

HAROLD DAVID ALEX KERSHAW VANILA NETTO



A fluid dynamic between self and other is mirrored by the three Sydney-based artists in this project. All use the camera and the photographic medium to humanise rather than analyse, none have a specific political or theoretical framework supporting their work but all are informed, however obliquely, by past theoretical and photographic practices as much as they are by the direct experience of popular culture in its multitude of forms. In using the photograph, they are knowledgeably accessing its specific relationship to the real and using this in order to communicate to the viewer what is sometimes mundane and sometimes extraordinary in a mode that is, however, without dualism.

Harold David's *Worthville* series presents images of people and buildings in small town U.S.A. where his sister lives. This once thriving community is in decay and the people who reside there have lost much of their hope of betterment. Rather than a meditation on social decline David presents an environment which he is familiar with, sympathetically. All the people seem very at ease with the photographer so that the decaying environment almost slips out of view. The girl behind the barbed wire fence, however, does have her feet in a muddy puddle and the wire passes through her mouth. The devil is in the detail of a tattoo, the sheets of paper left on a table, or the headline of the newspaper. David's work is deceptively formal yet it is these formal qualities that urge us inwards to notice more and more aspects of these people and their community without any sense of voyeurism.

Vanila Netto's installation *Outside Chemical and Physical Boundaries (Detected by Interferometers)* presents fragments of possible realities culled from literature, popular culture, and the childhood imaginary. Netto has written that: 'These photographic tableaux are based on mental reconstructions of things and places seen in the flesh, via mass media, or dreamed.' Objects cavort in clean, brightly coloured environments which are then photographed. The images are seductive and cute because of the miniature scale and the materials used to create the objects. The other worlds presented emerge from the human imagination and are firmly attached, in part, because of their handmade aspect. Neither surreal nor spooky, these worlds are familiar to all those who were Trekkies or devotees of 1960s science fiction movies. Equally, there is a resonance in terms of the utopian projects of Buckminster Fuller or the architect of Brasilia, Oskar Niemeyer. The dreams of perfect habitats and glorious design for living are here scaled to be manageable and intimate.

Alex Kershaw's *Geodetic Monuments* appear to have a kinship with the objective realities presented by Bernd and Hilla Becher in their obsessive archiving, over decades, of the various manmade structures throughout Europe. The Becher's taxonomic approach and teaching has spawned a substantial European school of contemporary photographic practice where objectification and classification has only recently been superseded by a clear desire on the part of younger photographers to be rather more proximate to their subjects. Kershaw is interested in the relationship between individuals and their environment, how we mark monuments and how they may mark us. *Geodetic Monuments* presents a set of five photographs, scaled to human size, of survey markers. These constructions are used by surveyors to map, fix and, as Kershaw has said, 'to lock all air and land into a vast lattice.' Each geodetic marker is, however, different. Just as the land on which it sits and surveys varies, so does the marker itself according to who made it, when, and its subsequent alteration through weathering and human intervention.

There has been a shift in contemporary photography over the last ten years, and these three artists evidence aspects of this. The shift can be loosely categorised as a movement away from the intense analysis of the image and its meanings toward a renewal of the narratives and collective experience which a photograph can inspire. The egalitarian nature of the photograph and its ongoing relationship (no matter how tenuous) to the real has not been diminished by the attentions of post-modern theoreticians in the 1970s and 1980s nor by the ironical manipulations of the artists who came to maturity alongside. The attempts to objectify the photograph and its contents have been outstripped by the artist in pursuit of a closer relationship with subject and viewer. In addition, the years since the mid 1990s have witnessed an unprecedented breadth of photographic practice and a complex interweaving of the genres of commercial photography with art.

