



Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

THE ICE
David Stephenson

15 July – 14 August 1994

Bad Light

Photography has often figured in the exploration of Antarctica. The photographs of Herbert Ponting and Frank Hurley, taken between 1910 and 1916, are the first and perhaps most famous photographic views of the continent (the last expanse in the world to be charted). Ponting and Hurley accompanied the first expeditions to Antarctica led by Scott, Mawson and Shackleton, their job being to document these first attempts to reach the South Pole. The photographs record men and animals at work, domestic arrangements at the stations, flora and fauna, environmental phenomena, as well as the precise moments of discovery and declaration. As photographers they composed a detailed, episodic compendium of the different courses taken to this end of the world and of the events along the way.

David Stephenson visited Antarctica in 1991 as part of an expedition arranged by the Australian Antarctic Division. He went as a photographer, one of several different professions represented in a select party. Stephenson's brief, unlike Ponting's or Hurley's, was not documentary. He was not required to narrate an expedition as they were. Rather he was

free to respond creatively – in any way he chose. The result is a series of white and ice-blue landscapes, almost entirely devoid of feature and reference.

Rather than document human and other activity, or the remarkable berg and glacial formations, Stephenson chose to depict the featureless floes and field-ice. In this respect, Stephenson chose to represent the views *in between* the classic images of Ponting and Hurley, composing the remainder of Antarctic exploration and activity which escaped their cameras as a barely differentiated print. As Stephenson remarks: 'No pictures or description can prepare one for the total alien strangeness of the view, unlike anything one has encountered anywhere else before.'¹ His pictures tend toward a literal translation of this sentiment; empty planes which eschew pictorial and descriptive elements. In short, Stephenson presents a kind of 'non-picture' to counter the more conventional views of Antarctica returned by Ponting and Hurley. The dark, contrasted forms of historical incursion are replaced by the barely legible contours of depressions, cracks and seams in the ice.

In his written journal, Ponting emphasised the abundance of subjects available to the photographer. But why comment? Perhaps only to assert the contrary; to insist on detail and visual distraction where in fact it was strangely absent. In contrast, Stephenson's photographs acknowledge these unregarded stretches of ice and floe as the normative terrain of Antarctica. They represent the unpopulated and barren distance between various remarkable events and activity; precisely, the white space against which Antarctic exploration and representation was set.

The journals of Scott, Mawson and Shackleton repeatedly refer to a subject which never appeared in the photographs of Ponting and Hurley: the blank white surfeit which consistently confounded their orientation and impeded their progress to the Pole. The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (the first to reach the Pole) described it most prosaically in 1912:

Snow, horizon and sky all ran together in a white chaos, in which all lines of demarcation were obliterated.²

The journals of Antarctic exploration resound with similar descriptions: 'there was no horizon to be seen'; 'everything looks the same'; 'never certain of one's surroundings'; 'there was nothing to be seen'; 'we could see nothing'; and so on.³ These and other observations summarise the predominant self-reflexive register of the journals on 'bad light' days: 'in looking I see nothing' they seem to concur.

The affliction of snowblindness provides a physical model of the same perceptual quandary; the retina becomes exhausted due to a surfeit of light resulting in temporary blindness ('in looking I see nothing'). In turn it finds another corollary in the fresh blank page of the journal – too bright to look at – where the frustrated and exhausted explorer reported the day's failing. 'It is painful to look at this paper' remarked a snow-blinded officer, Henry Bowers, in



Immediate left and facing page:
Untitled images from the series THE ICE (1992)
colour photographs 100 x 150cm

1912 towards the end of Scott's failed expedition. Snowblindness, exhaustion, frustration; all endemic to the Antarctic explorer on 'bad light' days.

This catastrophic failing of vision, a kind of wide-eyed blindness, is reproduced in Stephenson's prints. The images are the photographic products of what explorers would have called 'snow-blind light', a diffuse light on evenly overcast days (the very same 'bad light' days). As Shackleton put it, on these days 'the light came equally from every direction'; the crystalline structure of the ice dispersing the light throughout a completely white and blazing scene.⁴ The absence of contrast renders the detail of snow and ice almost imperceptible.

The effect of this light in Stephenson's photographs is a largely undifferentiated print, except for a faint crevasse or horizon. Certainly, there is sufficient light – too much even – to make the photograph. But its diffusion throughout the scene renders the landscape, as well as the photograph, unintelligible. The view is without orientation, a point redoubled in the video, which according to Stephenson has 'no correct orientation', such that the flow of ice proceeds neither up nor down. (Indeed, the concept of orientation is radically altered at the poles. Upon reaching the South Pole, the compass needle is confounded; its tendency is 90° straight down.)

The photographer has evidently absented himself as the orientating force in these representations. Were it not for our presumption that these scenes were first observed through a viewfinder they would retain little semblance of human

proportion at all. Both the eye and camera – as different embodiments of vision – seem to be irrelevant to the record of movement and fissure occurring on an indeterminate scale and in indefinite directions.

A single vantage point, however, remains a requisite component of earthly representation; of the banal everyday events around us as much as the beautiful and sublime elements of nature. This conventional logic of appearances and representation implicates a human subject – at least an eye or some other aperture – which limits the diaspora of perspective according to the outer limit of peripheral vision, constituting a picture plane or field of sight. But, in Stephenson's images these limits appear arbitrary and pointless, like the out-takes of satellite photography, bearing little or no relationship to formal composition or real optical capacities. They are anathema to the gift of sight on a clear, bright day; a disavowal of the viewing subject.

