



Ann Shelton, *Blue Room*. Two channel, HD digital video, colour, 16:9, channel 1, 24min 17sec and channel 2, 1min 9sec, continuous loops, Blu-ray, 2013

Contested narratives

Ann Shelton explores the twilight zone between documentary and fiction, and photography's potential to challenge the singularity of historical narratives. Virginia Were reports.

With four exhibitions in four cities in the offing – one of them a solo at the Sarjeant in Whanganui, another an off-site project at the Govett-Brewster – Ann Shelton has the wind in her sails. Although these projects all invoke past historical events, representing the sites, architecture and objects associated with forgotten or traumatic episodes, they're utterly contemporary and relevant to some of the most contentious debates being played out in the world today.

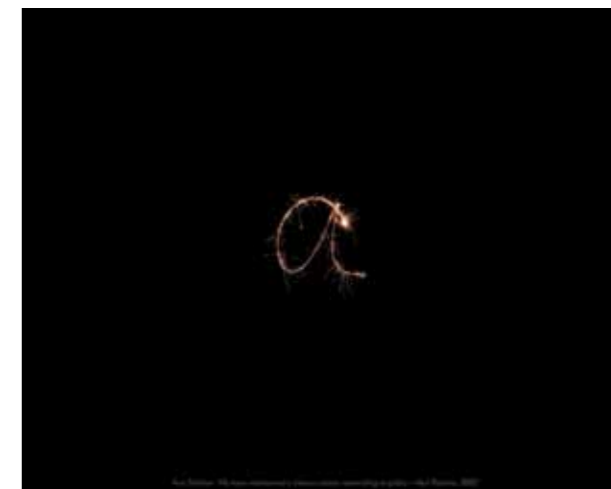
During her recent residency at Tylee Cottage in Whanganui, Wellington-based Shelton honed in on two events, which focused her research and formed the basis for the exhibition, *The City of Gold and Lead*, at the Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua. The exhibition looks at the contentious role and eventual demise of the 'Wanganui Computer' – a major symbol of New Zealand's right wing conservatism at the time, and of the Muldoon era. Commissioned in 1976, the computer allowed Police, Land Transport and Justice Departments to share information for the first time. For nearly 30 years it gathered the personal details of hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders and was hugely controversial when it began and continued to attract ill will during its operation. On 18 November 1982, 22-year-old punk anarchist Neil Roberts attempted to blow up the computer, detonating six sticks of gelignite outside the entrance to the building that housed it. Although the large explosion caused extensive damage to the foyer, police claimed the computer system continued to operate unimpeded. Roberts, however, was killed instantly by the large blast. Shortly before the bombing he spray-painted a message

on the wall of a public toilet in nearby Moutoa Gardens: "We Have Maintained a Silence Closely Resembling Stupidity".

At the time the media reported this event as the act of a 'misguided youth' rather than an extreme political act and a protest against the increasing mood of despair in the country at a time when unemployment was disturbingly high and the conflict that divided the country during the 1981 Springbok Tour was still fresh in people's memories. Roberts had tapped into the public ill feeling towards the computer, which was nick named "Big Brother". Aptly, the exhibition's title, *The City of Gold and Lead*, comes from a children's science fiction series, *The Tripods*, in which machines known as "the masters" control people.

In Shelton's Govett-Brewster project, *doublethink*, which is an adjunct project to the Whanganui exhibition, she will install roadside posters around the Taranaki region. These will show Roberts' graffiti-ed phrase, which Shelton rewrote in the night sky with sparklers on the 30th anniversary of the bombing. The phrase comes from a revolutionary proclamation of the Junta Tuitiva in La Paz (now in Bolivia), South America's first independent government, installed briefly in 1809.

Shelton's decision to re-examine Roberts' words in a new context seems timely, given the heat of current debates about privacy rights. The show seems incredibly well timed as the debate about governments' surveillance of citizens continues in the wake of the Kim Dotcom saga, and the questions it raised about the powers of New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau.



Ann Shelton, *Anniversary*, "We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity" Neil Roberts 1982, eight pigment prints, 755 x 604mm each, 2013. For the off-site project *doublethink*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery 2013, and *The City of Gold and Lead*, Sarjeant Art Gallery 2013



Left: Ann Shelton, From the project *Holland Street, Adam & Eve Court* (former site of 19th Century water pump), London, pigment print 975mm x 2595mm. 2011/2013

restored until 1985. No mention of him or his considerable services to Whanganui appeared in any local history for the next 50 years. Historians now believe it is possible that Mackay was 'set up' by his detractors, who wanted to oust him from the mayoralty.

Shelton has an ongoing interest in the way historical narratives are constructed and the subjectivity of that process. In *The City of Gold and Lead* she takes a tangential approach to the main events, focusing for instance on the removal of Mackay's name from the gallery's foundation stone. In her piece *Golden Dawn*, which physically re-inscribes Mackay's name in gold onto the stone, Shelton alerts us to the act of 'erasure' that occurred, and importantly, to the instability of the social, political and historical contexts that inform our understanding of particular sites and objects.

