

Forensics and Poetics: A Context for ‘Accident Music’

Ross Gibson

The NSW Police Forensic Photography Archive at the Justice & Police Museum in Sydney is the detritus of police-work performed all over town between 1890 and 1970. It is a vast, mysterious collection of photographic negatives batched in cardboard boxes that often have nothing more than a year stamped on them. Inside the boxes, you find clusters of manila envelopes holding images captured on glass plates or acetate sheets. You might see mugshots, fingerprint records, handwriting samples, close-up objects or damaged details ripped out of context. You might see crime scenes and accident scapes that are either airless and empty or stocked with victims of bad luck and malfeasance. The envelopes usually bear the following marks: the name of a photographer who was also a detective, plus a date, a location and a terse description of the case e.g. ‘Redfern Park — Suicide with Gelnignite’; ‘Ashfield Hotel — Man in Yard’.

	No. 49/1414
Subject	"PLUMB AXE" case Ernest Brown - caretaker of store - Plumb cut off with axe
Location	Studio
Photographer	White
Taken on	31.10.49

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And that's the full extent of the hints offered by the archive. There are no investigators' notebooks, no court reports, no charge sheets, judgments or cross-referenced newspaper articles. There's nothing conclusive, nothing to put an end to the interpreting and storytelling that every picture stimulates so prodigally in your imagination. The archive is an unruly almanac of Sydney, a jumble of clues associated with unknown but actual people who have been caught in painfully real outbreaks of fate, desire, rage, cruelty or stupidity. The pictures can provoke and disturb as much as they might educate. They give rise to plausible stories that never resolve into agreeable certainty.

In fact, these photographs offer something better than certainty: they prompt an endless list of unsettling questions and possible accounts about the real lives and places they witness. Imagine you're in the archive, an envelope in your hand. Stimulated and often a little worried by the words on the front of the file, you imagine what you are about to see. The anticipation builds while your gloved fingers pinch at the edges of the negative that you hold up for a squinted preview before placing it carefully on the light box. At which point all the anticipation either ignites or fizzles. You might see the most banal of scenes — a backyard with a rake lying prongs-up; a bedroom with a doll sitting in a stained armchair. Often you don't comprehend anything until you manage to 'translate' the image, to invert its contrasts from negative to positive in your mind. And just occasionally, you see something utterly shocking that gets burned permanently into your nervous system and stops your thinking. Mostly though, you catch yourself again and again in the act of narrating: 'What about *this* story as a way to account for what I'm looking at?'

When I began examining these crime-scene photographs, I had the inkling I was looking at rooms and streets that were in shock somehow. I read Luc Sante's wonderful description of a batch of murder-pictures he had found: each one was 'like the voice print of a scream' (1992: 60). That's true, but Sante is describing the lingering after-effect of the image. In the Justice & Police Museum collection what transfixes me is the way many of the images scream, or more exactly flare or ignite,

during the viewing; they flare like a struck match, and then some of them glare almost hurtfully for a time before dimming down either to luminance or banality. I'm talking metaphorically here — about the affect in the pictures. But I'm being literal too, insofar as the viewer really does feel something scorching, a burning surge of anxious energy plus a kind of glandular scald. The flare ignites on the surface of the image but radiates in the viewer's nervous system. It's the shifting, contextual relationships amongst the images and their interpreters that give the archive its unending power. All the work I've done with the photographs, including 'Accident Music', investigates the semantic potential in such relational ignition, when astutely chosen elements are pushed together to spark thoughts and feelings.

If you do this archival fossicking long enough — say for fifteen years, as I have done at the Justice & Police Museum — you accrue thousands of feasible but contestable stories concerning the everyday spaces of your life and you begin to feel quick rushes of emotion pulsing between you and your city. This is how 'Accident Music' has come about. It is just one of a dozen artworks and installations that have arisen from my research in the archive. (The several projects are all part of a suite of projects known collectively as *Life After Wartime* which have been produced since 1998, mainly in collaboration with Kate Richards. See <http://www.lifeafterwartime.com>). Excerpted here, 'Accident Music' is a collection of one hundred interchangeable layout sheets, each one composed of an image and three breath-short utterances that touch obliquely on some quality or suggestion or worry in the picture. The utterances tinkle against each other, leading to fugitive thoughts and filamented stories and flutters of feeling. Like musical stings in movies, the utterances open up the images as much as they tie down the pictures the way captions can do. Then of course each sheet chimes against all the other sheets so that a loose symphony of stories resonates from all this chordal strumming. And no particular meanings congeal or settle. But my hope is that a speculative mood coalesces and prevails, even as it shifts constantly.

