

The Poorest Instruments

Dan Miller

*Is anyone out there,
they used to say, or was
they also some remote chance
of people, a company, together.*

*What one never knows is,
is it really real, is
the obvious obvious, or else
a place one lives in regardless.*

—from Robert Creeley, 'Water' (1990)¹

Selective, fallible, unforgiving: the true predecessor of photography is human memory. Although the two are now hopelessly entwined, their image-origins could not be more different. Compared to the human body, the camera makes a poor instrument. Whereas a body—typically in infancy—is capable of overcoming solipsism, a camera has no mirror stage.

Photography's history has not been one of battles over representation, but a struggle against its own limited capacity for empathy and imagination. The camera, or anything that emulates it, is all ego. Indexicality implies indifference. In the hands of the neoliberal subject, or contemporary artist, it consistently proves itself a weapon of the most craven kind.

Cowardice is now the hallmark of photographic practice. As public space is further privatised and surveilled, and as privacy slips into privation, the range of acceptable uses for a camera by a citizen has narrowed. Squeezed from multiple sides (by paranoid privacy advocates, governments and corporations eager to shield their activities from scrutiny, and alarmist campaigners for 'child protection'), the photographer-artist is one of the more cramped figures of our age.

Among those who use photography as medium (and not as corporate shill or dumb recorder), some camouflage themselves in hat-and-sunglasses, or as harmless consumers. Many keep their distance, seeking shelter in private architecture, or in landscape. Still others retreat to the cameraless, shaking off the instrument (but not its poverty of imagination). Like photography and memory, photography and alienation embrace at terminal velocity.

The ego-eye of the camera—real or simulated—alienates its users from the world at large, and from each other. More than most media, photography resists attempts to complicate the norms of singular authorship. Nonetheless, a good artist can inhabit this alienation and develop a careful self-consciousness. What the categorical survey exhibition holds out—especially when that category is photography—is the possibility of collective consciousness.

All exhibitions make promises. Most of them cannot be kept. Whether a survey exhibition's pledges can be met depends on the artwork's ability to navigate the problems of the survey itself. This challenge is compounded—and the risk of failure heightened—in an exhibition that shows work from a single locality, made within a certain time period, and using the tools of a single medium.

In one respect, photography has a great advantage in engaging the local. It tends to produce images that, in their visible nuance, could only have been made in that place. Yet its formal limitations (notwithstanding all attempts to introduce new processes) and its callousness, frequently combine to produce objects that may as well have been made anywhere. In the globalised practice of contemporary art, what photographs look like is more important than what photographs look at.

Considering what these photographs are looking at (and how they are looking), does this exhibition succeed in providing an image of Western Australia's consciousness of itself?² A catalogue essay is in no position to judge. Written as this is from a great distance and prior to the exhibition's opening, attempting to answer this question would amount to an exercise in science fiction.³

What is obvious, even from this vantage, is that if a macro-image can be said to emerge from this grouping of artworks, it will be as fallible as any of the singular images in the exhibition. It should not be forgotten that photography is—presently as much as historically—an easy friend of colonial ambition and a handy means of erasure. Close attention must be paid to who makes an image—especially a collective one—and what is excluded from it.

A similar scrutiny must also be directed at claims for the value of local contemporary art practices. Who is included in arguments for the greater visibility of Western Australian art? Who is missing? The state's relationship to its own peripheral status is a fraught one, wavering—as in many similar places—between pride and insecurity. But complaints of under-representation in national discourse must be tempered by an acknowledgement that the urban centre of Perth has its own history of incurious isolationism.⁴

The globalisation of the art world has not collapsed the centre-periphery dynamic; it has merely proliferated it. Despite the apparent freedom and speed at which information flows, power still accrues in places where financial capital and social capital meet. The intervention of city- or state-funded institutions in this context is less corrective than it is complicit. Nonetheless, public institutions retain—at least in principle—a critical responsibility to their audiences not shared by other arbiters of value.

