

❖ **Within an illustrated box: ontology of a photography in demise. An extract from the exegesis *Photography: the dominant aesthetic***

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It's a small world, but I wouldn't want to have to paint it (Murray, 1988).

Abstract

This paper is an extract from a larger body of research that is concerned primarily with the ontology of a photography in demise – that is to say, traditional film-based photography. Inevitably it proceeds to examine more than the recent industrial shift from analogue to electronic technology by reviewing what the original status of photography essentially was and how perceived from a phenomenological view of photography's affect, value and persistence as a global and culturally dominant way of seeing and communicating. Review and analysis undertaken proceeds on the premise of the author's practice as an artist, thinking about and making photographs leading to a functional understanding of the convergence of contemporary art processes with philosophical method and particularly existential phenomenology.

What surfaces out of an examination of historic ontologies of photography, tracing the industrial shift from analogue to digital photography, is a larger, discernible ontology of a photography in demise and the promise as well as hazards of its electronic 'palingenesis'. This reshaping of photography tracks a decades long, irregular shift in post-modern perceptions of photography from a discourse locked in dichotomy between 'formalist' and 'contextual' theorizing that ended in reconstituting materiality to the image. However, it is the socio-perceptual affect on seeing and understanding in photographic terms, of perspectival and monocular views of the world, truth in detail, meaning in focus, mimesis and beauty in photogenic form and all of it as anodyne and slender as the paper upon which it is printed.

I am sifting through some of the philosophical underpinnings of the power and limits of photography as a dominant descriptor that busily replaced and determined modern forms of written and spoken language as well as other forms of representation, in its minute yet magnified, partial trace of the real. The method of analysis is shaped here by the idea, histories and presence of art unashamedly as a kind of observational laboratory with a notion of 'sculpture' supplanting 'art' as a tool for seeing and understanding informed by the method of existential phenomenology. Whether accredited as art or not, it may have been just "visual-mindedness" on my part that logs a persistent view of 'photograph' as a sculptural condition, a discrete object.

By 'sculpture' I do not mean elevating 'photograph' to a plinth as revered object but, in the

Duchampian sense, the way the notion “ready-made” cleverly shifts context by nature of its placement, in this case, the viewing paradigm of gallery from that of “traditional museum setting” to something like an “experimental, observational laboratory”. For example, in the act of seeing a displaced urinal with its misnomer ‘fountain’ and bawdy signature, “R. MUTT 1917”, prejudice may be stripped bare to reveal object as an object in itself.



Alfred Steiglitz 1917
Marcel Duchamp's Fountain

Thus, given that experience, one either rejects it as an abomination within a place intended for viewing the desirable ideal, or emphatically accommodates a whole new way of seeing. From this point on it can be shown that artwork itself begins to think or rather, wonder. Thus, I see sculpture not in terms of idealized art object but simply a technique for seeing, setting aside, naming or titling, without preconception.

This view of sculpture – as a potent trope – positions me to see without language becoming a kind of veil, a fixed and customary filter. Instead I am experiencing, seeing and wondering, rather in the same vein as C. S. Peirce the American logician, philosopher and key figure in establishing semiotics with his acronym ‘F. R. L.’. That is to say, the First Rule of Logic is ‘wonder’ and “in one sense, this sole”, rule of reason is that, “in order to learn, one needs to desire to learn and desire it without resting satisfied with that which one is inclined to think” (Peirce, 1899: 135). According to Van Alphen:

Art is a laboratory where experiments are conducted that shape thought into visual and imaginative ways of framing the pain points of culture (Van Alphen, 2005: xii).

When Van Alphen characterizes art as a laboratory, he is not only relaying that insight to art practitioners, but rather reprimanding “art critics and scholars” for continuing to see art and the museum as historical product and not historical agency – that is to say, art in action and as process. The museum converts into studio and an extension of studio practice, though located alongside and not necessarily at the expense of, the institution’s archiving aegis. Thereafter, for me as practitioner it has always been that oddness of “photographic image” – a strange thing, a weird object, seen-as-though-seen-for-the-first-time – and so to experiencing ‘photograph’ essentially without prejudice and/or context, as a thing-in-itself, akin to a “peak experience” (Maslow, 1964: 23). It is the most beautiful, unencumbered way of seeing and experiencing of the world and what Susan Sontag implies when she divines the most ‘surreal’ aspect of photography as being the photograph itself.

