"WHAT WAS DIRECTLY LIVED HAS MOVED AWAY INTO A REPRESENTATION." [1]

PHOTOGRAPHY AND POST-OBJECT ART

"POST-OBJECT ART" is a catch-all label for work deriving from the expanded field of experimental sculpture that emerged in New Zealand in the late 1960s, in performance, installation and intermedia. The "post" of post-object art denotes a desire to go beyond "the object", which had become freighted with oppressive values and meanings, to refocus on actual bodies, processes, ephemeral situations, specific sites, everyday materials and new technologies. What remains of such activity is a fragile archive of displaced traces: photographs, film footage, videotapes, notes, diagrams, drawings, sound recordings, publications, private memories. My research, based entirely on this surviving documentation, has so far been to reconstitute and explain post-object practices and retrieve them for art history.[2] This essay, however, seeks to rethink post-object art not in terms of what has been lost but rather for what remains, focusing on one particular dimension of this archive, its photographic legacy.

Post-object artists' engagement with photography is an early, indeed necessary, instance of activity that addressed — consciously or unconsciously — the condition of "moving away into representation" that Guy Debord invoked in *The Society of the Spectacle*. The photographic remnants of post-object art are no mere by-products. They signal the creeping mediation of reproductive technologies as a condition of our postmodern moment. Although post-object art sought to circumvent the production of discrete and privileged objects in order to break down modernist autonomy, to draw attention to the contingency of art, and thus to operate within the social realm, reproductive images and technologies were integral to its meaning and function.

IN THE 1970s it was exactly photography's freedom from the baggage of fine art that drew artists seeking an alternative to the aesthetic tyrannies of late modernism. While art photographers were arguing their case for a place for photography in the pantheon of high art, post-object artists were using the camera as a recording device in their moves away from that institutional framework. Disinterested in its aesthetic qualities and technical aspects, they undertook photography in the manner of the amateur snapshot or the scientific record.

Post-object artists' use of photography was both critical and complementary; a conscious alternative to traditional media, but also a mechanism to add meaning without investing art with value. It suited artists seeking to evade the system to break down barriers separating them from their audiences and assert a new and radical temporality, for such records of live actions or situations afforded the raw encounter a non-reified afterlife. This was because the photograph and its derivatives had both a contingent connection to physical and material subjects in the social environment and a non-hierarchical relation to the discursive fields within which meanings were produced and information circulated. The photo-document had an ambivalent status as a work of art. It served instead as a site for further work, where the conceptual process could continue.

There were solid theoretical grounds for this. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has pointed out, in modern industrial societies photography is historically the means by which the world is represented.[3] Indeed photography's pervasiveness has naturalised it. So to post-object artists,

