

Historian and philosopher of art Thierry de Duve (TD) talks with Anne Ferran (AF) via email in October 2013.

TD: Anne, as we are starting this email conversation with the Pacific Ocean between us, and I have only the jpegs you sent me to meditate on, would you mind if I start by asking you a couple of technical questions? I surmise that we can agree that technical decisions are never innocent. That's why technique seems to me, at least for now, the best entry into your work.

1) In his essay for your catalogue, *The ground, the air*, Geoffrey Batchen writes that the photos from the *Soft caps* series were 'slightly under-exposed and over-developed (no digital manipulation here)'. Do I understand correctly that the caps were actually worn by women acting as models for you, and that by under-exposing and overdeveloping the negative, you were able to bring the relief of the white out while pushing everything else into pitch-black?

2) The *Lost to worlds* photos are square digital prints on aluminium. Were they taken with a digital camera? With a square-format camera? Are they cropped?

AF: The *Soft caps* were made in the way you describe. I photographed the model (who wore a black mask as well as black face paint) in front of a black backdrop. The rest was done in film processing and printing. There is some shadow detail visible in the negatives but it vanishes when printed 'correctly'. The *Lost to worlds* prints were shot on 6 x 6 cm film (on a Hasselblad) and the negatives later scanned. They're not cropped, or only very marginally.

TD: A black mask and black face paint! Talk about technical decisions not being innocent. Why both? Does the mask cover the face and the paint the neck, or something like that?

AF: The mask was a standard airline eye mask, quite inadequate to the task. Black face paint was a quick way to augment it, and had the advantage of not changing the contours of the face, which are visible in the images, in some more than others. I don't remember doing it but the neck must have been painted as well.

I agree with you that technical decisions aren't innocent. Even when they seem to be foregone conclusions, the only possible or practical way to do something, they have meaningful results. I tend to think that's especially the case in photography, but that might be my partiality speaking.

TD: I think similarly about photography. Because the medium produces so many automatic results, the decisions affecting each one of its technical parameters matter with a sense of urgency not found in painting or elsewhere. Of course I'm talking about analogue photography; there is a lot less pressure exerted on digital images. The history of photography is replete with heated discussions about the ethics and politics of technical decisions: to crop or not to crop; to retouch or not retouch; whether a completely blurred snapshot is admissible; whether the 'decisive moment' doctrine is elitist, etc. And here I am, already uttering the words 'ethics' and 'politics'. We will find ourselves discussing them often, I suppose, because one of the great qualities of your work, as I see it, is to summon ethical and political questions right away.

So, let us stay with the *Soft caps* for the time being. They point at a crucial feature of photography as a medium, the fact that the models or sitters, or sometimes innocent passers-by, for that matter – in any event, human beings – belong to the medium. They are 'stuff' subjected to technical decisions. That is why painting somebody's face black has ethical and political consequences. I understand that one woman was your model for this series. How did you go about working with her?

AF: Do you remember my saying how I hoped this interview would throw up questions I haven't been asked before? Well, it's already happened with your question about painting the face black. I have been asked about it previously, but not so pointedly. To begin to answer a question that's just revealed its full complexity for the first time: my daughter was the model. It was the last time she allowed me to photograph her for my work. In the 1980s, when she was a teenager, she modelled for me a lot, sometimes on her own and sometimes with her friends of the same age. The series that put her off was one called *I am the rehearsal master* (based on Jean-Martin Charcot's hysterics), but that's another story. This time, in spite of being initially a bit reluctant, she was very patient and cooperative when we came to shoot the photos, perhaps because she could see how excited I was.

My entire focus was on the question of how to make a portrait of an anonymous person. I'd just seen an archival photograph of some old women, inmates in an asylum for the infirm and destitute, sitting in the harsh Australian sun, with their faces cast into deep shadow by the cloth caps they were wearing. I seized on those dark shadows as a way of visualising their anonymity and their disappearance from history. I was also excited by the active part the photographic process played in doing this. I wasn't thinking at all of any other implications of turning my model's skin from white to black and, to be honest with you, I've never once thought about them until now.

