The Event Horizon: Returning
“After the Fact”

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Abstract

“Trauma is a disorder of memory and time. This is why in his early writings Sigmund Freud used the metaphor of the camera to explain the unconscious as the place where bits of memory are stored until they are developed, like prints from black and white negatives, into consciously accessible recollections.” The relationship between the photographic impulse to record events in the landscape and how those events are viewed in the “here now” unfolds across complex layers of meaning that engage with artistic, philosophical, and theoretical positions on photography in relation to memory, trauma, time, and history. What is the association between trauma and time, between the photographic image, the past and the present? This article examines how the photographic might relate to concepts of trauma, and how those subjects are expressed in relation to landscape from a contemporary position. Psychoanalysis advocates remembering (perhaps for the first time) an event as part of therapeutic process, and often one visits a site as an aid to memory, whether this is an individual or collective memory. Hence, this article will also explore the testimonial potential of the photographic image and reflect on how it can act as an indexical marker of past events.

Keywords: photography, landscape, “after the fact”, memory, trauma
The photographic and the psychoanalytic have been inextricably linked through their concurrent and intertwined histories. The well-known images of female patients at Salpêtrière show this relationship in stark relief. Here photography was a witness to, and accomplice in, the construction of our understanding of pathology in relation to mental illness. As Georges Didi-Huberman notes, the concept that one should look at the surface of the body rather than vivisect it was popular in the nineteenth century as reflected in the then promoted science of phrenology. At this time psychiatry, photography, art, and science collided; indeed psychiatric photography used the “art of the portrait” as an instrument of measure.

Through the images made at Salpêtrière and other institutions, as one of the authors paraphrases in an artist text elsewhere, pictures of auras, bodies, vibrations, and emotions became a tool with which to attempt to extract scientific data from a surface: the two-dimensional surface of the photograph. David Campany argues for the most part that “photography after an event” exhibits a kind of “numbness”; a depoliticised and ineffectual positioning of places and their histories, which results in an evacuation of context and meaningful dialogue. Conversely, we would like to suggest that some key contemporary photographs taken “after the event” form a response to the inadequacies of representation rendered so obvious by images such as those from Salpêtrière.

The images of Sarah Schönfeld and Mark Adams have evacuated this pseudo-scientific impulse into seemingly empty vistas of place. However these photographs are of places where traumatic events, both cultural and social, are referenced in a particular way and with specific intentions. This photographic methodology can be understood as a crucial position in the development of representational strategies, an attempt to represent the potentially traumatic, the violent and the anxious, and to picture such difficult content within a transformed framework.

Psychoanalysis advocates remembering or retelling (perhaps for the first time) an event as a component of the therapeutic process. As part of that process of recovery, one may re-visit a site as an aid to memory, whether this is an individual or collective memory. In much the same way, the very act of photographing the landscape requires a kind of secondary pilgrimage to the site of an event for the practitioner, and the viewer makes a similar vicarious visit through their engagement with the resulting image.

Enacting and inviting just such a vicarious return are the photographs of Mark Adams. Taking as their subject the complex contact relations between Māori and Pākehā, his photographs depict this subject referencing the often devastating outcomes in stunning black and white, large format, sometimes scenic, images of people-less places. Appearing initially as images from the nineteenth-century pictorial tradition, and seemingly empty of political content, a closer reading prompts a recollection of New Zealand as saturated with the memory of colonisation, and its violence and loss.
His images can be read as textual documents in the symbolic sense because they argue for a country more cognisant of its complex past and for an in-depth understanding of these significant events and histories. Pākehā, current resident of Oxford, North Canterbury, and born in the region, Adams has always occupied a multi-faceted position himself—simultaneously outsider and insider to contemporary local Māori political and cultural life through his long-standing commitment to these issues.

Figure 1. Mark Adams. The heke to Te Ao Marama. Aoraki-Mount Cook, Hooker Valley, 1988. Courtesy the artist.

Six images in his book, The Land of Memories 1993, (one variation of which is illustrated here) mark a significant event in the history of Te Wai Pounamu (the South Island) which is largely forgotten by Pākehā but not by South Island Māori, NgāiTahu. The images retrace a journey of protest initiated by Temuka Māori from Arowhenua and Moeraki Māori to their traditional food gathering areas (or mahinga kai) and beyond to Aoraki.7

As Harry C. Evison explains in his book, Te Wai Pounamu, these mahinga kai (which included mountainous areas) were confiscated in what is known as the Kemp Purchase of 1848.8 Evison goes on to detail a complex series of manipulative manoeuvres manifest as legal and linguistic deceits which were orchestrated through Kemp’s Deed and its mistranslation. He explains further that these actions clearly contravened the rights of Māori as stated in the Treaty of Waitangi and by the New Zealand Supreme Court at the time.9 Nonetheless, Evison outlines that these significant sites were sold to Pākehā landowners violating the promises made by Kemp himself during the original negotiation of the deed with South Island Māori chiefs.10

Evison reminds us that the outcome of these proceedings was that many Māori were impoverished, and dispossessed of their traditional food gathering areas and sacred sites.11 Māori also witnessed the destruction of their food resources and
they no longer—according to colonial law—owned many of their spiritually and economically significant places.

