

World Without End: Photography and the 20th Century

Some rare photographs but a flawed approach

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World Without End: Photography and the 20th Century, a recently concluded exhibition of 200 works by 42 photographers at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), was billed as the largest photography exhibition ever mounted by an Australian state-owned gallery. While the show contained some rare and unusual pictures from the vast archive of photographic work produced over the last 100 years, many seminal photographers were not represented.

Perhaps, given the budgetary constraints generally imposed on Australian photography exhibitions, it may have been too ambitious to attempt a major review of 20th century photography. With only 200 photographs it might have been better to concentrate on an in-depth examination of a few key photographers or styles. This problem, a legitimate subject for discussion and debate, was secondary, however, compared to the ahistorical approach taken by the organisers.

The exhibition catalogue declared that it would “examine the relationship between the photograph and cultural memory in the 20th century, and the relationship between the photograph and the workings of the imagination” without dealing “directly or specifically with issues to do with art history, the history of photography, or the relationship between the two”.

But how can anyone explore the relationship between photography and “collective or cultural memory” or “the photograph and the workings of the imagination” without history as a guide? What level of aesthetic appreciation or inner exploration of a photograph is possible if the viewer knows nothing about the history and the social conditions that produced it?

Exhibition organisers ignored these elementary questions and arranged the show thematically, not chronologically, with work of significant early photographers displayed alongside pictures by lesser talents from the 1990s. Vague wall texts and the eclectic four-page time line in the catalogue provided little assistance.

No serious attempt was made to present an objective and accessible historical overview of photography's complex evolution, examining the main lines of development and trends along with artistic controversies and leading personalities. Viewers were essentially left to their own resources.

Stieglitz and photography as an artistic medium

At the dawn of the 20th century, academies and art museums regarded photography as a useful tool for the reproduction of artistic work or scientific investigation, not as a medium for serious artistic expression. One of those who helped to establish photography as a recognised art form was American photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946). *World Without End* had eight Stieglitz prints on show.

Described by one historian as a “20th century American, but with the bark still on him,” Stieglitz was uncompromisingly hostile to the view that photography was a “lesser” art. As he declared in one article: “The arts...

have distinct departments, and unless photography has its own possibilities of expression, separate from those of the other arts, it is merely a process, not an art.”

Stieglitz learnt photography while studying engineering in Germany during the 1880s and became a leading proponent of the pictorialist movement. Pictorialism first emerged in the early 1890s as a reaction against the bland naturalism of the Britain's Royal Photography Society. The pictorialists, who wanted to elevate the status of the medium, were influenced by 19th century painters—Turner, Whistler, Degas and Monet—and stressed the formal and atmospheric effects of the photographic image over subject matter.

Much of their work was symbolic and romantic with an emphasis on soft-focus techniques, dark and moody lighting and the use of elaborate darkroom and printing techniques. Other pictorialists, such as Stieglitz, preferred not to rely on complex darkroom techniques. They used natural conditions and available light to create the painterly qualities favoured by this trend.

Stieglitz edited *Camera Notes* (1896) and the influential *Camera Work* (1902-1917), formed an association of artists and photographers in 1902 and then established the Photo-Secessionist Gallery in New York. The gallery, later known as 291, encouraged experimental artistic and photographic work and played a major role in introducing the most radical contemporary European artists—Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse and Braque—to the US.

Most of the Stieglitz photographs in *World Without End* were taken after he had moved away from the romantic pictorialist style, and embraced what became known as “straight photography”. *Georgia Engelhard* (1921), a full-length portrait of a self-assured teenage girl standing in the doorway of a wooden holiday home, is my favourite. The picture, which appears to have been taken on a hot summer day, has a luminous almost transcendental quality and captures the casual confidence of this middle class girl, as well as Stieglitz's break with pictorialism.

New styles

Pictorialist photography, which to a large degree represented an attempt to merge late 19th century artistic traditions with modern photography, was one of several important innovations in the visual arts, such as cubism, fauvism, expressionism, futurism and other styles, which emerged in the 1890s and the first decade and a half of the 20th century.

These trends were animated by important technological advances and a specific social climate—one in which masses of people believed that human progress would develop through a critique of the old cultural values and political institutions. A major factor in generating this atmosphere was the intellectual and practical challenges levelled against capitalist society by the working class and the socialist movement, which had grown enormously in the preceding period.