←— Roger Peters *Snowfall* (1975) closed circuit video screening of a photograph, installed in *Songs of the Earth* at
Auckland City Art Gallery (1975). Photo: John Daley
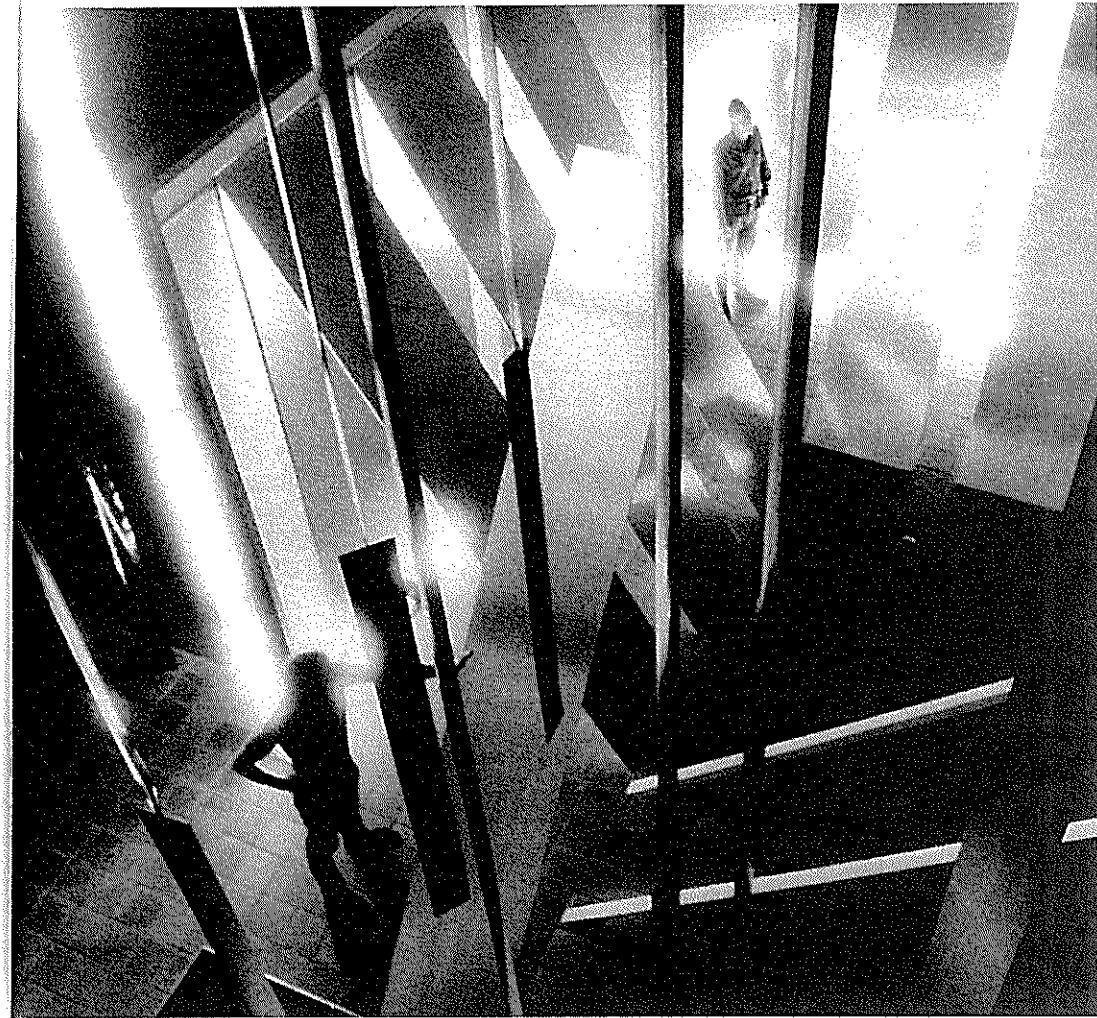Previous spread: Bruce Barber, from *Kiss* (1974) slide-tape sequence

photography's myriad everyday uses made it seem more closely coupled to the world and less easily separated into the autonomous arena of art. Further, as Walter Benjamin had persuasively argued, photography's reproducibility posed a vital challenge to art's autonomy and proposed a new function for the visual within society.[4] Photo-documentation in artists' books, journals, catalogues and publications, like other forms of reproduction, could be democratically distributed and its social nature underscored. As Dan Graham has argued, work gained a "certain independence" by "belonging to the more general cultural framework".[5]

This can be explained in semiotic terms as evidence of two intrinsic features of the medium: first, photography's intertextuality, and, second, its indexicality. The photograph, as one element in a hybrid practice, confirms post-object art's heterogenous operations across a range of discursive practices, denying modernism's central claim to the essential specificity of each medium. Not only was photography one of many modes utilised by artists, but visual images were used to shift attention away from the physical components of a work, to relay different temporal moments (through feedback and time delay) or to upset spatial parameters and boundaries. Once reproduced as secondary documentation, the photograph operated in an intermediate zone, between the now past event and the proliferating space of reproduction.

Leon Narbey's *A Film of Real Time* (1971) is typical. This short film documented visual and spatial effects, sounds and kinetic sensations from his multi-media environment *Real Time* (1970). Narbey treated film as a suitably fluid and contingent medium to blur distinctions between temporary sculpture and permanent document. Narbey denied film its illusionistic or narrative uses, to work instead with its material qualities — sound, light, colour and movement — creating a visual and aural analogue to physical immersion in his multi-sensory, three-dimensional work. The camera functioned mechanically to record events as they happened, but it also performed reflexively, to recall the original work's kinaesthetic effects as discombobulating experience. This effect and the differences between the work's spatial/sculptural and temporal/filmic forms are what the work is about: the medium is indeed the message.

