

Palpable History

ROSS GIBSON

Imagine some undocumented circumstance, a situation that you know needs witnessing. Imagine it's an aftermath with no adequate residue of the *textual* kinds of records that we conventionally use for tracing what happened, for making history of it. Say these records have gone missing or were never gathered. Now imagine that some *non-textual* traces of this circumstance have persisted out of the past, despite all the obfuscation. Let's say we know that some such traces prevail not in documents but in photographs. Or equally probable, the traces might be detected in landscapes, in bodies, family tales or personal memories.

Given this kind of circumstance, is there something we can do to grasp the forces that have pushed out of the past and are shaping the world now? If you are deprived of written accounts, or indeed if you are disinclined to offer writing as your historical practice, what aspects of the past can still be evoked with historicist intent? Say in audio-visual formats, say by utilising photographs in temporal sequences and spatial installations? What role might these fleeting, time-brittle things play in offering us some persuasive, deeply felt insights into the way the past seems to flow through the present toward the future?

Responding to these questions, I think we need to be adept in a mode of historiography that appeals to the senses. We need non-textual (but designed and structured) patterns of propositions about the past, propositions that register in the nervous system, that register as pulses, flows, rhythms and lapses. And we need to propose these patterns in such a way that the perceiver gets convinced 'in the bones' rather than in the portions of our sensibility that manage linguistic, textual argument.

This attentiveness to *felt conviction* leads to a couple more questions, which challenge the precepts of conventional historiography. First, where in your consciousness, in your

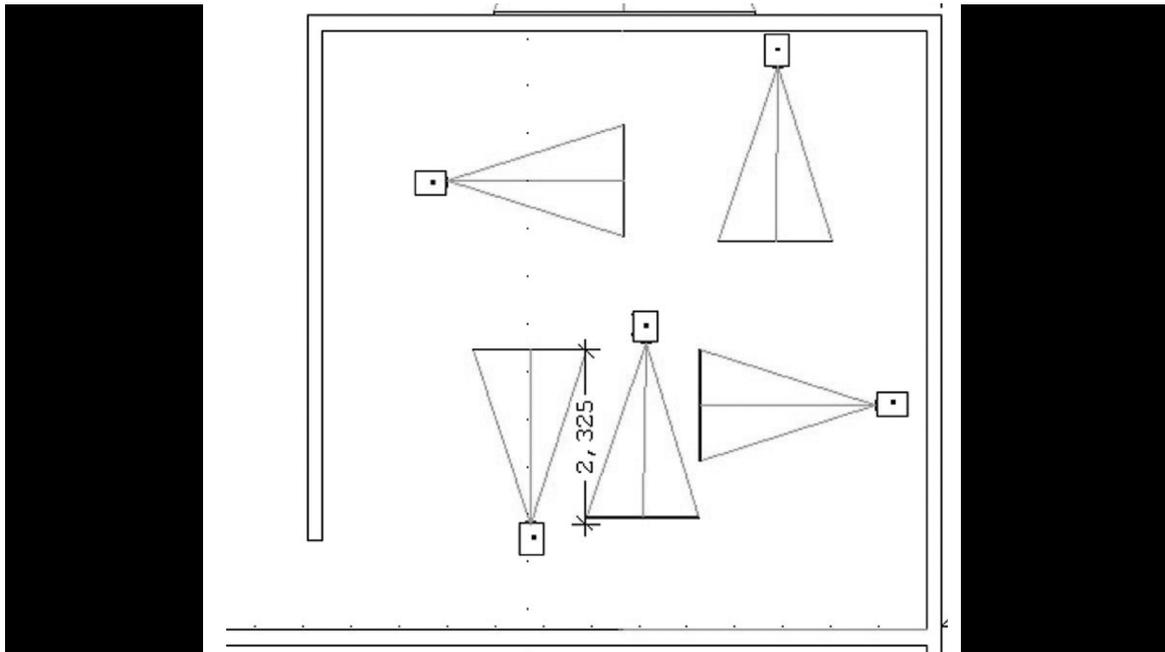


Figure 1: Plan drawing of the layout of *Street X-Rays* in ACMI gallery

sensorium, can conviction lodge? Second, what might it mean if a convincing proposition takes the form of a structured feeling rather than an argument? Or to ask this another way, can you 'tell' a history that has conviction but no particular semantic *meaning*? Can you tell history which gives you a feeling rather than a message?

All these questions challenge discourse with rhetoric; they all disturb reason with affect. They are questions concerned with feeling, with sensing what urge or animus moves through a scene and through time. They are questions concerned with how vital an event or topic might be. So, they are concerned firstly with detecting *how* vital a force might be and secondly with detecting how one gets a sense *in* the vitals.

