DAMIAN DILLON REBECCA SHANAHAN
HOMELANDS
12 JUNE - 20 JULY
This resource has been written for Stage 5 Visual Art students who are studying or are interested in photography, film and video. It focuses on three key areas of contemporary photographic theory:

- photography as documentation
- digital vs analogue
- representation

Each key area is explained and then exemplified, using work from the exhibition ‘Homeland’ UTS Gallery 12 June - 20 July 2012.

An image by each artist, Rebecca Shanahan and Damian Dillon, is analysed under each of the three theoretical areas listed above. Students will learn how a photographic image can be read and understood through these theoretical lenses.

At the end of the resource there is a glossary, a list of texts and film for further research and some discussion questions to help students and teachers explore some of the key themes in the resource.
There are two schools of thought on whether a photograph is a document of reality or something else. The first states that a photograph is a true depiction of reality, an idea that is closely aligned with documentary photography. In this situation the photograph is caused by a referent. The photograph is referring to something that takes precedence over the photo itself. For example, when you see a photo in the newspaper of someone leaving a courtroom, it is the person leaving the courtroom that is the referent, the thing that is considered important to look at. In this situation the camera acts in place of our own eyes and we see the event as though we were there.

The second school of thought considers a photograph as a semiotic system. It is the photograph and how it functions that is important not the subject. The photograph is different to reality and brings something of its own to the viewer. Instead of seeing the event as though we were there, we realise we are being made to feel as though we were there. As a viewer we are aware of the photographic frame, and therefore what is outside of it. We can see only what the photographer has chosen to include and exclude form the photograph. Our point of view is constructed as the photographer has chosen the position of the lens and therefore our viewpoint.
Photography as a documentary and artistic medium has developed greatly over the last 150 years. Different technologies will produce different results and have different implications on the role of photography in society.

Analogue photography is the older, traditional form of photography. It necessitates a hands on approach where the production of photographs take place in a darkroom. Analogue photos are described by the type of film used to record the image, 35mm, medium Format or Large Format.

Digital photography is more contemporary and instantaneous. It is measured and described in pixels usually counted in the millions, called megapixels and the size of an image and the capability of a camera is described using megapixels.

When reproducing a digital image, the copy is the same as the original. No degradation of the image occurs, which can devalue the original, as every copy is just as ‘good’. When reproducing an analogue image the copy is always a slightly degraded version of the original, meaning the original is the ‘best’ image available.

Digital images are also easily uploaded online making publication and exchange quick and easy. Analogue photos must be converted to digital for uploading, in both cases the artist’s intended image size, paper choice and often image quality is lost.
Images are a large part of our lives, they are used in many different ways to represent things to us. In advertising we often see representation that is idealised. These are images that attempt to create desire in us or to make us believe something, for instance a breakfast cereal box may have a picture of a smiling lady or a field of wheat with the sun shining on it, enticing us to believe our cereal is a pure, natural product.

Artists also use representation in photography. They make work using the world around them combined with a personal language of representation. When an artist takes a photo of a subject they use their language of representation to present the subject. For example an artist could take a photo of a street at daytime with lots of people in it. The artist would be creating an image that is ‘lively’ that perhaps represents trade and society. If that same street was photographed by another artist at night using only the light of a streetlight it would be ‘read’ differently. Perhaps in this case the image of the street would be read as dangerous or alienating.
The image below is a photo in the series ‘Small Hours’ 2012 by Rebecca Shanahan. The image situates the viewer on the threshold of inside and outside a home. It is taken at night and is lit by the available light rather than photographic lighting. The light sources are a ceiling lamp, a streetlight and a child’s toy lightsaber. As a viewer we have been positioned between a private space of a home and a public space of a street. It is a space we often don’t stop in and consider as usually we use that space to enter or exit a house, when in this threshold space we are usually in transit, not stationary and observing.

**Documentary?**

On first glance it seems that the photo is documentary style, an image that records a referent, in this case a home and a street. But on closer inspection the artist has also made choices to make this photo more than straight documentation. The lights in the image highlight areas that catch our attention. Shanahan has used the available lighting as a **semiotic system**. The different types of lights, their placement and purpose give the viewer tools to read the work. We are able to see the humanism of warm lighting as it illuminates personal spaces and the alienation of cold lighting.

“For this series I mostly used existing light and only added light where it was needed a couple of times. It was important to me that the work read as authentic rather than over-worked and contrived, and retain a documentary quality as these are actual places and events.”
Digital vs Analogue:
Shanahan uses a digital camera that is also a video camera. In the exhibition she is showing both still photography and video work. Her subject matter in photography and video are similar. Having a camera that records both still and moving images gives the artist more options and choices when she is at location as she can jump from still to moving easily.

“Over the years (I have) experimented with video and Super 8 (but) I couldn't find my own personal video language until the two media converged in the new digital cameras. A lot of my video work is conceived and composed identically to my still photography, just with duration added.”

Representation:
Shanahan's work represents everyday spaces that her friends, family and community occupy. Her language of representation uses light to create a mood of absence, uncertainty and alienation.

