

Conference paper presented at the Monuments and Memorials session of the 2008 Association of Art Historians Conference at Tate Britain.

[ill. cemetery] This photograph is one I took about 8 or 9 years ago, in a small cemetery in country Tasmania. What strikes me now is how little I understood of what I was photographing at the time. I can see that I tried to fit as many headstones as possible into my picture, while keeping the one that interested me most in the foreground. The camera was zoomed out as wide as it would go to emphasize the scattering of the headstones over the otherwise empty ground. I probably stood on tiptoe to take it, to eliminate as much as possible of the scene behind.

Most of the things that make this the place it is don't appear in the photo. I'm thinking of the ephemeral things: the footsteps of people who come and go (there is a tourist footpath that brings visitors here most days); the flight of birds; the passage of clouds. All these small events constitute the rhythm and the atmosphere of the place, and they are invisible in my picture. If I took it today I'd be more patient and I'd know what to wait for, and it would be a better photograph.

But it still would miss the most important thing, and that wouldn't be my failing, it would be photography's, as this *thing* belongs to the large category of "things photography can't show". The important thing here is the *unmarked* graves, the ones that populate the ground between these headstones. I don't know how many exactly and I can't locate any of them with precision but I know they are there. The difference between the few graves that have been dignified with headstones, and the rest that lack them, is telling. It confirms something I already knew by then about the importance of absences in the material and the archival record.

Before I leave my now maligned photo, I should point out one thing I think *is* good about it. It describes a concrete, identifiable location— one you could in principle return to. This is a pointer to something I will come to later in the paper.

[ill. view from cemetery] Knowing the graves were there, the question was how far to pursue this knowledge, and the answer has turned out to be quite a long way, though I have done it in an idiosyncratic fashion—as an artist, not a historian. In this paper I try to show something of what I’ve done, and to say why I think it has been good to do this work, while leaving open the things I haven’t been able to resolve.

So where is this place? It is in Tasmania as I said, on the outskirts of a small village called Ross. To get to it you climb a steepish path to the top of a hill. Once there you can see a long way in every direction. The scene has not changed much from the mid-nineteenth century when convicts were still being transported here. (This is something quite distinctive about Tasmania, the traces of its convict past are still close to the surface.) **[ill. Ross site]** Down the hill and across the road is a site that has since become a major focus of my work. It is a paddock with some gently undulating mounds. In the mid-nineteenth century this paddock or field was the site of a female factory, or female convict prison; now it’s a place where sheep come to graze. The cemetery and the former prison are closely if invisibly connected, since it is the female and child inmates of that prison who are occupying many of these unmarked graves.

[ill. Hobart site] At the same time as I became aware of the Ross factory site, I became interested in another one in Hobart, about an hour’s drive away. That site is empty too but in a different way: a bare rectangular yard is enclosed by a high stonewall. In the nineteenth century this was a much bigger complex: there used to be five walled yards. It also operated for a much longer time, in spite of being a totally unsuitable site to house so many people. Where Ross lies open to

the sun and air, this site is in deep shadow much of the time, especially in winter. The stream alongside makes it damp and subject to flooding as well.

[ill. Hobart site in b/w] Over the years I have made a lot of work about these two sites. I have variously titled this work *Lost to Worlds*, *The Ground at Ross*, *Female House of Correction* and *in the ground, on the air*. In retrospect it has been important to spend that much time. On the face of it, the work is about the past, but in making it I believe I am making or uncovering connections with the present, with the kind of place Australia is now. These kinds of past-present cultural connections run deep, especially in a settler culture where the past is full of events you no longer want to know about, you only wish to forget.

[ill. Ground at Ross] The first work I made was purely photographic, very spare in both subject matter and form. It focussed entirely on the ground and the wall. There is so little material evidence relating to female convicts that it was not *entirely* bizarre for me to be searching two impenetrable surfaces so intently for meaning. However it was paradoxical: the ground and the wall might have witnessed much, but they seemed to have no way to release that knowledge. **[ill. Ground at Ross AGNSW]** But I photographed anyway, knowing the photographs would fail to say very much at all and hoping that their failure would resonate with the audience, who would understand it as a comment on a failure/absence in history and in photography. **[ill. Ground at Ross double]** I lost the wall as a visual subject quite early on, though I stayed with the ground, continuing to photograph it, and gradually those photographs have become somewhat more varied and expressive, though the restraint and economy is still there.

[ill. FF by J W Beattie] This might be the place to say that Tasmania is unusual in the amount of forgetting it has sustained. Forgetting was both a collaborative undertaking, in the sense that very many people were doing it, and deeply secret, as individuals and families set about denying or concealing their own particular

brush with the “convict stain”. Forgetting took many forms including demolishing convict buildings such as the female factories and recycling the materials into houses, churches, shops. The picture of people actively dismantling the past, stones and bricks in hand, and making something practical out of it, like a new house, is a national image many Australians would recognise and identify with.

[ill. Ground at Ross] About four years ago I started to look in more depth at the babies born in the factories. This is still one of the least known and least researched aspects of Australia’s convict history. Lack of evidence is a partial explanation for this blind spot but is very far from being a complete one.

