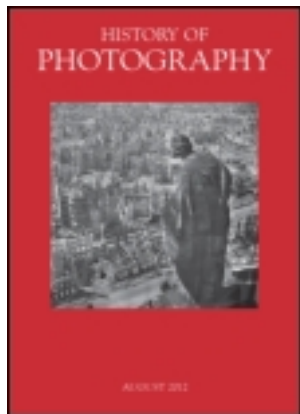


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Witnessing and Untimely Images: Anne Ferran's 'Lost to Worlds'

Susan Best

This article examines 'Lost to Worlds' (2008), a series of thirty photographs by the contemporary Australian artist Anne Ferran. The series depicts a historically significant site where there is almost nothing left to see. All that remains of the former nineteenth-century female factory are minor marks in the earth. By showing the viewer almost nothing, 'Lost to Worlds' raises a number of questions about what can be known or communicated about the past by photography. In particular, the traditional understanding of photographic witnessing is transformed by Ferran's subtle evocation of the history of a site by images of emptiness. The article considers the recent rise of scholarly interest in the idea of witnessing and how Ferran's series can provoke a deeper understanding of such depictions of the past.

Keywords: *contemporary photography, Australian photography, depicting the past, aftermath images, witnessing*

Speculating on images of emptiness in contemporary photography, Australian artist Anne Ferran suggests that they register belatedness, an observation based in part on Ferran's reference to contemporary photographers such as Sophie Ristelhueber, Alan Cohen and Roni Horn, each of whom has taken pictures of sites that have historical significance but are now devoid of people and visual incident. The photographs and their tone of withholding, Ferran suggests, point to the loss of photography's traditional tasks of bearing witness and capturing time. The photographers, as it were, arrive too late to document an event. As Ferran puts it: 'The emptiness of these photographs arises because the photographers have, consciously or unconsciously, employed it as the visual counterpart of their own photograph's untimeliness'.¹

This sense of untimeliness and the transformation of the mode of witnessing it implies are my concerns in this paper. I examine Ferran's photographic series, 'Lost to Worlds' (2008), which comprises thirty digital prints on aluminium (figures 1–7). The images show the remains of a nineteenth-century factory staffed by female workers in the small town of Ross, Tasmania, the most southern state in Australia. This topic has preoccupied Ferran for over a decade: in an earlier series, 'Female House of Correction (after John Watt Beattie)' (2000), she re-photographed details of John Watt Beattie's nineteenth-century images of a female factory in South Hobart. The female factories – where convict women were put to work in colonial Australia – are only now being investigated by feminist historians in order to reveal what one historian calls 'the hidden stories of ordinary people'.² Ferran is often drawn to histories that have been occluded or neglected, particularly those of Australian women.

In this context, 'Lost to Worlds' can be described as aiming to redress a historical gap but not to fill it. Ferran's evocative photographs of emptiness serve this double function. On the one hand, the emptiness of the photographs can be understood as

I am grateful to Anne Ferran for permitting me to reproduce her photographs.

Email for correspondence:
s.best@unsw.edu.au

1 – Anne Ferran, 'Empty', *Photofile*, 66 (September 2002), 8.

2 – Karen O'Donnell, 'Revealing the Hidden Stories', in *Women Transported: Life in Australia's Convict Female Factories*, exh. cat., Parramatta: Parramatta Heritage Centre 2008, 5.

Figure 1. Anne Ferran, *untitled*, from 'Lost to Worlds', 2008. Digital print on aluminium, 120 cm × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Anne Ferran, *untitled*, from 'Lost to Worlds', 2008. Digital print on aluminium, 120 cm × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



representing the paucity of visual records of women convicts in Tasmania; on the other, the evocative quality conjures up something like a mood, an atmosphere or a feeling of place. In essence, the series attempts to make visible the haunting of the present by the past. In other words, the past hovers out of reach; it is not something properly remembered or recorded that has been, or could be, photographically captured. This liminal state between remembering and forgetting best serves the kind of historical memory that Ferran explores.

