

## MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Geoffrey Batchen

They loom out of the darkness, as if hovering uncertainly between past and present, offering themselves for our scrutiny with an intensity that borders on the confrontational. Part of it is the look these people give us, staring at the camera for as long as 60 seconds or more, resulting in a kind of clenching of the eyes (as a sitter, you become aware of the sheer physicality of looking under these conditions, of the need to fight your eyes' desire to wander). Part of it is the texture of their skin, turned into rugged planetary surfaces by the tintype's peculiar response to colour and its high resolution of detail. And part of it is the differential focus with which these people are depicted – sharp in some places and strangely liquid in others – as if their bodies are floating in a primordial wet world with just the faces breaking the surface. For all these reasons, Keliy Anderson-Staley's tintype portraits are best described as otherworldly, rather than antiquarian.

The tintype, an American invention, was introduced in 1855 and continued to be widely used until the 1930s, making it one of the most enduring of photographic processes. The selection reproduced here is part of a collection of hundreds of contemporary examples taken by Anderson-Staley. Among their other attributes, these portraits – each designated only by a first name and the year of exposure – offer us a survey of race, gender, and age that considerably expands the primarily Caucasian version of American society recorded in nineteenth century tintypes.

As a collodion negative developed on a small sheet of lacquered metal, a tintype has the appearance of a positive print but no possibility of being reproduced in multiple manifestations. Each tintype is, in other words, a unique object. As a mirror image, tintypes also show an inverted version of their subject (what appears to be a right hand is in fact the left, and so on). To make her tintypes Anderson-Staley used hand-poured chemistry that she mixed herself according to nineteenth century recipes, period lenses, and wooden view cameras to expose positive images directly onto blackened metal (usually aluminum) plates. Exposure times are long by today's standards, and many of her sitters have made use of a hidden metal posing stand, its cold extensions holding the head steady as the seconds tick interminably by, counted off by the photographer.

These technical details matter. They help explain how these photographs come to look the way they do (why, for example, nobody smiles). Walter Benjamin evokes this look rather well in his 1931 essay "Little History of Photography", when he writes,

The first reproduced human beings entered the viewing space of photography with integrity – or rather, without inscription... The human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested... The procedure itself caused the subjects to live their way into, rather than out of, the moment; during the long duration of the exposure, they grew into the picture.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps that is what is most striking about these pictures: the people portrayed still appear to be growing into them, still seem to be in the process of becoming themselves. In this sense, Anderson-Staley's work transcends the undoubted curiosity value of her chosen medium. For, before they are tintypes, these pictures are portraits, portraits of contemporary Americans (perhaps, even, when seen collectively, a portrait of contemporary America). As such, they raise the whole question of photographic portraiture, of what exactly can be deduced about an otherwise unknown person from a mere picture of their face. These particular faces stare back unblinkingly, eyes unnaturally bright and piercing, as if intent on hypnotizing us, here on the other side of the page. It is unclear who is looking at whom, who is the subject of this act of looking. Is it them, or is it us?

The pictorial qualities of the tintype, its obvious artifices and self-conscious accentuation of surface appearance, make these questions unavoidable. They remind us of what we already know (but usually choose to suppress): that a photograph represents a truth-to-presence (it certifies that a person was once there before the camera, in some past moment in time and space), but not a truth-to-appearance. These tintypes don't look much like the people they represent; the process itself results in visible deformations of form and feature. And yet these same people seem so much more present than the subjects of other kinds of photograph, in part because the passing of time between then and now – a feature of all photographs – seems here to be flowing before our very eyes. In simultaneously drawing attention to both the medium's pictorial deceptions and its temporal peculiarities, these pictures insist that our relationship to photography hinges, not on truth, but on desire (on our own desire to transcend time and space by means of the magic of the photograph: to, as it were, cheat death). In short, the work of Keliy Anderson-Staley is an open invitation to see much more than meets the eye.

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1. Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography' (1931), in Michael W Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y Levin eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 2008, 279-80.

## Perspective

## WHY LOOK BACK?

Joyce Campbell

*The following text is the transcript of a talk given at the Monash University Museum of Art (Melbourne) symposium Archive States, Contemporary Art and the Document, in July 2012.*

I'm going to talk about three projects that I've worked on over the last six years that can be seen as functioning as archives: "LA Botanical," "Crown Coach Botanical," and "Te Taniwha."

