The Dark Light: The Matter of Ann Shelton's Art

Zara Stanhope

Ann Shelton's practice began in the 1990s and coincides with the most extensive period of questioning about the nature of photography. The move from analogue to digital technology and the rise of online modes of storing, sharing and viewing photos has been accompanied by sustained discussion on the ontology of the medium.[1] Photography's physical tools and processes, and their evolution across plate and film, form a distinct material history up until the arrival of the digital. The consequent dematerialisation of photography[2] has a parallel in dark matter – the proposition that an unidentified type of matter composed of mass and energy which remains a mystery to research is holding the universe together – that I will return to. No longer solely window, mirror, record or index, the strangeness of photography which continues to be highlighted in the critical literature indicates the many questions around the medium in this post-photographic moment.

Situated in this context, Shelton's practice is deeply interconnected with the concern for an ongoing unfolding of understanding. Her work explores presence and absence, and the rational and irrational or conceptual and real, in a range of ways. Different bodies of work in her oeuvre explore aspects of being, connecting the visceral body with its literary, filmic and other recountings, while reflecting the unfinished becoming of photography.

As a being itself, even a strange one, photography can be interpreted as having natural traits. It can see, perform, be silent and blind, repetitive, violent, wrong and be ascribed a range of social and cultural behaviours. Shelton has always been concerned with human subjects, both the I and the Other. This essay looks into the substance of her work, at the dark matter of images that signal the presence of agential subjects, seen and unseen, and at the infrathin[3] trace or viewing journey between the physical photograph and its connection with the enigmatic social body.

The Document

In an age of selfies, encouraged by high-resolution phone cameras and social media, the photograph as evidence, and its fallibility in terms of truth, remains overt. The history of the photograph as document is as old as the medium itself. Nevertheless, photo-documentary practice in art and the later convention of the modern photographer as an autonomous eye were notably ruptured in the late 1960s and 70s with Conceptual art's inquisition of the image's embeddedness in modes of power. Conceptual practices taking the form of seemingly direct, serial images, such as Ed Rucha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, which appeared as a self-published book, or Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, 1965–70, also conceived for the printed page, blurred the definitions between art, art history and popular media. Other conceptual photo works of this period that foregrounded the mediation of the camera – for instance, Robert Barry's *Reflections* series, 1975, which comprised texts with slides and transparencies in a circular format, or addressed the politics of the context (think of Allan Sekula's *Untitled Slide Sequence*, 1972, of employees leaving a factory, Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 1974–5, or Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971) – provide a

1 This discussion includes: David Campany, 'Conceptual Art History, or, A Home for "Homes for America"', in **Rewriting Conceptual Art**, eds Michael Newman and Jon Bird, Reaktion Books, London, 1999; Ariella Azoulay, **Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography**, Verso, London/New York, 2012; John Roberts, **Photography and its Violations,** Columbia University Press, New York, 2014; Kaja Silverman, **The Miracle of Analogy, Or The History of Photography, Part 1,** Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2015; and on photography and affect: Margaret Olin, **Touching Photographs,** University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL/London, 2012; Shawn Michelle Smith, **At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen,** Duke University Press, Durham NC/London, 2013, and **Feeling Photography,** eds Elspeth H Brown and Thy Phu, Duke University Press, Durham NC/London, 2014.

2 Claire Bishop understood the arrival of the digital to potentially mean the de-authoring if not obsolescence of art photography, see Claire Bishop, 'Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media', **Artforum**, September 2012, and Claire Bishop, 'Sweeping, Dumb, and Aggressively Ignorant! Revisiting "Digital Divide"', in **Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century**, eds Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter, MIT Press, Cambridge MA/London, 2015, pp 353–6.

3 The infrathin or *infra-mince* refers to an interval or nuance that separates material objects and dimensions that implies a becoming, with an emphasis on the sensorial as well as concepts of presence and absence, playfully coined by Marcel Duchamp: Marcel Duchamp, **Notes**, intro Paul Matisse, preface Pontus Hulten, Flammarion, Paris, 1999, pp 19–36; Marcel Duchamp, **Notes**, trans Paul Matisse, preface Anne d'Harnoncourt, G K Hall, Boston MA, 1983, unpaginated.

legacy for the continued investigation of the photograph as witness while acknowledging the medium's complicity in the systems and institutions under critique.

