mounted and framed for the wall. Related to the materiality of photographs is the concept of the object as having its own history – which extends beyond provenance to encompass use and circumstance. Photographs wear this in physical terms, in the inscriptions written onto them, in the tears and creases on their emulsions and so on. The traces left behind attest to particular kinds of relationships with their viewers and owners, all of which offer considerable narrative potential.

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*Western Spectacle*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004; Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> *Portraits of Oceania*, 1997, curated by Judy Annear, Senior Curator of Photography, Art Gallery of New South Wales, was the first exhibition of anthropological photographs to be held within an art museum in Australia. *Paul Foelsche: The Policeman's Eye*, 2005, curated by Philip Jones and Tim Smith, was a touring exhibition of anthropological photographs of the Larakia people by the German-born Foelsche, the Northern Territory's first policeman. Jane Lydon has produced the first scholarly book devoted to photography of Aboriginal people; see her *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Brenda L. Croft, 'Laying Ghosts to Rest', Judy Annear, ed, *Portraits of Oceania*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997 and Michael Aird, *Portraits of Our Elders*, South Brisbane, Queensland: Queensland Museum, 1993.

<sup>52</sup> Blair French and Daniel Palmer, *Twelve Australian Photo Artists*, Sydney: Piper Press, 2009, 9.

The categories of photography and history are so stretched that they have become almost meaningless, demanding qualification in an era when discussion of 'post-photography' and the 'post-medium condition' (as theorized by Rosalind Krauss) is commonplace. Nonetheless, the desire for historical information and fresh interpretation of historical material appears to be strong in Australia, evidenced in an unprecedented spate of publications and proliferation of new kinds of photographic history in recent years. They do not attempt the overarching sweep and grand narrative that was intrinsic to histories in the past but assume a new form – one that can be described as purposefully fractional. These new works of history deal with material that is demarked or restricted in some way; for example, they may be based on a single collection, involve a theme or a carefully delineated historical period. The Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Victoria, State Library of New South Wales, National Library of Australia and Australian War Memorial have all published their own collection histories in the last few years, providing selective, necessarily partial engagements with historical photographs.<sup>53</sup> In 2007 the Art Gallery of South Australia published the first state-based survey history of photography, *A Century in Focus: South Australian Photography 1840s-1940s*, by Julie Robinson and Maria Zagala.<sup>54</sup> The appearance of these books and exhibition catalogues underscores the fact that art museums and public institutions continue to exert a dominant role in Australian photography's historiography – supporting research in the first instance and disseminating the results in substantial, well illustrated publications. Finally, a significant recent development with potential for the future is the support of the Australian Research Council (ARC) for photography research. Anne Marsh's book *Look! Contemporary Australian Photography Since 1980* (2010) is the outcome of ARC funding, enabling a new benchmark in visual comprehensiveness with more than 400 illustrations and extensive documentation in a timeline listing important exhibitions, publications and events from 1980-2009.<sup>55</sup>

I conclude with reference, not to a photograph, but to a video work by Sydney artist, Petrina Hicks. Her *Ghost in the shell*, 2008 is a single channel colour video in

<sup>53</sup> See, Peter Conrad, *At Home in Australia*, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2003; Isobel Crombie, *Second Sight: Australian Photographs in the National Gallery of Victoria*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2003; Alan Davies, *An Eye for Photography: The Camera in Australia*, Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 2004; Ennis, *Intersections*; Shaune Lakin, *Contact: Photographs from the Australian War Memorial Collection*, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 2006; *Photography: Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Julie Robinson with Maria Zagala, *A Century in Focus: South Australian Photography 1840s-1940s*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Anne Marsh, *Look! Contemporary Australian Photography Since 1980*, South Yarra, Vic: Macmillan, 2010. The book is far more limited insofar as critical discussion and analysis are concerned; it includes only five short essays on photography of the last 30 years. In 2010 Melissa Miles secured major ARC funding for a project entitled *Light, Place and Presence in the History of Australian Photography*.

which the subject, a young woman in a patterned shirt, turns slowly in a two minute time span, smoke curling from her mouth as she moves. She does not acknowledge the camera or address the viewer but appears to be in her own world. I refer to it, not simply because it is beguiling, but because the subject in it can be seen in the round. Seeing a photograph as an image and as an object, from the front and back, does not fix meaning. However, it does animate the photograph, propelling it into the present tense and into the viewer's own space. As I see it, this propulsion is one of the crucial roles of any kind of photographic history, fractional or otherwise.

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