[ill. Ground at Ross] When a convict woman became pregnant, she was sentenced to a period of hard labour in the factory as punishment. Her baby was thus born into the penal system and was reared in one of the communal nurseries that formed part of the prison network. All babies were weaned at six months; the mother was then sent away from the factory to work out the remainder of her sentence. Sadly, most of these separations were final. Occasionally a mother was able to reclaim her child later, but this was rare. Much more often the child remained in the system. Conditions were harsh and many died.

[ill. Ground at Ross] The scarcity of evidence that characterizes the women’s lives is doubly and triply true for these babies who died so young. In fact, there is only one source of information, and that is the archival entries of births, deaths and burials, the efficient but impersonal bureaucratic record. Working through the death and burial records in the Tasmanian archives I found about 1200 babies registered as having died in the Hobart and Ross factories between 1829 and 1856, nearly all of them at less than two years of age. I was surprised to find that I was the first to undertake this research.

[ill. blankets – MA, BR] The first work I made with that information was some woven textiles, the size and shape of small blankets. They were designed and woven here in the UK. **[ill. blankets – DY, HO]** I worked in collaboration with a designer and weaver named Frederique Denniel, at a place called ASF Weave in Arundel. I had previously decided that this work would focus on the causes of death but there were so many of them that I narrowed it down to the nine most often recorded: Dysentery, Diarrhoea, Marasmus, Convulsions, Pneumonia, Catarrh, Hooping Cough, Syphilis, Bronchitis.

[ill. 5 blankets at Port Arthur] I have written elsewhere that these blankets were designed to be “too light to be warm and too harsh to offer comfort”, as a reproach for the care that wasn’t taken and the comfort that wasn’t offered. Meaning that this work is not just about the fact that very many babies died, it is that they died in institutional care, under a system that should have nurtured them but didn’t. Infant mortality was commonplace at that time, but what sets these deaths apart is that they were, through a mixture of prejudice, neglect and indifference, officially sanctioned, even if by default. They were systematic, not accidental.

[ill. 8 blankets at Port Arthur] That bothers me very much, possibly because I don’t know whom to identify with – with the babies and the mothers who were outcast and reviled, or with the administration that allowed it to happen. Possibly also because I think I see it repeated in Australia’s 20th treatment of indigenous children taken from their families (known as the stolen generations), and of asylum seekers’ children forced into detention, to mention two notorious examples of contemporary child mistreatment in my country.

[ill. in the ground, on the air DVD] This brings me finally to the video, the most recent and also the most overtly memorial-like of the works I have made so far. I think it is probably the most successful of this group of works but also one that leaves some issues unresolved. It lists the names of all those who died, 715 so

far (all the babies who died in either the Hobart or Ross factory in their first year of life). I have still to make the companion video for the ones who died in their second year.

The background image is the ground at Ross. The image is changing slowly and over the 75 minutes of the work it renews itself nine times. The names appear at the right of the screen and move in a steady procession across it, moving over the ground in the way that clouds might, inhabiting their own dimension – hence the work's title, *in the ground, on the air*. At some point most stop and fade into the ground. It might or might not occur to the viewer that this point corresponds to the length of that child's life.

As I see it, this group of works say something about the power these deaths have to haunt the present. As I've said Australia's past is full of unacknowledged ghosts; it is only by waking them up that we can hope to wake ourselves as well. Recently I came across a line from the poet Marius Kociejowski that seemed both simple and mysterious, "A ghost is not a ghost until it has a living audience". I have been reflecting on it ever since, the relationship of the living audience to the ghost, and the ghost to the living audience, of the work of art to the memorial, of the living and the dead to one another.

People have said to me on more than one occasion that the names sound like those of adults not babies. This reflects, I think, on the archival record, its impersonality (no nicknames, no pet names) and also indirectly on what was lost – the adults they didn't grow into, the descendants they didn't have, the life stories that will never come down to us.

Video being the immaterial and fugitive medium it is, it feels like the right one for lives that were so short and inconsequential that they left literally nothing, not even a memory, behind. My friend and sometime collaborator Anne Brennan pointed out to me that in this respect the memorial text inscribed over the gate at

the Hobart factory (*Through these gates passed thousands of women and children. Lest we forget*) is ironic in a way the writer could not have intended. For these babies, whose lives were so short and unlamented, the admonition not to forget makes no sense; if anything, it exacerbates the forgetfulness around them.

This brings me back to where I started, thinking about the sites.

In making this work I was conceiving of it as art, not as memorial, and consequently I didn't give particular thought to where the audience would encounter it. I long ago condensed the two sites into one for the purposes of my work, and that felt a legitimate thing to do, along the lines of the condensation in a dream image. But I'm less sure about the dislocation. I have a work now that is uprooted from its place of origin – half-ephemeral, half-memorial. There is no special place to see or show it, which sits uneasily with the knowledge that those prison sites are the strongest points of physical connection left.

As well as its dislocated-ness, I have some lingering reservations about the work's unremitting sadness, about something passive and acquiescent at the heart of it. To try to counter this I thought for a while about adding one more element, a suggestion to the viewer that they might speak a name or names aloud or, if that makes them too uncomfortable, say them under their breath. This impromptu performance element would be a way of beginning to address the dislocation as well, since calling to each other over distances is a commonplace thing people do. Even though I thought better of it later, I still like the idea. It comforts and consoles me that, after all this time, someone might call to them by name.