The outbreak of World War I in August 1914, which upturned all aspects of life, killing eight million men and laying waste to large parts of Europe over four years, heightened belief in the necessity for a radical break with the old order.

Fernand Léger, a military conscript and early member of the Cubist movement in France, was one of many European artists deeply affected by the barbarism. “This war,” he wrote in 1915, “is the perfect orchestration of every means of killing, both old and new. ... It’s as linear and as arid as a geometry problem. Such a large number of shells in such a short time over such a surface area, so many men per metre and in order at the specified time, it is all triggered off mechanically.”

While it is not possible here to detail the impact of the Russian Revolution in October 1917 on artistic and cultural life, it is impossible to underestimate its influence. For those who sought to challenge the old institutions and methods the revolution signified a tremendous victory. It demonstrated the ability of socialism and the working class to find a way out of the war and a way forward for all of suffering humanity. The revolution opened a new era of artistic experimentation, not only in Russia, but also in Europe and the US. Artists from every genre demanded new styles and methods that more closely approximated and explored society and life. In photography, pictorialism’s ethereal imagery suddenly looked rather quaint against the new social and cultural reality.

Paul Strand, Alvin Langdon Coburn and other leading pictorialists began developing new techniques. Strand declared that photography had to explore the beauty of everyday objects, “without tricks of process or manipulation but through the use of straight photographic methods”. In 1917 Coburn made a series of abstract photographs or vortographs while other photographers in Europe, the US and the newly-established Soviet Union began experimenting with photomontage, negative printing, multiple exposures, solarisation and photograms as a means of freeing themselves from what they believed were the mechanical constraints of the camera.

Disappointingly there are no prints by Strand or Coburn included in the AGNSW show and only one picture each by Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956) and El Lissitzky (1890-1941), two of the most significant Soviet artist/photographers of this period. The gallery provided no biographical information on the Soviet photographers or any background on the extraordinary combinations of photography, painting, typography and other media produced by Soviet artists at this time.

Rodchenko, a sculptor, painter and graphic artist, did not begin taking pictures until 1924. His photographic work was notable for its unusual camera angles. As he declared in his *Ways of Contemporary Photography*: “In order to educate man to a new longing, everyday familiar objects must be shown to him with totally unexpected perspectives and in unexpected situations. New objects should be depicted from different sides in order to provide a complete impression of the object.”

Lissitzky, another multi-talented Soviet artist, believed the duty of artists was to use their skills and resources to liberate the population from superstition and old-world prejudices and thus lay the intellectual foundations for socialist construction.

The Rodchenko photomontage is the back cover illustration of a 1926 publication of *Conversations with a tax inspector about poetry*, a Mayakovsky poem. The picture is startling: Mayakovsky stares out at the viewer, the top of his head merging into a world globe circled by three biplanes.

Inter-war photography in Europe

World Without End exhibited some remarkable work by a number of European-based photographers from the 1920s and 1930s. Photographs by Karl Blossfeldt, Man Ray and Eugene Atget were particularly interesting.

Karl Blossfeldt (1865-1932), a former sculptor influenced by 19th century natural philosophy, was a leading figure in *Neue Sachlichkeit* or the New Objectivity trend. Applied to German painters who rejected

Expressionism, the term was also used to describe those European photographers who rejected pictorialism and all forms of photographic manipulation.

Blossfeldt specialised in plant photography. Using powerful close-up lenses and diffused natural light he photographed the complex and beautiful natural architecture of thousands of plants over the course of 30 years. The delicate and otherworldly *Equisetum hyemale* (1926) and *Chrysanthemum carinatum*, both taken in 1926 and typical of his work, were on show at AGNSW. Blossfeldt’s work experienced a resurgence of popularity in the mid-1970s, following publication of prints made from his original plates.

Man Ray (1890-1976), an American painter and sculptor based in Paris during the 1920s, had eight prints in *World Without End*. Ray took up the camera in 1920 to record his paintings but then began to explore the medium for its own sake. A member of New York’s Dadaist group, where he worked with Marcel Duchamp and others, Ray moved to Paris in 1921 and became a fashion and portrait photographer. His portraits of Parisian artists and intellectuals were internationally famous and financed his search for new photographic forms.

The Ray photographs exhibited—*Integration of shadows* (1918), *La femme* (1920), *Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, New York* (1921), *Marquise Casati* (1922), *Kiki with African mask* (1926), *Noire et blanche* (1926), *Barbette with mirror* (1927) and *untitled [woman with closed eyes]* (1928)—provided some flavour of his radical and experimental technique.

