



Half Life

From the series: *Displaced Objects 1986/96*

Direct positive colour print/
Type C photographic print

50.0cm x 50.0cm/127.0cm x 127.0cm

Collection: *State Library of Victoria*

The Migrating Self: Sittings for a Family Portrait

Chris Barry, Australia

For those being borne across the world and translated by migration, writes Nikos Papastergiadis, the state of exile offers the freedom of modernity—mobility, transplantation, reinvention and the desired break from traditions, whilst, simultaneously, yearning and desiring precisely the thing that was lost—the home or *heimat*—the place of ancestors, traditions and the specificities of culture—where memory and meaning is articulated and where the self is formed.

The polarity between ‘traditional’ home as place of integration and conformity (attachment) and ‘modernity’, the place of self-expression, freedom, and self-determination (dis-attachment), defines the symbiotic relationship between ‘home’ and ‘exile’: the permanence of home and the desire to journey away from it (Papastergiadis 1998, p.9). Modernity becomes a condition of exile characterised and located within its dis-attachment to a fixed place. Modernity frames identity and one’s relationship to homeland as fragmentary and partial, broken off, or broken away from knowable traditional societies. Anthony Giddens describes these societies as places where, “the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations” (Giddens 1990, p.37). Migration, then, appears to be a process of grafting identities onto new locations and one in which the symbiotic tensions between ‘belonging’ and ‘displacement’ are performed continuously.

For the exile or immigrant, the photograph acts as both icon and narrative. It supplants oral histories, personal narratives and places of belonging. The circulation of photographs

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links and binds familial relationships across space and time. It works towards the construction of self and the articulation of that belonging. Photographs perform imaginative returning(s) to those places, communities and families left behind or extinguished – ‘imaginary homelands’ drawn into present-day itineraries and contemporary lives.

The potential for photography is not only to commemorate this loss of homeland or heimat, but also to transform it. It allows for the re-imagining and re-imagining of new places of belonging and the production of new relationships to the past. Photography, then, is deployed in the act of reconstituting relationships, both in the past and in the present, and redefining possible futures. It becomes an affective agent in the act of reparation and reclamation—potentially rewriting familial narratives and reinventing private lives.

These photographs, then, not only exist as an archive of fragmented, disembodied, partial images, but equally, of incomplete, ill-sorted, isolated texts—where missing parts are left to one’s imagination. This past is colonised by missing family members, partial histories, unfinished sentences, gaps, and vacancies. This contemporary present continues to articulate ‘the violence of migration’ and the subsequent ‘violent’ integration into another cultural schema and life world (Papastergiadis, 1998). Where the larger questions of identity, history, nation and memory are played out within inter-generational narratives and post-memory inventions.

Displaced Objects (1986/96), a series of 15 photographic works, is the re-assorted and re-assembled fragments of my own familial stories of forced exile, internment camps, Siberian gulags, Polish concentration camps and human redistribution centres for ‘displaced persons’. These histories of displacement not only reconstitute the ‘imaginary homelands’ of the exile, but, more so, historically charts my own ‘dubious (familial) cartography’ whilst equally positing ‘the dubious cartographies’ of Australian identity and Australian contemporaneity.

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Cargo

From the series: *Displaced Objects 1986/96*

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On p. 116 of this issue:

Untitled (Synonymous)

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Postscript

From the series: *Displaced Objects 1986/96*

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