Seeing ‘sculpturally’ in this way is close to philosophical speculation in phenomenology, *shāh māt* 1 by Duchamp, and what is experienced here, in phenomenological terms, is an *epoché* – ‘photograph’ as ‘sculpture’ or:

... a suspension of belief of existence and consequently of action in the real world whereby one's own consciousness is subject to immanent critique so that when such belief is recovered, it will have a firmer grounding in consciousness – the world 'is lost in order to be regained' (Husserl, 1931).

Furthermore, the descriptiveness of the phenomenological method – economic, careful – and persistent description of that which is present and observed, returning again and again to the experience it seems so similar to the process of drawing which, according to Ihde, (1986: 34) is "in Wittgensteinian form: 'describe, don't explain'". At this point it seems description splits amoeba-like and new meaning, insight, like new life, is conceived. It is conscientious reflection that splits open description through correlation and as intentionality, an exponential shaping of experience making the noetic process, or insight, philosophical or, indeed, art.

Witnessing photograph as a phenomenon, its essential 'thingness' and affect takes speculation beyond our almost peremptory modern, optically dominant, sensorium. This draws on the photograph in synaesthetic reflex for concern that illusion remains structurally undisturbed and hidden so that it becomes a 'habit of mind' or subconscious in unison with much of the conceptual formation of illusion regarding image content and referent. And, this digs deeply in terms of the photographic object as a whole, its materiality being subsumed, becoming transparent and unspoken, to the point where we need reminding that "... a photograph is a three-dimensional thing, not only a two dimensional image" (Edwards & Hart, 2004: 1). Further, that photographs have "... volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in the world" (Batchen, 1997: 2).

What I have had to address as part of a fresh examination of ontologies of photography, and what has become, in the industrial shift from analogue to digital photography, an ontology of a photography in demise, follows a decades long, irregular shift in postmodern perceptions of art and photography reconstituting materiality to image and a discourse locked in dichotomy between 'formalist' and 'contextual' theorizing. Postmodern critical theory of photography around the mid-to-late 20th century commenced with an ontological desire to reveal essentially what photography is, working from an earlier phenomenology of photography by André Bazin 2 and including the unaffected writings of proto-photographers – that is to say, the early experimenters in photography such as Fox Talbot, Daguerre and Niepce. So that, known commentators on photography such as Roland Barthes, Phillipe Dubois 3, Susan Sontag 4, John Berger 5 and Hubert Damisch, are all concerned with an ontology of photography as we knew it, pre-electronic/digital, in 'traditional' chemical or analogue form.

Roland Barthes explains in his tract on the essence of photography, *Camera Lucida* 6, that he was:

... overcome by an ontological desire: I wanted to learn at all cost what photography was "in itself", by what essential features it was to be distinguished from the community of images (Barthes, 1980: 3).

Writers of this trans-Atlantic milieu based in Paris, included Christian Metz 7, Rosalind Krauss 8, and were all

... associated with October, a journal concerned with visual studies, semiotics and psychoanalysis...they brought with them insights gleaned from the discipline of semiology, and asked: what kind of sign is the photograph? (Hauser 2007: 67).

Not a surprising inquiry from such a group really, and the overriding conclusion was, based on the original work of C. S. Peirce that, as a sign, all photographs are indexical, the sign and signified are similar – understanding that the photograph image fundamentally comprises a

trace, or physio-chemical imprint of the real, as photograph and referent or its object. Indeed Peirce, the key-figure in the establishment of the study of signs as semiotics, considered that:

... photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But, this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs [indices], those by physical connection (Peirce, 1955: 106).

The closing decade of the 20th century entertained a rift in postmodern critique of photography between what may be referred to as the ontological 9 and the contextual 10 group of theorists, though it is the latter group that most vigorously declared fields of practice and exercised exclusion in order to hold the debate. Kitty Hauser, Geoffrey Batchen and Winifred Nöth all refer to the issue in slightly different ways, but with similar effect:

The most serious challenge to the ontological approach to photography is derived from the other major strand of postmodern photographic theory, one which stresses the importance of context (Hauser, 2007: 69).

