



text + work

Going back

In *Going back* Denny Robson is interested in the ways a medium of stillness can take time itself as its subject and suggests something of the complexities of relationships with the past. Her work depicts a journey, both spatial and temporal, back to the seaside towns where she grew up, and back to another time. Denny is interested in the universal in any '*going back*', that at such times the past can exist in the present, a present in the past, so that in the act of looking we may see not only a present-day landscape, but also an overlay of the site it once was.

A dark, deserted funfair marks the end of the journey, and climax of recall. The Spanish City at Whitley Bay, built in 1903 and recently pulled down, was the summer backdrop for generations of teenage desire, played out in nights filled with excitement, the smell of diesel, music deafening at every ride.

These images are devoid of life, the dodgems, the waltzer, the grand national (on which only the coolest would stand, precarious but nonchalant), all are stilled. But the emptiness of the images, together with captions that float rather than anchor, hints at narratives, at tales that have no beginnings or ends.

"I don't believe the past is fixed, any more than our memories are fixed, but that both are flexible, subject to interpretation, to our creativity, and open to narrative possibilities that may alter as often as we do ourselves. In *Going back* I wanted to explore such possibilities, in spaces that might invite the viewer to do likewise". Denny Robson

The following essay does not comment directly on the photographs by Denny Robson. This is, in part, to respect the openness of her work, but also to insist on a lack of closure in the essay here. This text is not here to explain her work, but to speak indirectly and parallel to her project, to what her work addresses. In other words, the relation is a poetic one, where meanings may fray across one another, like two pieces of overlapping fabric.

David Bate

Time Past and Photography

The relation of photography to time has been a topic of growing interest in recent years, perhaps because photography is no longer the medium it was. In fact photography has always been seen as having a specific relationship to time, such that time is regarded as part of its essence. Yet, oddly, no one ever actually asks: what or whose time are we talking about?

Photographs are seen as traces of the things they represent and, whether that is true or not, the notion of time involved in this idea has always gripped thinking about photography. Indeed, any photograph has a specific relation to time, firstly, the time in which it was made. Photographs are said to have a 'date-stamp' that they give to the contents of a picture, a 'this is how it looked – then'. Since photographs are always produced after the shutter has been clicked, the actual production of the picture is always as a 'pastness'. The picture constructs an image of something that, by the time

it is an image, is already a 'past' event. This 'pastness' about the photograph is assumed to be inevitable. Now the strange thing about this pastness is that when the viewer looks at a photograph they are always looking at it 'now', in their own time. This is a different time from that of the photograph (the time of its production). So already there are two different times involved here. One is the time of the photograph itself; the second is the time of the viewer, the time in which they look at the picture. In this second time, the act of looking at a photograph is always in the present tense, it is always 'now'. Even if she or he is looking at a photograph from the 1830s, it is always the viewer who animates the picture here and now ¹.

The differences between these two times, between what might be called the social time (the 'then') of the photograph and the psychological time 'now' of the viewer, is what is always encountered by a viewer when looking at a picture. This process of dealing with different times can be named as a process of the negotiation of temporality. It is this relation of then to now that is always said to be present in the encounter of looking at photographs. So, as it can be seen so far, the question of time is already far more complex than merely saying 'photography has a pastness about it'. Indeed, the first time, the social time of the production of the photograph, is made more complicated when the content (or even the form) of the picture is itself already from another time, i.e. not from the social time when the picture was actually made. Thus, the already existing time of an object represented in a photograph can create an internal disruption of time within the picture itself. A kind of internal pastness, where the

photograph appears in conflict with its own timeliness and a double pastness is invoked within the structure of the photograph. It is perhaps for such a structure that photographs are so often regarded as simply a medium of melancholy and loss. Thus far are three times: the social time of the picture, a psychological time of the viewer and the time of an object, thing or person(s) in the photograph.

Now, there is another type of time to be introduced here before returning to the issue, raised above, of the process of negotiation of temporality (or temporalities). This other type of time is historical or cultural time: the time of human society. Cultural processes, 'our history' have had their own impact on photography. For example, today photography is no longer a 'latest medium' as it once was at the beginning of the last century. Since its invention in the industrial revolution, photography has played a key role in visually representing cultural processes. But now time has changed the historical role of photography.

As digital technologies speed us into our new century faster than photography did in the last century, lives are lived with visual images at a pace unsurpassed in history. Television, computer images, website culture and mobile phone pictures via satellite transmissions, etc. have all superseded 'photography' (in its old analogue support structure) as the dominant form of visual representation. The old processes of photography now seem slow. (Of course computers can and do reproduce photographs, but in this instance I am simply concerned with the perception of photography 'as an old medium'.) Screen images have entered our homes, introducing transient

impressions that flicker across to our individual lives in a relentless tornado of pictures. In such a fleeting space, photography is relegated to the past because it is perceived as an old medium and too 'slow' by comparison. Such a teleological technologically determined view would put photography and photographs in the same relation as painting was when photography spread across the world in the 1840s. The new 'photographers' looked down on painters and painting as the purveyors of an 'old' process.