By responding to selected banalities and monstrosities in this

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archive of pictures, you can detect persistent, formative tendencies running through Sydney's history. The myriad photographs map a mood of the times, a zeitgeist. Some historians of consciousness have described this process of discerning the whole pattern in one view as 'imagistic cognition', the ability to catch a systematic understanding all at once (Kindelan 1996: 69). James Agee sought to write it in prose:

[L]et me hope the whole of that landscape we shall essay to travel in is visible and may be known as there all at once; let this be borne in mind, in order that, when we descend among its windings and blockades, into examination of slender particulars, this its wholeness and simultaneous living map may not be neglected, however lost the breadth of the country may be in the winding walk of each sentence (1988: 111).

Haiku writers have a comparable notion: in the right conditions the most fleeting glimpse or note or smell or texture can resonate so that 'the mind is struck as with a hammer, bringing the senses up short and releasing a flood of associations' (Hoover 1978: 205) causing a 'temporary enlightenment in which we see into the life of things' (Blyth 1949 1: 270). This is the type of acuity that a detective strives for, to make hundreds of speculative tales and then to test them against plausibility determined by the laws of physics as well as the laws of the land. As one of the detectives once remarked to me in conversation: 'That's all you do, every minute you're on a case — speculate and test'. From such accountable musing, a prosecutable case can get sifted into existence. But a good detective won't settle too quickly on a conclusion. The quest depends on a restless, imaginative drive to keep telling stories and to keep laying out speculative scenarios even as one hankers after closure.

William Sanders in his 1970s classic, *Detective Work: A Study of Criminal Investigations*, remarks that cops tend to operate on the assumption that there are two kinds of crimes: walkthroughs and whodunits (1977: 174). With walkthroughs, the offender is obvious (usually a relative, workmate or neighbour) and the conviction is a quick and simple procedure. Most investigators start every case by

looking for the walkthrough. Life gets challenging (and exhausting) when a walkthrough slides over (usually after three or four days) to become a whodunit, a mystery without obvious solution. Detectives are always tempted to espouse the 'walkthrough-est' interpretation in order to avoid the work that a whodunit will demand over an extended period of time. This amalgam of emotions and contingencies drives every investigation, the longer it goes on: temptation, mystery, intrigue, dread, conjunction, coincidence, intuition, exhaustion. Especially intuition and exhaustion.

'Accident Music' is a small testament to the poetics that you need to bring to forensics when you find yourself in a whodunit. Which is where historians really live and work most of the time.

References

Books

- Agee J 1988 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Picador Classic London (first published 1941)
- Blyth R H 1949 *Haiku* 4 vols Hokuseido Press Tokyo
- Hoover T 1978 *Zen Culture* Routledge and Kegan Paul London
- Kindelan N A 1996 *Shadows of Realism: dramaturgy and the theories and practices of modernism* Greenwood Press Westport Connecticut
- Sanders W B 1977 *Detective Work: A Study of Criminal Investigations* Macmillan New York
- Sante L 1992 *Evidence* Farrar Strauss and Giroux New York

Multimedia works

- Life After Wartime* Ross Gibson and Kate Richards <<http://www.lifeafterwartime.com>>

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Case details of images used in excerpt of ‘Accident Music’

- 1 Witness Dog: 1949 (no day or month supplied); Randwick; ‘Horse doping at stables’; Photographer — White.
- 2 Long Road: 09-07-1959; Botany Rd, Waterloo; ‘Death of pedestrian’; Photographer — Brown.
- 3 Caravan: 24-06-1957; Eden Camping Ground; ‘Carnal knowledge’; Photographer — Morgan.
- 4 Metal Instruments: 23-07-1955; Central Studio; ‘Charles O——— charged, abortion’; Photographer — unknown.
- 5 Corpse: 07-04-19; Sunnyholt Rd, Blacktown; ‘Murder’; Photographer — Massard.
- 6 Stairs and tunnel: 19-04-49; Central Station at Devonshire St; ‘Fatal Fall – Accident’; Photographer — Groom.

Details of image used in context for ‘Accident Music’

Typical Case File Envelope, NSW Police Forensic Photography Archive at the Justice & Police Museum, Sydney.

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