LIGHT MATTER
a symposium on contemporary photographic practice

PROGRAM

9:30  Registration
10:10  Opening remarks: Dr Allison Holland, Curator ACP
10:30  The first frame: foetal portraiture as a preliminary human encounter
Dr Cherine Fahd
10:50  Discussion led by Dr Sara Oscar
11:00  Why ‘Light matter’ matters: on photographic presence
Professor Melissa Miles
11:20  Discussion led by Dr Kate Warren
11:30  Light and matter: photography from the black hole
Yvette Hamilton
11:50  Discussion led by Dr Donna West Brett
LUNCH

1:00  Socially latent images: Eva and Franco Mattes’ explorations of personal photography
Dr Kate Warren
1:20  Discussion led by Professor Melissa Miles
1:30  On optics and algorithms: photography in the age of AI synthesized technology and the truth apocalypse
Dr Sara Oscar
1:50  Discussion led by Yvette Hamilton
2:00  Lost images
Dr Donna West Brett
2:20  Discussion led by Dr Cherine Fahd
2:30  Artists’ panel: Ellen Dahl, Yvette Hamilton, Elena Papanikolakis, Ioulia Terizis, Garry Trinh, and Amanda Williams
Discussion led by Dr Izabela Pluta
3:00  Close
Lost images
Dr Donna West Brett University of Sydney

In our post-photographic era, the question of ‘what is a photograph?’ is central to discussions among the medium. Artists and scholars have questioned the ontological nature of photographs and where they exist in the realm of data, pixels and social media. This paper considers the life of the photograph, both analogue and digital, as an autonomous entity – what they do, what happens to them, and where they go. Within the deluge of images that travel the globe, trapped in our phones and computer screens, many are lost, misplaced or unseen, or remain as latent images in our digital systems. Barthès’ premise of ‘the death of the author’ is a provocation to rethink the contemporary photograph and its afterlife.

Donna is a lecturer in Art History and Curatorial Studies at the University of Sydney, author of Photography and place: seeing and not seeing Germany after 1945 (Routledge, 2016), and co-editor with Natalya Lusty, of Photography and ontology: unsettling images (Routledge, 2018). Donna is a recipient of the 2017 Australian Academy of the Humanities, Ernst and Rosemarie Keller Award; Research Leader for the Photographic Cultures Research Group; and Editorial Member for the Visual Culture and German Contexts Series, Bloomsbury.

The first frame: foetal portraiture as a preliminary human encounter
Dr Cherine Fahd University of Technology Sydney

Ultrasound images of a foetus in utero mark the beginning of a person’s figurative presence. These diagnostic images contribute to the storytelling capacity of the family, from the traditional photograph album to the contemporary equivalent on social media. From the perspective of photographic portraiture, diagnostic portraits are intriguing objects of enquiry. They visualise the otherwise unseen, they provide an encounter with a hidden subject which in turn activates relational existence. They are an inadvertent portrait of the unborn offering a preliminary human encounter. The representation of the foetal face in utero as the ‘first frame’ from which an intersubjective meeting is generated and experienced between mother and unborn child. This paper embarks on an imaginative leap to consider this unknowable experience, the encounter between the unborn subject and its mother in terms of being photographed, being watched, being posed, and ultimately being loved.

Cherine is Senior Lecturer and Director of Photography at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). With an enduring focus on photography, Cherine has evolved diverse research interests, from the study of the gaze in our post-photographic era, to the representation of darkness. Cherine’s current research focuses on the role of photography as a site of interconnectedness, and how the gaze of the camera might serve as a site of relational presence.

Light and matter: photography from the black hole
Yvette Hamilton University of Technology Sydney

In August 1835, William Henry Fox Talbot captured the light emanating from a lattice window at his home at Lacock Abbey using a ‘photogenic drawing’ technique. In April 2019, a team of scientists captured the absence of light in the supermassive black hole in the galaxy M87 using the Event Horizon Telescope. These two events are stationed at opposing ends of the medium’s history. From its very embryonic beginnings to the current state of the ‘post-photographic’, these polarities are meeting of light and matter in photography: presence.