The largely unseen *technologies of the self (remote self-portraits)*, 1995–2003, of Shelton photographed by others at her invitation signals a shift made by the artist to work against the power relations of photojournalism. Her interest in the social and relational nature of photography in the early 1990s followed work as a press photographer on *The Dominion* and *Oamaru Mail*. The photojournalist's subject is situated as the Other: typically a victim, criminal, politician or luminary, and the image a transparent window on the truth that best illustrates the writer's story. Shelton pushed against and quickly abandoned the documentary and voyeuristic nature of news photography in which a disconnect between subject and viewer is intrinsic, the viewing position Martha Rosler described as: '*It is them, not us*.'[4] Shelton's large-scale black-and-white photographs of and interviews with street kids that showed their community connection, exhibited at The Dowse Art Museum,[5] were an important move toward a socially collaborative and cosmopolitan pictorial language concerned for an empathetic engagement with others.

Informed by ideas, including Susan Sontag's formative thinking about images as visual code in *On Photography*,[6] Shelton heeded Sontag's argument for an ethics of seeing involving the subject and the viewer, pursuing new directions by turning the camera on herself and her close and willing acquaintances. To me, her works made in Auckland in the mid-1990s demonstrate awareness of the implicated nature of the photographer and awareness of the risk of being a 'pseudo-ethnographer' who does not question her own authority.[7] The *technologies of the self (remote self-portraits)* and other works from the mid-1990s deploy ethics for reasons of charting change and mark the beginning of Shelton's engagement with the creative de-stabilisation of photography.[8] The images in *Redeye,* 1995–7, *Soft Spot*, 1995, and *my friends are electric*, 1997–2016,[9] place identity and personal politics at the fore as their subjects playfully perform for the camera and challenge the relationship between image, context and viewer.

4 Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)' in **Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001**, MIT Press, Cambridge MA/London, in association with the International Center of Photography, New York, 2004, p 179.

5 **Don't Push Me / Kaua au e [Puhinga]** at The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1993.

6 Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1977.

7 The artist ethnographer corrupts disciplinary methods while undertaking a 'mapping and essentialising [of] the other'. Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in **The Return of the Real, The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century**, MIT Press, Cambridge MA/London, 1996, p 185.

8 There are formal connections that can be made with the composition and chromatic range of these works – think of Bruce Nauman's **Self Portrait as a Fountain**, 1966–7, for example.

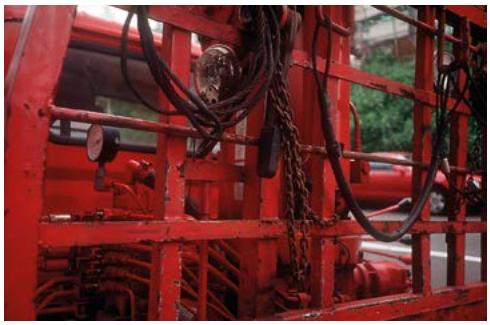
9 A further series that comprised a step in the masking of the figurative image depicted the backs of people's heads shot against the wall.

Don't Push Me / Kaua au e [Puhinga], installation view, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1993. Photo: Ann Shelton. Note: in the photograph below the Māori title is incorrect.

Soft Spot

1995, pigment prints,
297 × 420 mm (selected works).