In the mid1990s, Brooks Adams wrote 'that a new humanism had ... coalesced in contemporary photography ... [around] 1993.' Writing from the New York perspective, he cites the Boston school of photographers (which includes Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson and

Phillip-Lorca diCorcia, for example), and international photographers Araki and Esko Mannikko. Adams describes 'new humanist photography as a realist art of portraiture and self-portraiture, mediated through props, clutter, fashion, junk and graffiti.' Far from being simply grungy however, such photography can be seen to include the highly polished work of Jeff Wall and diCorcia, where 'realism' is in fact an elaborate fiction at the service of humanism.²

Five years on in 2001, JJ Charlesworth wrote a critical essay in *Art Monthly*³ analysing the exceptional growth of 'art photography'. The basis for Charlesworth's critique runs parallel to Adams' in that the end game of post-modernism and post-structuralism had forced a welcome return to the 'real' in photography: '... the emergence of a strong documentary impulse, as well as an equally pronounced interest in the uncanny and the fantastic, both lead from the problems that the post-modern photograph had left unresolved ...' Citing the success of photographers such as Wolfgang Tillmans or Boris Mikhailov, Charlesworth speculates that there is a willing acceptance of the photograph's informal and spontaneous verité which intersects with 'lifestyle media' – the plethora of fashion and interior design magazines. The other tendency in contemporary photography, that of the uncanny and fantastic, can be seen variously in the work of Anna Gaskell and Rineke Dijkstra, for example, in their attempts to present the unrepresentable interior lives of their adolescent subjects.

At the heart of both essays is an acknowledgement of the peculiar relationship we have to the photograph, and its relationship to the real. The photograph continues to be reinvented by its makers and viewers alike, providing an imaginative space which can reflect aspects of the real, as well as aspects of other kinds of realities. It is indeed probable that the intense scrutiny of the photograph by critical theorists in the 1980s has allowed the medium's very intangibility to shine forth: with its fictions entirely revealed, the mysteries in terms of *what* can be gleaned from its surfaces, and *how*, remain.

From its early years, photography was seen to be a tool which could educate and inform. Put to service by photographers such as Lewis Hine, or Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans during the Depression years, the belief was that people could be moved to change social conditions by the sight of a photograph. Such ideals tend to continue to be expressed in photojournalism despite the hard evidence that the photograph rarely changes anything. Many artists, such as Netto, David and Kershaw, are less than interested in the notion of change and much more concerned to present images which reflect an emotional and intellectual engagement with their subject. As a consequence the works are not necessarily politically or theoretically informed but driven by a wish to communicate quite closely. This interest in intimacy is drawn to a large extent from the experience of cinema which can present other realities very easily as its imagery is bolstered by sound, movement, and scale. The photograph is always silent and still, only a fragment of what could be a film⁴. In the pursuit of the filmic and the cinematic effect artists have increased the scale of their works, experimented with papers and surfaces but few of these experiments do more than approach the required illusion. Similarly, the current use of series of still images can be seen to be drawn from lessons learned by studying film structure rather than from the form of the photo essay⁵.

Unlike the photo essay the series may imply a narrative but usually, quite wittingly, does not. The fragments of the real which are presented are deliberately incomplete and operate much as the mind or sight does, that is, we join up the parts according to our needs and knowledge. This too stems, in part, from the residue of twentieth century criticism, particularly that derived from psychoanalytic theory. The need to know, however, has been replaced by a pleasure in parts and the possibility of various narratives – none of which are fixed or finalised.

Judy Annear

- 1 Brooks Adams, 'New Humanist Photography', *The Print Collector Newsletter* vol. xxvii May/June 1996 pp.53–56, 82
- 2 see also Wayne Tunncliffe, *Bittersweet*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2002 pp. 7–14
- 3 JJ Charlesworth, 'Reality Check', *Art Monthly UK*, no. 247 June 2001 pp. 1–5
- 4 see Christian Metz, 'Photography and fetish', in *The Critical Image* (ed. Carol Squiers), Bay Press, Seattle 1990 pp. 155–164
- 5 Until the 1960s the photo essay remained an important narrative tool in magazines and in the 1970s politically informed artists reinvigorated the form to depict the stories of others.

Biographies

Harold David was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and raised in a Detroit trailer park. After studying drama in New York, David moved to Sydney in 1994 where he undertook studies in photography at the Australian Centre for Photography. David's recent exhibitions include *Texas Trailer Park*, *Rubyayre*, 2000, *Runway*, Australian Centre for Photography, and *Rapture*, in collaboration with Mark Megahay, at Rubyayre, Sydney both 2001.

David works as a commercial photographer in the fields of advertising, fashion and portraiture, producing images that appear across the country in magazines, storefronts and billboards.