And, Geoffrey Batchen 11 opines that the differences between the two theoretical approaches are 'contextual' compared with 'formalist', intelligently proposing that they may need to not function antithetically as there is value in both.

Postmodern, relativist critical theory on photography through the 1980s include John Tagg 12, Allan Sekula 13, Victor Burgin 14 and Solomon-Godeau 15 working from Marxist notions of cultural materialism and the writings of Pierre Machery, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault "to shed light on the ways in which photographs have been used to support and (sometimes subvert) disciplinary power and dominant ideology" (Hauser, 2007: 69).

All maintain that 'photograph' exists only within specific contexts and the photographic image functions as an arbitrary assemblage usually acting out ideological tropes given the intent of an individual author/photographer and mostly in accord with prevailing institutions of authority and current power structures. Meaning for any and each photograph is a determinant of the context in which they are posited, formed by an array of surrounding features that include the milieu of discourses in which they exist as pictorial tropes, captions, titling and/or more extensive text in accompaniment.

Geoffrey Batchen, attending to ontologies of photography compared with individual photographs analysed in the context of power relationships, maintains that "recent Anglo-American 16 accounts of photography" as opposed to American-Gallic 17 accounts promoted throughout the 1970s and 80s, "then as now, dominates how photographs are discussed in most museums and art historical texts" (Batchen 1997: 176).

Employing a prime neologism of Derrida's 'différance', Batchen describes the critical dichotomy between formalist and postmodern views, each claiming liminality of photography in opposition to one another, or most particularly a postmodern dismissal of a more 'formalist' view – either 'natural' or 'cultural' respectively. He goes on to elaborate:

... postmodernists and formalists want to identify photography with a single generative source (either culture or nature, either context or essence, either the outside or the inside) (Batchen 1997: 176).

The transparency of the medium is such that "in order to see what the photograph is of we must first suppress consciousness of what the photograph is in material terms" (Batchen,

1997: 2). The Anglo-American nexus of art and photography by postmodern theorists, comprising artists and academics not “collectors and curators”, sought to dematerialize all art 18, including the photograph, rendering its physicality transparent and image emphatic, on several fronts. Firstly, culling ‘photograph’ into the realm of cultural materialism and conceptual redrafts it into a more familiar mediation of text.

Second, underpinning Anglo-American postmodernism, there is a political, Marxist determination to excoriate distractions of connoisseurship and commodification and finally, rendering to white noise mindless prattle on technique and formulaic aesthetics. This is not an agenda that can be sustained over the longer term, because it simply ignores, blanks out, making transparent a physicality that is essential to photographic image both as support and as the ‘inscribed’ fundament of a photograph’s descriptive power.

What the ‘contextual’ branch of postmodernists did was to elicit the exchange value of the photographic image as solely a discursive system, leaving its unspoken physicality to the museum, auction house, collection, practitioner, commerce, publishing and industry. The prevailing tendency is that photographs are apprehended in one visual act, absorbing image and object together, yet privileging the former. Photographs thus become detached from their physical properties and consequently from the functional context of materiality that is glossed merely as a neutral support for the material (Edwards & Hart, 2002: 1-2).

Furthermore, the technological shift from analogue to digital affects ‘photograph’ at fundament, so photography throughout my photographic projects are deliberately un-staged compared to my previously exhibited photographic artwork. The making of documentary photography is seen here as a testing of photography’s unique indexical condition, its inscription of the real and fidelity to nature, chaos and symptomatically, chance being at the essence of documentary authority, a priori of the medium’s descriptive power. Thereafter, photography appears a cultural assemblage controlled by natural liminalities requiring measured control over brilliant description – that is to say subjective realisms shaped out of a pinhole of objective reality.

Primarily though, it is this key point of trace, the forming of a latent image, exciting the intelligence and awe of proto-photographers at what had been ‘captured’ and it’s the same slight shock that subsequent viewers and makers consistently experience, then sublimate, whenever confronting ‘photograph’ with its illumined tracing of the real, capturing copious detail from a single viewpoint at unimaginable speed 19 received often as the verisimilitude of its referent. Yet, paradoxically, the photograph is fundamentally unnatural even given its iconic and/or indexical representation, its completion ends as an artifice encasing a trace of the real 20, whereby its image is perceived to “stand for” its referent.