My point is, that the act of looking at a photograph may today contain its own sense of pastness as a precondition, even before any particular picture is considered. Of course, whatever the technological substrate/base of the photographic image (analogue or digital), the still photograph still has a capacity to grip the viewer and it must be realized that the changes in technological form have only renovated the old not transformed it. Modernity turns out to be not a fixed moment, but merely the sense of movement, of presentness in relation to the conventional tripartite division of time: past, present and future. We can see here in the views about the time of a technology as old or new the very assumptions about time held in our notions of culture. What is 'new' or 'old' is held in relation to contemporaneity. And of course, if the idea of pastness is associated with a negative value by one constituency, i.e. those who are usually assumed to be progressive, (like the avant-garde), it will nevertheless be valued positively by another constituency, i.e. those usually assumed to be fundamentally conservative (although for the melancholic even 'nostalgia is not what it used to be'). This cultural sense of history

and historical time, then, overlays the experience of the three times already introduced, though important to see here is how an individual viewer's own psychological time must intersect with these other times in the look at photographs.

Perhaps one of the most striking contemporary examples of this question is the refusal to let Princess Diana actually die. Although her body is buried in the ground, her image continues to appear across global media as though she is still alive. In this astonishing paradox, Diana appears to be not dead. In fact, to re-phrase this sentence: in order for Diana to not be dead her image is used to keep her alive. Here the past is invoked not as a memory, but as a cultural refusal to let the dead pass into memory. If an individual kept the pictures of their recently deceased loved-one around them in the way that images of Diana are kept circulating around our society, one might legitimately think they are suffering deeply in a severe state of traumatic loss and a refusal to 'let go'. Alongside such grand states of cultural loss, a kind of permanent social mourning inflicted on the public mind, the individual negotiation of temporality in looking at photographs can also involve this same type of, what must be called, a fetishistic refusal of death or 'the past' as the past. Yet, a viewer's relation to a photograph – even these same photographs - is not necessarily one that animates a simple wish for the past to be present, a nostalgic relationship. The relationship to the past can have another shape. Indeed, as psychoanalysis has already made us aware, in many cases an analysis of the past is essential in order for someone to actually have a future.

The particular relation of any viewer to the negotiation of these temporal dynamics is not always decided in advance. The outcome of the negotiation will depend upon a whole set of factors, internal and external, on mood and disposition to engage with a picture, the context in which it is seen and so on. From this perspective it would be wrong to automatically assume that the response evoked is always 'nostalgic', as a yearning for the past. While such responses certainly exist, as in the cultural example of Diana, nostalgia can be described as a passive response to the conflicts of time. For example, 'I prefer that past time to this present' is a passive and perhaps sentimental relation to the present, or indeed a future. A more active relation would not collapse the present into the past as the nostalgic does, but do something else, which is precisely not the opposite. A more active relation re-negotiates the past.

To re-awaken the past from the viewpoint of the present is a means to re-consider that past from the perspective of the present, or even for the future. Such an experience may not be without pain. To detach oneself from a past, which by its very definition is already 'lost', means re-thinking its relation to the present. The relationship to the past can be re-negotiated and re-constructed in and through the present. If photography is imputed with a pastness in its essential definition, this might also be its strength, as in where a viewer can interrogate the past. Indeed, is this not what an author of a set of photographs might well use the production of photographs for, to interrogate a past too? In this respect, it is interesting to think about photographers/artists who have done precisely this, though they may not ever have made claims to do so with their work.

When someone sets out to interrogate the past with a camera (the photographic codes of such work are yet to be mapped), to attempt a re-construction of the representation of a past, the work is already asking questions about time past in an active mode. To look is an attempt to know. Such a project opposes the usual notion that looking inhibits knowledge. If photographs can be used to re-construct the past from within the present, this reconstruction is a work of afterwardness that become a representation for analysis of the past.

I think that this is the work that many photographers who work in 'street photography' are doing, even if they never put it like this. Why is it, for example, that so many well known - mostly men - photographers have 'returned' to the same sites associated with youth and courtship, for example the investigation of family homes, parks, seaside resorts and funfair palaces, places of the scenes of adolescent dreams? To take the relevant example here, famous photographers fascinated with the space of funfairs are absolutely abundant, from Lewis Hine to Robert Frank and Bruce Gilden, Coney Island in New York is returned to again and again, like criminals to the scene of a crime. In the UK there are many photographers too from Tony Ray Jones to Martin Parr ... and many others.

Already these seaside sites and their leisure objects - funfairs - have a fundamental pastness about them. The machines of the funfair seem to have a nostalgia in their archaic mechanical pleasures, but perhaps this effect is based, not so much on their pastness, as a sentimental

loss, but more as an enigmatic space that has some unfathomable significance. This enigmatic meaning only manifests as a sense of loss, i.e. a non-meaning only appears as like a lost experience. Perhaps this is why teenagers so often find themselves at home in such places. The funfair is a space that is not a place. It is somewhere one can stay, as though 'at home' without deciding where it really is. 'Killing time'. The smell of popcorn, and salty air amidst the brightly painted, strange contraptions intended to whisk the human body into an alienating state offers, perhaps, an anxious homeliness floating exterior to concrete historical and cultural space. The idea of a funfair as a kind of home is not so absurd; indeed many characters in films and other stories often do live there. These characters have usually found the funfair to be some kind of refuge, from evil, their families or enemies or even from themselves. It offers them a respite from social time and their presence in the human narrative of history.

