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in 2005 for Ann Shelton: *a kind of sleep*

# Word reaches us from the distance

*Charlotte Huddleston*

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For a long time photographs were the official site of memory; memory shifts, but a photograph is fixed. And for a long time this fixity stood for truth. As we know, under the influence of swathes of reproductive photo-based imagery dealing in altered realities, the relationship between photography and truth underwent radical changes. In the wake of this inundation it was natural that the authority of photography would be questioned. But even before this, after the effect of writing on memory we knew well that any medium that transcribes has an embedded sense of loss.

Roland Barthes has written about the anxiety of the gaze in relation to the photographic image, suggesting that an aspect of this anxiety is derived from the aura of lost past attached to all photographs. Writing in *The photographic message* in 1961 Barthes discussed the idea that the structure of the photograph contains two elements. The first was the denotative capacity of photography to imitate the world, the second the connotative power of signification: the cultural resonances activated by a photograph. It is the denotative aspect of the photograph which can be identified with emotional trauma and loss. In a later essay *Rhetoric of the image* Barthes expanded upon his earlier

distinction between the denotative and connotative dimensions of photography.[i] Stating that denotation established “a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*.”[ii]

If Barthes’s here-now refers to the moment of viewing the photograph and there-then refers specifically to the moment the photograph is taken, then Ann Shelton’s ongoing series of doubled photographs suggest other moments of pause. As Barthes describes they contain the spatially immediate here-now of viewing and the anterior there-then of image making. However, they also contain a further layer of temporality; that is the earlier event Shelton is memorialising with the photograph. Shelton is manipulating the temporal anteriority by re-memorialising the past. But it doesn’t end there; Shelton has also altered the realm of spatial immediacy by reversing and doubling the image. In turn the doubling creates a dual there-then: the taking of the photograph and the creation of its mirror image.

The doubling of images in Shelton’s work has predominantly been discussed in relation to interplay of fiction and reality and the creation of myth, “marking out the relationship between the projected desire and the conception of events that is central to our fascination with cinema and photography.”[iii]The image and its reverse not only reinforce the similarities of fiction and reality, together they outline a rich territory of their own as both a point of rupture and of hyphenation. Just as seeing ones self between two mirrors is seeing the true self, the space between Shelton’s images allows for a reflection on the apparent dichotomies of truth and fiction and the influence of memory on both.

In the same way that philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to rearticulate the Cartesian approaches of philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre to the relationships between the dualisms of subject and object, self and world, Shelton's reversed photographs also reassess binaries. The photographs put the viewer between two mirrors, in a "reflection which turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but which, coming second, reflects back to it only its own light"[iv]

What the reflected light illuminates is a matter of perception. According to Merleau-Ponty ambiguity prevails both in our perception of things and in our knowledge of ourselves. This occurs primarily due to our temporal situation, which cannot be anything but ambiguous. He suggests: "My hold on the past and the future is precarious and my possession of my own time is always postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it, yet this stage can never be reached, since it would be one more moment bounded by the horizon of its future, and requiring in its turn, further developments in order to be understood."[v]

Similarly Shelton's photographs are cognisant of the ambiguity of temporality and perception. The deliberate focus on the 'polarities' of truth and fiction brings the ambiguity of the difference between the two into focus. Shelton's front on documentary style of photography has the authority of truth and many of her photographs are of places that have seen real events, often of historic importance. However, the true location of the past action often remains unconfirmed. Shelton relies on the uncertain reflection of memory, recognising that our precarious hold on the past often denies us full understanding of what took place.

Shelton's photographs in *a kind of sleep*, and others taken during her residency, are a continuation of her documentation

of, often marginal, sites of historic significance.[vi] Memory and collective consciousness play a vital part in the realisation of Shelton's photographs. During her residency Shelton photographed locations of historic significance in the Taranaki region. One site in particular Te Ngutu O Te Manu/The Beak of the Bird is a well known landmark. It was once a village built by Riwha Titokowaru. However, between June and September 1868 battles were fought between southern Taranaki iwi led by Titokowaru and colonial forces. It was a time of conflict brought on by what is known as the creeping confiscation of Māori land by Pakeha. Today the site features a white stone cross, marking the place where British commander Major Gustavus Ferdinand von Tempsky fell in a battle on 7 September.[vii] However, it is generally accepted by those who have some knowledge of the area that the cross is in the wrong place. The site remains one of discord even now with divergent views creating histories with different emphasis. As a site of history and memory, and particularly a site marking a chapter in the conflict over land, Te Ngutu O Te Manu is a rich location for Shelton's conceptual exploration of the shifting ground of history and memory.

The 7 September battle at Te Ngutu O Te Manu is memorable for several reasons: the humiliating defeat of colonial forces by Titokowaru, the death of von Tempsky and the capture and kidnap of a Māori boy named Ngatau Omahuru. Within the first week of contact between Māori and English in 1769, children were snatched by both races. This continued on and off for many years. The story of the Ngatau Omahuru/William Fox is distinctive amongst the stories of kidnap due to the political implications of his subsequent adoption by Prime Minister William Fox and because of a photograph taken of the boy. A few days after he was taken Ngatau Omahuru was photographed in English garb in a Wanganui studio, fixing a

point in his life, the course of which had been irreversibly changed. The photograph of the Fox Boy, as he came to be known, is one of the few fixed points in the story of Omahuru and it reminds us that truth is still a cousin of photography. Shelton's doubled image of Te Ngutu O Te Manu reflects the disorienting effects of a dual identity experienced by Ngatau Omahuru/William Fox.