This is re-enacted in one of two videos shown back to back in the middle of the exhibition space. One shows a hand repeatedly writing and then erasing Mackay's name and mayoral title. The other is a chilly blue image, which looks like a negative, showing Mackay's former office – where he shot Cresswell. In this empty room nothing moves except the light creeping almost imperceptibly across the walls and floor and the bush outside the window.

Shelton describes her visual methodology of pairing, reversing and inverting identical images as a form of "visual stammering" – something she does to alert us to photography's inherent subjectivity, to jolt our trust in the photograph as a reliable document. She seems to be telling us we should distrust the veracity of the image as much as we need to question the truth and singularity of accepted historical narratives.

In the past Shelton has often used site as a way to talk about a narrative. In *The City of Gold and Lead* she has instead

The other traumatic event underpinning the exhibition concerns the controversial figure, Charles Mackay, the energetic Mayor of Whanganui from 1906 to 1913 and again from 1915 to 1920. He was responsible for much of the town's development at the time, and his main project from 1915 was the construction of the Sarjeant Gallery.

Mackay's life changed dramatically after meeting the writer D'Arcy Cresswell on 10 May 1920. The two men became friendly and met on several occasions, and after an argument at Mackay's office, Mackay shot and seriously wounded Cresswell. It was later alleged that Mackay had made homosexual advances to Cresswell, who then attempted to extract a letter of confession and resignation from the mayor. Mackay was arrested, charged with attempted murder and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. His wife divorced him, the street called after him had its name changed, and his name was removed from the foundation stone of the Sarjeant Gallery and not



Ann Shelton, *Rhodophyta*, A view across the Rangitata River Valley to Erewhon Station, from Mesopotamia Station, Te Wai Pounamu, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Single channel, HD digital video and sound, colour, 16:9, continuous loops, Blu-ray, 2013

focused on objects, which appear 'mute', unremarkable and even boring when seen out of context. We see an isolated computer part, a collection of platinum and palladium (precious metals salvaged from the computer) and a floppy disk or two.

The two central figures, Roberts and Mackay, are notably absent – and to counter this, there will be an accompanying publication, fleshing out the complex historical narratives within the exhibition.

Although the two separate events seem unconnected and are widely separated in time, Shelton teases out the links between them and the way the narratives surrounding them have changed over the years.

It's not surprising to learn that she started out as a photojournalist working for daily newspapers, and then decided to become an artist because she wanted more control over how her photographs were used. Since then her work has mined the rich terrain between reality and fiction, and between journalism and art.

Shelton also has two works in the group exhibition, *AMONG THE MACHINES*, at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, which explores the long-term concerns of ecology alongside the hopefulness of utopian thought. Her work *Rhodophyta* is a large-scale projection of a photograph of the Southern Alps – with a red wash of light moving very slowly across it. "You could see this light as an LED, a reference to a machine or some kind of dark weather event," she says. The photograph was taken from Mesopotamia Station looking across the valley to Erewhon Station – the region Samuel Butler is assumed to have been thinking about when he wrote his dystopic 1872 novel, satirising Victorian society, machines and the environment. Shelton's work imagines a place that is a fiction and then inscribes it into a real place.

Meanwhile, in Wellington, she will install a series of photographs in eight of the council's 16 light boxes on Courtenay Place. Titled *Holland Street*, the project is a two-person show featuring Shelton and Sarah Caylor, a PhD student at Victoria University's School of Design, who has designed the other eight panels. *Holland Street* looks at two 19th century events, London's cholera outbreak in 1854 and Wellington's typhoid epidemic in 1890–2.

When Shelton was in London in 2011 she became interested in the 19th-century physician John Snow who's considered the father of modern epidemiology. In those days people believed cholera was spread by 'miasma' or foul air, but Snow was skeptical about this theory. Using a Voronoi diagram he was able to illustrate the cluster of cholera cases around particular wells and pumps in Central London, making a strong case for the first time that cholera is a water-borne disease.

While researching the typhoid outbreak in Wellington, Shelton and Caylor discovered a 'disease' map with a very strong resemblance to Snow's cholera map. In *Holland Street* Shelton's photographs of the cholera sites in London are overlaid with dots indicating the typhoid deaths in Wellington. The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication with an essay by Caylor, who is studying the 'cultural history of faeces' as part of her PhD.



Ann Shelton. Photo: Nina Van Der Voorn

By looking at these largely forgotten, dramatic historical narratives Shelton is able to shed light on how our understanding of these events has shifted over time and how the issues surrounding them continue to resonate in the present moment. Her modes of visual representation – pairing, inverting and doubling images – are a way of underlining not only the unreliability of the image as a document, but also the subjectivity of history and the way fact and fiction overlap. Often we can't distinguish between the two as narratives circulate and develop a life of their own – repeatedly filtered through media, books, art and film.

The City of Gold and Lead, Sarjeant Gallery, until 3 November 2013; doublethink, *New Plymouth environs*, 28 September 2013 to 26 January, 2014; *AMONG THE MACHINES*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, until 3 November 2013; *Holland Street*, Courtenay Place Lightboxes in Wellington, 15 August to 1 December 2013.



Ann Shelton, *Heavy Metal #3*, Palladium, recovered scrap metal from the remains of the decommissioned Wanganui Computer, pigment print 604 x 755mm, 2013