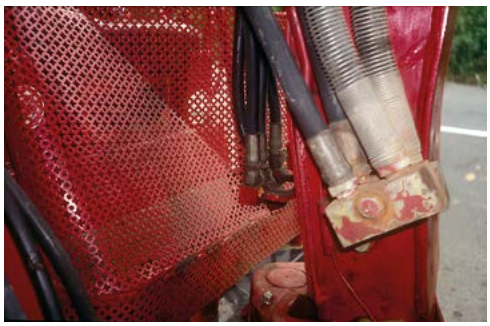




Marlboro

欲望、ジャマする



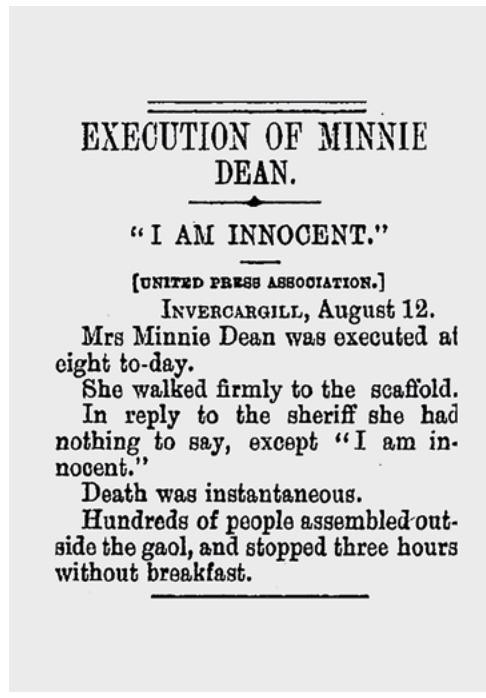



Salem
Salem
LIGHTS
KENT
Super Lights

At a time when the document had been replaced with overtly constructed and intertextual approaches to photography and psychoanalytic readings of art, Shelton's almost diaristic images privileged a humanity that is almost sociological, as well as a shared psychical engagement with a private social reality.[10] Alongside Sontag, magazines such as *Déjà vu* from Japan or *Camera Austria* and the pop culture favourites *Face* and *i-D*, Shelton's influences were wide ranging and international. These included any books she could access on photography and artists who engaged with the social, often with a snapshot aesthetic, such as the work of Larry Clark, Nan Goldin and Hiromix (Hiromi Toshikawa). Photography as a social document in modern New Zealand came out of a legacy connected with the politics of nationalism – for example, in the rise of the genre of colour photo books on the nation[11] – and continued to be important.[12] However, Shelton, like other artists of her generation, increasingly explored alternative ideas of the social body in contrast to candid investigations of citizenry, culture and the state.[13] The methods of 1960s and '70s conceptual photography, 1990s structuralism and examples of international photography remained foundational for Shelton's work as its focus turned to absence rather than visceral social reality.

Flipping and Twisting

K Hole, 2000, with its floor-based light boxes, seemed to do a flip, in moving away from 'actors' to a shared public reality and the act of the photograph itself. *K Hole* comprises two overhead views of a 'found' site, Karangahape Road in Auckland where the artist lived and which was the environment of her works from the mid-1990s. For at least one writer the image casts the viewer in the role of a rational, all-seeing subject:[14] the viewer has to physically engage to see these floor-based images but little apart from infrastructure can be discerned. The subjectivity of its viewing is a clue to the unsettling nature of the seemingly objective images. The work contains an ambiguity that is a type of dark matter, that of the uncanny which is situated in the heart of the familiar. *K Hole* and *A Girl in Every Port*, 1999, began to shift the relationship between photograph and viewer in Shelton's images in the imperative to recall or imagine collective and individual social behaviour related to sites. Her series of charged modernist interiors, *Abigail's Party*, 1999, added the evocation of female stereotypes that continued to be important for Shelton in its reference to Mike Leigh's 1977 play of the same name.[15]



EXECUTION OF MINNIE DEAN.

"I AM INNOCENT."

[UNITED PRESS ASSOCIATION.]

INVERCARGILL, August 12.

Mrs Minnie Dean was executed at eight to-day.

She walked firmly to the scaffold.

In reply to the sheriff she had nothing to say, except "I am innocent."

Death was instantaneous.

Hundreds of people assembled outside the gaol, and stopped three hours without breakfast.

10 Some of these works remain unexhibited.

11 This phenomenon was interrogated by Gavin Hipkins in the exhibition **Folklore: Photographs for a Local Tradition** for Artspace, Auckland, 1998.

12 The recent history of social documentary photography in New Zealand remains to be written and ranges across photographers who operated from the edges to those who were at the centre of their social participants in a search for personal and communal identity, and includes Peter Black, Les Cleveland, Marti Friedlander, Gil Hanly, John Miller, Robin Morrison, Max Oettli, Ans Westra and others.

13 For another direction in the repositioning of photography thought though citizenship see Ariella Azoulay, **The Civil Contract of Photography**, Zone Books, New York, 2008.

