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Crime Scenes

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Rebecca Scott Bray and Derek Dalton



Reflection in dresser mirror of Police Photographer Ian White at work inside a Mortlake residence. Police Photographers White and Graham, 1954.

A Future Undreamed: The Forensic Photo Beyond the Darkroom, Case-File and Courtroom: Memory, Mediation, Museology

Caleb Williams

An estimated 130,000 crime, accident and mug-shot negatives currently reside within the Justice & Police Museum's forensic photography archive in Sydney. Exploration of these images not only requires optical stamina, but also a strong sense of reflexivity about personal and institutional agency, from the researcher or curator who elects to undertake this task. Anyone who desires to display or publish photographs from the archive must walk a precarious middle path. On the one hand there is the need for an honest, historically aware, and aesthetically inflected response to these startling, disturbing and sometimes also darkly beautiful images. On the other is the need to adhere to an institutional ethical code, with its concerns for 'community-appropriateness', 'moral-sensitivity', and 'avoidance' of what is too horrible or upsetting to show. Indeed, the images of violent crime and everyday human fallibility comprehended by the 1912-1964 time-span of the archive, appear almost cosmically post-prelapsarian in their damning collective testimony and yet, also, somehow parochial, banal and even humorous, in the forms of misadventure and deviance that they so regularly document, dissect and expose. The possibilities for interpretation using this material are varied: audio-visual installations,

illustrated novels, films, print photography shows, lavish coffee table books, 'performance art', talks, public programs and learned symposia are among them. This essay ruminates on the processes, politics and perceptual challenges that must be negotiated to bring the forensic photograph to the general public. It draws on my experience as the Curator/Manager of the Justice & Police Museum, dealing with an array of projects — including my own attempt to curate a travelling exhibition using the archive — that have taken place between 1999 and 2009.

Part 1: The World Without Colour

One of the first, and certainly most memorable visits to a specialist unit within the NSW Police that I made not long after joining the Justice & Police Museum in 1992, was to the Physical Evidence Section at the Sydney Police Centre in Goulburn Street, Surry Hills. The purpose of my visit was to negotiate the loan of a variety of items for an exhibition. But what struck me forcefully then, and what remains most deeply in my thoughts about that visit now, was not who I spoke to, or the exhibits that I intended to borrow, but the manner in which the foyer area to the Physical Evidence Section itself was decorated. Freestanding display panels were encountered as soon as you passed through the plate-glass security doors to the section, and crowded across each of these panels was a bizarre photographic homage to every imaginable variety of death. The photos were large, and backed on cardboard. Some of the edges of the photographic paper were peeling, and some corners of the photographs bore multiple holes from various pins. The surfaces of the photographs were matte and semi-gloss, and the scenes they depicted uniformly lurid: hacked limbs, wounds, slumped bodies and heads blown apart by shotgun blasts: furniture, bathroom tiles, carpets and walls splashed, sprayed and dribbled on with copious amounts of blood. Lit up by successive bursts of the photographer's flash the carnage pulsed with its own technicolour intensity. These were pictures that only the police would ever see, that only the police would ever show. The photography was strangely intimate; the spaces

it revealed, their domestic calm shattered by the presence of broken bodies, seemed like places that you yourself had visited; the blood in these pictures had *an emphatic presence*. It was recorded in every phase of liquidity and dryness, from the fresh scarlet wetness caused by a minutes old stabbing, to the dark purple scabbing and coagulation found on the body of a shooting victim a day after death. Violent death, its lacerations, cranial trauma, ripe contusions, bloating, shards of bone and shreds of flesh, is hard to look at. But the detectives who worked in the SPC's Physical Evidence Section had obviously been long ago inured to its presence. They strutted jauntily to and fro past this little display whistling, eating sandwiches, and hurling jokes at one another. Dumbfounded, I stood there staring, unable to take in the slaughter and cruelty that their job confronted them with on a daily basis. I finished up the visit, selected some objects for loan and came back to the museum. I sat down at my desk and closed my eyes. But the blood was still there: pooling on linoleum, dripping from toilet bowls, scattering itself in enormous calligraphic swirls over walls, couches and floors. I realised that unlike the detectives working in the Physical Evidence Section who had developed the composure and professional capacity to withstand it, I, along with most of those that visited my museum, preferred to live in a world without colour.