Rosalind Krauss has argued that "the photograph is . . . genetically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm-prints, death masks, cast shadows . . . Technically and semiologically speaking, drawings and paintings are icons, while photographs are indexes."[6] According to Krauss, photographs have an indexical relation to reality because the process produces images that not only resemble the objects they represent, but bear the direct traces of them. The photographic image has an existential relation to the world that is beholden and contiguous. Although it deals in appearances, it is patently not illustrative.

No wonder post-object artists were drawn to photography, just as they used other indexical processes to evade the distancing effects of representation. Pauline Rhodes' rust-stain grids on paper demonstrate her commitment to a working process designed to allow time and weather to leave their marks. Their mode of transfer — from world to work — is in essence indexical. So too is Kim Gray's use of light in *Time Wedge* (1971). She funnelled a ray of sunlight into a specially constructed box at exactly midday on 24 September, the spring equinox; creating a kind of camera obscura to capture a specific moment.

Leon Narbey *Real Time* (1970) installed at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

Bruce Barber, from *Kiss* (1974) slide-tape sequence

Krauss' contention may explain photography's special relation to reality, but her argument pointedly posits the photographic image as a category of sign, and thus an element of language, of a different order to the sensory experience of reality. As Bruce Barber stated, the point was not to frame experience (the illusory nature of this task was understood), but to frame "the sets and contingencies through which experience may be obtained".[7] Thus the photograph was not used in the belief that it might transcend its status as sign, in some pure and unmediated relation to the real. Photographic meaning was not considered inherent in the image but was recognised as being produced in relation to context, usage and the specific capabilities of the apparatus. Artists used photography reflexively to point out the difference between past and present, duration and the instant, to highlight the tenuous connection between the there of the world and the here of the photograph. So photography served as a means to critically reflect on representation, its relation to perception, social application and ideological effect.

Kiss (1974), a slide-tape piece by Bruce Barber, achieved such critical reflection. The slide sequence documented the artist walking up to and kissing the image of Sophia Loren on a billboard advertising the movie *The Man from La Mancha*. It was accompanied by a voice-over of his wife, Pauline Barber, reading a passage from anthropologist Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* reflecting on the place of women in non-Western culture. Here, real action was undertaken in relation to a mass-produced, spectacular image, then re-presented as a sequence of projected images reminiscent of a film experience. The complex positioning of photography in the work made the point that our lives and desires are mediated by images, and that any response to this realisation can only occur through a similar process of mediation.