The *Marquise Casati* portrait was perhaps the most striking. A wealthy Italian countess, Casati hosted wildly extravagant parties for Europe’s rich and famous in the late 1920s and early 30s. She accumulated a personal debt of \$50 million within a few years and died a penniless alcoholic. Ray’s heavily-grained photograph is out of focus and double exposed, giving Casati four eyes and a ghostlike appearance—an appropriate illustration of the decadent and unreal world inhabited by Casati and other members of Europe’s high society between the wars.

While in Paris, Ray discovered and promoted Eugène Atget, a French photographer who spent the last three decades of his life photographing old Paris. Atget, who died in 1927, took more than 8,500 pictures of the city. As he explained in a 1920 letter, “This huge artistic and documentary collection is now complete, and I can truthfully say that I possess the whole of old Paris.”

Atget’s photographs—mainly street scenes, shop fronts and some landscapes—appear at first glance as bland historical documents; closer scrutiny discloses an eerie dream-like atmosphere. *Boulevard Massena* (1912) and *Boulevard de Strasbourg* (1912), two of the eight prints on exhibit, are typical.

Boulevard Massena is a picture of a junk-strewn alleyway or yard. Under the bright, over-exposed sky and amongst the clutter of horse bridles, broken baskets, pieces of cloth, discarded clothes and other odds and ends stands a tiny and barely noticeable figurine of a naked woman. The contrast is haunting. *Boulevard de Strasbourg* is the front window of a Parisian corset shop. While there are no human figures in the photograph, the combination of street reflections on the window, the carefully structured display, and blurred movement of items hanging outside the shop are intriguing.

World Without End also included eight prints by August Sander (1876-1964), a German pioneer of social documentary photography—*The fighter or revolutionary* (1912), *Blind children, Düren* (1921), *Student, Cologne* (1926) and *Trade unionist* (1930). Sander, a former miner, took more than 10,000 portraits during his working life. Classified according to the sitters’ class and occupation, these austere pictures provide an objective record of the rigid class divisions in capitalist Germany and a sense of growing tensions before Hitler’s Nazis took power in 1933.

Sander’s work directly clashed with Hitler’s promotion of the Germans

as a super-race. His *German Land, German People* book series was denounced by the Nazis. The printing plates and negatives of *Face of Our Time*, the first part of his “Man in the Twentieth Century” series, were seized and destroyed by Hitler's Ministry of Culture.

Documentary photography and photojournalism

Documentary photography was largely neglected in *World Without End*. The inclusion of Sander, a seminal figure in early 20th century documentary work, was an exception rather than the rule.

There were no prints by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers—Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Margaret Bourke-White or Arthur Rothstein. Although the exhibition included Walker Evans' *Subway Portraits*, these pictures were taken between 1938 and 1941, after Evans had ended his association with the FSA. This group of photographers opened a new chapter in documentary photography with their powerful and humane exposures of the impact of the 1929 Wall Street crash and the Great Depression on small farmers and rural workers.

Nor did the exhibition include any original photographs by Robert Capa, David (Chim) Seymour or Henri Cartier-Bresson, all active anti-fascists and probably the most influential photojournalists of their generation.

The exhibition did feature Eddie Adams' famous *A Vietcong expires, February 5, 1968* (1968) and prints by three significant American photographers—Weegee (1899-1968), William Klein (1928-) and Diane Arbus (1923-71). Work by the latter group bridges the gap between photojournalism, social documentary and artistic work.

Adams, a veteran war photographer, covered the Vietnam War from 1965 until 1975, when the US forces were driven out. *A Vietcong expires, February 5, 1968* records the street corner killing of a civilian by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Chief of the South Vietnamese National Police, at the beginning of the Vietcong's Tet offensive in 1968.

Loan claimed that the victim, who was never officially identified, was a Vietcong soldier. Though Adams' career was relatively undistinguished before this photograph, his grim picture of the police chief nonchalantly extinguishing a life came to symbolise the brutality of the US-backed forces and barbaric character of the Vietnam War as a whole.

Weegee, or Arthur Fellig, immigrated to New York with his family in 1910. He quit school at 14, working in various odd jobs, including as a street photographer, to support his family. First employed as a darkroom operator for Acme Newspictures, he became a freelance photographer in 1935. Using a large format press camera and flash, he photographed small time crooks, crime scenes, car accidents and other events for New York City's tabloid press. His work won international acclaim following the publication of his book, *Naked City*.