Alternately, in their ineluctable flatness and seductive materiality they might resemble the apotheosis of artistic vision under the formal entropy of modernist or even minimalist aesthetics. The abstract monochrome canvases of 50s and 60s American painting tended towards the same dispersal of the gaze evenly across the support, the same abrogation of perspective and orientation, and, in their presentness all at once – their fulminating Gestalt – they seemed to require for their adequate perception, not a human eye, but a kind of transcendental optic, no less than the superior eye of God (or Greenberg). However,

Stephenson's photographs are ultimately held back from this brink by their evidentiary status as photographs, the ebb of reality halting the swell of formal, metaphysical comparison.

Finally, it is the reluctance of Stephenson's prints and video to disclose their bearing as well as their proximity to the Antarctic landscape which replays the dilemma of navigating a course through such terrain. The failing of vision ('in looking I see nothing') corresponds exactly to the failing of photography under these conditions (which explains the absence of similar views in the folios of Ponting and Hurley). The indeterminate scale and bearing of the abstract, elemental patterning of the ice and floe simply remark the inconsequence of the individual in Antarctic climes, and the total and utter indifference of nature.

Stuart Koop June 1994

- 1 David Stephenson, 'Romantic Projection (The Indifference of Nature)', artist's statement, 1993
- 2 Roald Amundsen, *The South Pole: An account of the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition in the 'Fram', 1910-12* (orig. 1912), University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1979, p.242.
- 3 See Robert Scott, *Scott's Last Expedition* (orig. 1913), John Murray, London, 1968; Apsley Cherry-Garrard, *The Worst Journey in the World* (orig. 1913), Chatto and Windus, London, 1965; Douglas Mawson, *The Home of the Blizzard*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1938
- 4 Ernest Shackleton in his diary in 1908, cited in Christopher Ralling (ed), *Shackleton: His Antarctic Writings*, BBC, London, 1983, pp.84-5.



David Stephenson

1955 Born USA

1982 Moved to Australia

Currently Senior Lecturer and Head of Photography at
the Centre for the Arts, University of Tasmania

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1981 Camerawork Gallery, San Francisco
1982 Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
1983 Robert Freidus Gallery, New York
1984 The Developed Image, Adelaide
1985 Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
The Friends of Photography, Carmel
1987 Chameleon Gallery, Hobart
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
1988 Salamanca Place Gallery, Hobart
1989 Salamanca Place Gallery, Hobart
1990 Melbourne Contemporary Art Gallery, Melbourne
Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
1991 Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide
Melbourne Contemporary Art Gallery, Melbourne
1992 Dick Bett Gallery, Hobart
Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
1993 Melbourne Contemporary Art Gallery
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
1994 James Danziger Gallery, New York
Dick Bett Gallery, Hobart

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1979 *Photography as Document*, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia
1980 *Western Landscape Photography, 1850–1980*, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento
1981 *Masterpieces from the Permanent Collection*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
1982 *Recent Acquisitions*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
1983 *Australian Perspecta 1983*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Recent Acquisitions, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco
1984 Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
1985 *Approaching Landscape*, Chameleon Gallery, Hobart and Penrith Regional Gallery
1986 *New Views: Landscape Photographs From Two Continents*, University of Missouri
Recent Australian Photography, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
1987 *Australian Contemporary Photographers*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
The New Romantics, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, and regional tour
1988 *Australian Photography: the 1980s*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
1989 *Tableaux Mourant*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of Tasmania
1990 *Fragmentation and Fabrication: Recent Australian Photography*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
1991 *42° South*, Chameleon Gallery, Hobart and Australia/New Zealand tour
1992 *Location*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, and Asian tour
Imitations of Mortality, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Contemporary Works, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart
1993 *To the Surface – Contemporary Landscape*, Centre for the Arts, Hobart
Artists in Antarctica – Visions of the Frozen World, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart
Reflex, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, and national tour
1994 *Tradition and the Unpredictable: The Allen Chasanoff Photographic Collection*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Pictograms: Aspects of Contemporary Photographic Practice, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne and National tour
The Full Spectrum: Colour and Photography in Australia 1860s to 1990s, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Selected Bibliography

- Jonathon Holmes, 'Provincialism in Art', *Island 14*, 1983
Jonathon Holmes, 'Contemporary Visual Arts in Tasmania', *Studio International*, Volume 196, Number 1002, October 1983
Brian Allison, 'David Stephenson', *Photofile*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, Autumn 1984
Jonathon Holmes, 'Resuming our journey into the landscape...', *Art and Australia*, Volume 22, Number 4, Sydney 1985
David Stephenson, *New Landscapes: Photographs From Two Continents*, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1985
Christine Godden, *CSR Photography Project: Selected Works*, CSR, Ltd. Sydney, 1986
Heather Curnow, 'Mountain/Sea', *Photofile*, Sydney, Spring 1987.
Helen Ennis, *Australian Photography: The 1980s*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1988
Sue Backhouse, *Tasmanian Artists of the Twentieth Century*, Pandani Press, Hobart, 1988
Edward Colless, 'Hobart Commentary', *Art and Australia*, September 1989
Stuart Koop, 'David Stephenson at Melbourne Contemporary Art Gallery', *Agenda*, 1990
Sean Kelly, '42 Degrees South', *Art and Text*, Number 34, Sydney, December 1991
Stephanie Radok, 'Anti-aesthetics', *Artlink*, Vol 11 No 4, Summer 1991/92, Adelaide, 1991
Museum of Fine Arts, *The Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection: Tradition and the Unpredictable*, Houston, 1994

David Stephenson THE ICE (1991–93)

Ten untitled chromogenic colour photographs on aluminium panels, 100 x 148 cm, in painted timber and acrylic frames; single monitor VHS video installation

The artist gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Australian Antarctic Division and the University of Tasmania

Untitled image from the series THE ICE (1992) (detail) colour photograph 100 x 150cm



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