For post-object artists photography served as a means to re-examine the status of the art object in both ontological and epistemological terms. For example, in documenting objects that had been set up expressly for the camera, Bill Culbert, Boyd Webb and Pauline Rhodes proposed a cognitive and perceptual conundrum. These objects might have once had tangible life as "sculpture" in the tradition of the assemblage or site-specific marker, but as photographs they were only images. The physicality of the object was replaced by an evanescent trace, contrasting the experience of being in the same space as the object with a representation of what no longer existed. These works were not concerned with the visual (in formal or expressive terms) but rather dealt with what David Campany has called "making visible".[8] That is, they functioned as metonyms of the representational process, whereby live events are granted meaning by being fixed by the camera, just as meaning is produced when an artwork is placed into a discursive framework. As Jeff Wall argues, "it is this contradiction between the unavoidable process of depicting appearances, and the equally unavoidable process of making objects that permits photography to become a model of an art whose subject matter is the idea of art".[9]
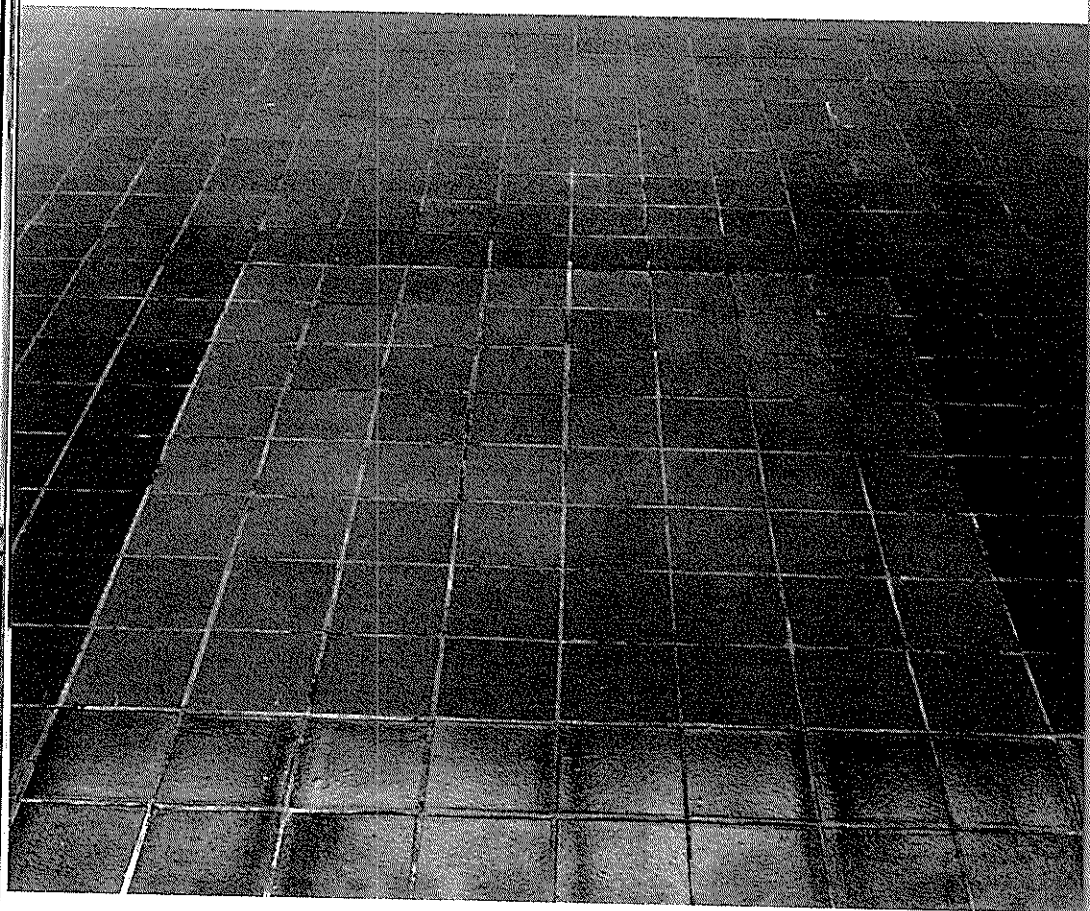
Billy Apple *8 x 8: A Subtraction* (1975) wax polish removed from floor tiles at Auckland City Art Gallery.
Photo: John Daley

POST-OBJECT ARTISTS recognised the growing pressure of representation's grasp. In translating the experiential into art they offered up traces of the real in modes not derived from the formal language of art, while recognising art as one of a number of structured representational systems. Their work's intertextual materiality did much to undermine art's autonomy and stitch it back into the systems of communication commonly available in everyday life, blurring the boundaries between artwork and commentary, and breaking down the priority of the former to insert a critical, self-reflexive dimension. This critical dimension is evident in the relation between primary event and secondary documentation, but it is also a feature at that further level of mediation, when documentation was subsequently published and circulated. It is at this third level that the specific function of photography as text is revealed. This trajectory confirms post-object art as conceptual and interdiscursive rather than physical and discrete, and positions it at a liminal point in the progressive drift towards the postmodern.

This trajectory can be charted by closer examination of specific instances. Billy Apple's *8 x 8: A Subtraction* (1975) — where the artist removed wax polish from a square of 64 floor tiles at the Auckland City Art Gallery — was recorded by gallery photographer John Daley, and his photographs were published with a commentary by Wystan Curnow in an issue of the Gallery's *Quarterly*.[10] These photographs, while not strictly formalist, fix the view, offering a stark alternative to the actual experience of the work in situ. Minimalist procedure, with its emphasis on phenomenological effect, was replaced by the rigid symmetry and instantaneous fixity of single-point perspective. No doubt on the artist's instruction, the photographer presented an ideal view to highlight the shift from real experience to documentary exegesis. To achieve this shift author and photographer were required to take up an objective vantage point from which to view the work. Thus the ordered stasis of the perspectives organising the photographs serves as a visual equivalent to the critical distance evident in the writing. Both confirm the logical separation of art and commentary and the priority of the live event in light of its subsequent explication.