Yet public art institutions are also prone to the asociality and indifference inherent in the medium of photography. Tethered as they are to real estate and staid norms of presentation, most communicate within a limited formal range. Much like the camera, the exhibition is an instrument with a limited imagination. The expansion of 'public programming' in recent years is an acknowledgement of this problem, but a great deal of this activity serves only to bolster the exhibition of objects as the prime site for the experience of visual art.

Wherever there are artists who identify themselves with what is called contemporary art, there will be some who attempt to challenge the mainstream art world's "holy trinity" of authorship, objecthood, and spectatorship.⁵ With the will and the means to work in solidarity with each other, these are the sites of productive antagonism where artists develop a genuinely local contemporary art practice. This is how what was once called an avant-garde can emerge. This is also how artists, acting collectively, can begin to form alliances and solidarities with artists embedded in other places.

For this to be realised, artists, their supporters and their educators must reject the

dominant social model of contemporary art, a system which functions as "a dispersed network of competing individuals who never cohere into a historical subject with the capacity for collective resistance."⁶ Communities of artists working in the periphery (that is, most communities) must forego the chance to sit at the existing table and collectively reconceptualise the form and logic of the table itself.

Demands by those in a peripheral place like Western Australia—or Australia—that their artists receive greater visibility in national or global discourse, merely on the grounds of 'fairer' representation, do a disservice to the artists who work in that place. If local institutions truly wish to foster a rigorous community they must support open-ended experimentation whose outcomes are not decided in advance.

What might this look like? For organisations with the resources to provide artists with funding, logistical support and access to audiences, potential shifts are not hard to conceive. A move away from the exhibition as the representative form of contemporary art practice is a good start. Likewise, increased support for non-object and discursive practices, as well as for collaborations and collectives whose aims are not market-driven—all guided by a commitment to maximal artistic autonomy—will significantly change local conditions.

Some artists may see a turn from the role of agile hyper-networked agent towards collective efforts to re-make their immediate art world as counterproductive. Yet counter-production is precisely what is required. Artists working at the centre may have the privilege of ignoring the true social and cultural contexts for their work, but those working in the periphery have a responsibility to practise in ways that renounce the myopia of the powerful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Miller is an artist. Born and raised in Perth, he studied Law/Arts at The University of Western Australia from 2002 to 2004, before dropping out and moving to the east coast. Since then he has lived in Brisbane, Melbourne, Southwest China and the United States. He holds an MFA from the Department of Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern University and a BA Photography from RMIT University. He has been based in Chicago since 2014, where his work has focused on an experimental collaboration with the convenience store owner and self-taught artist Thomas Kong. With Kong he coordinates The Back Room at Kim's Corner Food, a project space and archive housed in an adapted storage room behind the store. A forthcoming booklet on Kong and Miller's collaboration will be published in June by Half Letter Press.

NOTES

- 1 Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1975–2005*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 2006, p.349
- 2 This phrasing is borrowed from a 1972 diary note by Terry Smith, which describes an “image of Australia’s consciousness of itself.” See Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem: Then and Now,’ *ARTMargins* Vol. 6, No. 1, February 2017, p.19
- 3 Writer and critic Jennifer Allen articulated this idea in an opinion piece for *Frieze* in 2009. See Jennifer Allen, ‘Futures Trading: How do you write a catalogue essay for a show that hasn’t yet opened?’, *Frieze*, 1 October 2009, <https://frieze.com/article/futures-trading> (accessed 24 February 2017)
- 4 Darren Jorgensen, ‘Better Off in Adelaide,’ *Artsource Newsletter*, Summer 2014/15, <http://www.artsource.net.au/Magazine/Articles/Better-Off-in-Adelaide> (accessed 2 March 2017)
- 5 Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, Van Abbemuseum: Eindhoven, 2013, p.10. Published online at <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf> (accessed 26 January 2016)
- 6 David Hodge and Hamed Yousefi, ‘Provincialism Perfected: Global Contemporary Art and Uneven Development,’ *Supercommunity* (blog), Day 34, 20 June 2015, <http://http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/provincialism-perfected-global-contemporary-art-and-uneven-development/> (accessed 6 March 2017)