14 **K Hole** has been related to the 'invisible hand', or indiscernible market forces, a term coined by Adam Smith, in **The Theory of Moral Sentiments**, 1759, and repeated in **The Wealth of Nations**, 1776.

15 Leigh's **Abigail's Party** addressed social aspiration and was first performed at the Hampstead Theatre in London in April 1977. Later that year the BBC made a television version of the play.

16 Benjamin H D Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', **October**, 55, Winter 1990, pp 105–43.

17 David Green, 'Between Object and Image', **Creative Camera**, 340, Jun–Jul 1996, pp 8–13.

18 Shelton's research included sources such as Lynley Hood, **Minnie Dean: Her Life and Crimes**, Penguin, Auckland, 1994.

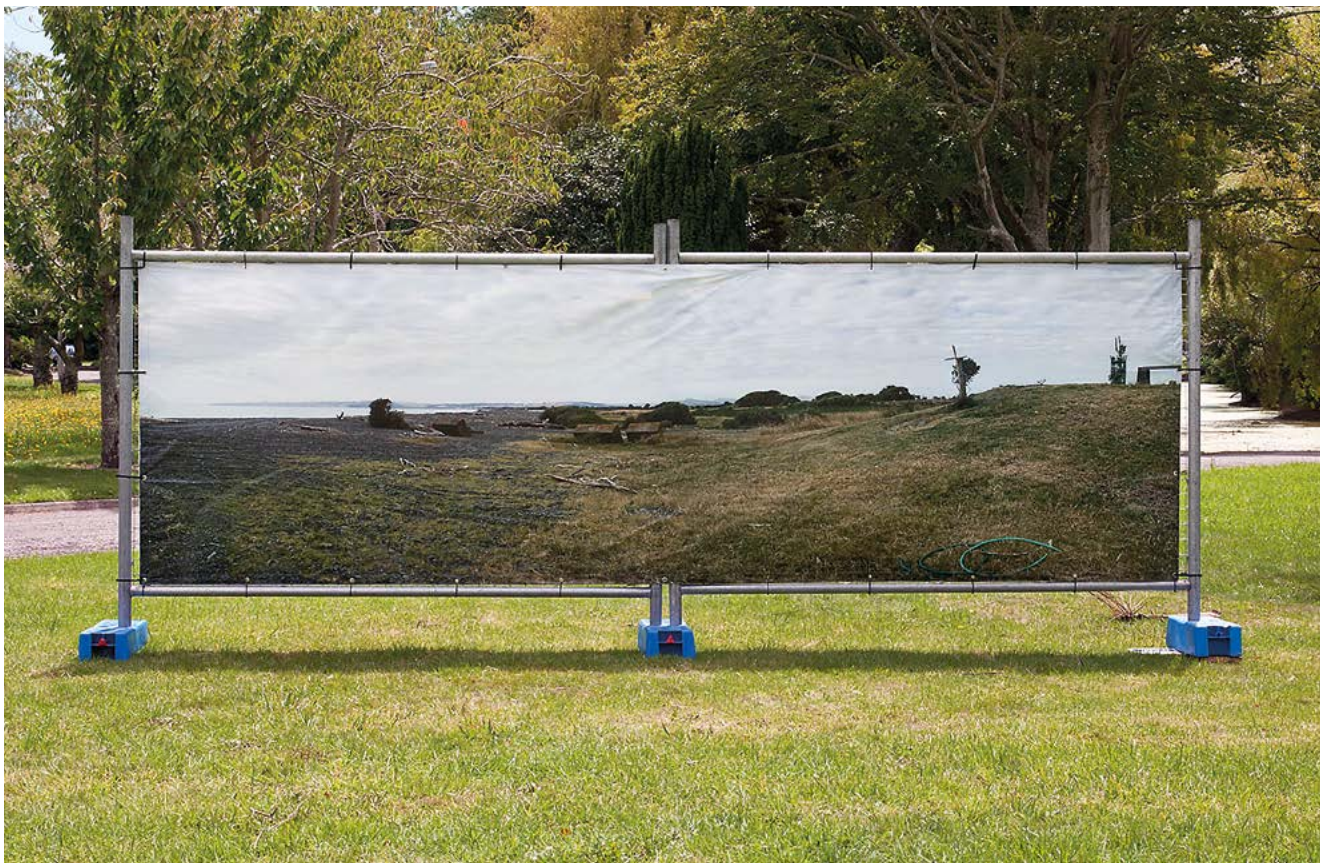
19 Published by Spiral, Wellington, 1983.

