

Photo-Discourse: Critical Theory and Practice in Australia

Kurt Brereton

“In the past ten years so much has been buried as if it never happened. Visual art does not progress by having a good memory.” Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, 1986

Setting the Backdrop

Within the history of photography and art movements over the last quarter of a century, the late 70’s has frequently been dubbed a cross over period between Modernism and Postmodernism, between “photographers” and “artists who use photography”. (1) In many ways I’m sure Photo-Discourse will come to be cited as just such a transitional publication. However, such neat reconstructions of events necessarily leave out the complexities of how things actually unfold and the heady mix of cultural, social and political forces that shaped art at the time. Political affiliations (friends get a mention while enemies are rubbed out!) or even just plain ignorance or lack of memory, all conspire to compose a history, be it retrospective or write as you play, that graphically resembles more a holey block of Swiss cheese than a solid chunk of history.

One way of redressing this problem of huge absences and tiny presences, that is a hegemonic power struggle between a desire for smooth outcomes pitched against the chaotic pleasures and pains of rough reality, is to bite off a smaller piece of the object under study and savour it more carefully, more slowly and more passionately. In the west this would find its highest expression in a wine & cheese-tasting night. In Eastern culture the metaphor might gravitate to the finer art of eating a Ramen noodle, in a bar a la the Japanese film Tampopo. Both culinary arts share a philosophy that

seeks to know the depths, sympathies and contradictions inherent in any work of art. The poverty of language is matched against the wealthy chemical resources of a million taste buds. The aim is to analyse the many foreground and background flavours that make up the character of any dish, era, movement or event. It is hoped that such a method of analysis just might add to intellectual palettes a critical language and poetic strength to engender subtle differences in how photography for example is thought about in the next twenty years.

The analogy between analysing photography and judging a soup is of course my cheesy joke but it does open a way forward for my analysis of what happened back in the late 70's with photography and specifically my editorship of Photo-Discourse, the first book in Australia to bring together critical and theoretical writing and practice in a dialogue. I want to recount and try to tease out a few threads of the "photo-disco" story and the talented chorus line of artists, writers, critics, philosophers, typesetters, printers and art school bureaucrats who made up the (Rocky Horror or was it Aunty Jack! style) musical performance.

It was a desert out there!

At the time of conceiving Photo-Discourse in 1979-80 there had been precious few critical or even coffee table books published on Australian photography. I think the Australian Centre for Photography had put out two; namely, *New Photography Australia* and *Aspects of Australian Photography* (both 1974) and Victorian Arts Board published *Australian Photographers* (1979) and *Four Australian Photographers: Aspects of the Phillip Morris Collection* (1980). Most of the work in these books registered to my angry young mind at the time as "straight Photography" ie slaves to the old boys black and white 60's Modernist school in the tradition of Lee

Friedlander, Robert Frank and others. Christine Godden, then director of the Australian Centre for Photography, had just edited *CSR Pyrmont Refinery Centenary Photographic Project* (1978). The first *WOPOP* (Working Papers on Photography) conference papers had been published in 1977. The editors, Euan McGillivray and Matthew Nickson, were concerned with the ideology and sociology of photography from a post Marxist perspective. I attended one of the conferences (there were three from memory) and heard Allan Sekula speak which was exciting.

On the local magazine front, there were: *Halide* (1980, Sydney); *Light Vision* ('77 and '78, Melbourne); *Art & Text* (1980, Melbourne then Sydney); *FX* (1978, Sydney)

Critical Thought & Practice in Photography

The sub title to *Photo-Discourse*, published in 1981 by Sydney College of the Arts, where I was employed, was "Critical Thought & Practice in Photography." As co-ordinating editor I gathered a great collective of artists, writers and academics to work most weekends for what seemed like forever (a year or so) in my warehouse office floor at Central Station opposite UTS.

The confluence of theory and practice was a critical part of the political and artistic agenda driving much of what I and my friends were doing inside and outside the art gallery during the 70's and early 80's (and still are in a lot of cases!).

The 70's saw the rise of a number of politically and ideologically driven action movements that brought together, in a molecular, rhizomatic fashion, people who previously would not have entertained the idea of

socialising together let alone working together for a common cause. The Free Radio Alice, Brigatti Rossi ensemble of enunciation that brought together factions made up semiological delinquents, post-Marxist cadres and post-Freudian (Lacanian) lapsed Catholics, gay activists and clubbies, feminist orders of different degrees and deviant anarchists who were thrown out of all the deadly serious reading groups, men's and women's only groups run in group households around the inner city squats and run down blocks of flats dubbed "mansions" of Sydney.

