PHOTOWORK >> PERFORMED PHOTOGRAPHY



As a skeptical young archaeologist back in the early 1980s I was fascinated by the connections between archaeology and photography, in archaeology's project of *documenting* the remains of the past. Skeptical – I thought, and still do, that archaeology's long links with the identity politics of nationalism and colonialism and its role in the growing heritage industry called for ideology critique – the careful and savvy dissection of the roots of secure archaeological knowledge, under the suspicion that the past is most often invoked not to enlighten but to support partisan interests in the present.

It was Barbara Harbottle, then County Archaeologist in Tyne and Wear UK, who most encouraged me in those years as a fieldworker. With her Pentax Spotmatic and ME and

a couple of lenses, she had me recording the excavations at the Black Gate and Black Friars' in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, photographing, planning, drawing, filling up notebook after notebook with modest experiments in writing up our archaeological engagements with chapter houses, Civil-War defensive ditches, Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, Roman store rooms. (She died in February – I have never forgotten her open-minded generosity and was sad that I never got to thank her, even though I have returned to working in the north east of England).

Since then photography has become a means for me to work through the key matters of how we get on with what remains of the past. Hands-on, experimental, rooted in instruments rather than words, located, skills-based, craft-science-art, mediating past and present. Connie Svabo and I recently wrote a summary statement about the homologies of archaeology and photography [Link] [Link]. There is more discussion in my book about the archaeological imagination [Link] [Link]. Also – [Link] Take a look too at the archaeography photoblog – [Link]

Though my photo web site is called archaeographer, I don't see myself as a photographer, so much as someone who works with photography, uses photography in pursuit, in my case, of the archaeological imagination. Here is what, archaeographically, I have explored this last thirty years.

Crafts of making. Getting to know the skills and expectations, tools and processes, the genres and forms, analogue and digital. Technical matters of framing, focus, resolution. Instrumentalities.

Mindfulness. Forcing self-conscious awareness of practice –

photo-work

– everything that goes into the *making of photographic imagery*, the mediation.

Always located. With a standpoint.

Actuality. The articulation of moment captured and moment of looking. A distinctive temporality quite different to date. And closely related to

Duration. The way things hang on. A photograph is then and now and perhaps for the future.

Site specifics. It happened here, or there. For many years I worked with the arts company Brith Gof who have come to define *site specific* performance – holding site as place/event/purpose – bringing together host (site), ghost (haunting traces), and visitor(s). This applies as much to photography and archaeology.

Modes of engagement. Photography is an architecture that brings together photographer, subject, site in an arrangement around the instrument, the camera, with its viewpoints, lines of sight, and aperture or window-on-the-world. Mise en scène, staging people and props in this architecture. And then again in the acts of viewing and sharing, on a public screen or in a gallery, in an album, in a framed personal gift to a friend.

Dislocation. Photography facilitates displacement, as camera and image are relocated.

Juxtaposition. Montage and collage. A function of dislocation.

Hybridity. Force justapositions (katachresis) in order to generate frictional insight.

Interruption. A time-based medium, photography interrupts and intervenes. Stop – look at this!

Media materialities. All information systems are materialities. Working with *quiddity* – the whatness, *haecceity* – the hereness of the act and the photo. Media archaeologies too, as analogue techniques die and are revived, as new digital media degrade, entropically.

Signal and noise: figure and ground. That photography is information management was always a key aspect of its archaeological use. Photography has been a primary archival medium since its beginning. Photography is often key to documentary portfolios, to museum records, to a report on a scene of crime. I have also accordingly become very interested in signal-noise, figure-ground relationships- directing attention to this and not that, selecting this over that, discarded as irrelevant, as background noise.

Quotidian ambience. The noise of the everyday, the overlooked. Archaeology is saturated in incidental detail; photography records the surface of things, often in

the exquisite detail of utter irrelevancy. Is this not history/historicity itself? *Human* experience?

Break the illusion. Simply admit to the rhetoric and the work put into re-presentation, mediation. Admit to the lie, the fakery, the magic of the fictive. “This happened; and it’s a lie.”