While Fellig's work was direct and harshly lit, he also worked with infrared film and flash, largely invisible to the human eye, thus allowing a more discreet line of attack. All seven of Fellig's pictures in *World Without End* are infrared shots of working class children at New York cinemas in the mid-1940s. In contrast to his chilling crime and disaster photos, these are soft and forgiving shots of children seeking temporary shelter from their poverty in the darkness of the cinema.

Two of the three photographs on show from William Klein—*Gun 1, New York City* (1954) and *New York, no. 12, Brooklyn* (1955)—are among the most outstanding pictures in the exhibition. Klein briefly studied painting under Fernand Léger in Paris and was influenced by Man Ray, Rodchenko and the Bauhaus photographers.

The two photographs, part of the collection published in Europe under the title “Life Is Good & Good For You in New York. Trance. Witness. Revels”, use extreme angles, heavy grain texture and blurred shapes. Klein's New York is chaotic, claustrophobic and disturbing, entirely at odds with the saccharine advertising and television visuals used to portray post-WWII American life. Klein, who also photographed street scenes in Europe, stopped taking still photographs in the mid-1960s to concentrate on filmmaking, later working with French directors Alain Resnais and

Jean-Luc Godard.

Gun 1, New York City (1954) is a tightly-framed picture of two young boys on a New York street. One grimaces fiercely as he aggressively points a gun into the camera lens. The other child looks on approvingly. In the background a partially obscured adult is impervious, ignorant or indifferent to the confrontation. Four decades ago, as the post-war boom was coming to an end, the idea of a child menacing someone with a gun seemed outlandish and far-fetched. Today it appears as a prophecy of what is an alarmingly regular event.

Seven Diane Arbus photographs appeared in the exhibition—amongst them *Teenage Couple on Hudson St, NYC* (1963), *Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark* (1965), *Transvestite with torn stocking, NYC* (1966) and *Identical twins, NJ* (1967). Like Klein, Arbus challenged conventional documentary photography and portraiture.

Teenage Couple on Hudson St is a poignant and yet distressing picture. It is not clear whether this young couple is married, but their weary faces are filled with despair, the weight of the world upon their shoulders. The youthful appearance of the couple is contrasted against their formal dress and a demeanour that suggests they have already endured too many tragedies.

The daughter of a wealthy department store owner, Arbus began her career as a fashion photographer in 1946 before deciding in 1957 to devote herself entirely to her own personal photography, in particular street and other “on location” portraits. After 11 years as a fashion photographer attempting to make her subjects beautiful, almost idealised, individuals, she began taking pictures of those on the margins of society—circus freaks, transvestites, nudists, asylum inmates and others—as well as empty motel rooms, eerie Disneyland venues and other cheap architectural facades.

Favourably compared with August Sander, Arbus' sharply focused and confronting portraits were widely acclaimed in American and international art circles soon after she began exhibiting in the 1960s. By 1967 she had received two Guggenheim Fellowships and held a major exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Arbus, who suffered from depression and had a low opinion of her own work, committed suicide in 1971, at the height of her career. Although it is not entirely clear what precipitated her suicide, Arbus' work touched on social and psychological issues few were ready to explore, let alone acknowledge, at the time.

New successes and problems

The widespread and well-deserved enthusiasm for Arbus's work coincided with an increasing interest in the collection and exhibition of photographs, old and new, in the US and internationally. During the 1970s, established museums began holding major photographic retrospectives, arts grants were available and serious university and high school courses were established in photographic appreciation and history. Never before had photographic exhibitions been so well attended or signed prints by photographers been so expensive.

In the 1980s and early 1990s these prices went through the roof as photography and other visual arts began attracting substantial investment funds. But as the market boomed, creative photography was being stifled by individualism, glorification of the market and conformism of every kind. Photographers, gallery owners and wealthy dealers began to lose interest in pictures that tried to refresh viewers' engagement with the world or registered a protest about it. Instead, they turned to bland reproductions of everyday icons; faddish and introverted works; or complacent staged photos promoting identity politics—multi-culturalism, feminism, etc. Genuine dissent seemed to have been exorcised from the artistic scene.