Part 2: Mediation

Film stock, negative size, aperture, composition, focal length, dark room intervention and cropping all perform their own acts of mediation when it comes to the photographic image and its rendering of 'reality'. But black and white photography starts with reality already mediated, already translated into a monochromatic tonal scale absent in normal visual perception. In the varying contexts of exhibition, publication, and audio-visual presentation, the Justice & Police Museum has enabled the general public to come face to face with the historical crime scene image on a number of different occasions. In the last 10 years such photographs have been released in two major exhibitions: *Crime Scene* by Ross Gibson and Kate Richards (1999) and *City of Shadows* by Peter

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Doyle (2005). But in all this time, the museum has *never* presented a death scene to its audience in full colour.

Colour is emotional; it has an empathy-inducing presence. It is a widespread human habit to react to colour photography's presence, its literalness, as if it actually *is* the thing it *reproduces*. The red blood, in contemporary crime scene photography is stomach churning; the black blood in historical crime scene photography is confronting, but tolerable. Red blood is always *ours*, black blood always that of an earlier *other*. In its temporal remoteness of mediation, the black and white image of a violent crime is more able to be accepted — and 'assimilated' by curators and audiences — in a way that a colour image of the same subject would not be. Black and white photography, particularly in the context of crime scene recording offers both the buffering and inherent distancing of a cool historicism. Despite its beauty, evocation, and objective and sensual precision, the black and white image cannot disguise its photographic artefactuality. As a documentary methodology, black and white crime scene recording has been overtaken by colour in most police departments around the globe. Due to the existence of Weegee's *Naked City*, first published in 1945 (Felig 2002), black and white photography may be the medium most associated with crime scene photography in the visually literate exhibition goer's head, but this association is always with crimes of the past; crimes that do not connect with 'us' now. Due to its freighted sense of 'noir' revelation, black and white crime scene photography also prompts fantasy, nostalgia and aesthetic rumination in beholders. In its uncovering of forgotten, hidden and dark histories of the underworld it triggers immense curiosity in the viewer, urging narratives into being that are profoundly concerned with event re-construction, and historical contextualising. The Justice & Police Museum forensic photography archive is more or less totally composed of black and white photography. If it had been in colour, I doubt we would have had as much success with it as we have had. The inherent re-rendering of reality performed by black and white forensic photography is the first mediation in a range of later mediations, including processes of research, thesis making and filtration that turn such photography into something that is consumable

by the general public in the museum.

The total effects of mediation appear in all that is unconsciously summoned forth by the act of re-presentation itself. The original context of any crime scene photograph is functional and short-lived. Its active life-span usually lasts from the onset of an investigation to the time a prosecution reaches court. The rescue and re-presentation of historical crime scene images for museum, gallery or book involves placement in a potentially vast system of image circulation. This system of image circulation encourages opportunities for critical discussion, creative speculation and historical learning; opportunities such images, used for a pragmatic, short-term purpose in a police bureaucracy, were never intended to promote at the time of creation. Most crime scene images are 'serial' in nature. A typical batch of forensic negatives will offer multiple views of a scene from a variety of angles typically close up, middle distance and further away. But within books and exhibitions, these serial images undergo an iconic transfiguration. The image that is isolated for interpretive, historical, or aesthetic reasons from others that surrounded it in the archive takes on a solitary signification, and new intentionality. By its very appearance in contemporary cultural forums where meaning making runs rampant — and often promiscuously blends nostalgic fantasy, formalistic analysis, and the craving for 'historical back-story' — the newly visible forensic image becomes layered, wrapped, and disguised in a variety of re-shaping emotions, suppositions and discourses. In the last 20 years, since the pioneering work offered by Luc Sante in *Evidence* (1992), the forensic photo has travelled a surreal distance. It has undergone a journey from forgotten police record seen by no one, to cultural commodity seen by exhibition goers and book buyers all over the world.