"LA Botanical" is most obviously, among these three series, an archive. It was my very personal response to the collapse of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the absolute abdication of responsibility by the US Federal government – which left their people to drown and starve and descend into chaos en masse during the week or so after the initial disaster: I was living with my husband and two-year-old son in Los Angeles at that time, and my very bodily response was to start scanning the landscape for food, medicine, weapons, fuel and the like. Walking in the hillsides around my home I saw real barley we could eat, walnuts, acorns, and then sacred datura and the castor plant – a source of lubricants, industrial and personal, as well as the deadly toxin ricin. Obviously, 14 million other Angelenos would soon have stripped the hills bare, but I was engaging in the kind of survivalist magical thinking that will be familiar to many parents here when I imagined I could save my son by harvesting this somewhat desiccated cornucopia.

"LA Botanical" refers to botanical knowledge that was either held by indigenous communities or which was brought to the city, with the plants, by immigrants steeped in subsistence knowledge. It was a concerted effort to archive wild plants with uses ranging from weaponry to pharmacology to entheogenic plants used for spiritual initiation and insight. I documented 45 functional plants as 14-inch-square glass plate ambrotypes – around life-size – and

exhibited them as glass sheets – ghosts casting shadows against the walls of the gallery. I made a small, cheap book that included all the plants and text that encapsulated my research into their uses. It was a kind of guidebook to the region, although a hazardous and erratic one, and is my most widely disseminated publication to date.

“Crown Coach Botanical” is a survey of the Crown Coach site, a poisoned, petrochemical-saturated industrial brownfield, the former home to the Los Angeles school bus provider the Crown Coach Company, in downtown Los Angeles. I set up an on-site darkroom in an old Chevy truck and made ambrotype images of every species I could find living on that site.

The plants depicted in “LA Botanical” and “Crown Coach Botanical” are not all native. Most are introduced and this is in part their interest for me. They have been brought to Los Angeles – mostly with good cause – by immigrants who needed them, and then forgot why they needed them, so they have become wildings, weeds. People need plants. There is no other way for our bodies to channel the energy of the sun. This is our only connection to life, but we have forgotten it, en masse, in a city like Los Angeles. This is a case of real alienation – from life in its most primary form. These archives are a very limited attempt to undo that alienation.

I used ambrotype – a photographic technique invented in the mid-nineteenth century – to produce the “LA Botanical” images because the invention of the ambrotype process was simultaneous with the ‘invention’ of the city of Los Angeles in the early 1850s. I wanted a technique that would instantly draw my audience into the realisation of the time that has passed since the city’s beginnings. It’s a small envelope of time, but immense change has occurred within that period. The landscape and the ecology of Los Angeles have been utterly transformed, and yet a life force persists on the edges of our control that is really spectacular in its regenerative power.

My use of anachronistic photographic techniques could be interpreted as an attempt, perhaps nostalgic, to transport my audience into the past with a view to critiquing the present. One thing I’d like to make clear is that I don’t regard the primordial as having gone away, or as being truly in the past. Rather, modernity lies on top of it, smothering it, although it occasionally breaks through. As a photographer working on-site I have a great deal of control, but I am also at one level simply recording what is there at that moment. The photographs are of plants – some of them sacred – places and the spirit or wairua that inhabits these places. These are things that are there, in the landscape, now. My intention is to sensitise my audience to what is all around them that is verdant, unruly, persistent and strong – but which is also staggering under the weight of humanity’s collective abuse.

What I discovered while shooting “Crown Coach Botanical” was that the ambrotype technique was allowing me to tap into a spiritualist or psychic aspect of photography. I was confronted every day by unexpected and apparently miraculous manifestations around the plants. I’ve been drawn further into that spiritualist aspect with the “Te Taniwha” work.

“Te Taniwha” is shot in Te Reinga, a rural settlement near the east coast in the central North Island of New Zealand that, despite its isolation, has also been transformed enormously by the modern colonial project. What was temperate rainforest is now largely farmland and many of the plants you see are not native. Many of its people have been economically obliged to leave their customary home, and a good number reside here in Melbourne and also in Western Australia.

But the site is sacred and its sanctity remains physically palpable to anyone who spends any time there. It’s occupied by an ancient water deity or taniwha named Hinekorako who takes the form of an albino eel, but has also manifested as a human woman. She once married into the local family line, before returning to the water, and is the ancestor of everyone in the hapū (or subtribe) known as both Ngāi Kohatu and Ngāti Hinehika. In photographing sites associated with the taniwha I was guided by my collaborator Richard Niania, who is the kaitiaki or guardian of Te Reinga marae and also of all the sacred and customary knowledge passed down through millennia regarding the origins of the land and its people.

I was aware, as was Richard, that sacred objects would result from my attempts to channel the taniwha’s spirit. The ambrotype and daguerreotype techniques that I use are open to such channelling, although so is photographic film. I don’t know that digital photography is useful for this kind of work. It is so malleable, so tuned to the whims of the artist that I don’t know that there is room for any other creative force to intervene, so I don’t use it in these kinds of places.