And yet this shift is complicated by the fact that the work only survives as documentation. Unlike other reproductions in the journal, Daley's photographs do not illustrate some real but absent object. Set amongst conventional art historical essays, Apple's images and Curnow's commentary appear problematic in standing-in for a now non-existent original. The photographs function like uncanny doubles with their own supplementary meaning. For the removal of the floor wax, which typified Apple's ambition to make work out of the givens of the situation, had an indexical relation to the space similar to the photograph's indexical relation to the work. Both were granted meaning that was contingent, both therefore refused art's autonomy, and the distance between art object and documentation was blurred.

Moving to the early 1980s and the performance work of Peter Roche and Linda Buis we find a different order of documentation. Their performances were structured around the dynamics of physical and psychological interaction, and their negotiation of the relationship between performers and spectators. Each work was undertaken over a particular period of time and acted out within the confines of a specific context. If the accounts of those exemplary witnesses Tony Green and Wystan Curnow are anything to go by, these were not comfortable affairs. For the

repetitive, arduous and at times emotionally charged interchanges were designed to viscerally engage the audience, make them face their own reactions and their role as observers.

Given the particular function that duration played in Roche and Buis' work, it comes as some surprise that their published documentation, which is some of the most visually arresting of the period, always consisted of single images that distilled particular moments.[11] Though they occasionally used film in the process of making work they preferred still imagery as its primary form of documentation and distribution. Photographers Ron Brownson and Gregory Burke recorded the various stages of each work and captured key moments. But they were not working on instruction, rather responding as collaborators. Thus their images supplemented the action as a form of visual commentary or critical interpolation, being less pictures *of* the work than *about* the work.

In the context of a journal article these photographs continued to function discursively, but as one order of sign amongst others. "Peter Roche/Linda Buis: A Gathering Concerning Three Performances", compiled by Wystan Curnow, was published in *Parallax* in 1983.[12] First-hand accounts by Curnow and Green were interspersed with recollections and commentaries by the artists, set alongside uncaptioned images whose scale and presentation mirrored the textual page layout. The piece functioned as a non-linear, first-person, multi-voiced, written and visual record, where images and words were equivalent "texts". By denying the critical distance of objective interpretation, and by a process of experiential montage and compilation, the performance was re-presented without recourse to traditional exegesis, in a form that made the reader aware of the pitfalls of historical reconstruction.

In its shifts from live action to recollection, from the movement of actual bodies to the stasis of single images, in its slippage from linear time to the shifting temporal zones of memory and intention, and in its multiple and proliferating viewpoints, this text declared its difference from both live performance and art history's usual expository styles and formats. The piece did not assume that the object of art can be fixed and anatomised, granted a single meaning, indeed it did not have a single author. Crucially, with its tolerance for different interpretations, its indifference to faulty memory or misplaced emphasis, it acknowledged problems of representation. It is not surprising that it appeared in a journal of postmodern literature and art (indeed the first of its kind in New Zealand). Here, perhaps for the first time, an intertextual reading of a work was postulated, indeed where new work was done in the absence of the original.

PHOTO-DOCUMENTATION WAS a critical aspect of post-object art, as was the use of photographs, photocopies, film and video in the execution of work. This was evidence of the growing presence of reproductive technologies as a force shaping both art and everyday life in the 1970s. It suggests that post-object artists, despite their resistance to photography's mediating effects, co-opted the apparatuses and systems by which mass-media imagery had so effectively colonised their social realm, to specific critical ends. If one were to (re)write a history of New Zealand art of this decade it would be necessary to link the work of post-object artists to the work of artists in other areas also responding to changing social and cultural conditions and engaging in representational critique.[13]