In the work ‘Small Hours’ 2012, the ceiling light shows us a space that has been used but has recently been vacated as an incomplete game sits waiting on the table. Outside the door a toy lightsaber, marks the final boundary of the home, it's an abandoned object still alight, waiting for its owner. Out in the street the colour of the light changes. The yellow glow of a street lamp illuminates the footpath, cars, trees and the childish graffiti on the opposite wall. Beyond this wall a large important looking building with sterile white lights dominates. Shanahan creates juxtaposition between the familiar and the foreign. The foreign object in this image is the building with sterile white lighting.

Shanahan makes choices using her personal language of representation to portray familiar spaces as surreal or to delineate the difference between outside and inside, public and private space. In the example image given the sterile, brightly lit building in the distance has the effect of making the rest of the image familiar. This exemplifies the juxtaposition of outside/inside and public/private space.

Questions:

Consider the advantages of having a camera that records both still and moving images. Research the development of still cameras and movie cameras and discuss your findings with a friend.

By using digital photography and video what exhibition and publication options are available to Shanahan that are not available to Dillon, who uses analogue photography?
Damian Dillon

Damian Dillon’s photo in the series ‘What the Thunder Said’ 2012, (below) is of the interior of what seems to be an abandoned car. The photograph is dark and grainy, taken at night. The camera and therefore viewer is positioned at the very back of the car, looking towards the front windscreen, which is cracked and broken. The driver’s door is left ajar, implying the car has been left quickly or without care. Beyond the frames of the windscreen and car door windows we can see an industrial space with other cars lined up in what seems to be a graveyard for old vehicles.

Documentary?
Dillon has positioned the camera at the back of the car giving the impression of hiding, of being inside and peering out. It is a position of fear, rather than ownership of the space. This frame implies that the photo is of a place where precaution is necessary, where the protection of being inside or above the action is necessary. Dillon has also taken the photo at night, with no people present. He has made these choices to construct our reading of the image, using a semiotic system, to create an image that makes us feel isolated and fearful. Dillon is documenting something and constructing his image to make the final work.
“Isolation and emptiness runs thematically in my work, my process of taking and making works reflects this.”

Digital vs Analogue
Dillon’s images are made from old film that the artist has collected or inherited. His method of installation in the gallery reflects his interest in the physicality of the image. For Homelands Dillon has installed his images, overlapping and ripped, on a board with black gaffa tape. As his paper and film is often old degradation of the image can occur throughout the course of the exhibition. The clarity of the image changes from photo to photo, a result of Dillon using traditional dark room methods to produce each image by hand.

“I have to do tests with each batch of film...testing for grain and film problems as I predominantly use old film I have collected or inherited...development times also relate to which camera I use. I have a collection of cameras that respond differently so I try and customise my processing to each camera to get the results I need.”

Representation:
Dillon’s language of representation is apparent in the photos he takes, the obsession he has with night time and vacant spaces, and in the installation of his images. The result is a series of images that convey feelings of loss, isolation, darkness and vulnerability. His style of gallery installation is different to the usual large format framed images we see in photography exhibitions. Instead Dillon makes his images look discarded. Their darkness makes it difficult for us the viewer to see the subject matter clearly, causing us to feel that the photos don’t want our attention, that they too feel the alienation and difference that they depict.

“I have always been to drawn to the built environment and in particular function and dysfunction in relation to these spaces. I am drawn to emotional states of loss, and the traces of what once was in relation to human existence... Isolation and emptiness also runs thematically in my work so my process of taking and making works reflects this.”

Questions:
Look at Dillon’s work and consider how the works make you feel. Are the images of foreign or familiar spaces and objects? Find an image that is of something familiar and consider how Dillon has represented that space or object. Discuss with a classmate.

Do you use digital or analogue cameras? Why? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both mediums?
absence: lack, deficiency, not being present

alienation: to make indifferent or hostile

construct: to frame or devise something

degradation: the act of reducing in quality

idealise: to represent something as perfection

juxtaposition: placing two things close together to exemplify contrast

referent: the object or event to which something refers. (A photo of an apple refers to an apple)

representation: the process of depicting an idea or an aspect of the world in a particular way

semiotic system: relating to signs and symbols

uncertainty: to have doubt

Books
A fantastic theory reference book that explains key concepts and the role of prominent thinkers in the development of photographic theory

Excellent resource of contemporary artists’ work and their context in contemporary art practice

Beautifully written book discussing the effects of photography on our lives and our consciousness

A series of essays by Ritchin examining the effects of the digital age on photography and therefore on society

Film
‘Blow Up’ Director: Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966
An all time classic about photography, documentation, truth and the swinging sixties!
further discussion

List all the places that you see photographs and images in your daily lives – consider everything you see from when you wake up to when you close your eyes at night.

Are you surprised by the amount of images you see every day? Compare your list with a friend and discuss your responses.

Marshall McLuhan, who wrote about our experience as people in a media saturated society said:
“One thing fish no nothing about is water” meaning fish can't know what ‘wet’ is as they have no experience of ‘dry’, so how can we understand what the media is to us or is doing to us when we are so surrounded by it? Discuss in groups.

What other contexts outside of the gallery could these works be viewed in? What would be the difference of viewing Shanahan’s work to Dillon’s work if they were, for instance, online?

What is your personal language of representation? Discuss with a friend the themes and techniques that you enjoy exploring or that seem to come up a lot in your own work.
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