TD: I easily imagine your daughter resisting the idea of being cast in the role of Charcot's hysterics. As you say, that's another story. It makes sense, though, that she would be the model for the *Soft caps*. You can only visualise someone's anonymity — your words, and I find them fascinating — if that someone is anything but anonymous to you personally. The flesh of your flesh! Beautiful. Unfathomable as is the realisation that black is the colour that visualises anonymity, I think you're right in not wanting to make too much of that. The same black that obliterates the face and the body also 'spills out' into the background, making the photos formal and abstract. Actually, that's what they are at first. As a viewer, you must retrieve human presence from them through careful attention, like when you notice a lock of hair animating an otherwise seamless contour.

AF: Relative to the act of blacking out the face, making the background black could seem quite a neutral thing, but I don't see it that way. Compared to the archival photograph, which is full of contextual detail, these figures are nowhere in particular. They've lost their place, if they ever had one. A similar thing happened — not by design — with the clothing photograms. The garments appear in the middle of a sea of black (in this case purely the result of exposing the photographic paper to light — there was no actual backdrop). Looking back at both these series, it seems that by cutting the object loose from its historical context I was able to give it another kind of life.

While we're still talking about the *Soft caps*, another aspect that has importance for me is the way the cloth shapes itself to the head, helping the body to 'speak'. So there's an individuality to each photograph, as well as anonymity.

TD: That's right. They even seem to retain their individuality when they become sculpture, as in your *Rydalmere* installation. Although in this work the caps now form a small community, all of them looking in the same direction, they don't merge. At the same time 'sculpture' doesn't seem to be the right word: they look like trophies waiting to be dusted before being placed on a pedestal, or like marble busts in a museum storage room, or even like wiggled props at a hair salon. There is something forlorn and cruel about them, or at least so it seems from the installation shots.

AF: Actually, those aren't installation shots (sorry for not making that clear before). It's a photographic work called *Rydalmere vertical* that came about because I wanted to look at and photograph the asylum women as a group, rather than bring individual images together, as with the *Soft caps*. The six heads appear four times in four separate photos, so it's effectively quite a big group. I really like the way you refer to them as a 'community'. It's true the effect is very different. I wonder if the 'forlorn and cruel' air you mention has anything to do with the photos being taken from a greater distance. Or is it just because the figures have been cut off at the shoulders in an inhuman way?

I remember how much harder it was to make the images work without human figures to support the caps. It's probably the formal structure of the photos that 'saves' them (the way they face in four directions, like compass points), and the studio lighting. Going back to the installation aspect, I shot them inside the former Rydalmere Female Orphan School in Sydney, built in the 19th century to house young women and girls (many of whom were the children of convict mothers, not orphans at all). It had been disused for a long time and was boarded up — hence the artificial lighting. I don't think it would have worked as an installation; somehow it needs the strict control — over the viewpoint particularly — that photography lets me exercise.

TD: Now I see the background is always the same, so you must have turned the table three times so as to have the caps face the four directions of the compass. But you must also have 'installed' the caps on the table in order to photograph them, am I right? You say you worked 'without human figures to support the caps'. What is their support? Are they indeed props, 'hair-salon' style? I'm just asking to make sure I see correctly.

AF: They are wig stands. Not an elegant solution. I'm actually relieved there's a degree of ambiguity there. I'd have preferred a purpose-built solution for the support but there wasn't the budget for it, or the time. We didn't move the table once it was in place, or the camera, but we repositioned the heads for each photo.

TD: Let me address another detail in one of the *Soft caps* photos, which is utterly fascinating to me. To the left of the photo, on what appears to be the right shoulder of the model, the cap curls back, showing a little triangle of its inside, in such a way as to make the shoulder vanish or become transparent. At the same time, the space this arch of cloth is opening is too narrow to be the shoulder. All this generates a conundrum the eye is unable to solve, and becomes an even more poignant signifier than the blackened face of loss, oblivion or endless mourning. To use Barthes' famous phrase, that detail is the punctum of the photo – and then not just of this photo: it communicates its particular mood to the whole series.