Part 3: The Research Process

The processes involved when photographs are examined and set aside for potential exhibition or publication usage are complex. Judging from observations of the research that has taken place in the Justice & Police Museum, both by myself and others, it would be accurate to say that

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for every single image of forensic photography that ends up in a book or an exhibition, up to 50 or 60 others will have been unpacked from boxes and envelopes, laid out on the light-box, carefully scrutinised with magnifying glass or lube, shared and perhaps even robustly debated with interested colleagues, before being set aside, digitally scanned, logged, printed and filed. As the files containing these images for exhibition continue to expand, other varieties of examination, discussion and veto are then instigated; this process continues until the total photographic content is refined, compressed and shaped into what will eventually appear before the public. In most cases this is only the tip of the research iceberg, only a sliver of what the researcher has actually 'seen'. This filtering process is informed by the conscious aims of museology and the unconscious impulses of the researcher. It is also fed into and influenced by the aesthetic, historical and intellectual sympathies of the team that surrounds and supports the researcher; by the attitudes of 'politically and community minded' institutional overseers; and in the case of my own organisation, the legal perspectives of a solicitor (particularly in regard to issues of privacy, and the still-living relatives of those depicted in a crime scene or mug-shot). In the final instance, what makes it into the realised exhibition or book will also reflect the strengths and limitations of the researcher's thesis.

The Justice & Police Museum provided opportunities for Ross Gibson between 1996 and 1999, and Peter Doyle between 2003 and 2006, to carry out just the sort of work described above. It was my role to facilitate, and in a large and loose sense, 'supervise' some of this work, which often meant little more than turning a key in a lock which led to the museum's loft where the archive was housed. At the end of the day I'd return and stand chatting about how the work had gone, often marveling at some of the strange, provocative and intriguing images their research had unearthed. I had also, in a limited, random way, at various times pursued my own investigations of the archive in the museum loft, flipping through glass plate negatives held within dusty Kodak boxes dating from the 1920s. In a couple of instances these images, discovered serendipitously rather than through the hard graft of long hours at the coal face, found their way into the *City of Shadows*

book and exhibition. An essay on this experience, titled ‘Spirits Awake: encountering the archive’, published in the book that accompanied the exhibition, outlined the uncanny sense of encounter that underlay those activities (Williams 2005: 225–226). So, it was with some self-consciousness that I embarked on my own protracted phase of personal research on the archive in 2006, towards an exhibition that I then hoped would tour to international photography venues overseas. Because of my awareness of the impressive interventions mounted beforehand I began to periodically set down notes on my work. It seemed important to do this; to think, in the present, about what was actually happening as I examined the archive in raw form. I also thought it might be useful for others concerned to understand what goes on — what goes through the researcher’s mind — when the forensic photo is discovered, inspected and mulled over, prior to translation into cultural product in a gallery or museum. An extract of the journal on this phase of work with the archive appears below.

Part 4: Archive Diary: Wed 20th June 2007

I spent the morning crouched over the light box, in the cramped confines of the old police station kitchen, where the archive has been temporarily stored pending renovations to the museum loft. The stiff sepia-coloured envelopes of negatives I was dealing with this morning all dated from 1964 and held between one and twelve negatives each. The negatives themselves are 3 x 4 inches, flexible, oblong shaped, made from dark, slightly clouded plastic that has a transparent border. A small round hole perforates the upper right corner of each negative. From my understanding, this perforation in the plastic originally allowed them to be strung together in case-files for court or investigation use.

Prising each packet of negatives open and separating internal contents which are sometimes stuck together due the effects of moisture and dust, feels a bit ticklish, but soon I’m building up pace. The negatives have a distinctive odour; some are affected by ‘vinegar syndrome’, and smell of decomposing acetate. It sits within the sinuses, throbbingly insistent. The sweet, powerful synthetic odour suggests

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the wooden benches and Bunsen burners of my old school science laboratory.