Witnessing

The intense interest in history and, in particular, in neglected histories, which has been a consistent concern in Ferran's work, takes place within the context of a shift in contemporary art since the 1990s towards addressing worldly affairs. Increasingly, artists are working within documentary and ethnographic protocols and examining historical events and contemporary politics; most often, these are events and conflicts that affect them directly. There are several strands of art practice that comprise this art of real events. Hal Foster, for example, has identified an ethnographic turn and an archival turn; he characterises these shifts in contemporary practice as representing an engagement with the under-represented position of marginalised people, in the case of the ethnographic turn, and neglected historical events, in the case of the archival turn.³

In 'The Artist as Ethnographer', Foster proposed that in the early 1990s the artist's newly assumed role as ethnographer represented the contemporary position for advanced art on the left.⁴ The artist, in most cases, occupied a double role, simultaneously native informant and ethnographer, and thereby was able to present the under-represented viewpoints of previously oppressed or colonised peoples. Almost a decade later, in 'An Archival Impulse', Foster identified an upsurge of art focusing on archives and demonstrating the pursuit of a kind of 'counter-memory'.⁵ That is, such practices seek to retrieve and represent what he terms 'alternative knowledge'.⁶ The archival art that he highlights continues the critical enterprise of documenting and recovering neglected or marginalised knowledge, but this time with an emphasis on history and historical records.

The prevalence of this kind of political or testimonial art has led to a concomitant rise in the use of the term 'witnessing' to describe the viewer's position relative to the issues and images displayed. The viewer, it is suggested, is asked to bear witness to the artist's account of events rather than to approach this art with the more usual critical or aesthetic concerns. In the case of art dealing with historical archives, the viewer's position is described by Ulrich Baer as 'secondary witnessing'.⁷ Baer uses this expression to describe the kind of belated relation to historical events that I mentioned earlier. Referring specifically to recent photographs of Holocaust sites, he argues that when contemporary viewers are made aware of seeing things that, as he puts it, 'no one ever wanted to know about', they are positioned as secondary witnesses.⁸ Such images, he continues, make us 'as much spectators as seekers of knowledge'.⁹

The empty photographs Baer considers, however, are banal, un compelling images, despite the gravity of their subject matter. Images by Mikael Levin were originally presented in 1997 in *War Story*, where they were surrounded by original reports and images of the Holocaust.¹⁰ The affectless quality of this ancillary material served as a counterpoint to these deeply disturbing historical photographs. When taken out of that context, they lack the necessary aesthetic strength and complexity to generate interest. The absence of engaging visual qualities undercuts the provocation to inquire further that Baer suggests should be the appropriate response to these images. Ferran's work, on the other hand, demonstrates precisely the kind of visual strength and appeal necessary to give memorable form to the events and issues it addresses.

3 – Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, MA: MIT 1996, 171–203; and Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110 (2004): 3–22.
4 – Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', 172.

5 – Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', 4.

6 – Ibid.

7 – Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, Cambridge, MA: MIT 2002, 83.

8 – Ibid.

9 – Ibid., 84.

10 – Mikael Levin, *War Story*, text by Meyer Levin, Munich: Gina Kehayoff 1997.

While Baer's term 'secondary witnessing' underscores distance from an historical event, the term used most frequently, even in these historical cases, is 'witnessing'. To date, a number of anthologies and books have taken up this terminology; at times to describe the position of the viewer, at others to describe the position of the artist. Jane Blocker, for instance, in *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*, uses the term to refer to the position of the artist. She introduces her alignment of witnessing and authorship by noting that much of the literature considers 'how' trauma or the devastation of war can be represented; in contrast, she wants to examine 'who' can represent such events.¹¹ For Blocker, the witness is 'a privileged subject position'.¹²

11 – Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*, Minneapolis: Minnesota UP 2009, xix.

12 – *Ibid.*, xx.

In this way, the art of witnessing seamlessly joins with the project of identity politics, and testimony is the mode of art practice favoured. Framed in this fashion, such art is difficult to criticise, except of course by highly conservative critics who disdain and dismiss this kind of art; art and politics, they usually argue, do not mix. What is more surprising and troubling is that art framed by the idea of witnessing is generally not subjected to the rigorous criticism that important or contentious art should receive.

In turn, with this suspension of the critical faculty, the beholder assumes a relatively passive role in receiving that testimony; debate, discussion and disagreement tend to be precluded. Instead, the pedagogical role of art is emphasised. E. Ann Kaplan, for instance, emphasises the role of witnessing in developing an ethical consciousness and a sense of responsibility for injustice.¹³ Attention to ethics should be part and parcel of all rigorous criticism, but art produced under the rubric of testimony still needs to be interrogated and debated; it should not be granted automatically the status of a truthful representation. In other contexts of witnessing, such as the therapeutic, this uncritical stance makes sense; however, it has limited relevance to the public world of contemporary culture, where robust debate is what enables different positions to be articulated and understood.

13 – E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP 2005, 23.