Damisch goes some way to describing the photographic document literally and in its physicality, as thin and insubstantial compared to its dynamical object or referent 21 that has no actual connection with such apart from astonishingly accurate, but very narrow, aspects of appearance that can only be consigned objectively to status, and meaningfully so, within the pantheon of photography and all other photographs. Nonetheless, within this precise, yet compact, correspondence to the real, reside all claims or supposition to the objectivity of a photographic image – its realism.



David Cubby 2011 Headless Man at Australian
Citizenship Ceremony, Australia Day

This is the deception, as the perceived differs from the actual, built into the make-up of the photographic image, a construction in which author and viewer are interchangeably complicit in same way Sartre maintains all images are in essence a deceit (Sartre, 1940).

Tom Gunning's examination of the camera's intercession between 'real' and 'photograph', notes that within most theoretical discourse on photography, lens, film, exposure, shutter and film/print process tend to become "magically whisked away if one considers the photograph as a direct imprint of reality" (Gunning, 2004: 40). Gunning neatly divines Hubert Damisch's 'theses' for those carried along with the ontological sophistry of trace constituting, "a far more subtle and insidious historical deceit" that comes with "the black box, the photographic camera" that is the effect of the variable assemblage(s) incorporating human decision-making all of which intercept and structure image meaningfully.

It is necessary to recognize this 'number of theses' function in synchronicity, natural and cultural, so that as Barthes' proclamation of photography's evidential force, being a corollary of time not the object, asserts, "the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation"²². This supplements Susan Sontag's description of the function of the photographer determining lighting, exposure, texture, tonality, placement and the geometrical super-structure of the image is "... as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawing ..." (Sontag, 1977: 6-7). In the end event though, it is the synchronic effect of a set of theses, whichever is deemed emphatic, that construct a photographic outcome from light inscribed 'signs' as a natural event cultivated by framing, composing, focusing, timing and scaling into a precise and meaningful whole.

It is important to be aware that the photograph is the end product of the various stages of photographic production, bearing in mind how at each point in the process human intervention and technological means may affect the resulting image *and its semiotic status*²³ (Hauser, 2005: 74). Lev Manovich underscores Sontag's emphasis on an interpretative bias for film questioning the indexicality of motion pictures, tagging cinema as a "sub-genre of painting" in the context of digital manipulation, and increasingly accurate three-dimensional animation and the capacity:

... to cut, bend, stretch and stitch digitized film images into something which has perfect photographic credibility, though it was never actually filmed (Manovich, 1995).

Similarly, Levinson claims that digitization of the photograph undercuts any "truth claim" as the very reliability of the photograph as mute, unbiased witness of reality" because of the "fallibility

of technological manipulation and the potential for human refinement of production (Levinson, 1997: 41-43).

It is clear that digital camera technology supersedes its analogue predecessor(s) in overwhelmingly successful parody, manipulating electronic hardware and software, sensors as well as circuitry, in a pixelated, centre stage re-enactment of the analogue bringing augmentation along with sometimes disconcerting, though, often useful and superior, deviation from its analogue predecessor. There is also a complex technical argument that photographs derive from a latent image, a 'trace' formed within electronic sensors.

It is inevitable that the credibility of the "truth claim" in terms of the iconic status as well as indexicality of 'photograph', must be questioned within the digital aegis because the physio-chemical retention of actual light and its absence, though effectively simulated, can only ever be an electronic parody of the analogue and that disparity acutely excises photograph from real. Such is the incisive and momentous change from analogue to digital because what previously distinguished photography from all other forms of representation, was its actual annexation of the real, mapping photography closer to nature or chaos, in time intersecting space, than any other form of visual representation. And, as cause is to symptom, the "capture of light" in the analogue process is by far a more important factor in registering the authenticity of photograph than image manipulation and enhancement, the latter having always been similarly extant throughout analogue and digital eras. Differences between high-resolution manipulation and enhancement in the digital compared to analogue process is that electronic is less irksome than wet chemical process or a wide range of direct material application, whereas the digital requires specialized software skills as opposed to extensive and varied range of specialist analogue technical skills 24.

