

tracking the truth

we seem to spend a lot of our non-art making time trawling through other peoples memories. a year in the life of a school that we edit into a nostalgic ten minute pop video for their yearly speech night celebrations. ten years worth of a family's video holiday archives transferred from vhs and chopped into neat little digital chapters for dvd. pica's [perth institute of contemporary art's] annual short performance festival 'putting on an act' where we document up to fifty weird and wonderful perth based dancers, performers and poets as they strut their stuff to a 15 minute time limit in front of a rowdy audience. classic moment this year when s zoomed in for a tight close up on a dance duet only to find the video capturing in excruciating detail, the graceful twist of a hip swinging the leg round to find the [perfectly arched] foot squarely smashing into the face of their unsuspecting dance partner. no going back on that zoom, that was the moment, the truth of it. preserved digitally in full colour for posterity, [and a possible future slot on australia's funniest home videos]. i can't help but wonder what the photographer caught on film that night. two types of documentation sat side by side facing the same subject matter, one waiting for the perfect moment, the decisive moment that conveyed the essence of the piece, the other grabbing every moment, every wince, every missed beat, every bruise in the making. who has the more faithful window to reality..

it's an unfair comparison bearing in mind the huge disparity between video and stills photography. but when applied to perhaps video surveillance and photo documentary, maybe the question has a little more resonance. recent discussion has focused on the role and validity of documentary photography as a means of recording 'the truth', questioning the impact that digital manipulation technologies have had on our sense of believing what we see in film, print or modern news-media. in light of recent revelations of falsified news articles being placed in iraqi papers to publish positive coverage of the u.s presence, the integrity of not only the documentary image, but reportage itself is being challenged. dr kyla mcfarlane [from monash university's museum of art] during ccp's recent lecture series 'is documentary still credible' suggested that if photo documentary was to be freed from it's responsibility to replicate and instead given the breathing space to *respond* to the real, our sense of suspicion with regard to the degree of truth that photo documentary held in its frame, would perhaps be alleviated. has the responsibility of the photo as evidence of the real shifted to surveillance then? the worlds eyes taken away from the compassionate bystander and placed on top of the tallest tripod in the street. the ultimate position of authority. do we see the truth in a downward gaze now.

I started to think about how surveillance has evolved over its short life span in comparison with [my rather limited knowledge of] the development of photography. surveillance originated as black and white, gradually progressed to colour [although b&w is still just as popular] and due to advances in digital & wireless technology, is equally as mobile and cheaply available to the domestic market. it has negotiated it's way around the public and private realm [from street & traffic cams to paranoid parents' nanny-cams and reality tv programs] to the point where it is an accepted part of contemporary life. half the global population has it's own network of paparazzi targeting their lenses on the

tops of their bobbing heads 24/7 and the coarse highly contrasted footage is just as likely to make the front-page, as any award winning photo-journalists' hi-res print. the only difference I can detect is that in the land of cctv, there is no regard for composition or visual impact or lighting or sense of atmosphere. it's just an impartial witness picking up the pixels and passing them without prejudice thru the lens.

I start at ground level by looking at images taken by documentary photographers on the streets. conscious of how images tend to proliferate around a crisis, I gravitate initially towards david dare parkers' photos during his commission as official war photographer of the war on iraq and then segue into a more personal project of street gypsies in romania. finding the crisis somehow more shocking with images depicting families daily routines of scavenging in garbage pits for anything that could aid their survival. i come across a black and white of two young children, boy and a girl maybe 6 years of age posing for the camera. scruffy, smiles, immediately lovable. the boy has his arm slung around the girl, half dressed, casually clutching a lit cigarette. you want to see the adult in them but as it begins to seep thru you think about whether or not they'll actually get the opportunity to reach adulthood and the optimism slides straight out of the image. it triggers for me a recollection of the now iconic surveillance shot in 1993 of the uk case of james bulger's murder. as a two year old he was led away from the strand shopping centre in liverpool by two ten year old boys down to a nearby canal walkway where he was smothered in blue paint, hit with bricks, stripped and dragged onto the railway tracks to be dismembered by a passing goods train. the last visual record of him alive was from the shopping mall camera, revealing the boys leading him away hand in hand. this story made global news headlines accompanied by the grainy b&w image grab of their exit under the horribly ironic glowing signage of baby retail outlet, mothercare. it was the image that 'shocked a nation'. it was an image that in the act of looking at it, lost us a collective belief in the innocence of childhood and it is often cited as the ignition point for the prolific rise in street surveillance in the uk. it didn't matter that we could barely make out body frames or facial details, we knew the story by the time the image was released. some newspapers helpfully circled the freeze-framed action so we could make sense of the cluster of pixels. camera 3 was a blunt tool for the job, but it handed us the cold hard evidence and in doing so we all became the last to see him alive.

