

The Camera Net

The City of Gold and Lead is the story of a town of equal parts: conventional and cryptic, a town with ordinary and arcane histories running in parallel. When Ann Shelton arrived in Whanganui in December 2012 for a three month residency at Tylee Cottage she found a city ripe for inquiry. The Tylee Cottage Residency requires artists to engage with the local, to make work as a response to this place and community. Shelton's immersive, committed and thorough processes have always had a strong sense of place, making her uniquely suited to this type of residency programme. She uses short periods of time in precise locations and landscapes to explore broader themes of history, politics, evidence and loss. Traversing moments and places as disparate as a cholera outbreak in nineteenth century London (*the index case*, 2011-12), vestiges of Nazi Germany in suburban Timaru (*in a forest*, 2005-) and intimate collections of archives and personal memories (*a library to scale*, 2006, the result of her 2004 Govett Brewster Art Gallery residency), Shelton's work conceptualises documentary photography and problematises accepted histories.

Whanganui provided fertile ground for Shelton. Once the fifth largest town in New Zealand, Whanganui has been inhabited for centuries by Māori and was one of the earliest areas settled by Pakeha. The region's past is rich in industry, progress, intrigue and scandal. Shelton discovered multiple veins of history to use as the

sources for her work and then set about sifting through the vastness of local folklore to find facts, evidence and people overlooked or hidden in historical records. For *The City of Gold and Lead* she whittled her research down to two major events in the town's history. The first is the case of the city's Mayor Charles Mackay and his notorious shooting of his blackmailer in 1920 and the consequences of this action. The second is an exploration of the narratives surrounding the 'Wanganui Computer' and its bombing by anarchist Neil Roberts in 1982. Accounts of both of these events are well known to local, and to a lesser extent national, audiences. During her residency Shelton focused on subsidiary moments within these histories – the removal of Mackay's name from a foundation stone, the long gone graffiti-ed protests of Neil Roberts and fragile pieces of obsolete technology from the 'Wanganui Computer' which have been quietly held in a private collection for thirty years. Today we view these events with the fresh eyes distance provides and see them as indicators of the cultural shifts that took place in New Zealand in the 20th century. While they occurred in Whanganui, each event speaks to a national history of social change and movements towards equality. In retrospect we see that Mayor Mackay's story illuminates the complicated history of gay rights in New Zealand and Neil Roberts, the rise of activism in the early 1980s, a watershed moment for New Zealand as a society.

The work of an artist such as Shelton, driven by an interest in the photographic, appears so tangible that it seems to subvert the real. As Walter Benjamin put it, photography is an equaliser that has an intimate relationship with reality, as a media which 'penetrates deeply into its web'.¹ By focusing on the minutia of historical events – be they oak trees supposedly given by Hitler to Olympic Gold Medalists or code cards, discs and metal remnants of a disassembled computer – Shelton focuses on unnoticed or forgotten aspects of history, items that have been held outside of public collections. In revealing facets of history that have often been overlooked in conventional retellings Shelton asks us to question the veracity of 'factual' events. How many other figures have been reduced to one event and removed from foundation stones the way Mackay was in Whanganui? As Shelton puts it – "I am offering new or revised points to examine on a continuum of history that has been and continues to be manipulated and contrived in various ways"²

Reality is under constant revision and where history, archives and images were once viewed as fixed we now understand that they exist in a state of flux. The fluidity of

1 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>, accessed 20 June 2013.

2 Ann Shelton, interviewed by Dawn Roe for *Metadata*, number 17, June 2013, text provided by the artist 11 June 2013.

Seven years ago an anarchist blew himself to pieces

WE REMEMBER NEIL ROBERTS. . . .

"N2 Truth"



NEIL ROBERTS . . . talked suicide for three years.

PUNK groups throughout New Zealand held quiet memorials for a martyr last Saturday.

It was seven years ago to the day that anarchist Neil Roberts walked into the foyer of the Wanganui Computer Centre and detonated six sticks of gelignite in a carrybag on his shoulders.

Last week, small groups throughout the country had gatherings to mull over the times that were and consider what could have been—if Roberts' act had sparked the revolution he intended.

The punk movement has splintered in recent years, some sections becoming vocal in the anti-violence protests, others moving into the militant Skinhead faction, others have donned collar and ties.

But seven years ago the movement appeared united as a nation was shocked by a bomb blast as a 21-year-old man ignited his own annihilation.

For years before, the punk movement in New Zealand had gained in momentum, taking direct influence from London

lifestyles and music.

Spiked hair and public exhibitions of self-mutilation, such as safety pins driven through cheeks, were becoming commonplace in New Zealand city centres.

The movement gathered, organised and became louder on the streets with ideas of anarchy and the overthrow of authority.