Paul Frosh natively reverses Barthes' semiotic maxim to read digitally as "photographs are codes without a message" followed by, in less slick manner, "re-purpose-able visual content made of malleable info-pixels" (Frosh: 2004, 45). Otherwise, there are definite differences in the response of sensors that transform light into electricity rather than blackening salts suspended in an emulsion, one being that digital responds to a far more extended light range with much higher resolution.

Now, regarding the difference between CCD/CMOS, semi-conductors/sensors, and silver halide, it is argued that digital photo-imaging lacks indexicality as distinct from analogue photography. Even so, Tom Gunning maintains that, similar to the process of chemical photography, encoding data about light in a matrix of enumeration is determined indexically by objects external to the camera (Gunning, 2004). This is a similar premise to the principle of the physics of colour theory showing that while the outside world is colourless in itself, our eyes will register a particular colour dependent upon how much, or not, of a wavelength of electromagnetic spectrum penetrates an object surface.

Martin Lister envisions that the parodical disposition of digital camera is so effective that the images produced are photo-realistic, they borrow from photography's currency its historic "reality effect", simply in order to have meaning. (Lister, 2007: 252). In other words, the electronics and computer, as well as photographic industries, in order to deliver a vehicle that appears usefully accommodated within extant paradigms and popular anticipation of what a photograph is, are determined upon shaping a parody of the digital camera that is so effective that dissimilar means of capture, retention and output are an insignificant factor in the perceived relative values and intent of the new vehicle.

Nonetheless, whilst it is true that analogue and digital systems capture and hold a definite range of the electromagnetic spectrum in different ways and for the most part the outcome is comparable, there are inevitably useful characteristics of electronic capture that have already

altered and extended as well as shifted photography's vernacular into new trajectories for example in terms of exposure and resolution and/or still images culled from HD video. Even so, it appears that the digital/analogue divide over claims to veracity may close in short order as non-sequitur as digital photography proceeds, at the least, in powerfully parody of the analogue or persists with arguments that the latent image exists electronically, all resulting in an parodically similar camera obscura/lenticular apparatus and one point perspective. Yet, as we attend to new media technology within its own objective liminalities and possibilities, amongst these novel forms and paradigms, again and again the question needs to be asked and shall be asked with increasing frequency: do we desire or need to continue to produce and consume still images?

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Footnotes

1 'shāh māt' is the Persian word for ambush and the origin of the chess phrase 'check mate'

2 Bazin, André, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, (Bazin, 1958)

3 "According to Philippe Dubois, the first semiotical theories of photography tended to look upon the photograph as a mirror of reality, or, in Peircean terms, as an icon. Then came that

most celebrated generation of iconoclasts who tried to demonstrate the conventionality of all signs, supposing even the photograph to present a 'coded' version of reality, or, as Peirce (according to Dubois, at least) would have said, a symbol. And finally the photograph was seen for what, according to Dubois, it really is: an index, more specifically, a trace left behind by the referent itself." <http://filserver.arthist.lu.se/lutsem/ecyclo/photography.html> (accessed 19 November 2009)

4 Susan Sontag's *On Photography* 1979 is the seminal tome on photography, still in print

5 John Berger has written extensively on photography: *Understanding a Photograph in The Look of Things*, *Uses of Photography* 1974 *Another Way of Telling* 1982 and more

6 *Camera Lucida* was dedicated to Jean Paul Sartre's 1940 essay addressing a phenomenology of imagination, *L'Imaginaire*. (Barthes, 1980)

7 Christian Metz, French film theorist pioneering semiotic analysis of film

8 Rosalind Krauss: American art critic and associate of Clement Greenberg, until association with him became 'untenable' because of vitriolic criticism from anti-formalist, postmodern artists and art theorists

