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in 2007 for Ann Shelton: a new skin

The sound of the past being sliced apart

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If we were to search for the source of photojournalism's specificity, might we find it in the kind of nervousness that animates it and in turn gets traced across the surface of its images? We understand and perhaps happily accept that images sit at the core of our relation to the world, and that we come to predominately experience and comprehend it through the image's remove. "The image is the thing that is not the thing;" remarks Jean-Luc Nancy, "it distinguishes itself from it essentially. But what distinguishes itself essentially from the thing, is also the force - the energy, pressure, or intensity." ¹ The distinct force of the image, it could be claimed, finds its most persistent and pervasive form in the urgency of the news photo, as it is here that we find a palpable record of the modern world's restlessness. In our compulsion to document the world, the news photo is imbued with an anxiousness born from the weighty responsibility of trapping lost moments and turning them into significant ones, whilst also bearing the absolute concentration of the 'here and now'. The necessary weight of the present moment (the immediacy of the news item) endows these images with an uneasy sensation, which, if it exists at all, seems far less tangible in other kinds of images. Perhaps this is the reason why press photos come hauntingly doubled by accompanying text, for the text anchors the image (and perhaps

it settles its anxious energy) by making us "read-again" what we have already seen.

In the late 1980s, before her photography took a conceptual and contemplative turn, Ann Shelton worked as the sole press photographer for the Oamaru Mail, a small, regional newspaper delivered nightly throughout the North Otago valleys of New Zealand. Her responsibility at the paper was to supply up to ten photos a day, gleaned from the tamed pastures of this wealthy farming district, its small towns and its rural centres. Shelton documented the daily events of the district by photographing flower and agricultural shows, visiting personalities, prizes, cheque presentations, accidents ... the events of rural life. There was little salacious or criminal news, but the paper traced its way across the valleys, charting the activities of the inhabitants and visitors. Regional papers, such as this, operate as mapping devices, both shaping and securing the limits of a community's desires. The filtering of news images through the competing demands of public interest and market concerns - converting images into 'newsworthy' commodities that both shape and sell the world in varying and differing ways - meant that Shelton's early press work participated in a process that effectively papered over other stories: the human cost of land degradation or the suppression of stories from tangata whenua, for instance, despite the region being ineradicably marked by its colonial past. Is this the history we deserve?

Shelton will soon challenge the abstracting, constructing and homogenising of daily events. Public Places [2001-03], a project that re-envisioned the ground of infamous scenes that had been washed by crime or trauma was "installed as mirror pairs" [to] question monocular vision and foreground the role of the camera in the construction of fields of representation."² The mirroring affect of these uneasy pairings is always a

destabilising one, spinning the viewer into dizzying and vertiginous epistemological caverns. The images return in their mirror images but, as with Nietzsche's eternal return, the things that return (the images, the histories) never return unchanged. In the image's mirroring is Shelton's questioning of a single version of history.

In 1989, Shelton moved from Oamaru to Wellington to work at The Dominion as the only woman in a team of six photographers. The coverage of local concerns expanded, exponentially - becoming more urgent perhaps - political clashes, industrial relations crises, demonstrations against the first Gulf War, anti-nuclear protests ... and the ordination of the first woman bishop. These were events that tapped into large and momentous shifts in global politics, massive social changes and the rumblings of a market-driven economy that we continue to endure today.

Sometimes it is easy to track the forces that form and change us. From the very beginning, Ann Shelton collected in scrapbooks, every press photo she had taken, detaching them from their original context (their place in the structure of the newspaper), and thereby providing them with new meaning. What might these anxious recordings become, once they have been stripped of their by-lines, their "stories", their places in history? How might new narratives take shape and then continually collapse and reform through the slow building-up of the scrapbook? Such are the first tiny, empathetic threads that will eventually weave their way to Fredrick B. Butler, to his own daily practice of snipping and pasting items from newspapers, his collecting of a range of ephemera into his extraordinary archive. These shared processes that map a quite different reality to the one envisaged by their original producers (the

editors, the advertisers), are quiet acts of rebellion that shatter the smooth flow of information.

But there may be another facet here: the cutting and recutting, "giving the images and information a new skin", as Derrida describes, it is a victory over memory and its inadequacies.³ Perhaps this is the other impulse behind Shelton's scrapbooks, for even though she knows that such constructions are always fictional, they nonetheless mark her presence in the world; they prevent her vanishing under the weight of the story, her inevitable disappearance as the silent agent of the press image.