But enough with the abstractions. I should offer a specific example, the particular instance that started me thinking about these notions of non-verbal, meaningless but palpable historiography.

A couple of years ago, with cinematographer Ben Speth, I made an artwork called *Street X-Rays*.¹ It is a spatial installation with surround sound and five video screens suspended in a pattern such that the viewer can never see all five screens at any one time. Investigating the room, the viewer is encouraged by the layout to adopt different vantage-points, to assemble different configurations of relationships, screen-to-screen, whilst all the time understanding that there is no singularly privileged, all-seeing point where the entire installation might be available to one sovereign scope. The investigative viewer understands that the scene can only be known partly and in passing—in motion, through motion and as motion.



On each of the five screens is a diptych. One side of the diptych shows a black-and-white crime-scene photograph from Sydney in the 1950s; the other side shows colour video footage with live-location sound depicting the same scene fifty years later. You get twenty seconds of such a pairing, with the screen showing the passage of fifty years, from the black-and-white historical photograph over to its contemporary kinetic counterpart. Then that pairing fades to black and a new pairing replaces it as, on the luminous screen, a different pulse of historical time takes place. Likewise, all the other screens are receiving these ebbs and flows of time and place, thus making the installation an active, changeful thing with several places and times alive in it at all times.

Figure 2: Diptych from *Street X-Rays*

Viewed all together as an aesthetic system, the five screens assemble a shifting audio-visual version of a city composed by spatial, temporal, graphical, kinetic and thematic relationships. See the cars, the architecture, the advertising. See the way people stand, how they walk, their relationships to vehicles, to doorways. See how these relationships change over time, how closely men stood to each other in the 1950s, how chary men are of each other now in public spaces.

From any one vantage point in the installation, the viewer is able to see, at most, eight framed images, all of which are tending to form relationships in space and time. Well, they are tending to form, but they are also tending to lose form, as each on-screen sequence drops away and is replaced by a new one (even though the old one gets held in your memory for a time), and the entire installation stippled with little sequenced instabilities

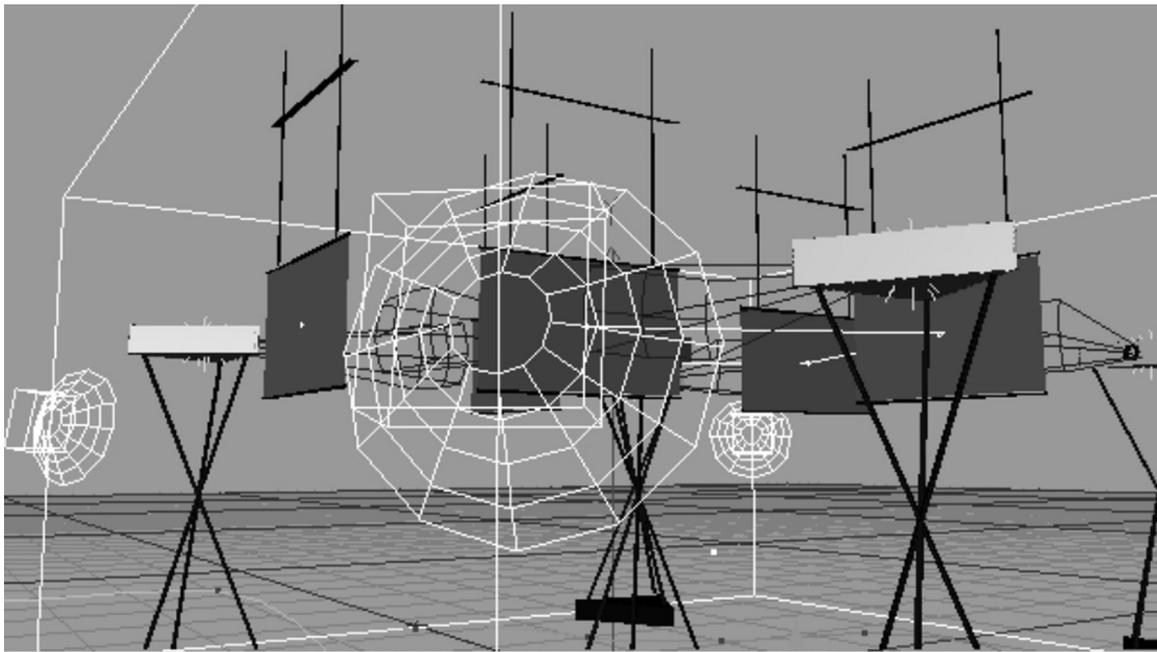


Figure 3: Wireframe rendition of viewer's perspective in *Street X-Rays*

of appearance-and-disappearance. And all around, the massed sound of the several video sequences plus a minimal mood-music soundtrack envelop the viewer with a fullness-of-scene

that is heard entirely but can never be fully seen.