Slowly, every variety of misfortune and malice is disgorged onto the light box and after an hour or two, I begin to feel as if I have been viewing images from a war zone. There's an abundance of death, fire, car crash, putrefaction and exhumation photographs on display. A lot of congealed sadness: pictures of an old woman who has killed herself using a gas oven, corpses slumped on floors in innocuous seeming flats and bungalows, an image of a suicide at the bottom of a cliff at Fairlight, another of a teenager who hanged himself in a garage; tons of bent metal; smashed vehicles singular, and collided vehicles multiple, even the melancholy wreck of a burnt-out (apparently bombed?) boat on the harbour.

Illuminated by the milky under-glow of the light-box, I expect the inverted tonal values of each negative to buffer me from the full impact of its content. But visual translation is surprisingly easy, the buffering does not occur. I begin to wonder if my idea that some of these photographs can be thought about as outstanding and sometimes also darkly beautiful examples of photography in their own right, is completely irrational. The repetition of depravities and tragedies normally censored from the imagination forces me to challenge some of my deeper assumptions. In the past I've often felt the urge to link different images from the archive with visual works that exist beyond it. This urge has some usefulness on occasion, but it now lies gasping, defeated (there is not much that I have seen this morning that parallels the lyrical qualities of a 1930s Brassai or Bill Brandt night scene!). Much is banal — repeated images of parked cars, street frontages, railway sheds, tramlines; yet much is terrible too — the numerous lives that have just 'given up' or been brutally taken.

Two packets of negatives deal with the activities and membership of the NSW branch of the Australian Nazi party, in 1964. There are several photos of a house in Burwood, in Sydney's western suburbs (the party headquarters?). A shot of an office shows an aerial map of Canberra, a large Nazi flag on the wall, a desk and typewriter, with

files and pamphlets scattered around. There's an associated image of eight party members: studenty, nerdish looking young men mostly. One of them who is slightly older, maybe in his late twenties, has the demeanour of an intellectual thug and is wearing a 'brown-shirt' uniform. In another envelope, I find a photograph of an Australian Nazi party membership card, complete with the words: 'Heil Hitler!' emblazoned on the front, and an adjacent eagle (a pure Deutsch-blooded and rather nasty looking specimen) clutching a swastika in its claw: strange to think that tucked away in the suburbs of Menzies era Australia this kind of weirdly anachronistic iconographic homage to the Third Reich was being churned out on an obscure printing press.

In terms of the death scenes, an image of a bohemian looking male in his mid 30s, found dead in a sparsely furnished flat, stops me in my tracks. Very different to the other deaths that I've seen this morning. No sense of violence here. His tousled head rests on a unmade bed. He has died sitting on the floor, his slumped torso wedged upright, partly supported by the bed. Signs of last pleasures are in evidence. A packet of Capstan cigarettes and a lone beer bottle rest on a bedside chair. The final things his fingers played with and lips touched, before death. The usual gore that stains bed-sheets, pools on floorboards, or scatters itself in Pollock-like drip patterns on walls — all of that is absent and, for once, your gaze does not feel like a cruel and unwelcome intrusion. This is an image I would definitely consider for my exhibition. Is that because it represents the palatable exception, easier perhaps for the audience to 'consume' than others, because it both resists, and replaces, a more brutal truth? This 'easeful death' in a frowsy bed-sit filled with its atmosphere of 'drowsy numbness' seems to imply death is nothing terrible. Most deaths I've seen here reek of violently delivered — and sometimes desperately resisted — annihilation, and this death stands in strong counterpoint to them. I ponder this: is the draw of this image due to the way it represents death itself to me, and makes me think about my own, everyone's, the universal preference for a serene, un-resisted floating away? Perhaps this is why I dwell on it with so much more curiosity than I do on all the other cruel, squalid, bitter deaths I have seen this morning.

I thought of *City of Shadows* while disinterring images onto the light-box: so dark, mean and threadbare, in its evocation of Sydney, but also somehow buoyant. In its deep rescue of forgotten criminals, *that exhibition* was about ‘life’. I wonder how the public will react to my own projected exhibition idea, which is about ‘death’ as much as ‘life’? Yes, about the archive as the purveyor of remarkable photography filled with every type of human drama, but also about the archive as a generator of metaphysical confrontations, the archive as a witness to being itself?