Other accounts of witnessing are more promising for thinking about the visual arts, despite their origins in literature and philosophy. The seminal work in this regard is *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, a book that addresses not just witnessing *per se*, but also the challenges and difficulties entailed. Laub, a psychiatrist involved in the gathering of Holocaust testimony, provides a complex account of the three levels of witnessing: internal witnessing (being one's own inner witness), external witnessing (being a witness to others) and, finally, the third level that he describes as being a witness 'to the process of witnessing itself'.¹⁴ Laub's levels bring together in an interesting way the generation of testimony and its reception.

14 – Dori Laub, 'An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival', in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York: Routledge 1992, 75.

Laub's account of the internal witness and of its destruction under severe traumatic conditions explains why someone cannot remain entirely separate from and reflective about events taking place outside them. Kelly Oliver develops Laub's idea of the primacy of the inner witness in refiguring witnessing as the bedrock of subjectivity.¹⁵ To bear witness requires this internal witness, yet much of the literature about witnessing in art or film seems to forego this necessary separation, advocating instead the kind of viewing associated with the experience of trauma itself; that is, a kind of psychic flooding where identification borders on merger and admits no critical or reflective distance. The capacity for critical reflection is as necessary for the evaluation of art as for the maintenance of healthy psychic boundaries.

15 – Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Minneapolis: Minnesota UP 2001.

Shoshana Felman, in her sections of the book, also complicates the role of the witness. As a literary critic, she draws attention to more formal qualities of artistic testimony; challenging content, she suggests, exerts pressure on language, such that poetry has to 'speak *beyond its means*'.¹⁶ Here and throughout her chapters she presents typical qualities of *avant-garde* art as fundamental to the experience of the literature of testimony, such as inducing an experience of strangeness or having qualities of opacity and incomprehensibility.¹⁷ It is in this way that the 'crises' of

16 – Shoshana Felman, 'Education and Crisis', in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 21 (original emphasis).

17 – Strangeness is discussed in Felman, 'Education and Crisis', 7. These themes are woven throughout her sections of the book. For instance, at page 3, n. 4, she indicates the orientation of the book towards 'what cannot be understood, transmitted'.



Figure 3. Anne Ferran, *untitled*, from 'Lost to Worlds', 2008. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Anne Ferran, *untitled*, from 'Lost to Worlds', 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5. Anne Ferran, *untitled*, from 'Lost to Worlds', 2008. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Anne Ferran, *untitled*, from 'Lost to Worlds', 2008. Courtesy of the artist.





Figure 7. Anne Ferran, *untitled*, from 'Lost to Worlds', 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

witnessing of the book's title are articulated; the experiences to be communicated are consistently discussed as almost beyond representation, certainly beyond straightforward transmission. Thinking about witnessing in the visual arts requires attention to these fundamental difficulties of expression and reception. In Ferran's 'Lost to Worlds' these difficulties are palpable in the way in which the traces of the past are suggested but are not fully present.

Anne Ferran's 'Lost to Worlds'

For over a decade, Anne Ferran's photographic practice has focused on forgotten Australian women's histories, which she brings to light with great care and a highly refined aesthetic. For each series of photographs she uses a strategy tailored to the representation of the women in question, what is known of their histories and the presence or absence of visual traces. She has used archival photographs that were hidden from public scrutiny, and she has also reconstructed objects based on historical records. In addition, she has photographed objects in the collections of historical museums and depicted historical sites, some of which are relatively well preserved. 'Lost to Worlds' addresses a site for which there are some written records but very few visual traces. The former location of the women's factory is indicated principally by a sign announcing the historical significance of the site, which today is little more than a field. It is an unlikely landscape with which to conjure up the harsh conditions suffered by convict women and to attempt to bring forth a history that Ulrich Baer would describe as one that 'no one ever wanted to know about'.¹⁸

18 – Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 83.