In protest, Māori from Arowhenua and Moeraki commenced a heke or migration in 1877 and were joined by many others along the way. They initially travelled south to the Waitaki river mouth and then inland to what is now known as Omarama. Here, Buddy Mikaere tells us, is where they set up village life and stayed for nearly two years until they were eventually evicted by armed police. Adams’s series of seven images indicate points along their journey, and beyond, to the source of the Waitaki watershed. His photographs retrace this protest, while marking out the historical territory of Arowhenua Māori from the Waitaki River to Aoraki, the apex of which is depicted in the gateway at Arowhenua (as seen in Figure 3).

While Adams is obviously not a nineteenth-century Māori, through his act of recording these sites he places himself in the position of Māori food gatherer,
traveller, and protester. His quiet images impart a tone one could imagine of the peaceful, but firm, protest of 1877. One might attempt to argue that these are empty images, dislocated from the context of protest and politics. However this would locate the photograph, as a “blank” document, according to John Roberts, freely floating without semiotic meaning. Instead the void that is created here between historical events and the construction of these contemporary photographs can be seen to stand in for the complexities of what cannot be said, both through the medium of photography and what cannot be remembered or articulated by a dominant Pākehā culture at large. In “re-presenting” and “representing” these traumatic displacements, Adams asks a viewer to extend their understanding of this history and to consider its revaluation.

Jill Bennett states that “emotions are felt only as they are experienced in the present; as remembered events, they become representations”. Adams’s use of the device of the return “after the fact” might be seen as a way to critique, to open up the potential of photographic testimony to layered complex meanings that are constantly in flux. His works allow reverence, contemplation, and study. However like the traumatic, his photographs also unfold over time, simultaneously placing viewers in the “there then” of the event and the “here now” of the viewing.

According to Roberts, photographs are subject to an eternal process of reinscription as they make a “continuous passage from dormancy in the archive to … [their] ‘eventual’ reinscription outside of the archive”. He believes this process always brings the possibility of counter-production and the reinterpretation of events. These images take his discussion of photography further and locate the archival event and the reinscription of its meaning simultaneously in the single image.

The process of looking at photographs that reference traumatic events taken “after the fact” is analogous to the process of “post-memory”, described by Marianne Hirsch as a response by the second generation to trauma experienced by the first. A photograph of a site of trauma or event taken “after the fact” has within it an intrinsic belatedness and a deferral of experience, exacerbated by time elapsing between the original event and its photographic reception. Such photographs attempt to fold back time and to capture some essence or trace of the original event.

In a similar vein Sarah Schönfeld’s series Void (2009) is a form of return and a folding back; a secondary witnessing to events experienced by her grandfather from 1944 to 1946 that unfold over eight immersive landscape photographs. The series records places that stand in for her grandfather’s experiences during World War II. She acts as a secondary witness, searching for traces of an event that, although real, is experienced by the artist as a post-memory via her grandfather’s testimony.
In 1944 at the age of 19, Schönfeld’s grandfather was fighting for the German army in Holland. On 17 September he became caught up in the largest ever air and land attack undertaken by the allied forces with over 35,000 men landing in the Netherlands and Germany. Their mission was to capture key bridges and to enable a rapid advance of troops into Northern Germany, over the Rhein, and past Germany’s defensive Siegfried Line. The battle lasted eight days, during which time the young soldier was immersed in the sights and sounds of death.

In the midst of the action, including a massive inferno in the Dutch forests, he was apprehended by local partisans from Oranje (in the rural province of Drenthe) while delivering a message by bicycle. He was then taken from Holland, via France, to Scotland where he was interned in a prisoner of war labour camp until 1946. The failed attempt of the allied military operation code-named Operation Market Garden has since become part of cultural history through the 1977 film *A Bridge Too Far* based on the writings of war correspondent, Cornelius Ryan.

Schönfeld’s eight photographs, which relate to the eight days of conflict, retrace her grandfather’s experiences following the route he took to Scotland through his “keeping stories”, in what she refers to as “history constructions”. She consciously interweaves the experiences conveyed by her grandfather, her own imagination of these accounts and experience of being in these places, into a visual meta-narrative that accommodates collective memory and the possibility of an individual’s open dialogue with the photographs. This process reflects Maurice Halbwachs’s contention that the two types of memory, the individual and the collective, interpenetrate one another.  

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The photographs are a personal attempt to understand her grandfather’s past, Germany’s modern history, and her place within it. They stand in for the experiences of an entire generation during the war, and the ongoing effect it has had on European society and collective or trans-generational memory.¹⁹

Using the aesthetic convention of nineteenth-century pictorial photography, Schönfeld takes us on an idyllic journey, beginning with a visual invitation into an avenue of trees in a dense forest to an unnerving photograph of a clearing covered in moss down (Figure 5.) The journey continues across streams and ditches that remind us of Benjamin’s “scene of the crime” where idyllic locations mask what the artist, David D’Anger, refers to as “landscapes of tragedy”.²⁰

The claustrophobic and enclosing nature of each photograph, with its central abyss beckoning us in, intimates that something has happened here. The images place us at the edge of a scene where we perceive something may have just occurred, and yet we are kept at the edge of experience and understanding, enhanced by their dark framing which makes us conscious of our own looking. The central abyss in each image exposes the blind spot in Schönfeld’s memory of the events that took place at these sites with the memories of her grandfather mediated by narrative, time, and history itself. This reveals the dilemma of secondary witnessing or post-memory.