20 **Doublet (After Heavenly Creatures), Parker-Hulme crime scene Port Hills, Christchurch, New Zealand**, 2001; **Tracker (After Picnic at Hanging Rock), Hanging Rock, Australia**, 2002; **Laudanum, Minnie Dean's unmarked grave, Winton cemetery, Southland, New Zealand**, 2001 and **The Black Bach (After The Bone People), The Kaik, North Otago, New Zealand**, 2003.

21 Shelton's series **Erehwon**, 2002, pairings of images that reference her personal experience in Vancouver, are a bridge between the mid-1990s images of people and the works from **Public Places** onwards that draw on cultural and social histories. Note also the connection of Shelton's 2002 series with Samuel Butler's **Erewhon**, published in 1872, a Utopian novel that refers to his experiences in Canterbury.

'Minnie Dean', www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/minnie-dean, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 29 Oct 2015.

Execution of Minnie Dean, Marlborough Express, volume xxxi, issue 196, 12 August 1895.



(September 1, 1983), Awatoto Beach, gun emplacement, near the mouth of the Tutaekuri River, 2010. From the series **lost girls**. Installation view, *Campus A Low Hum*, Bulls, 2011.

Along with an interest in the representation of the female figure Shelton's work is distinguished by a knowing employment of formal properties. Perspective, sequencing, doubling or mirroring, scale, colour and titling are put to use as part of photography's mediation of the real. The conceptual photography of the late 1960s and 70s that responded to a distrust of representation and photography's use within regimes of control is a touchstone in Shelton's shared interest in social politics, the archival and narrative strategies of ambiguity and anonymity that create conditions such as the uncanny.[16] The objective, documentary tone of the large-scale work of the Düsseldorf School of Photography, which began at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the mid-1970s under the tuition of Bernd and Hilla Becher by artists including Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and others in the 1980s and 90s, is another point of reference for the rematerialisation of photography.[17] Gerhard Richter's photographs of landscapes or the Bechers' grids of images offer both affective and formal precedents that connect with the seeming objectivity of works like *K Hole* or *Public Places*, 2001–3.

Shelton's titles are elements that similarly draw on the history of conceptualism but reshape the deadpan or descriptive labels of Conceptual art. Titles are a portal to meaning, an entry point for deeper clarity around the images. The descriptions associated with *Public Places*, cue the social standing of the fatal figures, often 'monstrous women', who are the images' protagonists – the murderous Parker/Hulme duo, fictional lost girls, the lethal 'baby farmer' Minnie Dean[18] and the violence and isolation of postcolonial New Zealand endured by characters in Keri Hulme's novel *The Bone People*[19] – singled out by society for their difference.[20] In referring to the psychiatric hospital where Janet Frame was incarcerated, *Cell (After An Angel at My Table), Seacliff Asylum, North Otago, New Zealand*, 2003, implicates photography in medicine and its use in phrenology and physiognomy, which stereotyped women as hysterics and endured until the 1950s. The title (if trustworthy) adds a layer of information to the strangeness of an empty site and alludes to the time and place of the 'scene of the crime'.[21] This information generates an immediate recognition of a narrative but also caution about its truth within a movie or book, and curiosity as to the relation between personal and collective memory or fiction and to the

Terrace Gaol, Wellington. Daroux, Louis John, 1870-1948: **Photographs of New Zealand and the Pacific**. Ref: 1/1-039356-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22334927.

image as a record. The combination of image and title is the key to overturning expectations or assumptions for the self-reflective viewer.