If I have strayed into fictional culture it is because the psychological experience of time by the viewer makes no such clear distinctions as the rational ones I have enumerated. In the act of viewing a scene, all manner of personal references, bits of film, life experiences and memories are woven into the cloth of an individual's sense of a place and space in time. All collapsed together these references obscure the origins of a photographer's or viewer's fascination with a particular time and space. Thus each viewer must do their own 'work' of memory and their own research into time past will have consequences for what becomes cultural memory. Otherwise, the more photographs there are, it can be claimed, the more we are condemned to live in a

society that is perpetually presented with its own past as a loss. William Henry Fox Talbot's remark about photography recording 'the injuries of time' could not have been a more prescient warning about how we use our relationship to time in photography. In one sense, the confrontation with different times can create a kind of catastrophe or crisis, a giddy assault on the human cogito of 'I am, here and now' into 'Am I, here or now?'. In another sense, the disorientation achieved from such an experience might well lead to the desire for a different kind of stability and a different destiny.

David Bate
Reader in Photography
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October 2006

¹ Of course one difference between photography and film is that in film (and television) the viewer does not control the time, the length of time that they have to look at an image. The film controls speed of viewing, although now on DVD and video the viewer has more control, they can stop it and start it, etc, as when looking at photographs in a book or on a gallery wall.



David Bate
Reader in Photography
University of Westminster, London

Dr David Bate is Reader in Photography at the University of Westminster. His photographic project Zone has been shown in seven different countries, most recently at the Istanbul Photography Biennale during September and October 2006 and was also at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago in March of this year.

His writings include: Photography and the Occidental Tourist published in Afterimage (USA), Third Text (UK) and translated into German in 2004; The Mise-en-Scene of Desire for the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Voyeurism and Portraiture in Geometry of the Face, National Museum of Photography, Denmark, and his first book Photography and Surrealism was published by IB Tauris in 2004. Alongside these writings he has also made many contributions to discussion of contemporary photography in art journals, such as Contemporary (UK), Portfolio Magazine (UK), Source (N. Ireland) and in numerous catalogues.

He was visiting professor at the National Academy of Arts in Tallinn, Estonia between 2000 and 2005 and is currently visiting professor of photography at RobertMeyer Kunstskolle in Oslo, Norway. His visual works are represented at Danielle Arnaud Contemporary Art in London, UK

Denny Robson

Photographic Artist + Fine Art Doctoral Candidate

Denny Robson grew up in the North-east of England and is now a photographic artist based in London. Before becoming a visual artist full-time she was an editor and a writer of both fiction and non-fiction. She completed an MA in Photographic Studies at the University of Westminster and is now an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) practice-based fine art doctoral student at Goldsmith's College, University of London. Her research title is 'Re-thinking time', and her current work-in-progress includes a series on 'lost objects'.

Denny exhibits nationally, recently in a solo show 'Shadowplay' at Focal Point Gallery, Southend, and Rochester City Art Gallery; and also internationally, most recently in a group sci-art exhibition at CERN, Geneva, and in 'Fantastic Realism' at Tallin Art Hall, Estonia.

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EVENT

The Gallery invites you and your guests to the
text+work event and private view
on Thursday 2nd November, details are as follows:

Event Thursday 2nd November 2006 from 4.30 to 5.30pm
Lecture Theatre One

Followed by a Private View in the gallery from 5.30 to 7.00pm

For further information and to book a place for the event please contact:

Violet McClean, Gallery Officer
on vmcclean@aib.ac.uk or 01202 363351

text+work

The Gallery, The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

The Gallery is a major resource for contemporary visual art at the Institute and has received regional and national recognition.

The concept of text+work underpinning the exhibition programme, promotes dialogue between innovative contemporary art and design practice and its theoretical context. It provides a platform for practitioners, writers and curators who wish to examine and extend the boundaries between contemporary practice and critical discourse. There are text+work gallery events, critical texts, shared and networked exhibitions, and a text+work website. A text (essay) is published by text+work to accompany each exhibition in the text+work programme.

The Gallery programme also includes collections on loan from galleries and museums, as well as initiating exhibitions by some of today's leading artists and critical writers including Ian McKeever and David Miller (poet), Susan Stockwell and Rosemary Miles (Curator, Victoria & Albert Museum).

The Gallery also functions as a learning resource and is integrated into the teaching, learning and research practice undertaken at the Institute. Student achievements are displayed in the Summer Show exhibitions and, at times, students have the opportunity to propose or curate shows as part of the gallery programme.

For more information on the text+work programme and supporting events please log on to the website: www.textandwork.org.uk



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Denny Robson + David Bate

Going back

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9.00am – 4.00pm Friday

9.00am – 1.00pm Saturday (term time)

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Please check website for dates

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