Peter Roche and Linda Buis *Liason* (1980) performance at Real Pictures, Auckland. Photo: Gregory Burke

Such an account has been undertaken in Australia. In the early 1980s, Paul Taylor argued that Australian artists rarely had access to art other than in reproduction and that this was a key factor determining their antipodean cultural condition. He used Australia's lack of "originals" to distinguish Australia's art from that of Europe and America and proposed this as something of a manifesto:

> When photographic rhetoric is accorded its status as signifier rather than signified in Australian art, it will not only be the photographic media that are released from the repression of painterly and sociological methodologies; Australian art as a whole will develop a discourse outside of those imposed on it.[14]

Taylor's argument gave shape to 1970s art in Australia and theoretical coherence to what followed. It also located Australia as a site for Baudrillard's fashionable notion of "the society of the simulacrum" and ensured the country a distinctive place in the global conceptualisation of postmodernism. While New Zealand undoubtedly shares Australia's isolation and its mediated access to modern cultural forms, no critic here offered a similar prognosis.[15] Perhaps it is timely (if not overdue) that we retrospectively recast our art in similar terms. Taylor's contention – that the implications of reproduction was the crucial factor facing Australian artists – is applicable here. Indeed post-object art plays a crucial role in the transition to the postmodern, particularly because of the use it made of reproduction, exemplifying one critical strand of practice addressed to the "problem" of representation facing artists in the 1970s. Post-object art brings us to postmodernism's brink, away from "the real" and towards "the text". To demonstrate this, and to arrive where Debord has directed us, consider two works from the 1980s. Each is a product of the cultural conditions of the 1970s; each owes a debt to the procedures and concerns of post-object art, yet both may be distinguished from their predecessors, signalling the new terrain of 1980s postmodernism.

Julian Dashper's installation *Motorway Schools* (1980) consisted of four polaroid triptychs of a generic school building and a soundtrack of motorway traffic. It was shown at 100m², one of New Zealand's first alternative art spaces.[15] Dashper's minimal and brief intervention into the old warehouse space, itself soon to disappear in the process of urban "renewal", spoke to that process through its focus on the bland impersonal functionalism of the city's infrastructure.[16] Subsequently, however, on three occasions (1989, 1994 and 1999) Dashper re-presented the work's component parts and its subsequent documentation – polaroids, cassette tape, signage, photographs of the installation by Peter Hannken and a copy of *Art New Zealand* open to Tim Walker's review – as stand-alone items in a museum vitrine. Dashper's re-working of the piece refers to the fate of site-specific work and to the operations of primary, secondary and tertiary documentation.[17] *Motorway Schools* was no longer about social circumstances, neither the effects of modern transport and the education system nor the real experience of the work as installation. Rather it was about the process of inscription of artistic acts as texts and their eventual institutionalisation and historicisation.
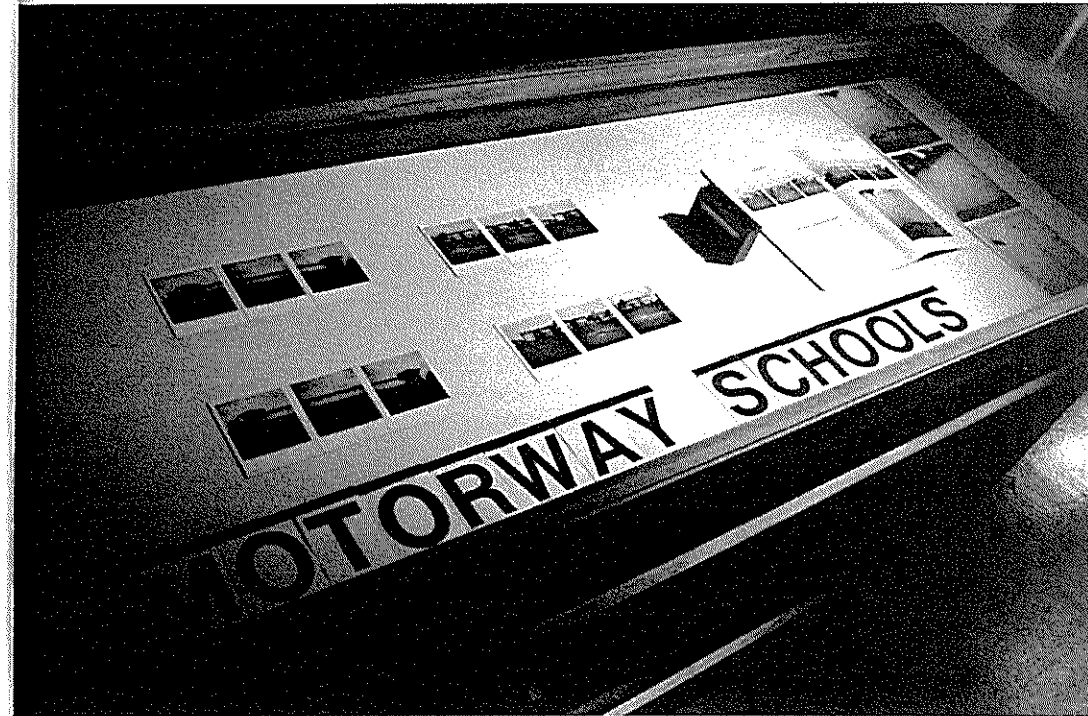
Julian Dashper *Motorway Schools* (1980) reconfigured for the exhibition *Julian Dashper Photography 1980–1994* (1994) at Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North. Photo: Athol McCredie