She uses a photographic deception in creating the void to respond to the Abwesenheit, the nothingness or absence of traces in the landscape, and the lack of what she refers to as Schrecken or “fright”. The series title itself references the void
or lacuna between narrative and experience, between memory and history, which Halbwachs notes is itself reconstructed after the fact.  

In the only photograph that identifies a specific location, Brahan Castle Camp (Figure 6), we are brought into direct contact with the prisoner of war camp (No. 109) in Scotland where her grandfather was interned. In the centre of the image a concrete circular mound with a partial low wall remains: the remnants of the seventeenth-century castle demolished in 1953.

The ruin, like photography, is a residue of experience and history revealing loss and tragedy as a palimpsest of the past. In the ruin, Walter Benjamin declares: “history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.”  

Monuments and ruins in the process of decay, Benjamin argues, cause the events of history to shrivel up and to become absorbed into the site of the event.

Schönfeld’s photographic approach responds to the idea of the camera recording a fixed reality and having an objective claim to any particular moment, and yet she is also aware that photography itself changes our ways of remembering and forgetting and our perceptions of the past. She recounts how she took photographs of places where she remembered that something had happened and where she found that: “There is nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to smell or experience, only the REAL place, where I can have my own experience of memory.”
This “remembering”, in terms of a phenomenological post-memory, folds into Schönfeld’s own experience of place through the collective memory of such events garnered through cultural and media images. Her photographs attempt to negate the erasure of memory and subvert absence by indicating and pointing to the events through the testimonial act of her grandfather.

Trauma theory posits that events of trauma are never fully experienced by the individual and that an absence remains—a non-experience of the event that, as Jessica Lieberman notes, allows the event to endure as a site of perpetual reinterpretation. For Ulrich Baer, the possibility of photography to capture unexperienced events raises the question of the parallel between photography and the structure of traumatic memory. The difficulty, he argues, in viewing images of events of trauma is that the viewer is confronted with a moment “that had the potential to be experienced but perhaps was not”, an experience of a recorded moment that may not have registered in the subject’s own consciousness.

If we consider a photograph to be unable to record the reality of an “event” in all its complexities and reflections, in its inability to record and tell the truth of an event or to represent the real, the photograph itself becomes a “trauma”. Also as Roland Barthes notes, every photograph is “a catastrophe of death”. In her analysis of photography and trauma Lieberman considers that:

Rather than looking at a photograph as the depiction of an irredeemable past or the promise of a redeemable future, we can look at it as analogous to a trauma, where what matters is not the inaccessible original event but the history of interpretations.

Photography “after the fact” presents a distance from the original event that (like traumatic memories) remains at the edge or the horizon of experience. The events of history cling to these photographs by Adams and Schönfeld of places that reference trauma taken “after the fact” as they explore the edge of memory, or what Benjamin referred to as “short shadows”. In these images, the shadows on the edge of midday are little more than the sharp black edges at the feet of things preparing to retreat silently unnoticed.

Adams’s photographs of the sites of both Māori protest and confiscated land, and Schönfeld’s images of places of conflict and personal trauma, both point to and reference events that, although represented as absence, are present on the periphery of history and at the edge of our memory and experience.

Post-event or “after the fact” photography frames a central question of how places of trauma (or places of memory) change our mode of looking and constitute a new way of seeing. Photography “after the fact” steps outside of an accepted framework of recording place, because of the very nature of the site itself as a place of trauma and the context in which it is photographed. We understand that photography privileges the event rather than an unfolding of time as Baer has argued. However, we suggest that in folding back time to the original event the photograph itself becomes an event.
Endnotes


7 We stress here that while these are sites of land confiscations, they are also those of waahi tapu. “These sites are waahi tapu or sites of cultural significance to Ngai Tahu, Kati Mamoe and Waitaha, the original peoples of the South Island,” in email conversation with Megan Tamati-Quennell, December 2010.


9 Everson, *Te Wai Ponamu*, 266-68 and 286-87.


16 Roberts, “Photography After the Photograph,” 295.


1. Ricouer, Memory, History, Forgetting, 394.
2. Known as Pierre-Jean David.
3. Ricouer, Memory, History, Forgetting, 394.
5. Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 179.
6. In written correspondence from the artist October 2010.

Bibliography


Biographical notes

Donna West Brett is a doctoral candidate in Art History and Film Studies at the University of Sydney. Her research area is on ‘Documenting Place in German photography After 1945’. Recent publications include: ‘The Uncanny Return: Documenting Place in Postwar German Photography’, Photographies, 3, 1, March 2010. Brett is also Manager, Copyright and Curatorial Research Coordination at the Art Gallery of NSW, and board member of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand and Peloton Gallery, Sydney.

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