AF: I don't know what that little space is, myself. I ought to know – I made the photos – but it's so long ago that memory is no help. How such a small and seemingly insignificant detail can expand to suggest something as big as loss or oblivion, not just in this one image but across the whole series, is something I can accept but don't fully understand, even after years of reading Barthes. Making these photos I would have thought I had everything

under control but luckily for the work that was a delusion. When I look at them as closely as you're doing now, every fold and crease in the fabric seems steeped in individuality; there's almost too much information. Maybe it's also significant that this spot is at the very edge of the white cloth, where it meets total blackness. The eye really wants to fill that space and its inability to do so sets off the sense of loss.

TD: Why don't we move to the *Lost to worlds* photos now?

You already told me that they were analogue, taken with a 6 x 6 Hasselblad, and not cropped, or only marginally. I take it that they were made to 'bleed' to the edge of the aluminium sheets onto which they are printed. I love those photos; they raise fascinating questions. But before I ask these questions, maybe we need a bit of background information. How did the series come about? What made you photograph those barren landscapes? Where are they? What are they?

AF: Both are the sites of 19th century female convict prisons in Tasmania. One is in the suburb of South Hobart and the other is on the outskirts of Ross, a rural village in the Tasmanian midlands. I heard about the Hobart site first, sometime in the late 1990s. I remember walking out to see it late one afternoon, after attending a conference. It was much farther out of town than I'd imagined, and it was very cold and nearly dark when I got there. (There could hardly have been a more unsuitable place to imprison a group of women and infant children, in the deep shadow of a mountain and right next to a watercourse.) Later an artist friend, Elizabeth Day, took me to see the site at Ross. It struck me how empty both places were of anything that might indicate what had happened there: just a remnant stone building in the corner of the Ross site and a perimeter wall at the Cascades – as the South Hobart site was called – plus a recent

memorial. If there'd been just one site like that I doubt I'd have started the work. But two in a similar state suggested something worth pursuing.

I began by photographing sections of the wall at the Cascades and of the ground at Ross. After a while I stopped photographing the wall but continued to research the site's history. Over the period of a decade I went back to Ross numerous times, always taking photos of the same ground. As you'd expect, the images were similar, but gradually differences started to emerge, not so much in subject matter (though there were changes there too) but by way of the means and the process.

TD: I have heard (and read) you provide the narrative that gives the photos of the ground at Ross their historical depth and load of human tragedy. You do this as soberly and tactfully as possible. The photos themselves, though, are poignant in a way the narrative, with its inevitable humanism, cannot be. They don't seem to proceed at all from an evocation of the lives the women imprisoned at Ross suffered. I read them as proceeding from shame, your shame. Am I right?

AF: I am surprised how many people have claimed that my photos 'tell the stories of forgotten women and children', and not altogether sure where that insistence comes from. I'm suspicious of it too, since I've found the claim hard, almost impossible, to dislodge. (I can't tell you how good it is to hear you say otherwise.) What I want people to see in these photos is that *there are no stories to tell*. This is so undeniably true for the convict babies who died in these prisons that it's frustrating, and I think a bit sinister, that I can't seem to get it across.

What happened to the prison buildings is a case in point. I think the 'story' – which I've pieced together from different sources – is that, over time, local people dismantled the buildings and

carried the material away. In part this was a practical thing to do; the stone was recycled into the buildings that are there now. But it was also an act, or a series of acts, of obliteration. After convict transportation ended, people didn't want to be reminded of their penal origins. (I like the idea that the disowned history is there in the village, hiding in plain sight.) Similarly, I had to search through the 19th century records to find out who the convict babies and their mothers were and what they died of; there was literally nothing else to know about them.

To answer your question about shame, that's part of what I feel but not all of it. Sorrow and outrage, resistance to knowing more, a certain hopelessness, all of these things come up. It gets even more complicated when events in the present mirror those in the past; for instance, the Australian Government's current indifference to refugees seems to mirror our past indifference to the fate of convict children. If I spare myself some shame over what happened to the convict women, it's because I imaginatively side with them and not with their gaolers. However, I know that it's the intervention of lots of time that allows me to do this, and how much of a luxury it is to be able to choose a side, rather than have one allocated to me.