Shelton also uses methods from Conceptual art to emphasise photography as a mutable being and one that relates to the viewer's body. She creates varied viewing relationships that modify a work's meaning. Works in series are reformed as grids or lines or sequences in galleries, published differently again in books (an important forum for the artist that allows the incorporation of research material) and online, seen as page works or mobilised in civic space.[22] For example, the *lost girls*, 2010 series, images of sites that are the last sightings of missing girls, were shown as temporary billboards in 2011. These display modes intentionally destabilise relationships within an already unsettled ontology.

With *Public Places*, Shelton initiated images that stand in for archived narratives, at times forgotten, and their representation. The ambiguity of the images refers to the fallibility of the record, whether institutional or popular, and the alterity of photography. This sense of dislocation is created partly through the mode of mirror imaging in the *Public Places* diptychs. A reminder of the focal operation of the eyes, the presentation of a diverging perspective however challenges and mobilises the viewing experience and the work's meaning.[23] Shelton describes the device of the space between the images as a point of release for memory. Other strategies include reversing photographs, seen in the images of Lake Alice Hospital in *once more from the street*, 2004, and *in a forest*, 2005–11.[24] The repetition of the subject disorientates and questions the nature of relativity between the images.

This unsettling of certainty or understanding operates across Shelton's oeuvre. In *Capital, execution site, formally The Terrace Goal, The Terrace, Te Aro, Wellington*, 2010, the almost fisheye-lens image invites the viewer to investigate the details of the site today, the location of a school.[25] The panoramic perspective of *lost girls* suggests televisual plots and their multifarious suspects and victims. Similarly, the sets of bookshelves of *a library to scale*, 2006, establish the conceit of the autodidact and an encyclopaedic eye, as if this private, home-made library could be absorbed at once, while the photographs reinforce the inaccessibility of the books' idiosyncratic contents. Finally, the connotation of a Claude glass in the seemingly

22 Shelton's image, **Big Head**, 1998, was commissioned by the Physics Room, Christchurch, for the back of a bus.

23 **Public Places** and other works connect with Roland Barthes' late writing on photography in which he considered reality to be a system of signs opened up by the conditions of the uncanny.

24 **in a forest** also utilises detailed titles to establish the meaning of the work.

25 The image is also printed in reverse and acts as a conceptual mirror.

convex images of *room room*, 2008, accentuates the voyeuristic, interiorised world of the inhabitants who previously occupied the Salvation Army rehabilitation facility on Auckland's Rotoroa Island during the 1990s and up until 2005. Shelton questions assumptions regarding the ethics of histories and the objecthood of photography by reconceiving the medium and its relation with the body in ways that expose the unfamiliar in the familiar and connect it with marginal subject positions and conditions.

Warm and Cold Facts

Offering other potential forms of understanding also questions the previous status of photography as a referent.[26] A different system of knowledge lies in Butler's eccentric categorisation of his more than 3500 volumes of clippings in *a library to scale*.[27] *Twenty six photographs of a house*, 2005–7, comprises a visual architectural and cultural timeline from the year 1930 until Shelton's shoot of a 75-year-old Arts and Crafts-style house designed by James Walter Chapman-Taylor. These works that show that things took place contrast others that turn on lost or buried information and require the viewer to look into divergent facts or recognise the shifting nature of information and material memory.

Images are often visual clues that lead to broader attitudes around forgetting, marginalisation or exclusion. Stimulated initially by understanding how versions of history reflect on a nation and a society, Shelton's process has involved undertaking research into documents and archives, rumours and myths, books and film, and tracing narratives to their sites. For example, *Laudanum, Minnie Dean's unmarked grave, Winton cemetery, Southland, New Zealand*, 2001, shows the cemetery where Minnie Dean lies. A labyrinth of questions now remain as to whether Dean, who proclaimed her innocence, was a killer – she was hanged in 1895 for giving a baby in her care an overdose of laudanum – or a scapegoat reflecting guilt attached to Victorian attitudes toward motherhood and high birth rates. Shelton's images trace the undocumented resting place of the only woman to have been hanged in New Zealand, due to a fatal conflict between morality and legality.[28]

