

In Living Memory*
Susan Charlton

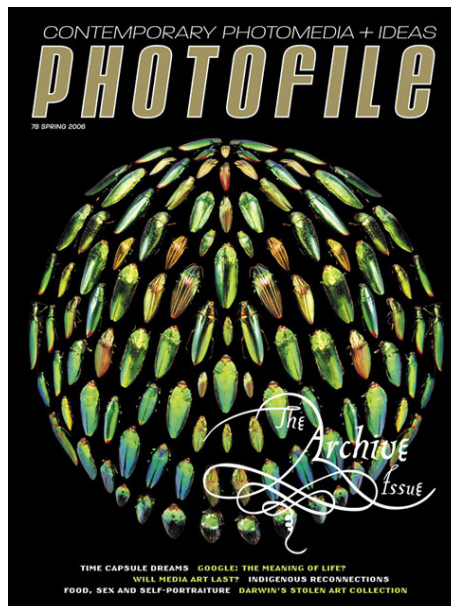
In June 1977, the official records of the former New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board were transferred to the protection of State Records, the NSW Government archives institution, including 1000 loosely stored black and white photographs of Indigenous people taken between 1924 and 1961.

Consider the photograph of your grandfather that you have displayed, handtinted and framed on the mantelpiece with other treasured family photographs. Imagine that a black and white version of the same image lies dormant on the shelves of a pristine, state-of-the-art government storage facility. And that there are one or two other photographs of him, which you have never seen, also entombed there; unidentified, unreconciled.

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Or that a handwritten ledger exists, which records key moments in your mother's early life: the names and ages of her brothers and sisters, the day she was taken away, the properties out West where she worked as a servant, the child she had to an unnamed father, the loss of that child, the fight for that child. Dated entries until the authorities lose their control over her or are closed down themselves.

Or that you work professionally with the photographs and hope to find your own family amongst the one thousand images in the collection. But it never happens. All you can do is be with the other families as they search for photographic evidence, share their pride and excitement, honour their silences, record their knowledge.



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Still Life

The Aborigines Welfare Board photographs do not provide a complete picture of Indigenous life from the 1920s to the 1960s; some people and places are represented by many photographs; others by a few or none at all.

Working with the photographs is like piecing together the fragile remains of a long-lost silent film. Only disordered fragments survive — sometimes in short sequences, and, other times, single still frames. Very little documentation exists of the connections between each shot, so the narrative trajectory must be discerned from the detail within each frame, and between frames. Many scenes remain vivid in the memories of those who have witnessed them; they recognise faces and places. One identified still image is matched with an unidentified other. Each surviving frame gestures towards the wider known story; each missing frame calls forth the deeper unknown.

Magnifying glass in hand, the researcher takes in all that lies within the boundary of each photograph. The captured image struggles against its containment. This agitation can be discerned by the magnified eye and perceived in the white-gloved hand. As though the compromised nature of the image-taking means that it has never been truly fixed by the photo chemicals. Working with these still images over time, heightens this sense of animation; this potential for cinema. Each cell contains within it notes towards the narration of

all other cells. Each scene projects beyond the specificity of its own time and space.

It seems possible to read the photographs backwards and forwards across time. The name of a young girl from the past is found on the grave of an old woman in the present. A seemingly innocent photograph triggers an explosive reaction years later. When a family comes searching for a relative, their name is immediately familiar, and you feel you already know their mother, their brother, their grandparents. But you don't know anything at all. An anxiety about reading the images begins to develop. You find you cannot truly trust any of them. The very context of their creation casts doubt on ever being able to reconstruct the complete picture.

Double Exposure

***In Living Memory* – an exhibition based on the Aborigines Welfare Board photographs – opens to the public at State Records Gallery in The Rocks on 8 September 2006.**

The exhibition title could also have been *Double Exposure*. Just as a photographer (or filmmaker) might superimpose two separate images to make the one, the exhibition will bring the Aborigines Welfare Board images to light again so they can be exposed to other layers of history and meaning. The effect of this double exposure on the status of the image has been immediately apparent in the process of meeting with Indigenous communities to research, develop and present the exhibition.

In the presence of community Elders, historical photographs that were taken to document the visit of a NSW governor to the town of Moree in 1954 are reanimated by reexposure to the light. The intention of the photos, the point of view of the photos, the meaning of the photos all change right before our eyes. As the community delights in identifying all the Aboriginal people at the edge of the official photographs, the governor's image begins to recede. All that was central begins to retreat; all that was peripheral is now centrestage. The formerly anonymous and unknown have asserted their place in the photographs and, hence, in the story of their own community.

This double take is also happening beyond the photographic image. Elsewhere in Moree, a group of women Elders, known as the Granniators, have taken over the former gentleman's club for their community support projects. What was once the exclusive domain of local landowners, is now a thriving centre full of Indigenous babies, young children and their mothers. The intention, point of view and meaning of physical spaces and community relations have also begun to change. Indigenous photographer Mervyn Bishop has been present at many of these moments of revelation and in these spaces of transformation. His contemporary personal photographs for the exhibition will bring new light to images of people and places previously documented in the Board's official record. Merv Bishop is not only making double exposures, he is creating new State records.

Writing based on the experiences of Susan Charlton and colleagues at State Records NSW whilst working with

Susan Charlton: In Living Memory

**photographs from the records of the former New South Wales
Aborigines Welfare Board**