TD: Yes. What I was clumsily trying to say, speaking of your shame, is that shame is one of the rare feelings that can count (it doesn't always) as a political feeling. You mention sorrow and outrage, and I'm sure you felt them deeply, but like empathy they are inevitably slightly suspicious, at least if you think politically. You, Anne, are so aware of siding with the convict women imaginatively that you cannot forget that you are, sociologically speaking, on the other side of the fence: having the choice is a luxury, you say. Shame is a feeling you can genuinely have on behalf of others, but it implies that you also identify, and not *imaginatively* this time, with the gaolers.

Why am I saying this? How do I know? I proceed from my aesthetic experience of the *Lost to worlds* photos. And I grab for the word 'proceed' for lack of a better word. It's also the word I used to speak of the photos: that they might be *proceeding* from shame. The last thing I want to say is that they *express* shame: they don't. They come out of shame, they emerge from shame, and of course they don't stay there; otherwise they could stake no claim on the political. The downward gaze on the land and the way it slowly moves up to barely reach the horizon is, to me, one of the most moving aesthetic features of the photos. It's the gaze of the lower classes when they have interiorised as shame the contemptuous gaze of their masters on them. But then it's that gaze adopted by you. I have the feeling that once it musters enough courage to rise to the horizon and dare look beyond at another, non-confined future, it changes into pride. That feeling is incredibly strong.

AF: This is not something I've thought about before. I'm of course very aware that these photos look down at the ground; other writers have commented on it too. But no-one, me included, has paid more than passing attention to the way some of them take in the horizon and a little bit of sky, or attached particular meaning to it.

This is an aside, and possibly an evasion as well, but I'll ask it anyway: You are aware that in Australia many of us – assuming we want to – can claim descent from convicts? Some would argue that the shame that their masters projected onto them and that they interiorised has worked its way through to us in a convoluted (because not acknowledged) way. I sometimes think I see evidence of this.

But getting back to your comment, I'm struck by how much more you see in the direction of my gaze than I saw myself. Making the *Soft caps* images, I was very aware of the downcast gazes and careful to leaven them with images where the subject doesn't look down. That was the feminist perspective coming through, not wanting to play to the stereotype of feminine submission. Yet when it came to approaching the ground or the land as subject matter, I didn't see the change of direction in my gaze as especially meaningful. Still, the shift is there, and I'm glad that you point it out.

TD: I am of course aware that many Australians are descendants of convicts. What you say about shame trickling down the generations gives me food for thought but, not being Australian, I cannot comment on this. But I want to tell you again how much I have been moved by the fact that in some of the photos, one catches a glimpse of the horizon. It's very strong, and all the stronger that in others there's no horizon at all, just the *all-overness* of the grass or shrubbery, to borrow a word from painting. Then what I also find very strong are the streaks of light, or overexposure, in some of the photos. I think they came about accidentally. Why did you keep them? What meaning did you see in them?

AF: Can I first come back one more time to the horizon? I found your remark about the photographs proceeding from shame hard to understand and your idea of the gaze lifting up very moving. The vocabulary I use to talk about these photographs – words like weight, restraint and austerity – is different, but I think we may be trying to get at a similar thing.

As for the streaks of light, during one of my trips to Ross my camera had a light leak that I didn't discover until later. A few frames were affected in just one spot, near the film edge, while in others the light spread across a larger area; in one it appeared as a shaft reaching from the top corner to a point near the centre of the image. That one in particular looks like I intended it to be there but it was a pure accident, like the others. They reminded me of 19th century photography where that kind of mistake was much more common. Mistakes, neglect, carelessness were part of the regime of the convict prisons – that's also relevant. Another reason was that the light leaks added something that wasn't there when I was photographing, and was absent from the photos I took on previous visits: an atmospheric effect that could be mistaken for mist or some other kind of emanation. The last thing is that in the overexposed areas most or all of the detail disappears, leaving the bare surface of the aluminium. Those areas are highly reflective, and I've found that the shifting reflections coming off them make a big difference to the work.