Yvette is an interdisciplinary artist who considers visuality and being, with particular reference to photography. Working with light, sound, video and paper, Yvette has explored the act of ‘seeing’ in a live and participatory manner. Yvette is currently a sessional academic at UTS in the Bachelor of Design (Photography) and holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts, University of Sydney.

On optics and algorithms: photography in the age of AI synthesized technology and the truth apocalypse
Dr Sara Oscar University of Technology Sydney

The ‘deep fake’ is a rising phenomenon in photographic practices, which uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) synthesis technology, or algorithms, to create images without the need for a lens or light. These ‘less-less’ images have the capacity to create highly realistic simulations of everything from cats, or an ageing face, to a naked body. The media responses to such a photograph is cautionary, especially in regard to violence against women and geo-politics in an era of post-truth and fake news. What is at stake here is the relationship between seeing and believing. But these possibilities are not without their historical antecedents in photography’s 150-year history of image fabrication, from Henry Peach Robinson’s Victorian construction of the past in the landscapes of his lake-side home in the 1850s to take-home War I montage photographs of the battle field. Photography has consistently illustrated the tenuous connection between reality and fiction, as well as the investment culture has placed in vision as the dominant form of knowledge acquisition.

This paper argues that the fear of losing sentient certainty is misplaced. It instead proposes a new language with which to discuss the new conditions of meaning and relational possibility that are emerging as a result of the newly possible. Sara is lecturer in photography at the University of Technology, Sydney. She works in the medium of photography as a way of investigating the mediums complex relationship to the past and its narration. She takes the archive as a starting point for her practice, and employs strategies of appropriation and digital collage to play upon the subject of her works. Her research focuses on theories of prosthetic memory and recently, considers the impact of the non-human and extinction in photography: the latter being achieved through artificial intelligence. Sara holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts, Sydney College of the Arts, and a doctorate in Visual Arts from University of Sydney.

Socially latent images: Eva and Franco Mattes’ explorations of personal photograph
Dr Kate Warren Australian National University

While the move from analogue to digital did not result in ‘the death of photography’ as predicted by many in the 1980s and 1990s, the contemporary ubiquity of digital, networked photographic devices has nonetheless changed many aspects of our understanding of such images. These changes are not simply a matter of photographic technology, as the social and political value of photographs and photographic practices has been rethought. For instance, certain trends today suggest a new value of ideas around latency and the vernacular in photography. Along with other theorists, Sean Cubitt argues digital images create a new phenomenon of latency. That is, “the time it takes a camera to migrate the image from chip to memory, the period when the camera is ‘latent’” (“The Latent Image”, International Journal of the Image, 2011) however, this camera-based latency is ever decreasing as photographic processing create faster film. Perhaps more significantly, the photographer’s lived experience of latency and its relationship to their personal photographs has been transformed. In the age of networked photo sharing, we might consider the phenomenon of the socially latent image, or in other words, the unshared photograph. This paper considers the work of Italian artists Eva and Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.org), whose recent projects have pushed the aesthetic, legal and moral boundaries of working with others’ personal photographs. Their highly discomforting projects are conduits for understanding and reckoning with social media’s impact on perceptions of authenticity, authorship and privacy – in relation to photography and beyond.

Kate is a Lecturer in Art History and Curatorialship in the Centre for Art History and Art Theory, Australian National University, Canberra. She is an art historian, writer and curator, with expertise in modern and contemporary Australian and international art. Kate received her doctorate in Art History from Monash University. Her research areas include: film; photography; video and film arts; and cultural and media art writing and criticism. Kate has published extensively in Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art; email; Online Journal of Art; Senses of Cinema; Persona Studies; History of Photography; Discipline; and Objektiv; and is co-editor of Peephole Journal, an online journal dedicated to creative film criticism. Kate has also exhibited for the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian and Channels Video Art Festival.