On November 18, 1982 one of the final acts by an anarchist caught the attention of the authorities when Neil Ian Roberts ended his short life.

Similarities with Guy Fawkes were obvious at the time, although these were overlooked as the days leading up to the bizarre act of self-destruction were examined.

The first hints of the suicidal act police gleaned from the wreckage was

By EDWARD
ROONEY

'It was not an act of a coward'

from the rendered body of Roberts himself, parts of which were found 65 metres away from where the explosion took place.

TATTOO

On his chest was a recent tattoo bearing the chilling message: "This punk won't see 23".

Another message was discovered across the street from the centre in a public toilet.

"For too long we have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity," Roberts had penned.

His friends, far from being shocked by his death, were quietly confident the blast had been planned and executed with precision.

Bronwyn Dutton, then aged 18, was angry when

it was suggested Roberts had intended to place the bomb and escape.

"He talked suicide for three years and he had every intention of doing it.

"It was not an act of cowardice . . . it was making a statement with his life."

BANNER

At the front of an Auckland house last weekend, a banner was displayed bearing the legend: "We remember Neil Roberts".

Others that will remember include Rob Butler, who headed the inquiry into the explosion, and the unnamed security guard who witnessed Roberts struggling with his carrybag moments before the blast.

fact is an abiding interest for Shelton and she approaches it as an archaeologist, using her camera to sift through the past towards a greater understanding of the present. Considerable emphasis has been placed on Shelton's use of repeated or mirror images to reflect the complex nature of history. Winston Churchill's famous quote "history is written by the victors" can serve as a template for understanding Shelton's approach to historical events – if the accepted facts are determined by only one group, then conversely there must be other positions, theories and realities to be discovered. It is this nuanced vision of history that Shelton expresses with her use of mirrored and inverted images, the two sides of the historical coin. While this concept remains central to the work in *The City of Gold and Lead*, the ways in which it is expressed represents a methodological development for Shelton. Instead of reflected images we see video and photographs that have been presented in the iridescent blue characteristic of a blueprint, a negative copy of an original positive. By using the binary opposition of positive and negative, a function intimately connected to the mechanics of photography, and denying the objects and moments their original colour, Shelton places further emphasis on the instability of history, photography and the meanings we prescribe to events.

Latent in all of Shelton's work is an element of performance. Each work has been made through a series of carefully planned events: months of research, travel, gathering and staging. The act of constructing and performing manifests itself in even greater effect in this new body of work. Given Shelton's curiosity about moments of violence, change and discomfort, it is unsurprising that her work has turned to a kind of 'acting out of memories'.³ She wields her camera like a net, trapping fleeting moments and overlooked items that are then filtered and re-presented through the lens. In a never ending video loop she presents the erasure and reinstatement of the Mayor Mackay's name on the foundation stone of the Sarjeant Gallery. In a series of images Shelton captures the moment, when, on the thirtieth anniversary of Neil Robert's suicide bombing of the controversial 'Wanganui Computer' she wrote his graffiti-ed 'call to action' in the night sky with sparklers. Through a conceptual restaging of these events, tangential to the primary narrative of the historical events, Shelton elucidates the often myopic presentations of history and the 'ambiguity of the reality involved'.⁴

What makes Shelton's approach to historical events interesting is her removal of the human form from these moments. Instead her work focuses on books, discs,

cards and landscapes, items that would be considered detritus to most are elevated to the quietly heroic. Each piece, unassuming at first, is imbued with weight under Shelton's careful eye. The materiality of these almost banal objects and places are reinforced through Shelton's hyper-real images, in which we see the shadows, lines and smudges that mark their passage through time. A strange humanity is invested in these objects and places – presented without any other visual context they are the ghostly remains of violence, mystery and shame. Where the human body is involved it is disembodied and made mechanical. The hands that rub the name of Mayor Mackay are like automatons replaying an action over and over again, while the identity of the scribe for Neil Roberts words, etched in the sky with fire, remains unseen.

The visual language Shelton uses is one of isolation and her images contain poignant echoes of the histories they represent. Her work in *The City of Gold and Lead* uses emptiness to evoke the trauma of the events – components of the 'Wanganui Computer', Neil Robert's anarchist graffiti and Mayor Mackay's engraved name are alienated from each other within individual fields of black. The additional layer Shelton adds to these works is the written word. Text, in its various forms, is vital in Shelton's practice. Rarely coy, the titles of her works are direct, informative and often lengthy. Her works require interrogation. The viewer is asked to invest in the photograph just as Shelton has done, searching for context in various forms – the image, the label, the introductory text or the accompanying catalogue. She relishes the tenuous line between an understanding of the photograph as evidence and the photograph as construct, with her work ultimately showing that the two do not need to be mutually exclusive.

Sarah McClintock

3 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1998, p.54.

4 *Ibid*, p.54.