I make a local leap to the same month 11 years later and we upgrade to 3-chip full colour with the events that preceded the death of aboriginal teenager thomas 'tj' hickey. the tragedy that sparked the then called 'redfern riots' [now toned down since the royal inquest to be described as a 'disturbance'] in inner sydney. the surveillance image taken from the redfern train station in true cctv tradition, eclipses the horizon in favour of the people on the pavement and shows us the bag snatcher who the police were attempting to locate that evening. this is the crime which inadvertently led to the denied chase by the police, which in turn resulted in hickey fatally impaling himself on the metal spikes of a fence after coming off his bicycle at speed. what at first glance could be a shot of a woman tripping over on the road, turns out to be the aftermath of a violent struggle for the bag with the victim being dragged along the ground in an attempt to hold onto her belongings. the image leans heavily on the presses various text captions 'man assaults woman' 'brutal thief' 'bag snatcher in action' in order for us to correctly position our thinking in line with the story. I realize that again without the caption or story context

the shot seems vacant. we have an image of real drama unfolding but, like the bulger case, it seems unable to express the truth of the situation on its own.

I search through dean sewell's body of photo-documentary work of the people and streets of redfern, to see if the same visual ambiguity appears in his shots. I find exactly the opposite. I know I'm looking at images that relate to inner city poverty and drug use and crime. reflecting trouble brewing in a broader sense in relation to known factors of deteriorating race relations with police and redfern's planned 'gentrification' scheme, which could see the majority of it's aboriginal population displaced. his emotive black and whites don't [for me] need captions to explain the frustrations of kids hurling rocks at the remnants of a burnt out car, or the young boy being escorted through the streets by police, head down, body resigned to the grip of his handcuffs. we don't need a circle penciled helpfully over the mans already bruised arm after plucking a syringe from it. there's no pictorial inadequacy to these shots, it's all very much in focus. but are they a neutral record? do they convey the truth or just attend to it.

I think about surveillances technical inadequacies and am reminded that the equivalent camera in a shopping mall now is likely to have vastly improved. full colour wireless networks are already in operation in the majority of street safety schemes in australia. biometric applications have already been approved and tested in australian airports. behavioural analysis and facial recognition systems are fully endorsed under the new anti-terror laws. decoding the surveillance image without it's printed byline won't necessarily be an issue in future. so if it were a competition between surveillance and documentary photography as to who has the most objective gaze, surveillance would, for me at least, cross the finish line first. you cant get more impartial than a machine, and if its cold hard unemotional un-constructed 'truth' with no trademark style or signature other than an embedded date and time on the bottom of the screen, then the surveillance gaze, is our true brutal contemporary eyewitness. but it's an unfair race. the intentions are different. one is assigned to capture everything like some thieving machine hogging all the content, the other chooses to contain the complexity in one iconic shot. in any case, having spent some time attempting to critique surveillance in my own arts practice, I can't bring myself to let it 'win' anything. I think about dr mcfarlane's notion of the documentary photographer 'resting alongside the real', helping us feel the weight of the content, to take ownership of it, the strangely intimate relationship that builds from engaging with it and I don't want to be looking at life through a network of elevated bullet proof domes made in taiwan. I want to learn about the world through human eyes, that's what brings us closer together. is that too romantic?

kelli mccluskey is co-artistic director of perth based arts group pvi collective. pvi have a long standing pre-occupation producing artwork that investigates issues of privacy, surveillance and its impact on social codes of behaviour in the public realm, responding to trends in local and global surveillance and increases in national security. their artworks respond directly to a city, town or site investigating it's fears, hopes and concerns about personal freedoms and in turn offers up darkly humorous survival tactics for living in a panoptic 21st century in the form of creative acts of intervention.

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