A statement issued by New York's Museum of Modern Art after it had bought Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* in 1996 is typical of this unfavourable and artistically debilitating climate. Sherman, a talented

artist who has produced some thoughtful and provocative work, was elevated to celebrity status after the museum paid her \$1 million for the set of 69 black-and-white prints. Peter Galassi, the museum's photography curator, declared that the "sheer volume of verbiage—the banal and bombastic along with the thoughtful and perceptive—is a symptom of the nature of Sherman's achievement (and now part of its meaning)". What mattered was the amount of attention paid to Sherman, not the aesthetic quality of her work.

World Without End did include a few serious photographers from this difficult period. Hiroshi Sugimoto's black and white photographs of cinemas—*Fox Theatre, Detroit, Michigan* (1978) and *Los Altos Drive-In (Lakewood)* (1993)—have a distinctive hypnotic quality. Rineke Dijkstra's *Beaches* series, which are large format colour shots of teenagers on beaches in the US, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and portraits by African photographer Seydou Keita, have an honesty and sensitivity uncommon in most contemporary work.

These, however, are the exceptions. Photographs by Nancy Burson, Jeff Wall and Tracey Moffatt are more representative examples of the empty and generally uninspiring work that has come to dominate the contemporary photographic art scene.

Burson, who had four pictures on show, specialises in creating computer-generated composite portraits. Critics claim her work "delves into the subjectivity of appearance" and "the instability of photographic reality". According to background notes, she was influenced by Sir Francis Galton, a 19th century British statistician who claimed he could ascertain a criminal type from facial characteristics.

One of her pictures, *Big Brother* (1983), is a composite portrait of Stalin and Hitler and other dictators. This nondescript portrait has no artistic merits. To proclaim the study of facial features as an alternative to a political and historical understanding of the individuals is fatuous in the extreme.

Tracey Moffatt's, *Pet thang* (1992), six dreamlike and vaguely sexual self-portraits with sheep, was equally banal. Moffatt, an Aboriginal photographer and filmmaker from Queensland, made her name with a series of cibachrome colour photographs of studio reconstructions purporting to deal with the issues of violence and race in Australia. This glossy and rather self-conscious work attempts to recreate the look and feel of 1960s B-grade film and television or garish postcards.

A not untalented individual, Moffatt has been "discovered" by a number of New York critics, where she has exhibited since 1997. The overblown praise for Moffatt from these quarters has not encouraged genuinely thoughtful or groundbreaking work. *Pet thang* may be a wry joke on her part but it is not clear against whom it is directed, or why.

Jeff Wall, a Canadian photographer who began his career as an art historian, had one picture—*The Destroyed Room* (1978)—in the exhibition. The large colour photograph is a blandly lit studio shot of an upturned and slashed mattress, broken furniture, clothing, shoes and other items. The scene is reproduced as a wall size colour transparency and mounted on a light box, like a subway advertisement. According to the catalogue notes, the picture attempts to recreate the "eroticised violence" of Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*. Despite the tangled clothes and other odds and ends, the photograph is sterile, with none of the atmosphere or presence of Delacroix's work.

In the early 1980s a critic commented that the characters in Diane Arbus' photographs were infused with a melancholy "only dispelled by artifice and imagination". "The 'real world', a gloomy backdrop," he continued, "is best shut out." This comment more aptly describes the direction taken by many photographers and artists during the last two decades.

Photography in 1901 was not widely recognised as a medium for serious artistic expression. One hundred years later this is no longer an issue of debate. *World Without End*, despite its ahistorical presentation and glaring

omissions, documents the extraordinary advances made over the past century. But as the 21st century begins, it is necessary to recognise that contemporary art photography, despite the availability of multi-media and digital techniques, is stagnating, crying out for a new orientation and direction.

Shutting out the "real world", as so many have done, is no solution. Rather, what photographers need is a deeper comprehension of it, a more profound understanding of the complex experiences of the 20th century and the relationship of photography to broader social and political processes.

Creative breakthroughs in the early years of the century reflected, at the most fundamental level, the intellectual atmosphere spawned by the growth of progressive social, cultural and political movements. Photography can only aspire to a qualitatively higher aesthetic level when illusions in the permanence and power of the profit system are shattered and masses of people start searching for ways to establish a new, genuinely humane and enlightened society. Those photographers frustrated with the current stultifying climate, who want to produce challenging and innovative work, should begin to give serious consideration to these issues.

See Also:

Cindy Sherman Retrospective: An artist to be taken seriously



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