One thing that connects these three projects is that they are reflections on my various homes. I was raised in the Mangapoike Valley which neighbors Te Reinga where “Te Taniwha” was shot, and which is about 15 miles from the small town of Wairoa. I lived in Los Angeles for almost ten years, for three of those years in downtown Los Angeles, and am married to an Angeleno. As someone who grew up on a farm, I experience both landscapes as verdant living environments, something I hope the work reflects. Beyond my personal connection there are other relationships. Both sites were colonised at a similar moment in the mid-nineteenth century. That history informs both projects and underlies my use of nineteenth century photographic techniques. Los Angeles was incorporated as a city of 1610 people in 1850. From the mid 1860s, Wairoa was the stage for increasingly aggressive British colonial land seizures from Māori. In both cases, indigenous inhabitants experienced huge loss and alienation from the land. I am the product of this colonial process and photography has been a vehicle for understanding it better.

Beyond these personal and historical parallels, LA and Te Reinga share little else. For me, the interest in discussing them together has to do with the tensions between the places where I have lived – the different ways in which the processes of modernity have played out on the landscape: what has survived, what has been erased, what has moved in to take its place in the landscape. Both “LA Botanical” and “Te Taniwha” are attempts to trace a line back to the moment modernity came to a particular place and to take stock of what has come to, or become of, that place since.

Right now I’m thinking a lot about how deeply in the thrall of capital and science (and in their combination, technology) we have become and what that has meant for other forms of knowledge and other forms of life. I’m not discounting the profound importance of scientific knowledge or capital and political conditions, which are in themselves valid, but I am very concerned with the necessity of reinvigorating other knowledge systems which are equally coherent and complete and which come out of a realisation of our embodiment, our corporality, our animality and our visionary potential as it emerges in mythology, fiction, art. I honestly think the survival of our biosphere is at stake when we hand everything over to technology in the hands of capitalists.

The sanctity of some places and things is strong enough that it infuses everything that touches them with some of that quality. The hope is that contact with the sacred, even in a secondary form like photography, might provide the conditions for a kind of truth event – a breaking through of something other than science, capital and, in their sutured form, technology.

Given that we are bleeding the earth dry, and at a terrifying rate, I want seriously to engage in protest – but this is hugely challenging for me and many many others, because everything we make and do exists in this framework of capital. I need something anomalous to break through, and to reveal that there is an outside to capital structures and the atomisation, quantification and exploitation that comes from wedding capitalism to science in the form of technology. Because her origins precede those structures, because she is largely invisible to them, and because they do not believe in or acknowledge her power, the taniwha Hinekorako – who is at once sacred, primordial and corporeal – is such an entity. There are many others and we need them very badly right now.

I’m mostly interested in intellectual worlds largely beyond art – but I do use art – not as some kind of privileged realm, but to produce contexts in which they might make contact across paradigmatic divides. Art provides one potential conduit for that. It’s a realm that’s not completely ideologically closed off. The “Te Taniwha” work is really made with and for a very specific group of people, who come from Te Reinga but have largely been driven by economic forces to live away from their place – their tūrangawaewae. It is an attempt by myself and by my

collaborator Richard Niania, who has the authority and mandate to do so, to preserve an ancient oral tradition at the moment when it is most threatened. The photographs are, at one level, a pretext for this other work to go ahead and, at another level, a gift to someone I loved who died around 15 years ago. That I get to bring these images into contact with others in Australia and, later this year, in Southern California, and in doing so get to bring Richard to both Australia and California to make contact with family members long separated – to reinvigorate the extraordinary intellectual tradition that is their whakapapa and to which they are heirs, and to enter into dialogue with other thinkers from parallel intellectual traditions – that is the really exciting bit for me, and a genuine privilege.

One role that these projects – these artworks that are also archives – might play is to disrupt the overwhelming claim to truth staked out by capitalism sutured to science in the form of technology. This suturing is how everything everywhere gets to be accounted for in terms of capital – that we should save the Amazon because there may be organisms in there that will cure my cancer; that there is an economic calculus to be applied to the survival of that frog versus that condo development; that perpetual economic growth is viable and even desirable – that kind of thinking emerges out of suturing ourselves to capital as truth. So I am developing a way of seeing truth which acknowledges the cohesion and validity of such an analysis, but does not allow it to sit alone and hold total sway.

With this in mind, what strikes me is that truth procedures can not come into contact if knowledge systems have been lost completely. We need to imagine, or to re-learn, how to live outside capitalism if we are going to survive as a species in this biosphere, and we can only get there by trying things out physically and intellectually. Micro-utopian experiments are essential, as is speculative thinking of the kind that gets played out in some science fiction. But we don't have to make everything up from scratch. There is the past to refer to, and there are some people still living in an un-modern present. We can ask those who still remember or who still live outside modern systems how it is that we can live.