TD: Leaving aside the remarkable allusion the aluminium surface of the series makes to early daguerreotypes, I must say that to me those places where the light streaks leave the aluminium bare are highly emotional. I remember reacting negatively to them at first. It was like hearing a piece of chalk screech on a blackboard – a visual equivalent of that unpleasant sound. But then I soon began to be drawn to those places; they were so meaningful, connoting everything from scorched-earth politics to clandestine

snapshots. They made the aluminium surface become the land itself, in its materiality. There the land had been, so to speak, erased twice: once by wilful amnesia, and once by the unintentional resistance of your camera to your recovery endeavours.

AF: I relate very much to what you say about the materiality of the metal surface and the land. That was always part of my intention for this work; to give the ground a physical presence, not just a representational one, but that only happened when I started printing them on aluminium. I initially printed them on large sheets of photographic paper, but the effect was much weaker.

Can we talk a little more about erasure, wilful and otherwise? There are so many forgotten histories that could conceivably be revived, and I've learned by now that it doesn't take much in the way of evidence to make a viable starting point. However, some histories present difficulties that others don't. There was no real impediment, apart from the lack of evidence, to my working with the convict history. No barriers were actively placed in my way. That was true even when I was dealing with the infant mortality in the factories, of which not many people were aware.

It wasn't the case though when I started to research the photographic archive that eventually gave rise to *1-38*. In fact, try to research would be more accurate, since these photographs were hemmed around with multiple impediments, not least my own uncertainties about what was and wasn't legitimate to do with them.

TD: What were those impediments?

AF: Bureaucratic and administrative ones to begin with. I first came across them on a pictorial database in the State Library of New South Wales: 38 photographs of individual women, clearly inmates, taken in the grounds of a Sydney psychiatric hospital in 1948. They were on public view but I later realised – and it's possible (though I've never checked this) that the library also belatedly realised – that, bureaucratically speaking, they ought not to have been there. This became clear when, in an effort to find out more about the women pictured, I approached the New South Wales Health Department. I wanted access to the records for that particular hospital – naively as it turned out. I learned two things from that approach: one was that the records were in disarray and that finding what I was looking for was unlikely; the other was that they wouldn't let me see the records since I was neither a patient nor a family member nor an approved (meaning medical) researcher. Where the library had treated the photographs in one way, as just another component of a huge archive that had originated in the Government Printing Office, the health department treated them as patient records, subject to restrictions around patient privacy and confidentiality. That difference was paralleled in the different ways the two institutions treated me. For the library I was a legitimate researcher; they made me copies of all 38 images, the same ones I've been working with ever since. The health department, I think it's fair to say, saw me as an interloper.

TD: That says a lot about the unacknowledged guilt those health department bureaucrats must have felt. At first I thought I was going to ask you about the cropping of the images in *1-38* – its aesthetics and its ethics. But as I look again at the jpegs you gave me, the cropping seems more and more natural. Even

without your explanations two things are self-evident: the 38 photographs making up the series are re-photographs of existing documents; and they are of women whom I somehow identify as inmates of a mental hospital from a bygone era. The striped frocks, the crudely tailored coats, the buttons and the buttonholes, the clenched fists and, of course, the straightjackets are giveaways. The size of the hands sets the distance from which I am allowed to observe these women. It's not always identical; it varies, but not much. And that distance seems right to me: it is determined by your cropping, not by the original photographer. So, in a way I'm disappointed because I don't really have a question, and I'm happy because the photos answered the questions I thought I would have. But I wonder. You may have a totally different take on the issue.

AF: I was half-expecting you'd ask me about the privacy issue. The cropping is interesting to me as well, especially the way you link it to distance – there's so much distance in these images. Not only the distance between observer and subject, but also the painful distance between the women inside the institution and everyone else on the outside, who can't reach them, or may have even caused them to be there. Then the many places *inside* the images where a distance opens or closes – a woman hovering in the background of someone else's photo; a nurse holding a woman by the arm; one distressed woman reaching out to another.