The Foucault inspired philosophy of there being nothing more practical than a good theory combined with rapid rise of new media technologies (eg computers, video decks, tape recorders, cheap cameras and photocopy machines) meant that young middle class art school students like myself were spending more time on the street than in the class room mixing with union and indigenous activists, radio producers (2SERFM and 2JJ), music theatre groups, film maker co-ops, poets, writers and philosophy students. Publications, live performances, conferences and exhibitions were in a sense clearing houses and shop fronts for the many different voices that wanted a sounding. The fact that many of these events were one offs (even when they expected to be long term ventures) was as much to do with the fluxing nature of political affiliations as it was to do with lack of money and resources.

Critical lines

Photo-Discourse didn't suddenly come out of a cultural vacuum or even some publishing house's marketing department. It was the culmination of at least two years organising and production work and four years (1975-78) of art school training on my part at least, absorbing various skills, knowledges and network connections. Looking back now I can see how the many

invisible conceptual and political threads worked to build up a network that allowed this publication and others besides to see the light of day.

My idea for putting together a book on contemporary photography sprang in large part from an ignorance of what else was happening around Australia in what I saw as a new critical and artistic approach to photography. I felt that I knew far more about what was happening in America and Europe (from books and magazines) than I did about contemporary Australian art. Coming from the deep north of NSW (Mullumbimby) directly to Sydney art school, I had made only one brief trip to Melbourne to make a video doco on Women Artists in 1977. After leaving art school I had worked for a year acting and writing in the theatre before starting work at Sydney College of Arts in 1980. The photography department was very strong there under John Williams and a number of other exciting staff and students including Virginia Coventry (photographer and lecturer), the English artist and photographer Dave Cubby, photographers Debbie Phillips and Joy Stevens, Martyn Jolly (editor of Halide photography magazine), John Young (editor of ZX magazine) and Michael Hill (film maker and lecturer) and many others created a rich critical and creative environment.

The major international critical and theoretical influences behind *Photo-Discourse* were the same as for a few other small magazines including *WOPOP*, *ZX*, *Feral Publications*, *Working Papers*, *Art & Text*. Perhaps the major difference in focus is that *Photo-Discourse* attempted to broaden the scope of its influence and discursive platform to include a wide range of social, political as well as artistic and critical voices. Consciously drawing on contributions from around Australia, there was a sense of taking stock and of sparking new debates on a coast-to-coast front.

Key publications such as *Photography/Politics: One* (1979), *CameraWork*, *Ten• 8* and *Block* magazine from England's cultural left and the appearance of Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1979), Roland Barthes *Image, Music, Text* (1977) and *Mythologies* (1972) and Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1973) all helped shape a critical and political approach to using photography as a tool or as a creative end in itself.

The first semiotics conference titled *Foreign Bodies* held at Sydney University in 1981 (a few months prior to publication of *Photo-Discourse*) published the *Foreign Bodies Papers* under the imprint of Local Consumption. It carried only two adverts, one for *Hecate*, a women's interdisciplinary journal and the other for *Photo-Discourse*. Local philosophy and literary studies students were joining fine arts and art school students in a joint inquiry that later in the 1980s came under the general banner of cultural studies. I remember, for example, doing a collaborative film and voice performance called "Aus-land" with George Alexander at the Foreign Bodies Conference. The 1950s Situationists, Fluxus and 1960's and early '70s Conceptual Artists (groups like Art & Language and Gilbert & George visited Australia) and Performance Art happenings all laid the groundwork for these connections and circuits that are still being played out today. The phenomena of "artist's books" was something that I threw myself into. Working in the library at Sydney College of the Arts meant free access to the photocopy machine and interlibrary loans. The thought of collaging, re-editing, cutting up your own anthology of articles, images as well as quickly publishing a limited edition of small books fitted neatly into the post punk, streetwise, anti-corporate, parodic stance that I claimed for myself.