'Lost to Worlds', as the title indicates, underscores what has gone forever, yet the series also tries to use the meagre remains of the factory at Ross to somehow counter the irredeemable loss or absence of historical material. This former site of incarceration and forced labour for nineteenth-century convict women has been reduced to suggestive scars on the landscape: soft indentations, mounds, bare patches and stones. Most of the images in this series are close-ups of the ground, generally without horizon or any other means of orientation. Taken when the artist was looking down at the earth, they are displayed vertically so that we do not view them in the artist's place. The departure from viewing conventions enabled by this simple displacement creates some degree of spatial unease. The images also have an engulfing quality. While the photographs are large – each is 120 cm square – the sense of engulfment is more an issue of proximity. The grasses seem larger than life as if they had somehow been brought too close, without the perceptual mediation of a body length. The mounds, with their strange depressions and deep inky black shadows, are suggestive of burial, even though that association has little pertinence for the immediate context of colonial Tasmania. Indeed, these images of rounded forms partake of that strange alchemy of the close-up where landscapes can suggest bodies and bodies can suggest landscapes. Four images in the series are spatially legible with visible horizon lines or other markers of orientation. One shows a small strip of sky, whereas another represents a fence and a line of trees along the upper edge. Such indications of direction provide geographical bearings and thereby approximate conventional landscape depiction. That said, the images invoke landscape and the human inhabitation of the land only to refute it. The sky has a peculiarly opaque, almost malevolent presence, for instance; it suggests a blockage or a limit to the landscape. Certainly, the impenetrability of the sky blocks the eye's passage deep into the picture plane, and the picture plane is thereby rendered as shallow and the convention of aligning the sky with infinite distance is negated. Similarly, the strange compression of foreground and background makes the eye restless and uncertain. The grass of the foreground seems to be bulging out or moving forward. In one photograph, where human activity is visible, the swelling of the earth in the foreground engulfs most of the visual field, and human labour dwindles in this picture or is pushed to the margins. While such images might seem to provide establishing long shots, the anchorage is only temporary and the sense of

the long view is quickly lost as the more tightly focused images absorb the viewer's field of vision. Most of the other images are more intensely focused on the ground and its occasional marks and undulations. Those images are to some degree empty: views of swathes of long grass, stretches of clipped lawn; occasionally there are patches of weed, and scatterings of rocks. Not unlike the empty images Baer describes of former Holocaust sites, Ferran's series does not attempt to picture directly what is historically significant about the site.

This focus on place or, rather, empty place as a way of indirectly representing the traumatic events of the past is most famously associated with Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985). As Florence Jacobowitz reminds us, the title of Lanzmann's film was originally to have been *Le lieu et la parole* (place and speech), a title that emphasised one of the techniques of the film's construction – namely the montage of footage of empty places filmed in the present, with the testimony recalling the events of the past by survivors, bystanders and perpetrators.¹⁹ Lanzmann's approach has been aligned with a principled refusal to represent atrocity directly, favouring instead the power of the spoken word as the most appropriate mode with which to bear witness to events of the past. Testimony and witnessing here proceed without the support of documentary images. Given that decision to exclude images of the past, the empty landscapes become like blank screens for the viewer's imagination, while also reassuring us of the 'pastness' of the events being retold. The landscape, which bears no trace of what has happened, can thereby function as a holding environment for the traumatic testimony.

In Ferran's case, emptiness is not the result of a deliberate choice, for she has not turned her back on available visual documentation; nonetheless, her decision to show 'almost nothing' is a continuation of this aesthetics and ethics of refusal. Ferran herself describes such images of emptiness using a vocabulary that suggests reticence: she calls the address of the images 'tight-lipped, even monosyllabic'. While the metaphors she uses suggest incapacity, inarticulacy or wilful muting, Ferran counterbalances this characterisation with a kind of visual flourish. She continues:

Yet, for all that, they [images of emptiness] possess a formal assurance that says they are sure of something. Initiates into their own inadequacy is how I like to think of them, fully aware of their limitations. As such they might yet turn out to be the variant form of photography best suited to the times we are in.²⁰

Ferran's diagnosis here of the current state of photography and one possible response to it suggests that visual testimony is much more complex than the literature on witnessing has registered. The confidence in visual art's capacity to bring forth counter-memories or to convey previously unheard voices is at odds with the acknowledgment of the limits of contemporary photography. Ferran's approach emphasises the fact that photography taking place in the aftermath of world events is not able to retrieve traces of those events.

That much is uncontentious. The incapacity to capture the past is well documented by the art organisation called The Legacy Project, which aims to chronicle precisely these kinds of aftermath images. They describe the depiction of empty places as a distinct genre of contemporary photography, built around images of absence and the search for the 'shadows of the past'.²¹ Using their catalogue of images, Ferran's list of artists of emptiness could be expanded even further to include photographs by Willie Dougherty, Drex Brooks, Henning Langenheim and Kikuji Kawada, among others. The Legacy Project notes that photographers have returned to scenes of terrible violence in order to document what they call 'the emptiness of places'. It is interesting that they posit documentation as seeking emptiness rather than the event; and shadows, it seems, are the most one might expect. What can primary or secondary witnessing mean when there is no assured presentation of documentation; when, instead, we are asked to apprehend something much less tangible?