I had to search each photograph to find the 'correct' crop; some were easy to find and some not. When it came to cropping the faces, I didn't have to search (a face is a face), but the effect was very different, more confronting. The variety of detail that you get in the hands and clothing was totally eclipsed by the facial expressions. I don't show those images in the usual way; they've been bound into an artist book that doesn't go on public view.

TD: The faces: are you talking about *Insula*? I have not seen the faces. Or have I? Did you show me them when Lisa [Blas] and I visited your studio last year?¹ If you have, then my experience of them is uncannily akin to that of Susan Best who, in her essay for this book, speaks of a strange amnesia.² I would have to see them, or see them again.

To come back to 7-38, I was not talking about privacy. Susan Best also remarked, and rightly so, that your showing us only a small slice of the original photograph preserves the women's anonymity. And I think that takes care of the privacy issue. What I was trying to account for is the strong impression I had that your cropping establishes a distance of observation that is both aesthetically and ethically just. What you say about the various distances we glimpse inside the images is true and moving: it is indeed the door onto an infinity of distances, between then and now, them and us, them and them – an abyss of unreachabilities. But the range of feelings that open door lets in has to do with gradations of empathy. I guess I'm talking about respect, which is an ethical feeling – empathy isn't. That's why I want to stick to the cooler words, 'distance of observation'. I have, of course, not seen the original images, but I'm pretty sure they were meant to put the viewer in the position of an observer, in the clinical sense. Psychiatry has an arrogant and naïve belief in symptomatology based on visual clues. Now I am still cast in the position of the clinical observer, simply because I know that what I see are re-photographed photographs. The extraordinary thing with your cropping is that, to my eyes at least, it converts clinical distance into ethical distance and thereby restores respect.

One of my greatest interests when I look at art is to find the delicate zone of attention where aesthetic decisions are simultaneously ethical decisions. In the case of 7-38, I believe that zone is precisely the distance of observation. But if this is so, then there is another aesthetic decision you made in this

work that I would take issue with, beautiful as its results may be: the tinting of the photos. I cannot imagine you doing this on a whim. I therefore surmise that you re-photographed on colour filmstock black-and-white prints that happened to be greenish or ochre or sepia. Still, you could have used black-and-white filmstock and thus avoided the slight nostalgia that inevitably oozes from tinted photos, and which I think gets in the way of a work that otherwise strikes me as having, not the ring of truth, but better, the ring of justice.

AF: I'd forgotten that you haven't seen the faces. The day you and Lisa came to the studio I'd taken all the *Insula* books out to show you, but we ran out of time. Knowing more about your thinking on ethics and aesthetics, I wonder what you'll make of them. Needless to say, I struggled very much with the ethics of making this work. Not showing the faces was an option, and would have been less controversial. With the book of faces I tried, mistakenly perhaps, to 'protect' the women by folding each page so that a flap of paper obscures most of the face. The reader has to lift that flap to see the image, and replace it so the page can be turned, making the process slower and ideally more self-reflective as well. The other impediment (that word again) is that the person looking has to be told first what kind of images they are, and agree to see them. This was all premised on the idea that if I can't change how the photographs were made, I can change some aspects of how they are seen.

The application of colour was deliberate; I scanned the black-and-white prints and added a colour layer to each image. I was hoping for a transformation that was noticeable but not marked enough to affect their integrity.

TD: Here, I'm afraid, we must agree to disagree. I tend to see the tinting of the photos as unnecessary aestheticising. But then Lisa, with whom I talked it over, agrees with you. I'm too much of a purist when it comes to the medium of photography, she said. She also said she saw that a colour layer was added to the images. So, I must admit that my eye is not trained enough to spot the nuances of manipulated digital images, and that my ethics are definitely pre-digital – you don't tamper with indexicality. In the case of *1-38* I stick to my guns, for the original photos were definitely pre-digital.

I wish I could see the *Insula* books in the flesh, and be subjected to your viewing protocol. It strikes me, again, as perfectly just. I cannot put myself in the proper frame of mind to deal adequately with jpegs on a screen, so I cannot offer a comment, except on the extraordinary blurred or superimposed portraits, verging on abstraction, in one of the books. How and why did you make them?