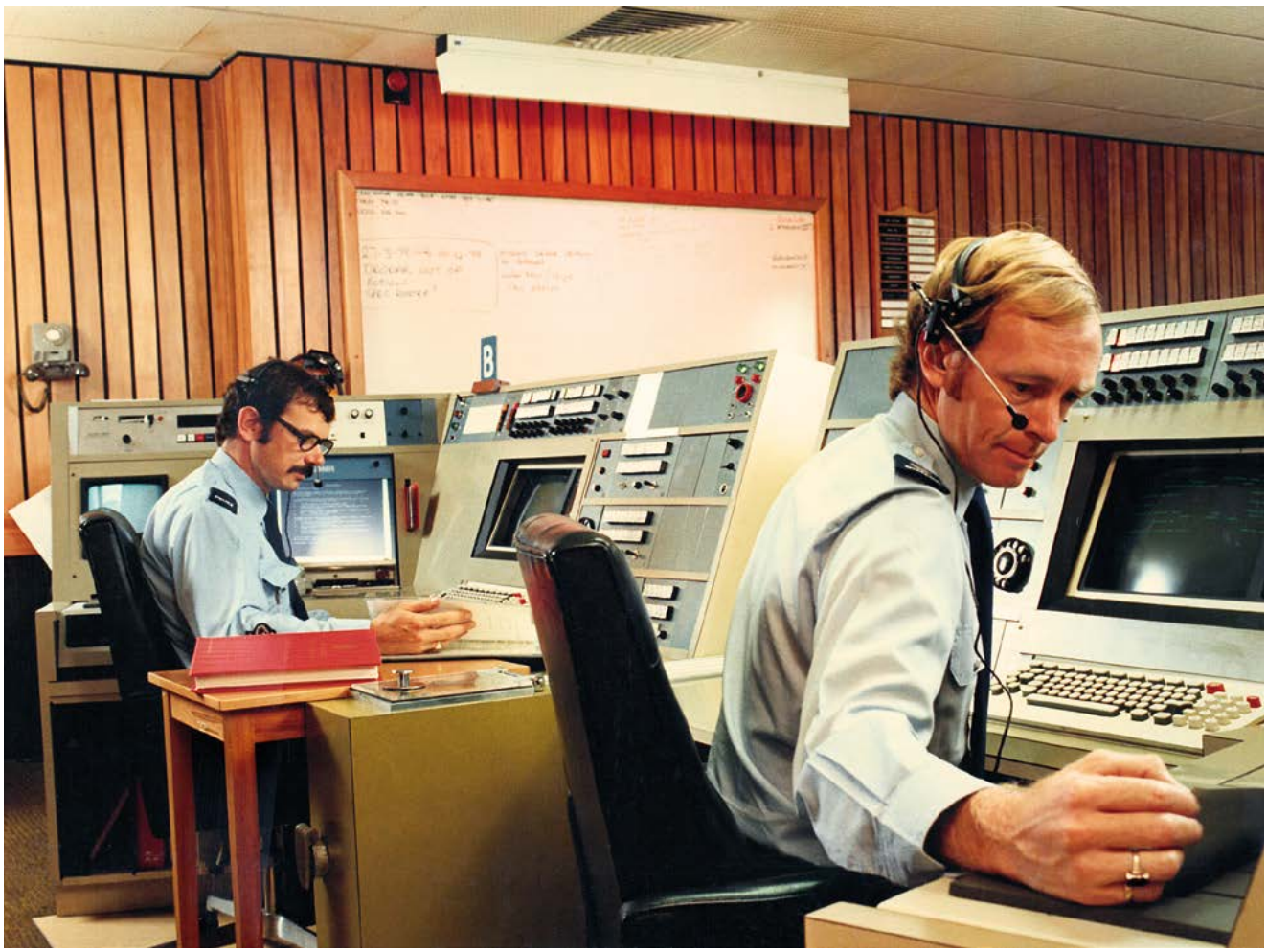
The telling or concealment of histories or events is as revealing as the stories themselves. And to whom they are communicated and how, as photographer Jeff Wall implies: '… the facts always exist in interdependence with your thinking, with your doctrine … Yet there are

26 'In the end photography seems to say (and to let this be dictated to itself): this took place, and it took place only once': Jacques Derrida, **Copy, Archive, Signature, A Conversation on Photography**, ed Gerhard Richter, trans Jeff Fort, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2010, p 3.