19 – Florence Jacobowitz, 'Shoah as Cinema', in *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz, Bloomington: Indiana UP 2003, 12.

20 – Ferran, 'Empty', 9.

21 – See http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=art_results&motifID=1012, accessed 14 January 2012.

And what can we make of Ferran's much stronger and more contentious claim that the emptiness of the image speaks of a crisis of photography, leading to a reflective relationship with incapacity? A sceptical approach to the indexical function of photography is, of course, now a common response with the advent of digital photography, but that is not quite what is being proposed here. Rather than scepticism, there is uncertainty and, most importantly, a reduction of what is claimed for the image. This pictorial modesty, to put the case more positively, can be seen more clearly by considering the way in which Ferran's images address this problem of belatedness.

While 'Lost to Worlds' cannot show the harsh conditions of the female factory, the images do convey a strong sense of atmosphere. This strange word, which means both a kind of apprehended mood of a place and more concrete weather conditions, is one way of trying to capture the affective tone of the photographs. The atmosphere of the images in 'Lost to Worlds' is at once bleak, unsettling and visually enticing. Features of the images create unease, like the deep shadows eating into the land and the strange 'bloom[s] of light', as Ferran calls them, which appear on some photographs.²² These are the accidental effect of a light leak that has traced its own paths across the ground. This accident is just one of a number of visual tropes that suggest emanations, movement or even a kind of haunting or nesting of the past in the present. The reflective surfaces of the aluminium images create a sensation of visual instability, and, to varying degrees, the images possess a destabilising shimmer. The images change as the viewer walks towards them and walks away; shadows become light, voids become shapes, and vice versa. These fluctuations suggest evidence that is at once tantalisingly present and yet just out of reach. This sense of something glimpsed peripherally is countermanded, however, by the relentless evidence of nothingness. The photographs' scrutiny of the variable topography of the ground, its shadows and depressions shows no discernible trace of the building, the women or their lives. Yet the visual scrutiny suggests searching for something, and the shimmering surfaces deliver movement in the undergrowth, as if signifying what remains of long past actions. The sequence of images is also enlivened by a remarkable sense of rhythm and subtle movement; the ground seems to swell up and taper away, like rich symphonic sound creating arcs of activity that surge and then disappear into nothingness.

In these very indirect and allusive ways, the images of this deserted historical site give the viewer a feeling of the place. Perhaps not the feeling or atmosphere of the actual site, which, no doubt, has nothing at all unsettling about it, but a feeling for the harsh history we cannot know or apprehend visually. In other words, there is an affective dimension to this series, which deeply involves and engages the viewer in the futile search for the irrecoverable past. This less tangible aspect of this series is part of the visual assurance of 'Lost to Worlds' – the capacities of photography – to finally switch from the concentration on photography's limits and limitations to what it can achieve.

The emotional tone or affective dimension of the photographs gives considerable expressive power to this series. That tone is complex and multi-layered. It includes the sense of vitality from the flickers of light, the bleakness of an abandoned site, the unsettling qualities of the images and their austere beauty. This conveys to the viewer the sense of the past as disturbing and a disturbance for the present. We cannot bear witness to this past in the usual sense of finally knowing things that were concealed or comprehending things that no one ever wanted to know about, but, on the other hand, we are engaged by the quest for that history which must, at least visually, elude us.

In this way, Ferran has not given in to the scepticism about photography that usually leads to either laments (or, on occasion, celebrations) about the mixing of truth and fiction or even their current indistinguishability. Rather, she remains committed to photography as a truthful representation of what can be historically excavated, even when that can be little more than a mood, a disturbance, a feeling of

22 – Jonathon Holmes, 'An Interview with Anne Ferran', in Anne Ferran, *The Ground, the Air*, Hobart: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery 2008, 51.

loss or destabilisation. Thinking about this in photographic terms, however, we might argue that capturing a mood is no less of an achievement than photography's traditional task of capturing time.

This reduced and modest adherence to photography's truth-telling capacities means that witnessing remains the correct term to describe how we should look at these images. Their visual complexity and intrigue means that they are both witnessed and 'watched', to use Ariella Azoulay's term intended to signify the attention and duration owed to photographs of the disenfranchised and the victims of injustice.²³ By scrutinising these images of an obliterated history and being put on edge by them, we bear witness to some emanation from the past, no matter how faint, strange and incomprehensible it remains. As Shoshana Felman reminds us, this may be the only way to speak or visualise what lies beyond representational means.²⁴

23 – Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone 2008, 14.

24 – Felman, 'Education and Crisis'.