Gregory Burke, from *Viewing* (1985) colour photograph

In its quotation of conceptual art documentation, *Motorway Schools* is postmodern. By means of critical self-reflection the work is rendered impermeable both to the social realm of which it was once a part and to its critical or discursive milieu where commentators once effectively collaborated. It seems to now await acquisition by the museum, its ultimate *mise-en-abîme*. Dashper has shifted the tense of his practice from the "present-ness" of post-object art to the "past-ness" which is postmodernism's condition. We are witnesses to a subtle slippage, a waiving of the potential of post-object art, a knowing deferral to the power and pervasiveness of the frame, to the distancing effects of art as representation.

Gregory Burke's video installation *Viewing* (1985) also made a poignant comment on the meaning and function of representation in the era of photographic reproduction. It consisted of 13 large, framed colour photographs of blurry faces in extreme close-up, and a 21-minute video of similar imagery played on a monitor turned on its side with an ambient soundtrack of real and electronic noises. Here "viewing" itself was Burke's subject. He sought to test the codes and conventions of portraiture by blurring the boundaries between mug-shot and artistic expression, and by obviating the distinctions between idiosyncratic and generic characteristics and their relation to concepts of identity. His concern was not only with the artist's instrumental role in the process of viewing but also in establishing a context within which the audience might also engage such questions. Viewers were drawn in by the relentless gazes of the photographic subjects, held by the failure of the images to coalesce into recognisable features, and made uneasy by the impression that these faces did not "fit" their frames. The work required viewers to scrutinise their own perceptual and interpretative experiences, to ask what it means to see and be seen.

But Burke's images were not of living subjects. Both the video and the still photographs represent polaroid snapshots: the stills are massive enlargements of the originals, amplifying the image's dissolution into grain, and the video is edited from Super-8 footage of the images shot as they developed. Both are therefore photographs of photographs. While Burke might have referenced the performative, he was not concerned with live action, but with the mediating processes of representation and its effects on the viewed and viewing subject. Ultimately, by filming the automatic polaroid process, Burke shifted responsibility for the image from the artist to the technology. In making this process a subject of the work, he wrested apart the traditional relation of artist and object; throwing into question the aspirations and assumptions of the creative act. Like Dashper, his was a distancing act, to put space between art and life. Clearly, these works both demonstrate a deferral to the representational, which is a characteristic of more recent (post-)conceptual practices. No longer do live actions or real situations serve as the absent obverse to the photographic; instead meanings are folded into the realm of the represented.

Perhaps post-object art's subliminal fascination for the photographic was instrumental in its ultimate hyphenation from the very existential reality it sought to work within. However, post-object art's remainder — the photo-document — survives as a vital index and trace. In its ability

to work across and between event and text, it continues to inveigle the actual into discursive space. A history of the 1970s might then serve as valedictory to the possibilities of both art's isolation from and immediate connection with the "real". This is likely to be one of post-object art's most provocative and enduring legacies.