27 Frederick B Butler's library (held at Puki Ariki) comprised clippings from newspapers, categorised and pasted over pages of existing books that had been turned upside down and the covers wrapped with wallpaper.

28 Dean's grave has since been marked in a revisiting of this history.

Capital, execution site, formerly The Terrace Gaol, The Terrace, Te Aro, Wellington, 2010, pigment print, 850 × 1650 mm



Police staff accessing the 'Wanganui computer', Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection.

facts that exist independent of doctrine, cold facts.'[29] Shelton shows the contentious nature of the fact in *in a forest*. For this work she traced both hard evidence and local memories of the places of residence of winning athletes from the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. The resulting photographs of the oak trees grown from the seedlings awarded by Hitler's regime are imbued with the Nazi history of racial and moral supremacist beliefs that still haunts questions around memory in Germany.

Selected narratives often highlight how histories have been rewritten to suit the times. *Arena, Te Ngutu o te Manu, Beak of the Bird, South Taranaki*, 2004,[30] reflects the murky events during early Māori and Pākehā contact that still define cultural relations in New Zealand. *Arena* symbolises battles and appropriation, with the site being the unlocated resting place of the colourful Prussian-born Ferdinand von Tempsky, commander of British troops and mercenary solider. The place of his final battle in Taranaki is also connected by Shelton to the colonial history of child theft (on both sides), in this case the kidnapped Māori child Ngātau Omahuru, who was adopted by William Fox the premier of New Zealand, who named him William Fox.[31] *The city of gold and lead*, 2013, is similarly a compound of stories of erasure: Neil Roberts's attempted anarchic destruction of the 'Wanganui computer', or the National Law Enforcement System, and the overt erasing of the name of Whanganui's gay mayor Charles Mackay from the art museum's foundation stone as part of expunging him from local history after he shot and wounded his blackmailer in 1920.[32] *The city of gold and lead* becomes part of this narrative in showing material remains of the computer and Mackay's more recently re-engraved name on the foundation stone. What were once considered dark and murky histories and gaps in formal archives, in Shelton's hands are revisited to reveal the contingency of history through the accent of a subjective medium.

29 Jeff Wall, **Landscape Manual**, Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Colombia, Vancouver, 1970, p 41.

30 From the series **a kind of sleep**, 2004.

31 Peter Walker, **The Fox Boy,** Bloomsbury, London, 2001.

32 Shelton came to this story while investigating the Wanganui computer and disputed events in the same city, before settling on the logic of erasure that connects Roberts and MacKay.

Research into gendered histories, past and present, has been a constant in Shelton's socially imbricated practice since her visualisation of mutable identity in the 1990s works. Shelton's most recent body of work, *jane says*, 2015–16, signals a new research interest, this time into abortifacients, or plants (including iris, rue, stock, juniper, thistle, ferula and aloe) known or allegedly used by women as part of herbal contraceptive remedies or to end pregnancy.[33] *jane says* depicts still lifes that resemble ikebana which Shelton created and which feature plants found in abortifacient recipes and used for fertility control.[34] The resulting images use but exceed the critical distance of conceptualism and extend the engagement with questions of ethics, personal control and the ability of photography to convey meaning. As in other bodies of work, the cold, often indiscernible facts of histories are activated within the warmth of social knowledge and viewing subjectivity. In Shelton's hands, photography echoes the instability of the medium in its recent and no doubt future contexts. A dark matter, this work brings into the light a number of gaps, fictions and strange uncertainties that reinforce the unknown dark matter or that which we choose not to see. ■

The National Law Enforcement System's UNIVAC 1110 – the 'Wanganui computer', Whanganui Regional Museum Photographic Collection.

33 Shelton's sources include John M Riddle, **Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997; Margaret Sparrow, **Rough on Women: Abortion in 19th-century New Zealand**, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2014, and Margaret Sparrow, **Abortion Then and Now**, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2010. This folk knowledge becomes increasingly less viable and has been criminalised in some countries.

34 Where the exact plant required was unavailable or unclear Shelton used plants from the same genus. Urban myth and interpretation of local knowledge often inform Shelton's practice.

Following spread: **Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow** (detail). Curated by Stephanie Gibson. Copyright National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Photo: Kate Whitley.