The deeper research behind "Te Taniwha" involves Richard interviewing knowledge-holders from Te Reinga, while I have committed to recording and processing these documents. While we're open to everything they have to tell us, many older people have enjoyed describing how they lived in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, when there was no electric power at Te Reinga, when Māori was still the first language (and an ancient and specific dialect was spoken) and when communal marae life was still the norm in that place. This was a community, now still very much within our intellectual reach, that was not based in capitalist practices, and which had a very limited interaction with modern technology. These elders have answered really simple practical questions about how to live a life of subsistence, but also raised deeper ideas about collective life, communal interdependence and family structure. There is a really viable model there, which we are hoping to record and discuss while those who experienced it are still able to describe it.

Knowledge systems can't make contact if they no longer exist. While I didn't know this at the outset, I've started to see a role for this work in supporting those who have knowledge in their bid to manifest and sustain it, and to channel its power.

The great threat of the present moment is the utter dominance of capital, sutured as it is to science in the form of new technologies. This propagates our current condition of hypermobility and with it the potential for the loss of entire knowledge systems. This is what is at stake when people from ancient communities in Aotearoa are drawn out into the deserts of Western Australia to dredge up commodities from which to fabricate iPhones and iPads, technological machines that will bathe us in images of horror, fantasy, ecstasy or release – while burying the very knowledge systems we need or sucking the life out of them at exactly the moment when we need them most – as our biosphere teeters on the brink of collapse.

## Perspective

### A HOLY GRAIL

Alan Bekhuis

As digital technologies have become more prevalent, so too have 'alternative' photographic processes within art photography. My perspective is that of a modern practitioner of daguerreotypy: the first publicly announced form of photography, which until recently has been at the tail end of the resurgence of historical processes.

Since the daguerreian era (c. 1840-60) there have always been people practicing the art. They are usually drawn to it because of a curiosity about the dawn of photography, or a fascination around the 'mirror with a memory' concept. Until the age of the internet they tended to be isolated individuals, and what community there was did not achieve the critical mass required to propel the practice forward into a fully-fledged art movement. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century practitioners such as William M. Hollinger, Charles Tremear and Ray Phillips are well known amongst modern daguerreotypists, most of whom experienced the same difficulties one hundred years later in obtaining materials and equipment. Furthermore, in order to perfect the process, extensive practical application is required, whereby the practitioner becomes familiar with the subtle nuances of the method, and the information that can be gleaned from a written account naturally falls short of providing this. These challenges have meant that practising artists have always remained few and far between.

The mid-nineteenth century practice of the daguerreian art reached astonishing technical and artistic heights because of the medium's popularity with the public as well as the industry that it forged. This industry provided high-quality silver plates produced especially for the purpose, lenses made to the specific light sensitivities of the daguerreotype, and an abundant supply of proven chemical formulas. Most of all, though, one could learn first-hand from a daguerreotypist who had achieved a technical plate quality which is still to be equalled in the modern genre. In the daguerreian period in the United States alone it has been estimated that over 40 million daguerreotypes were made. The absence of such an established industry in modern times has been a significant hurdle to artists taking up the practice in the post-daguerreian era, but over recent years this has begun to change.

From the 1970s through to the early 1990s small bands of makers started to emerge. This occurred primarily in the United States and developed out of antiquarian photography collecting. There is a link between the study of the history of photography and the rise in alternative photographic processes, and the world's first photography museum, George Eastman House, in Rochester, New York, has played a ground-breaking role in this area as well as in the development of photographic conservation science. This has meant gaining practical knowledge of the various processes in order to better understand them; to this end, Eastman House has since the 1980s given tuition in nineteenth century processes. Together with the unparalleled technology and manuscript collections at Eastman House, this has fostered the flow of practical knowledge of processes, and many modern-day masters have spent time there.

The internet has played a critical role in the renaissance of the daguerreotype, allowing for the sharing of information, technology and support across the globe. Whereas the pre-internet modern daguerreotypist was an isolated individual, tending to closely guard his or her accrued knowledge and to see the process in technical rather than artistic terms, today's practitioner has access to the rallying point the internet has become, and can easily be informed of gatherings and exhibitions about the process. In 2008 I co-founded the website [cdags.org](http://cdags.org) with this in mind. It features artist and technology galleries, a wiki, and an integrated forum. In 2009, due to heavy promotion on [cdags.org](http://cdags.org), 44 artists participated in an international exhibition in Daguerre's home town and resting place of Bry-sur-Marne.