List of works

Harold David
Worthville 2001
 28 pigment prints on Epson Premium Luster paper, printed 2002
 24 prints 59 x 44 cm
 (19 black & white, 5 colour),
 4 prints 62 x 83 cm
 (3 black & white, 1 colour).
 All paper size (image size variable).
 © the artist

EPSON  PRINTERS

Alex Kershaw

Geodetic Monuments 2001–2002
 1. Rutherford
 2. Kiamilla
 3. Edward
 4. Curtis
 5. Ramsay
 5 type C photographs
 152 x 127 cm each
 © the artist

Acknowledgements

Bronwyn Clark-Coolie
 Kate Collins
 Wayne Tunncliffe

cover photo captions:
 Alex Kershaw *Geodetic Monuments: Rutherford* 2001–2002
 Vanila Netto *Notebook sketches* 2001
 Harold David *Worthville* 2001

Alex Kershaw graduated with honours from the College of Fine Arts (University of New South Wales) in 2000. Kershaw's recent work has been seen in *Transfer*, *Gallery Wren*, *Expo 2002*, *Imperial Slacks*, and the Helen Lempiere Travelling Art Scholarship (all 2002).

Kershaw has lectured at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School and The University of Sydney, and is currently lecturing at the College of Fine Arts. Upcoming exhibitions include *Eating Mao Zedong* at Canberra Contemporary Art Space and *Terrain* at the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (2003).

Vanila Netto was born in Salvador, Brazil and studied architecture before moving to Australia in 1987. In Sydney, Netto has studied at both the Australian Centre for Photography and College of Fine Arts (University of New South Wales). She is currently a PhD student in photo-media and holds an Australian Postgraduate Award.

Netto has been exhibiting her work since 1995 and has recently participated in exhibitions at *Imperial Slacks (Expo 2002 and Patis Vasjian 2001)*, *Blaugrau* (2001), *First Draft*, *Sherman Artbox*, and *Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre* (all 2002). She was included in the Helen Lamprere Travelling Art Scholarship exhibitions 2001 and 2002. Netto has worked commercially on fashion shoots, and in the film industry.

Vanila Netto

Outside Chemical and Physical Boundaries (Detected by Interferometers) 2001
 1. Urban Grid 1 16.5 x 24 cm
 2. Urban Grid 2 16.5 x 24 cm
 3. Opening 1 16 x 22.3 cm
 4. Opening 2 16.7 x 24.5 cm
 5. Roving 12.5 x 17.9 cm
 6. Hardwares 2.5 x 17.5 cm
 7. First Habitat 12.5 x 17.5 cm
 8. Love Booth 12.5 x 17.5 cm
 9. Walking 12.2 x 19.2 cm
 10. Leisure Dome 10.5 x 15.5 cm
 11. Centrifuge Device 12.3 x 17.5 cm
 12. Ball Guy – Plunge 10.5 x 15.5 cm
 13. Puttysizing 12.5 x 17.5 cm
 14. Corrupted Model 12.5 x 17.5 cm
 15. Neo-plastic Dance 14 x 19.8 cm
 16. Ball Guy – Catch 10.8 x 15.8 cm
 17. Microvillage 1 16 x 24 cm
 18. Microvillage 2 16 x 24 cm
 19. Microvillage 3 16 x 24 cm
 20. Apartments 17.3 x 24.7 cm
 21. Bucky Dome 12.2 x 17.3 cm
 22. Prototype L 12.2 x 17.3 cm
 23. Prototype D.B. 12.2 x 17.3 cm
 24. Dynamic Mating 12.5 x 17.3 cm
 25. Groovygroove 12.5 x 18.5 cm
 26. Wireframed (Birth) 9.8 x 17.5 cm
 27. Ice Caps (157°E Outside Shore) 15.8 x 23.8 cm
 28. Ice Caps (029°W Outside Shore) 15.8 x 24 cm
 29. Exit/Entry 16x24 cm
 30. Quad on Paisley Frame 15.3 x 24 cm
 31. Spinning Baby 13 x 21 cm
 32. Freight 15 x 21 cm
 33. Psycho-Active Putty Acquired Taste for Green 19.5 x 24.5 cm
 All type C photographs
 © the artist