"Subject must not look at you. Use no flashes." ⁴

It is not only the echo through our being that leads us naturally to unsurprising places - for Shelton, her interest in rubbing away at the gaps and spaces of received histories - there are also those rupturing moments that have the power to flip us from one spot to its absolute other. After undertaking a photographic course in the United States in the tradition of the FSA (the weighty tradition of documentary photography made famous by Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White, among others, for the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s), Shelton began to question the distance demanded of a press photographer, the impartiality that becomes "the mark of honour" for this profession. Photojournalism carries the heavy burden of two forces, timeliness, or the here and now (the newsworthiness of the press photo, its spectacular dimension), and the insistence on the distance or objectivity of the photographer. Secluded in the pious folds of this position, however, is the proliferation of ethical questions that continue to trouble the profession, particularly in times of great conflict. The border is a very grey and porous one between our basic moral obligations (or more simply, our responsibility to get involved)

and the requirement, as documenter, to remain objective and detached.

It is possible to register Shelton's evolving questioning of the role of the news photographer in the progressive arrangement of her press photos into scrapbooks. As the time from the original event (the photographic shoot) grows, so does her intimacy with her collection of photographic subjects - she's lived with the images of these people now for many years, they are part of her private archive, her personal history. Now inscribed in each cutting and pasting are memories intricately bound to Shelton's, and distinct from those sparked exclusively by the news event. What gets born from the increasing intimacy produced by the process of collecting is a position about representation that will shift and change over the course of her career; how to respect, as Jacques Derrida might say, the infinite remove of the other.

Under such concerns, as doubts enmesh and then coagulate, press photography becomes untenable, facilitating a move for Shelton into the visual arts. This gave Shelton the air to critically explore some of the problems that had been scratching their way through her work, in particular, how to disturb and trouble dominant and uncontested stories, and how to construct a candid (visible) account of the authoring role of the artist. One of her earliest projects as a visual artist, REDEYE [1997], a series of photographs of her friends from the seductively seedy neighbourhood of Auckland's inner city, was her initiation into how to solve some of the dilemmas of representation. Her friends faced Shelton directly (confronting the viewer). There was also a sharp immediacy produced by the snapshot style, which minimised the time the artist had to "arrange" or "control" the images. In their capacity to alter the way her subjects are received, however, Shelton will determine these strategies to be

largely ineffective. It is not possible, she will conclude, to both picture and give power at the same time, for the photographer merely re-presents for consumption the cultural stereotypes that were violently imposed upon the subjects in the first place.

Her response to the problem of how to represent others, in a process that finds the subject inevitably stripped of power by the artist (the author/auteur) and persistently misread by the viewer, will be the radical removal of people from her images. As with the imposing figure of Fredrick B. Butler in a library to scale series [2007], or in the earlier landscapes of Public Places, in which the richness of myth and narrative coalesce over sites of trauma, people now sit in her works as absent and powerful presences. These people-less spaces resound noisily with the activity of the subjects. But they also make only a small and gentle intervention through the removal of the subject's direct representation. This gives the viewer the air to distinctively (newly) mould and sculpt the works' narratives, while evading the messy and complicated job of remembrance, how to produce an image of the other, which doesn't remove at the same time the other's unbounded differences (the absorption of the other into oneself).

Sheltering within this overarching problem of representation is a persistent curiosity of Shelton's - the unearthing and documenting of the stories of those who refuse to be contained by the "normalising" effects of society (the language of statistics, data, conformism, and so on). Her interest in Fredrick B. Butler, whose exceptional visual and cognitive acuity meant that he sliced against the grain of convention and mediocrity, is part of this too. And there are many other correspondences between Butler and Shelton who, in their differing ways, both rework history: she, by wrenching her early press images from their context, and then later by puncturing the smooth surface of

received histories with alternative or differing possibilities: he, through a unique project that pulled history apart, bit by bit, news slice by slice, to be reconfigured into his own immense universe (his archive). This is what makes a library to scale such a richly layered work: we see ourselves in it of course, a collective desire not to watch the world's knowledge simply disappear in a shallow stream of disposable information: Butler's rearrangements put a stop to that. But we can also find the artist's own past (her interests, her values, her thinking) entangled in the project, opening it out in new and complicating ways. Here there is also the echo of the artist, whose affinity with Butler finally addresses the disparity she sensed between herself and her early "news subjects".

1. Jean Luc Nancy, "The Image: The Distinct", *The Ground of the Image*, (trans.) Jeff Fort, Fordham University Press, New York, 2005, p.2
 2. Ann Shelton, "Statement", *Public Places*, Rim Publishing, Auckland, 2003, p.8
 3. Ann Shelton citing Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995
 4. Interview with Ann Shelton, June 2007
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