Part 5: New Interventions, Fresh Visions

In autumn of 2009 the Justice & Police Museum launched a new internal photography space, known as the ‘Archive Gallery’. The first exhibition held within this new space was titled *exposure*. It consisted of 42 black and white photographs that had not been seen by the public before. The exhibition largely dealt with images taken in the 1940s and 50s, a period of growth for the NSW Police Scientific Investigation Bureau (who produced the bulk of the images the archive contains). By 1952, SIB photographers might have to attend up to 10 crime or accident scenes across a single shift. The work demanded hourly confrontations with cruel sights and hard realities: each of these ruptures in the orderly life of the town needed to be recorded meticulously, visually mapped, with a rational gaze and steady hand. Due to a range of technological and historical factors, crime and accident scene recording became more thorough and pervasive at this time. The introduction of portable cameras and lighter-weight, less expensive negative media — in combination with a greater number of working photographers — resulted in significantly expanded documentation and deeper probing of Sydney’s rambling geography. Within the exhibition, images of violent crimes and suspicious deaths appeared next to others that seemed purely concerned with urban topography and atmospherics. The various localities of Sydney were revealed as sinister and lyrical: the midnight streets of Surry Hills spangling with the crazed reflections of car headlamps; the white heat of a summer’s day in Newtown welding

deep shadows to the feet of hurrying pedestrians; the glittering sand, water and gums of Toukley darkening in the twilight. Such images, with their inexplicit intentionality, asked as many questions of the viewer as they answered. Looking at them, each square inch of the city and its straggling suburbs could be conceived of as somehow *fallen* and *guilty*, and therefore demanding of omniscient surveillance.

The exhibition also contained another agenda: to re-connect the typically absent or invisible photographer to the physical act of photography. Fugitive portraits of photographers who attended various scenes were therefore offered to the viewer. Their accidental presences were to be discovered hovering on the edge of the photographic frame, or identified by a single body part, when hands or feet unconsciously protruded in front of the aperture. In several photographs, mirrored surfaces fielded them back to the camera lens. In one instance a car bumper bar reflection revealed the photographer crouching on the bitumen his bulky Speed Graphic camera, with flash pan attached, raised to his eye. In another, a photographer who has carefully positioned a camera and tripod in a bloody bedroom is reflected back to us in a dresser mirror, his odd air of scientific detachment in sharp contrast to the human gore on the bed sheets.

Part 6: Conclusion: Totalising Narrative and Individual Affect

It's often been remarked that police archives are coercive, bureaucratic, and obsessed with reductive classification. That archives are compact with the omnivorous need to record and categorise. In terms of the legal matrix, this recording is said to reflect a profound power relationship wherein the abject subject is caught beneath an unforgiving surveillant gaze. In terms of the crime-scene photograph, we are informed that the rational application of science, manifesting in the recording and capturing power of photography, optimistically intervenes to provide the first stage in a chain of investigative procedures that lead to crime resolution. But my feelings about the Justice & Police

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Museum forensic photography archive — which mixes its mug-shots, live offenders and dead victims with scenes of locality that are wounded by accident, fatality and folly — is that such perspectives are useful but are not the full story. In my view this archive arrests an enormous historic flow which it contains, maps, and absorbs, but offers no precise summary, absolute verdict, or possibility of an easy explanation about the human behaviour it has recorded. I demur from totalising generalities, handy political determinations, and elegant theoretical encapsulations. When reviewing the archive's coverage of fallen human beings and human short-falling, my thoughts about life and history are changed, deepened, my emotions compelled strangely, moved toward a sobering state of wonder mixed with humility (very much sometimes, a 'there but for the grace of God' type reaction). Sometimes too, I find my feelings are carried toward an abstract metaphysical state in which there is only the magnetic compulsion to stare, lost within the immersive borders of the photographic frame — and thought itself backs away, puzzled by so massive a confrontation with being.

