

PHOTOGRAPHY FOR EARTHLY SYMBIOSIS

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Photography is one of the major ways in which modern urban humans relate to nature and nature is mediated to us. Landscape photography, in particular, is one of the major ways in which modern urban humans relate to the land and the land is mediated to us. I define landscape photography as the creative, photographic inscription of the visual appreciation for the surfaces of the land in the aesthetic modes of the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful. American and Australian landscape photography has lived under the sign of the sublime and the picturesque for some time. Landscape photography in tourism, conservation and culture has played an important role in forming and maintaining national identity. It has played, and still plays, an important, but undervalued and misunderstood, role that is not aware of the cultural politics of pictures that underpins them. What role it will play in developing environmental sustainability in Australia is another question. Representing the natural environment as an aesthetic object does not promote environmental sustainability.

In relation to rural landscapes, photography has been important in developing and maintaining the bush and mateship mythologies. These stereotypical images of a pastoral, and pastoralist, country helped to create a theory and practice of land use, a way of seeing and doing, which is increasingly being seen as unsustainable. On the other hand, touristic and wilderness images of remote or accessible sites fuel the tourism industry and the conservation backlash of the 'setting aside' of sanctuaries of 'pristine' places may both be unsustainable too (see Giblett, 2011). Both touristic and wilderness images exploit the land they photograph and create unrealistic expectations of aesthetically pleasing or aestheticised landscapes that bear little relation to the lives of people, indigenous and not, who live on or near them and who rely upon them for their livelihoods.

By contrast, what could be called 'photography for environmental sustainability,' or what I prefer to call 'photography for earthly symbiosis,' could produce photographs focusing on people and places, landscapes and land-uses that exemplify principles and practices of bio- and psycho-symbiotic livelihoods in bioregional home-habitats of the living earth. Such a body of photographs could begin exploring, documenting and developing earthly symbiosis by showcasing communities working the land in ways that conserve or rehabilitate biodiversity. These could include indigenous people living traditional lifestyles, permaculture practitioners, organic farmers and gardeners, natural energy technologists,

etc. It could create a new genre of photography, photography for environmental sustainability. In this concluding section of the paper I develop these proposals and give some instances of what such photographs could look like.

After I introduced this idea to a couple of my photography colleagues, they asked, 'What the *^#! is photography for environmental sustainability?' I replied that I did not know and that it was not up to me to say so as I am not a photographer. Sometime later I was discussing landscape and wilderness photography and the idea of photography for environmental sustainability with Mel Barter, the then Environmental Officer at Edith Cowan University. She had the idea of running a student photography competition on the theme of environmental sustainability. One of her successors, Trena Ward, and I took up Mel's idea. The competition has now run for two years. In order to ensure that some students entered photographs on this theme and that the competition had an academic home, the competition was publicised amongst students taking Juha Tolonen's unit on landscape photography. Juha had already placed on the unit as part of the required reading for it an earlier version of my work on Australian landscape and wilderness photography that had been published as an article in *Continuum* (Giblett 2007: 331-346) and that concluded with a call for photography for environmental sustainability.

In the first year the competition ran, this reading did not produce many interesting results from the students taking the unit so Juha and I decided that it could be helpful for them for me to give a lecture on the topic of photography for environmental sustainability. I did so in the second year and began the lecture by introducing the concepts of sustainability and environmental sustainability. Photography for earthly symbiosis (rather than merely for 'environmental sustainability') would celebrate and showcase bio- and psycho-symbiotic livelihoods in bioregional home-habitats of the living earth.

Entries for the competition in 2010 opened on the day of the lecture and closed four weeks later. In future years, the lecture will be given earlier in the semester to give more time for students to reflect on it and produce relevant photographs. Juha, Trena Ward, Belinda O'Brien (Trena's fellow environmental officer) and I judged the winner and runner up for the student photography competition. The judging process created some lively and provocative discussion. On the one hand, environmental officers are motivated by the desire to get results by producing positive images that showcase creative and innovative practices and technologies that would result in changes in behaviour to conservation, recycling, waste reduction, smaller carbon footprint, etc. On the other hand, photographers generally don't like taking or viewing programmatic or preachy photographs that merely illustrate an ideology so they tend to end up producing ambivalent or negative images that display or play with the destructive that may or not result in changes to behaviour. The process of photographers producing photographs and of one photographer in Juha, two environmental officers in Belinda and Trena and myself being involved in judging the entries produced some interesting debate, but unanimity about the winners.

The first winner in 2009 was Mike Gray, at the time an Honours student in the School of Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University:



I read this photograph as a visual metaphor for global warming/climate change in which all breathing beings are suffocating to death on the greenhouses gases produced by modern industrial capitalist technologies in a plastic bag of its own making. Both the greenhouse gases and the plastic bag are made from petro-chemicals produced by the carboniferous resources of the earth (decaying plant matter). Instead of acknowledging and respecting the symbiosis of all breathing beings with the oxygen-producing plants of the planet earth, modern industrial capitalist technologies are suffocating all living beings to death through their parasitic and unsustainable use of the carboniferous products of those plants inside an ecosphere of their own re-making. There seems to be no way out of this prison cell of hypermodernity.