Throughout any investigation of Omahuru's life we encounter breaks in the narrative, points where time and loss cause a cleaving of facts. The points of rupture provide easy apertures for speculation about the life of Omahuru. Just as a hyphen simultaneously divides and connects so the fixed points of photography and first hand knowledge hyphenate the story of Omahuru. Comparatively, the gaps between Shelton's mirrored images hyphenate memory and location. Although the images themselves are un-peopled they are occupied by the aura of past events. Shelton chooses places resonant with presence, hyphenating the relationships between the measurements of space and the events of the past much like Italo Calvino's *Zaira*, the city of memory, holds the past in its architecture. Her images depict places bearing the marks of habitation that contain the past, they are filled with invisible but somehow tangible information and, of course, they are filled with loss.

The threat of loss generates a desire to record and collect. Collecting is an act which orders the past, keeping it visible, holding loss at bay. As Walter Benjamin revealed in *Unpacking my library: a talk about book collecting*, the collector's deepest desire is to renew the old world by gathering things that hold meaning.[viii] Through selecting, arranging and displaying the collector imposes order on a disordered world. The dialectic of order and disorder surrounds both the collector and the collection, positioning us once again in that ambiguous state

between binaries. Another of Shelton's photographs taken during her residency depicts part of a collection that clearly reflects notions of order and chaos. The Fred Butler collection comprised a vast array of items: books, pianos, china, paintings, furniture, clothing, lanterns, muskets, letters, negatives from the 1860s, patchwork quilts, historical records from the Taranaki region and more. Butler was a self confessed obsessive collector; his collection represented 60 years of dedicated collecting that really only stopped when he died.[ix] Shelton photographed a small part of the collection, housed at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth, of some hundreds of Butler's carefully compiled scrapbooks. The scrapbooks contain newspaper clippings of news stories, births, deaths and marriages from the Taranaki region, which Butler pasted in to old books that he had turned upside down. He covered the books with wallpaper, labelling each volume with the type of information and time period it covered. Butler's collecting contains a sense of pathos engendered by the material he collected and what seems to be a compulsion to protect against loss of local memories.

It seems that Butler knew well the precariousness of memory. Like Benjamin he recognised that the counterpart to the confusion of a library is the order of its catalogue. To bring order to the somewhat idiosyncratic collection Butler meticulously recorded and cross referenced each entry on a total of 20,000 index cards.[x] His assiduous collecting and cataloguing of newsworthy stories may have been driven by a need to organise the world, but as in all collecting there is the notion of defence against the anxiety of loss. A collector like Butler is not a holder of commodities but a custodian of history and memory. Butler took his self appointed role of custodian seriously, during his lifetime he went to great lengths attempting to ensure that his collection would remain together and cared

for. Inevitably the collection was dispersed. Not much is known about Butler the person, a search through the scrapbook index cards reveals an entry for Butler, however, the scrapbook it refers to is lost. Butler himself may be as shadowy as the Fox boy, yet memory of Butler survives in his collection, for a collection is a reflection of the collector. The scrapbook collection holds off the chaos of memory by fixing points in time. The clippings themselves are akin to the photograph of the Fox Boy; they hold a connotative and denotative capacity comparable to that of a photograph. They also adhere to Barthes's concept of temporal layering, the immediate here-now and anterior there-then. In turn, Shelton's doubled image of the collection presents further moments of pause.

As a series Shelton's doubled images restate sites of trauma and history, operating as two mirrors between which we can gain an inkling of the construction of truth. If any medium that transcribes contains a sense of loss, it is also important to remember that the act of transcribing is in itself an attempt to ward off loss. The taking of a photograph, the recording of a story and the collection of newspaper clippings are all moves to record and preserve sites of memory. If memory is reflection then Shelton's images are about the anxiety of what is able to be really known and kept.

[i] See Martin Jay *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* University of California Press, California and London, 1994, pp441-445.

[ii] Roland Barthes 'Rhetoric of the Image' in *Image, Music, Text* trans. and ed. Stephen Heath, Noonday Press, USA, 1978, p44.

[iii] Ann Shelton *Public places*, Rim Publishing, New Zealand 2003, p7.

[iv] Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible* trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1968, p35.

[v] Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Colin Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1962, p346.

[vi] During her residency Shelton also photographed the empty villas at Lake Alice and part of the Brewster house at Frankley Road. The residency series of images followed on from earlier works Shelton had done including *Vault, Lovers' Leap, Otago Peninsula* which was included in *a kind of sleep*.

[vii] For further information on Titokowaru and von Tempsky see *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/> and <http://www.pukeariki.com/en/>

[viii] Walter Benjamin 'Unpacking my library: a talk about book collecting' 1931, in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. Schocken, New York 1968.

[ix] For more information about the Butler Collection go to:

<http://www.pukeariki.com/en/stories/entertainmentandleisure/butler.asp>

[x] A search of Butler's index cards reveals references to Te Ngutu O Te Manu, Titokowaru, von Tempsky and to Sir William Fox but no mention of Ngatau Omahuru.

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