Practical flights

I was lucky to be in the first year (1975) of the art school at Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education.(2) The pedagogical philosophy was exciting and the student body was at least 50% mature age ie people who had a lot of great creative ideas and experiences to share. Conceptual art, performance art, body art, electromedia all conspired to challenge old disciplines notions of what painting and sculpture were. I started doing a painting major and an electromedia minor. I shifted to a photography major in second year feeling that I had little to learn from the painting lecturers who were stuck in 1960s colour field land and couldn't talk critically about it to boot. I had taught myself photography at University of New England in 1974, mainly to escape into a darkroom away from ruggie buggers and rednecks, and couldn't afford any facilities of my own at home.

Much of the interesting art (from my perspective) being produced during the mid to late 70's was featured in American publications like *Flash Art* and *Photography & Language* and revolved photography and video. The debates at the time about photography being an art form or not; documentary verses studio verses manipulated images; pure photography verses applied photography, all seemed highly charged at the time because many people who held powerful position within Galleries, Museums, art schools or within the art scene generally, all had something to lose or gain depending on how the dice rolled. In many cases though the philosophical and theoretical wars, if not the political battles, had already been waged a decade before in places like France, Germany, England or America. Yet it is interesting to note in the case of critical photographic publications, that

we saw *Photography/Politics: One* only after we had begun organising *Photo-Discourse*.

A collective production

I say we because it was a collective effort in every sense of the term. The production was Peter Crocker, Dave Cubby, Bill Gillam, Violet Hamilton, Martyn Jolly, Geoff Kleem, Brian Thompson, Karen Turner, Ali White and John Young. The Sydney College of the Arts publications committee, (who have never really published anything before to my knowledge) was bold enough to back the publication. In retrospect it was a brave gesture and a lot of thanks should go to John Williams, Head of Photography, and John (now Catherine) Cummings, then Head of the Information Resource Centre, and my direct boss. He didn't appear to flinch when my pamphlet turned into a 176 page duotone and colour book. I must say it certainly is hard to see such a gutsy and speculative publishing move being backed by an art school in today's conservative economic and political climate. In a strange kind of Rakes progress many of the Photo-disco collective are now academic heads of art departments, famous artists, dedicated not-so-famous artists or involved in other related creative occupations.

Contributors

Over fifty photographers, writers and critics made up the contents page as well as various collectives, political organisations, gallery directors and arts reps. I don't want to single out any particular contributions for special mention. It is surprising and ironically a little depressing that after twenty very odd years most of the work still looks fresh and challenging. If anything the work of the more overtly activist political and art collectives has aged ever so slightly but that is probably a testament to their successful efforts in inching the rest of us forward in our thinking. It is also uncanny and

frustrating how some of issues such as East Timor-Fretilin and Aboriginal land rights, have remained just as important and unresolved now as then.

What was that thing called Photo-Discourse?

Photo-Discourse has long been out of print and indeed is a rare book now, known only to those who were around at the time and postgrad fine arts students. It has barely been mentioned in subsequent critical and historical books on photography, and when it has appeared it is usually as a footnote, secondary text or bibliographical appendage. (3) Almost from the day of its appearance (after a fantastic opening launch at Exiles Bookshop and party at Lee Street!) it didn't seem to quite fit into the local photographic political scene. I filled my backpack with a dozen copies and headed for Europe for a few years and when I came back the few hundred copies had either sold out or were remaindered at Gleebooks or even worse, Goulds Bookshop.

Being kindly asked back by Judy Annear to join this 20th school reunion of middle aged photographers, curators and academics down in the bowels of the museum, was a real shock to a system that loves to forget as much as is humanly possible of the seventies and make up the rest. So much has been buried in the last twenty years since we published Photo-Discourse, that I fear I just might be able to reinvent the 70's, suitably disguised, if no one else remembers it. I would also like to thank the Art Gallery of New South Wales for giving me the opportunity to reinscribe a little bit of Australia's photographic publishing record that was in serious danger of falling through the cracks of history.

(published in Ewen McDonald and Judy Annear (eds), "What is the is Thing Called Photography: Australian Photography 1975-1985", Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000.)

Footnotes

1. See for example Gael Newton, *Shades of Light: Photography in Australia 1839 -1988*, ANG/Collins, Sydney, 1988
2. Alexander Mackie CAE later became City Art Institute and is now the College of Fine Art (COFA) within the University of NSW.
3. See Catriona Moore, *Indecent Exposures: Twenty Years of Australian Feminist Photography*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991 and earlier Virginia Coventry (ed) *The Critical Distance*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1986 and even earlier, Ian North, *A Decade of Australian Photography, 1972-1982*, ANG, 1983