Talhy Stotzer, a PhD candidate in the School of Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University, took up the symbiosis of breathing beings with the oxygen-producing plants of the planet earth and prison cell of hypermodernity in the second winner of the competition in 2010:



I read this photograph in part as an ironic take on the simulation of nature in photographs in unsustainable shopping malls and the kind of crushing impact these malls have on the living human beings who work and shop in them. This is expressed in the photograph by the man's bowed or lowered head, his downcast gaze not addressing the camera and photographer, and his clasped hands, all signifiers of the abject. Talhy's photograph, despite, or perhaps because of, being a snapshot of the moment when the lift doors are opening or closing, is auratic in Benjamin's sense of expressing the unique appearance of an object in time and space as the man is caught in an unguarded moment. He has not composed himself to be photographed; the photograph is not posed; his aura is sustained in and by the photograph. He enters the photograph with his 'innocence intact—or rather, without inscription' as Benjamin (1999: 512) said of the first people who 'entered the visual space of photography'. For Benjamin, habitation is the leaving of traces (as in the photograph of the man and of the patina of human hands on the edges of the lift doors). Habitation is not the marking of inscriptions (as in the photograph of the trees on the lift doors). The tracing of the lineaments of the living human being inhabiting this place in space for this moment in time is contrasted with the inscription of photograph of the trees on the lift doors that has already always frozen the dead-living trees and twice removed them from the viewer of Talhy's photograph in the hard and stark frame of the shiny recto-linear grid of the tiles on the doors' surrounds.

The opening in the lift doors is a pathway that mimics and reproduces the pathway in the forest. It leads the viewer into the photograph. The opening is also an aperture so that the space of the lift reproduces and mirrors the space of the camera. Rather than a camera obscura, the space inside the lift and the opening in the lift doors is a kind of camera bravura that simultaneously captures and displays the man in this unguarded, auratic moment in the visual space of the lift and of photography. Talhy's photograph becomes a kind of technological allegory of photography itself with the lift and the opening as a kind of counter-camera capturing the man in this moment, in this place. Aura in photographs is a function partly of the long exposure times and slow lenses and shutter speeds of old cameras, and partly of the subject's intact innocence in old photographs (as discussed in chapter one above). Aura in Talhy's photograph is a function partly of the slow speed and small aperture of the lift doors opening or closing and partly of the brief exposure of the man with his innocence intact.

The lift doors are a kind of veil that simultaneously reveals and conceals the man and the fluoro light in the lift above the man's head is even a kind of halo. Aura for Benjamin (2002: 127, n 22) is 'the object *in its veil*.' The object in its veil is, in a word, Julia Kristeva's word, abject. Aura is abject. The abject is the object in its veil before it comes object, before it is revealed as object; the abject is pre-object, and pre-subject for that matter too; the abject is in-between and before subject and object; the abject is the body in Nietzsche's terms (see Giblett 2008: chapter 1).

Compositionally the man's dark clothes resonates or rhymes with the tree trunks in the photograph on the lift door, his trunk with their trunks, his limbs with theirs, his body

with the trees', his veins and arteries branching like a tree sharing not only a common morphology but also the say *chi*, or life-energy flowing through them. Talhy's photograph is a visual reminder of the ways in which the human body was figured as tree by such nature writers as Thoreau (1854/1997: 287-288) before the body became machine, became organs. Artaud's (1965, p.164; see also pp.59 and 61) concept of the body without organs harks back to the pre-organic body, to the time when the body was without organs, when the body was viscera, or a tree:

The time man was a tree without organs or functions
But only will
And was a tree walking at will
Will return.
It was, and will return.
For the biggest lie ever was to frame man as an organism.

The body without organs is a tree, not a machine. In traditional Chinese medicine the body has stems and roots, trunks and limbs (Kuriyama, 1999, p.187). In *taijiquan* the performance of the graceful movements should be rooted in the feet, controlled through the trunk and expressed in the limbs. Although Talhy's photograph of the Chinese man depicts him imprisoned in the prison cell of hypermodernity, his body as tree bears the traces of the Taoist body of the earth of traditional Chinese medicine and *taijiquan* (see Giblett 2008: chapter 10). Talhy's photograph, including the photograph of the trees on the lift doors in her photograph, is formally and symmetrically arranged in strong vertical and monumental lines. The jumbled branches and leaves of the trees in soft horizontal and supine lines contrast with, and are framed by, the harsh recto-linear grid of the lift doors and their smooth, hard surrounds. The surrounds of the lift door and the doors themselves serve to encase the man and convey his aura. For Benjamin (1999, p. 328), 'the characteristic feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo, in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case.' The auratic object is framed or contained, as the man is framed or contained in the photograph. He is marked off decoratively and spatially from other objects, such as the trees in the photograph on the lift doors, with which he shares sacrality on a continuum.

Talhy's photograph is a photograph of a landscape photograph (albeit with both in portrait format), a portrait of a human body and trees, of living beings. Her photograph, like Mike Gray's, is a reminder that all breathing beings are in symbiosis with the oxygen-producing plants of the living earth. It ironically enacts this symbiosis between the living body of the man and the dead matter of the photograph of living trees on the lift doors. He is in symbiosis with the oxygen-producing plants of the planet, but not with these trees in the photograph on the lift doors in the moment depicted in Talhy's photograph. The non-auratic photograph of the trees on the lift doors is fourth nature, nature hyperworked in and by the communication technology of photography (see Giblett 2011: chapter 1). The auratic photograph of the man is first nature, nature worked by a living organism in its habitation (see Giblett 2011: chapter 1). As it is a photograph about photography and

landscape, it is an appropriate frontispiece for a book about photography and landscape (Giblett and Tolonen, 2012). It is also a photograph for earthly symbiosis.

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