AF: I'm also sorry you can't see the books. Those other works you mention are actually large photographs of *Insula: Book 2*, the book of faces. (They won't be in the exhibition but we can still discuss them here.) I made them in 2003 for a show at Stills Gallery in Sydney when I realised it wasn't going to be possible to include the books themselves, because the viewing protocols we've been discussing weren't practicable. The method was to rephotograph all the pages of the book onto the same sheet of film. Each individual exposure is very short, much less than normal. As the faces accumulate on the film, the features that they have in common gather density and thus visibility, while the individual differences remain faint and ghostly. (It's the same technique Francis Galton used to make composite portraits in the 19th century.) There was no way to predict precisely what image would emerge. In fact, when I repeated the technique with

the very different *1-38* images, the result was a blue rectangle with just a few barely discernable stripes.

This might be the place to say that I've recently recommenced working with this archive but in a different way. I've been photographing performers while they improvise with lengths of dyed and painted felt that are loosely based on institutional clothing.

TD: Can you tell me more about this work?

AF: I recently heard someone say that contemporary art has no memory – an idea that unnerves me. It set me thinking about how the circumstances of those women's lives, including the institution's wish to protect their privacy, had all but erased our memory of them. That wasn't the prompt for the recent work – it was all but complete by then – but it chimes with it. It began with me wondering if there wasn't a reserve of energy in the original archive that I'd failed to tap. Then it occurred to me to try working with performers, on the basis that performance is so completely in and of the present. In the new photos, collectively called *Box of birds*, the concern with concealment is still there; you see the performers' feet, hands and sometimes limbs, but never their faces. I was also hoping that something unpredictable, a new shape or form, could emerge. The work ended up in two parts, only one of which, *Chorus*, will be in this show. *Chorus* has a straightforward (i.e. numerical) relationship to the archive (one image for each of the 38 original photographs). The other images are fewer in number and more diverse, hence perhaps closer to my original intentions.

TD: I love your idea that archival photographs contain a reserve of energy. The implication is that you as an artist are unleashing that energy – you say ‘tap’ but I like ‘unleash’ better because what your work does is the very opposite of appropriation. Too much archive-based art these days is trapped in the dilemma of either hijacking the original material to an intention sometimes very foreign to it, or emphasising its ‘pastness’ not to say its ‘deadness’, as if that in itself was a mark of respect. Thus it makes perfect sense that you would work with performers, and that they would brandish felt cloths that evoke both the coats and jackets some of the women in *1-38* are wearing and the blankets of *In the ground on the air*. I love their marriage of constructivist design and performative randomness and the fact that they have the faciality of abstract painting. Now that I see the connection, their colour may even reconcile me with the tinting of the photos in *1-38*. But it is the range of mood they elicit that strikes me as a novelty in your work: without losing sight of the tragedies they allude to, they are whimsical and full of humour – a humour that is then allowed to burst out in sheer joy in what Kyla McFarlane, in her *Box of birds* catalogue essay, has called the ‘improvisations’. I feel like I am privileged to witness your full embrace of life after a long process of mourning.

AF: I’ve been aware of that dilemma all the time I’ve worked with archival material, without finding a way out of it. Now that I have one, suddenly a lot seems to be happening. You won’t get to see this unfortunately, but there’s a performance version of *Box of birds* by De Quincey Co – the dancers who performed for me – in rehearsal now. My contribution is the felt cloths, modified by a costume designer, and some video of the *1-38* images. I’m excited about this, as it confirms how much life is still in the material.

1 Lisa Blas, ‘Interview with Anne Ferran’,
<http://thestudiovisit.com/anne-ferran/>

2 ‘Despite having seen the book several times, I can’t recall a single face, while the details of the more publicly displayed images of *1-38* are strongly etched in my memory.’ Susan Best, ‘Anne Ferran: Histories of Women and Other Blind Spots,’ *Anne Ferran: Shadow Land* (exhibition catalogue, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia and Power Publications, 2014), 39.