At its first exhibition, *Street X-Rays* worked well enough, pretty much as I had hoped and expected. Except I became aware of a couple of features (as always happens when artistic practice is treated as research) that were unexpected and gratefully accepted. These little revelations started me thinking about historical feeling rather than meaning, about historical affect rather than argument.

First, because the screens are made with a translucent material allowing simultaneous front and back projection, a percentage of the beams from the projectors penetrate through the screens and cast enormous ghost-scenes on the surrounding walls of the gallery. These ghost-scenes imply an enormous, extensive world unbounded by the gallery and they swirl so that the entire gallery feels slightly vertiginous from time to time, as if the room is swallowing the viewer while the world itself is swallowing the room. You feel buffets of historical turbulence unsettle the room. You feel caught in the installation's surges, at the behest of the scenes' combinative energies and time-flows and you feel something like a force of history buffeting your whole world. It's real, this feeling; you get it inside yourself. The artwork produces it for you. It's a feeling that makes a quandary and leads to an implicit kind of knowledge. It's not an argument, this feeling, it's not even a proposition; it is palpable and it makes you think about the presence of the past in ordinary time, and in you, and in the



larger world which holds you and reacts to you. It gets you thinking about how dynamically interfused everything is: yourself, the larger world and all its times and urges. Perhaps its better to call this an *awareness*, implicit as it is, rather than *knowledge*, which implies a proposition made explicit and verbally communicable.

Figure 4: Diptych from *Street X-Rays*

The second surprising effect in *Street X-Rays* is a kind of 'vectoral continuity' that asserts itself at unpredictable moments in the darkened space-and-time that floats *between* the screens, in the gallery's 'negative space'. The vectoral effect works like this: in the video footage on one screen, a car will drive past or someone will walk or run or ride a bike across and out of frame. This traveller's trajectory—this *vector*—throws your attention into the black-and-white photograph alongside, where the traveller is now implied to your imagination despite being invisible.

Watching this happen, you feel the paradox of the simultaneous presence-and-absence of the figure that has been so animated in one moment and so evacuated in the next. You feel different time-layers and historical actors fold dynamically into each other and you sense that you can understand an irrational notion: that all times and characters from the past are equally available to each other and to you, all at once, if only you can develop the faculties for being aware of them. You trust this kinetically derived feeling, this trace you *feel*, this trace of the vector's presence now past. You acknowledge that the vector has *visibly* disappeared once it has exited the video frame, but you *feel* its continuation. You feel it play through your embodied imagination, both via the parts of you that have electricity or

endocrinal spurts move along them and via the awareness you have of how you yourself can move through the places of the world through time. The vector is there and not there, troubling your present reason with your persisting sensation of these events that have just been occurring and are continuing to occur invisibly and 'undocumented'. The kinetic event is gone but it remains moving in your continuing sensory imagination. The installation gives you this sense of historical continuity. It attunes you to such flux in space across times.

And then, while you keep watching, on another screen a different car or person will move across the field of vision with a similar vector, with a comparable urge or divagation. Meanwhile, the surrounding sound tells you of actions all occurring, unviewed but undeniable, outside your immediate scope. And as you notice all this happen, again and again, across the configuration of screens, you begin to feel that this shifting, partial city is threaded through with constantly appearing-and-disappearing forces which are moving and connecting from scene to scene and time to time, forces which are only occasionally visible but are constantly operational and fleetingly perceptible. You sense the absences too, the fact of them, not only how present these absences are but also how they are hatched across with tendencies and trajectories, with the kind of historical momentum that saturates large, historically governed environments such as the city that is being represented and investigated in the artwork.

You begin to feel a forceful world of historical tendency moving around you. Indeed, because you follow the vector and imagine its continuity whenever you cannot see it, you realise that you are moving with it and therefore this historical force is moving *as* you as well as *through* you. You are part of this systematically enlivened world of vectors appearing, disappearing but ever-present.

Then you begin to feel that you have become more than just a viewer. You have taken the role of a *sensor*, relying on convictions and sensations that are registering for you in unaccustomed faculties. As a sensor, you trust that there is a perceptible world available to your as-yet unaccustomed senses. You begin to entertain notions, for example that you might learn to imagine *haptically* rather than just *visually* or *semantically*, and that you might get a *choreographic divination* rather than a *surveillant reading* of the town, that you might never know the town's meanings but you might divine some of its tendencies. And that this too is historical awareness. It might even become knowledge.

