

RECORD

AND ENGINEERING PHOTOGRAPHS FROM COUNCIL'S COLLECTION

ANALYSIS

Record and Analysis brings together photographs and objects sourced from the City of Melbourne's Art and Heritage Collection, the records of the Engineering Branch and the artist's own photography.

Council's collection encompasses a broad range of material. It includes work by commercial practitioners such as Wolfgang Sievers and Bryan Ruffin, the images of William Robertson, official meter branch photographer from 1936–1976, and a host of photographs most likely taken by the engineers themselves. These images have been re-examined and re-ordered to produce an assemblage – a temporary archive – which presents an individual and at times enigmatic view of the role photography plays in recording the built environment.

At the core of the exhibition is a selection of forty photographs reprinted from a 'photofile' of approximately 1,600 medium format negatives produced in the decade that followed the 1956 Olympic Games. During this period Melbourne moved rapidly toward becoming a modern industrialised city, embracing contemporary international design aesthetics with structures such as the ICI building and Myer Music Bowl.

The Engineering Branch itself was large and well equipped, the practice of "contracting out" work through tender still years away. In 1965 the branch had over 600 employees spread over three locations and owned all the equipment necessary to do its work. A great many of the branch's projects were photographed and the images printed then pasted by category into large annotated books. These photographs, taken as records of activities and objects relating to the branch's duties,

have a great deal more to say than originally intended. A photograph is quite unaware of any singular intentions that its maker might have, and given the opportunity will include all of the minutia that makes up the chaos of daily life.

This phenomenon, which American photographer Lee Friedlander defined as being indicative of photography's "generous" nature, has provided the framework within which this archive of utilitarian images has been re-ordered and selected.

Photography has dealt in elusive truths since its invention, yet despite over 170 years of debate about what if any truth a photograph can convey, it still serves for most of us as an excellent way to record something. Accordingly, vast quantities of photographs have found their way into archives across the world where they ostensibly serve a purpose. This purpose is however a fluid one. Despite the intentions of its creator, the meaning of a photograph not only changes the further in time we move away from it, but also relies a great deal on the context we place it in. For example, imagine a photograph taken of a family on their porch in a late 19th century mining town, whilst initially made for the family archive this photograph could now be in a museum exhibition on architecture.

The City of Melbourne's engineering photographs are no different, originally part of the Engineering Branch's own archive they now reside in the Art and Heritage Collection, where their meaning and purpose has come under re-evaluation. This is not to suggest that they no longer serve as records of engineering practices, but that they have been augmented in their

meaning through juxtaposition with a broader collection, which includes cultural and historical objects and documents, as well as evidentiary ones.

The re-examination of photographic archives by artists is not a new phenomenon and has if anything gained momentum with artists trying to make sense out of the vast shapeless mass of the *uber* archive known as the internet.

In the early 1920s Man Ray published four of photographer Eugene Atget's images of Paris in the surrealist publication *La Révolution surréaliste*. Before his death in 1927 Atget had spent some thirty years photographing what remained of old Paris, which was soon to be demolished in the name of progress. His use of antiquated equipment and materials meant long exposures and therefore unless stood quite still, people were reduced to ghostly vapor in the resulting photographs. To the surrealists these photographic documents were laden with possibilities and when anonymously re-printed in their publication, Atget's images became a tool for their ideas.

On the 11th of September 1953 an exhibition of 122 photographic panels reproduced from a wide variety of archives opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art and Design in London. "Parallel of Life and Art" drew its material from geological surveys, x-rays, newspaper photographs and other sources of a predominately "non-art" nature. These images were then arranged on the walls, ceiling and floor without captions, the only means of discovering the original context of the material was a separate catalogue whose numbered explanations did not always correspond with the works on show.

The Independent Group, made up of cross disciplinary creatives who produced the exhibition, wanted to challenge the prevailing ideas about what constituted art. They considered the arts, mass culture and the sciences as part of a whole, and described their exhibition as "the first atlas to a new world". The critics felt otherwise and mostly saw the work as confusing and esoteric.

Over time conventional boundaries began to break down and when in 1977 American artists Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel published *Evidence* (New York, 1977), a collection of decontextualized photographic records from over one hundred government agency archives, the resulting work was completely stripped of any identifying marks, incorrect or otherwise.

Today the re-appraisal of the photographic archive is commonplace, with numerous books and exhibitions being produced which question our ideas about everything from crime scene to amateur photography, with publications such as *Useful Photography* (Amsterdam, 2002) finding interest in the images of items posted on ebay or the homogeneity of livestock photography.

The temporary archive of *Record and Analysis* has not attempted to entirely decontextualise the engineering photographs, although it has sought to examine the malleability of photographic meaning by placing the artist's own photographs alongside those taken by engineers and journeymen photographers. In truth this exhibition is a tribute to the pleasure of the photographic archive and the strange things that happen when photographs of a similar vein gather in one place.

Louis Porter, November 2009

Further Reading
Hans Aarsman et. al., *Useful Photography #002*, Amsterdam, KesselsKramer, 2002

Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever – Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, New York, ICP/Steidl publishing, 2008

Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 2nd edition London, Routledge, 2002

Marx, Schwarz, Schwarz and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Walter Benjamin's Archive Images, Text, Signs*, London, Verso, 2007

Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook A History Volume II* London: Phaidon, 2006

Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, *Evidence*, California, Clatworthy Colorvues, 1977

Victoria Walsh, *Nigel Henderson Parallel of Life and Art*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2001

About the Author
Louis porter is an English born photographic artist who has been based in Melbourne since 2002. His work, sourced mainly from the street, has been exhibited widely both in Australia and overseas. Porter has worked with the archive of the City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection since 2003.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank the City of Melbourne for giving me this opportunity, in particular the Collections unit of the Arts and Culture Branch, Eddie Butler-Bowdon, Cath Hockey and Julia Johnston. Also, Gordon Duncan from the Engineering Services Group, Asko Ryhanen at CPL for the black and white hand prints, Robb Nudds and Ryan Ward from Round for the design work and Michael Galimany for his research and advice. I also want to thank Georgia Metaxas and the various photographers whose work I have had the pleasure to sift through for this exhibition.

Exhibition Dates
12 November 2009 – 30 January 2010

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall
Swanston Street
(Enter through Half Tix)

Gallery hours
Monday 10am – 2pm
Tue – Fri 11am – 6pm
Saturday 10am – 4pm