References

Books

- Doyle P and Williams C 2005 *City of Shadows: Sydney Police Photographs 1912-1948* Historic Houses Trust Sydney
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- Williams C 2005 'Spirits Awake: encountering the archive' in Doyle and Williams 2005: 225-226

Exhibitions

- Crime Scene* 1999 Sydney: Justice & Police Museum curated by Ross Gibson and Kate Richards 13 November 1999-2 October 2000
- City of Shadows* 2005 Sydney: Justice & Police Museum curated by Peter Doyle 19 November 2005-11 February 2007

A Future Undreamed

exposure 2009 Sydney: Justice & Police Museum curated by Holly Schulte and Caleb Williams 28 Feb 2009-13 August 2009

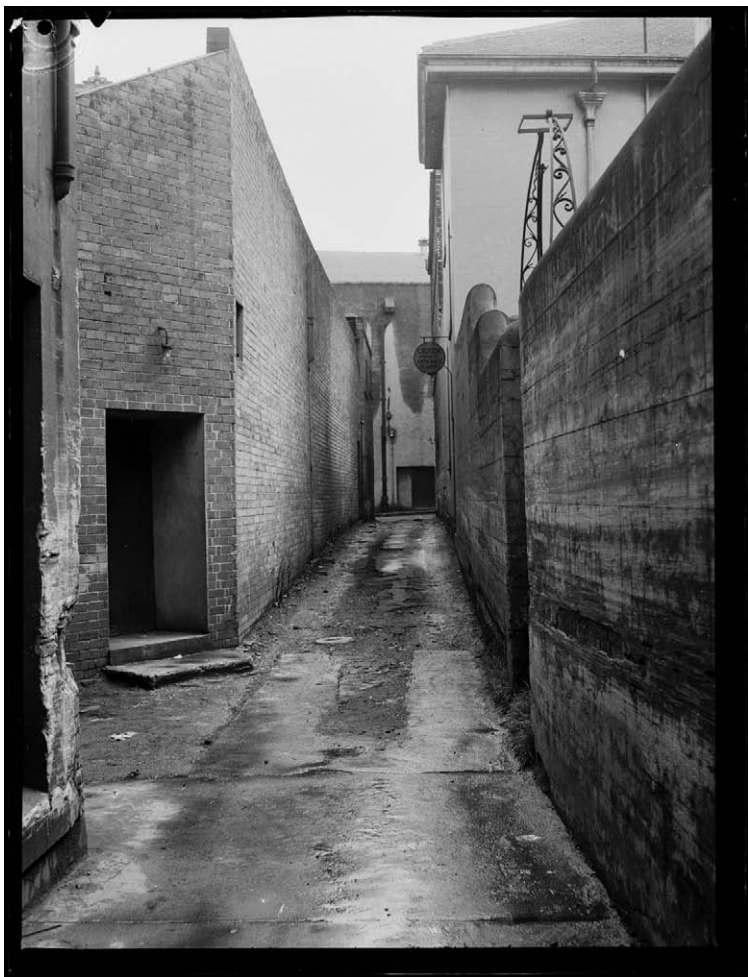
All photographs are reproduced courtesy of NSW Police Forensic Photography Archive, Justice & Police Museum, Historic Houses Trust.



Double exposure. Mug shot of offender taken at Central Police Station and scene of fatal traffic accident in Epping. Police Photographer Snowden, 1952.



Death on a staircase, location unknown. Photographer unknown, 1930s.



Central Lane, Sydney, after rain and an assault. Police Photographer K G Brown, 1954.



Kitchen death, Yagoona. Police Photographer Snowden, 1952.



Skull belonging to a man suspected of murder. Police Photographer Percival, 1960.



Injured hand belonging to a man involved in a North Sydney murder.
Police Photographer White, 1953.



Aerial view of police attending a fatal fall on Day Street, Sydney.
Police Photographer Ross, 1954.

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Newtown Bridge, scene of a fatal accident.
Police Photographer Nixon, 1950.



Bullet holes in the rear of a Holden Special after an
'attempted homicide' shooting, location unknown.
Police Photographers Merchant and Letherbarrow, 1954.



Reflection in chrome bumper bar of Police Photographer Snowden at Kingsway, Miranda. Police Photographer Snowden, 1957.



Legs of deceased male found on the cliffs at Steel Point, Nielsen Park.
Police Photographer Merchant, 1964.