Aided by the flux dramatised in such audio-visual systems, you might transcend what you can't *see* or *read* in and about the kinetic-spatial system of the city. You might feel and thereby imagine the dynamics of the place. You might become convinced in your senses, convinced about the existence of certain structuring forces that are prevalent and dynamic in the town. This conviction is not reasonable, admittedly. Rather, it is a sluice of urgency felt in the glands, a pulse of electricity zinging the nerves. But it is historical awareness made

palpable, and it feels convincing, this encounter with dynamic historical tendencies, no matter how invisible or illegible they might be. All this feels *unreasonably* convincing, for it is not playing out according to the clean ratios of logical intellect. You feel you have made contact with something emphatic and emotionally comprehensible about the city, about how it is a reservoir and a transponder for time, space and human energies surging across districts and decades. You feel convinced by this proposition, that the past is always abroad in our present-day experience. For example, if *Street X-Rays* helps you sense that a vector or historical tendency can appear and disappear but is always implied in the 'thickened' time-space of the city's everyday life, well surely other forces such as systems of political power, habits, emotions, fears and aspirations could all be felt flowing through past and present configurations of our habitable world. And surely this is no pointless exercise, to find the cultural means to help people become aware of this sense of historical continuity in their bones, in their glands and nerves? Such an artwork makes no lucid arguments, but it does create an awareness where ignorance or insouciance are usually encouraged. Awareness and argument—different but related.

Historians have traditionally maintained suspicion over aesthetics and rhetoric. Because aesthetics appeals literally to 'everything that is perceptible by the senses' and because rhetoric is a technique of persuasion tapping feelings rather than cerebration, the affective register of aesthetics is generally considered too *louche*, too unaccountable for valid historical discourse. But if discourse is meant to lead to conviction, must this conviction be evacuated of affection? For example, if no one *cares* about a conviction, if no one feels its urgent rightness in their desirous person, well, is that conviction likely to lead to any valuable action in the larger world? Is it likely to have any historic outcome? Who will care enough to bear witness to the prevalence of the past? Without personal affect, what social effect?

Please note that I'm not arguing that conventional, discursive history is useless. I'm just saying it's only partially useful. Just as imaginative speculation and aesthetic appreciation are only partially useful. Altogether, though, they might be productive, if we found rigorous ways to loosen and interlace the borders between 'proper' historiography and affective speculation and appreciation.

When responding to the sense of the urgency that one can feel in the present traces of our past, I am shy of declaring myself a historian, but I find myself in agreement with a great one, Greg Denning, when he says that the most important historical work happens when scholars apply imagination to evidence. *Imagination*, not *fantasy*, he stresses. What Denning is asserting, I think, is that one needs to retain an allegiance but not a fealty to the evidence. A fictionist is not obliged to do this; the fictionist makes a different contract with the audience. But the historically informed artist maintains an allegiance to traces that have been touched by the world.²

However, here's the trickiest and most important point: the conditions of living and working in an aftermath-culture such as Australia are such that a great deal of the vital evidence is either missing or non-textual and the evidence that we do have is often partial, broken or obscured by denials. Which means that conventional historiographical protocols often come up short when we try to get the fullest possible comprehension of the past that has whelped our present.

In Australia we need to imagine across gaps and quandaries in the evidence; we need to venture out past the vestiges or documented ruses that have been allowed some visibility, past what is accepted as admissible for discursive conviction. In thinking venturesomely like this, the first task for the sceptical imagination is to find ways to heighten our awareness of the prevalence of implicit historical forces. For without this awareness, so many different kinds of historiography are unthinkable. And plainly, it is not a given that we are presently sufficiently aware of the persistence of the past in the present. As the Stoics proclaimed all those centuries ago (stoically understanding that the majority of citizens usually wish not to know this), 'everything exists in the present, even the past'.³

ROSS GIBSON makes books, films and art installations. Recent works include the book *Seven Versions of an Australian Badlands* (2002), the video installation *Street X-Rays* and the interactive audiovisual environment *BYSTANDER* (a collaboration with Kate Richards). He is Professor of New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Technology, Sydney. <Ross.Gibson@uts.edu.au>

-
1. Mike Stubbs, editor and curator, *PROOF: The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, exhibition held at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), Melbourne, December 2004 – March 2005. See website: <<http://www.acmi.net.au/proofexhibition.jsp>>. Also, see catalogue: Mike Stubbs (ed.), *Proof: The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, 2005.
 2. See Greg Denning, http://www.nla.gov.au/events/history/papers/Greg_Denning.html, accessed 29 April 2007.
 3. Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, p. 22.