Reframe. Break the frame, the proscenium arch, because a frame attempts to contain what always reaches beyond. Point outside, affirm the temporary actuality of the frame, or remove it altogether.

Presence and absence – the *dynamic* at the heart of actuality. Cherish letting go, the absences, the hauntings, the faint traces glimpsed in the sea of background noise.

Photo-work – a turn to design, as I have been recently exploring in this blog – design as intervention, mindfulness, iteration, centered upon human experiences in the articulation of artifact/person/use/site – [Link]

The aim – informed practice, or *praxis* as we called it in the days of enthusiasm for critical theory.
The purpose? Authenticity, honesty, in our work done upon the remains of the past.
Why? – this is realism.

I have always had a fondness for Polaroid. The moment and the place, immediacy and actuality – the act of transforming place/event into material trace, then and there, via an almost alchemical transformation, of peel-apart film, the scented viscosity of the chemicals, and, for me, one of the icons of twentieth century design – the SX-70 camera.

I recall Mike Pearson telling me a while ago about a photographer he worked with, Paul Jeff, who used a big Graflex 4×5 inch press camera with a Polaroid back, shooting type 55, which delivers a print (Jeff gave it to the photographed), and a negative (for Jeff). A reminder of how different photographic experience can be. I am reading again Mike’s book on site specific art [Link], his extraordinary guide to what I am calling here informed practice, and I followed up on Paul Jeff’s work, an intersection of photography and performance.



Carrying Lyn – Mike Pearson, Mike Brookes, Richard Morgan, John Rowley, Lyn Levett – when Lyn was carried through Cardiff on the weekend of a Welsh rugby international – 2001

Here is the introduction to his web site [Link]:

This site is a showcase for the photographic experiments of Paul Jeff who as PAUL+A, and in collaboration with featured artists, is attempting to re-invigorate photography as a time-based medium. Bored of the ‘spatial’ picture making that has thus far mainly defined photographic practice PAUL+A aim to develop a practice of ‘Performed Photography’.

The work on this site demonstrates an attempt to formulate a time-based conception of photography, in response to a particularly held perception that the ‘world as picture’ has been more or less exhausted. The alternative assertion here is that photography should be interpreted in its complex relations to the concept of *event*, rather than its reified and literal manifestation as *picture*.

This means shifting allegiance from the current spatialised system of representation that it resides within, and a quantitative philosophical framework as bequeathed by the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. In contrast to this*status quo* it is suggested that photography can utilise the dynamism, flow, mobility, and multiplicity of interpretation posited principally by three uniquely modern thinkers, Walter Benjamin, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze. Using what has been termed ‘new Bergsonism’ as a methodology, it is my assertion that through a re-alignment of its spatio-temporal constituencies to a more *even*degree, then photography, especially in its interpretive possibilities, can be re-invigorated with new potentialities.

Inspiring!

DISAPPEARED.



PAUL+A

Most respectfully informs the Inhabitants of Cushendall, N. Ireland and their vicinities, including all the good people of the world, that on Saturday morning, February 10, 2007, artists Paul Jeff of Wales and Maria Sanchez-Portillo of Mexico, aided and witnessed by artist Emanuela Contini of Italy will commence a voluntary incarceration in the cell at the base of the

CURFEW TOWER, CUSHENDALL.

At 10 am a photographic portrait of Maria will be taken in protest at the continuing abduction, rape and murder of the young women of the city of

JUAREZ, MEXICO, AND THEIR VICINITIES.

This same portrait will be taken again at 11am and henceforth at every hour throughout the day, being a total of

24 PORTRAITS IN ONE DAY.

This feat they will perform for seven successive days, being a total of

168 IDENTICAL ? PORTRAITS.

No man or woman ever performed such an astonishing feat before.

Further supporting works will also be attempted in service of the portraits.

It is for no wager, but merely to show the people of Cushendall, and all the good people of the world what may be done in support of the plight of the women of Juarez.
Any interest or support they may be pleased to give will be thankfully received.

info@morebeautifulthangod.com

kindly facilitated by the Arts Council of Wales

I Watched Her until She Disappeared « morebeautifulthangod.