9 ontological, formalist, realist, natural

10 contextual, relativist, Marxist, cultural

11 Geoffrey Batchen, the Australian photography historian and theorist, has argued that the nature of photography can be understood through a study of its own history. He has attempted to think through the ways that photography has changed the institutions in which it has been deployed, and he has advocated looking at the way photography itself has been altered by entering into various institutional spaces. (Batchen, 1997)http://publish.uwo.ca/~sbassnet/Photo.html#_ftn_1

12 British photography theorist John Tagg has argued that photography is a discursive system, rather than a coherent object or a unified medium or technology. According to Tagg, the term photography refers to an array of practices, which operate across a range of institutional spaces. In one place, photography may be specified as instrument and record, while in another, it could be produced as artistic expression or commodity. When photography is considered as a discursive outcome rather than as a coherent medium, the meaning and status of a photograph are considered as an event. The study of photography would thus entail an investigation of the rules that govern and constrain the performance of a photograph, with an understanding that the performance is always both conditional and specific (Tagg, 1993). http://publish.uwo.ca/~sbassnet/Photo.html#_ftn_1 [accessed 18 December 2009]

13 Allan Sekula's ... interest in photography was sparked through his engagement with conceptual and performative art ... David Antin, John Baldessari and Herbert Marcuse - all lecturers at San Diego - helped spark an interest in Western Marxism, Fluxus and conceptual art. To these were added the feminist and anti-Colonial influences of student activists such as Angela Davis and Martha Rosler. Today Sekula is known as a critic, writer and artist. <http://www.zannybeg.com.third%20text.htm> (accessed 2 December 2009)

14 Victor Burgin is a British artist and a writer. Burgin first came to attention as a conceptual artist in the late 1960s. He has worked with photography and film, calling painting "the anachronistic daubing of woven fabrics with coloured mud". His work is influenced by theorists and philosophers such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Burgin (accessed 16 December 2009)

15 Abigail Solomon-Godeau is an American feminist art and photography critic and art historian specializing in nineteenth-century French art.

16 contextual

17 ontological

18 Victor Burgin's perjorative description of painting as "the anachronistic daubing of woven fabrics with coloured mud"

19 "capturing copious detail ... at unimaginable speed" seems a fair definition for 'une mémoire photographique'.

20 "... it is not part of its own nature that it must function as matter for an image. The photo, taken in itself is a thing ..." (Sartre, 1940: 18)

21 "In Peircean semeiotic, the immediate object is the semeiotical object as it appears within the semeiosis process as representatively present therein, whereas the dynamical object is the object as it really is regardless of how or what it is represented as being in any given representation of it. The dynamical object is "the thing itself," transcending any given cognition though not beyond cognition generally, whereas the immediate object is the thing as immanent in semeiosis, the thing as it appears to be (is thought to be). Understanding this distinction is of the first importance for anyone interested in the epistemological import of semeiotic, as Charles Peirce conceived it; for the dynamical object is that to which our thoughts conform when they have the value of truth, whereas the immediate object is the object as we think it to be, regardless of whether or not that thought about it is true or false. The former is required for the possibility of truth, the latter for taking due account of the possibility of error." (Randsell, 2007)

22 "... the important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation." (Barthes, 1980: 88-89).

23 My italic emphasis

24 Few now recall the viability and commercial scale as well as high level of skills of the analogue that existed until about thirty-five years ago in terms of the re-touching and image manipulation industry servicing re-touching, multiple exposure, toning, colouring, silver stripping, copy-work, darkroom techniques, negative and positive re-compositing and so on, all replaced now by digital imaging outlets but with similar aims and output.

About the author

David Cubby is a photographer and academic at the University of Western Sydney. Recent exhibitions include Spectacle Project, UWS AD Gallery, Brenda May Gallery, Sydney, Aurora Festival, Parramatta 2008/9, Finalist, Citibank Photographic Portrait AGNSW, Not Quite the Sydney Opera House, Museum of Sydney 2005, Somewhere Else at Phototechnica Gallery, Sydney 2003 and Australian Definition at Shenzhen City Gallery in Guangdong Province, China 2000. He has worked intensively through Asia, including China, India, Tibet as well as Thailand. Cubby's work is held in numerous public and private collections including the Art Gallery of NSW, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney and Fuji/ACMP Collection 8. He is currently completing a Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Western Sydney.

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