Christina Barton

1. Guy Debord *The Society of the Spectacle* Zone Books, New York, 1995. p12.

2. Christina Barton *Post-Object Art in New Zealand 1969–1979: Experiments in Art and Life* unpublished MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1987.

3. "Photography after Art Photography" *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991. p104.

4. Walter Benjamin "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *Illuminations* Schocken Books, New York, 1969. pp217-51.

5. *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965–1990* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993. pxx.

6. "The Photographic Activity of Surrealism" *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987. p31.

7. Artist's statement *Young Artists* New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts, Wellington, 1974. np.

8. "Conceptual Art History, or A Home for Homes for America" *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (eds. Michael Newman and Jon Bird) Reaktion Books, London, 1999. p138.

9. "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (eds. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer) Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995. p258.

10. Wystan Curnow "Billy Apple in New Zealand" *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly 61* May 1976. pp10-23.

11. See for example Roche/Buis *Six Performances* Auckland, 1983.

12. Vol 1, No 2, Summer 1983. pp166-87.

13. Although beyond the scope of this essay, this would necessitate a discussion of the emergence of photography as a fine art medium, with its own infrastructure of publications, galleries, exhibitions and collections; and of the local independent and commercial film industry, with its many links and connections to the art scene. It would also distinguish between those artists using photography as an expressive modern art form and those reflexively investigating the nature of the medium and the role it plays in the mediation of lived experience and the construction of identity. In the wider cultural sphere one might also think through the debt to photography evident in a younger generation of painters, for example in the deadpan imagery of Richard Killeen, Alexis Hunter, Ian Scott, Dick Frizzell and Denys Watkins, or in the encroachments of photography in the collage fragments of Jacqueline Fahey and Philip Clairmont. One would also highlight the fact that in New Zealand artists encountered international art principally in reproduction and this perhaps accounts for abstract painters' fascination with licked surfaces (Ray Thorburn) and photogenic effects (Geoff Thornley and Gretchen Albrecht). Whether it was to bring the world more literally into the field of play or to defer to its mediations, photography defines the period.

14. See Paul Taylor *Eureka! Artists from Australia* I.C.A. and Serpentine Gallery, London, 1982. p66.

15. See *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970–1980* (ed. Paul Taylor) Art and Text, Melbourne, 1984. With this book Taylor sought to retrieve 1970s art from its historical oblivion, with essays on various modes of practice from leftist posters to feminist art, from modernist abstraction to conceptual art. Francis Pound may be the one critic who formulated an argument about the mediated and mediating nature of the visual in a New Zealand context, however his sole focus was painting.

16. The polaroids are all of Westlake Girls High School on Auckland's North Shore, a typical Nelson Block, taken by the artist from the playing field between the motorway and the school.

17. For contemporary responses to the exhibition see Tim Walker "Motorway Schools at 100m^2" *Art New Zealand 18* Summer 1980. pp50-1. Also Elizabeth Leyland "Motorway Schools" and Harry Osborne "Motorway Schools" from an October 1981 issue of *Craccum* (clipping from Frank Stark's 100m^2 archive).

18. *100m^2: A 10 Year Survey* Artspace, Auckland, 1990; *Julian Dashper Photography 1980–1994* Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1994; and most recently *Time, Death and Narrative* Auckland Art Gallery, 1999 (where works by contemporary artists contextualised Colin McCahon's 1966 painting *The Way of the Cross*).

Action Replay: Post-script

ARTSPACE   PUBLICATIONS GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY

Action Replay was curated by Christina Barton, Wystan Curnow, John Hurrell,
Robert Leonard, and featured work by Jim Allen, Billy Apple, Bruce Barber,
Mel Bochner, City Group, Betty Collings, Philip Dadson, Andrew Drummond, Adrian Hall,
Terrence Handscomb, Christine Hellyar, Maree Horner, Darcy Lange, John Lethbridge,
Annea Lockwood, Colin McCahon, Leon Narbey, Roger Peters, Pauline Rhodes,
Peter Roche, Warren Viscoe.

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