Report: *Life After Wartime*:
A Suite of Multimedia Artworks

Kate Richards

Life After Wartime (*LAW*) is a suite of multimedia artworks that interrogate and respond to a database of archival crime scene images and texts. First exhibited in 1999, the suite currently comprises four screen-based interactives, two websites, a print exhibition, a live performance, and an immersive installation. It is documented at the website http://www.lifeafterwartime.com.

The *Life After Wartime* project was initiated when Australian curator Peter Emmett alerted historian *and* novelist and media artist Ross Gibson to the existence of a huge collection of crime scene photographs stored at the Justice and Police Museum in Sydney. There are an estimated 500,000 uncatalogued images in the collection, ranging from the late 1890s to the 1970s, most of them taken in Sydney. The photographic collection was salvaged from floods, relocation, and the duress of overwhelming police workloads before coming into the safekeeping of the Justice and Police Museum. As a result, the police and court reports explaining the cases have been lost. All that exists are the pictures plus some notes originally jotted on the envelopes containing the negatives. These notes include the name of the police photographer, the nature and location of the scene being investigated, and the date of the crime (Figure 1).

Before approaching me to work on the project, Gibson spent months sifting through the collection, letting the material "speak to him." He writes eloquently of the affective power of these photographs, their power to trigger an emotive, visceral response:

> Our Sydney pictures are as ordinary and wondrous as they are aweful. With their concussive stillness these images offer glimpses of lives you can almost remember. You can sense in these crime scenes a power that hums out of the past and makes an everyday city that is soulful and reverberant. A city with more blood and spirit than our perception usually lets us see. (Gibson, 1999, p. 1)

I began collaborating with Gibson on *Life After Wartime* in 1999 as a fellow artist and multimedia producer of the project. We work with a production team comprised of Aaron Seymour (graphic designer), Greg White (programmer), and Chris Abrahams (composer). In developing the project, our team became particularly intrigued by photos taken during the period 1945 to 1960. We created our own archive from within the larger collection by extracting several thousand

Kate Richards is an independent multimedia artist and producer/designer living in Sydney, Australia. She has worked extensively in the cultural sector and museum industry. E-mail: kate.richards@bigpond.com.

**Figure 1: Examples of the negatives and envelopes,
Crime Scene exhibition, 1999**
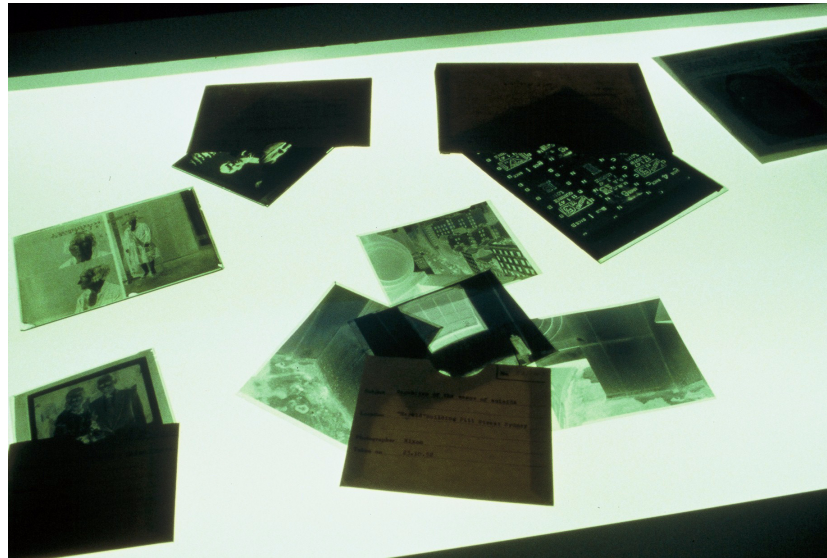
images and placing them in a database. The *Life After Wartime* database enables us to explore, group, manipulate, and create with the image/text data. Written in the accessible and simple environment of FileMaker Pro (FMP), the database stores the 3,000 images in our archive and the thousands of prosaic and poetic texts written by Gibson. Ultimately the database is a tool for finding patterns, signification, and flows within the collection as well as a pragmatic tool for tracking the large amounts of image/text content used in each *LAW* iteration.

Technically, the data is easy to export from FMP, in various formats, making it an ideal medium for use with other software environments, such as C++. The database enables us to experiment with tagging this rich set of image resources to assist us in locating images in our database. Our tags use a combination of metadata. The historical metadata used to tag photos contains the information police originally ascribed to the images. The prosaic interpretive metadata includes conventional descriptors of the images, such as shot size or its location. The interpretive descriptors refer to the emotional tone and describe the level of perceived narrativity in the images. We have assigned up to 25 metadata tags for each image. This database also allows us to track and change the ways in which the images and the texts are cross-ascribed in our different projects. Using the database and our system of tags, we can search and collate images and texts, and image/text combinations.

The crimes represented in our archive are metonymic and typify the aftermath of World War II that so informed our parents' lives, the society into which we were born, and our childhood consciousness. Thus the project title *Life After Wartime*. Although Australia was somewhat distant from the European theatres of

Figure 2: Bicycle accident, Bondi Road, 1952

war, the Pacific and Asian engagements were on our doorstep. At this time, Australia still had a strong orientation to the United Kingdom and Western Europe as "home," and thousands of Australians fought and served on all Allied fronts. World War II wrought both broad and subtle societal and economic changes in Sydney, itself a busy international port with its own violent nineteenth-century story. There was a shift in ideological, economic, and political allegiance from the "old world" U.K. to the "new world" U.S.A.; there was also an emphatic influx of displaced refugees and invited immigrants. The suburbs sprawled, and there was a developing consciousness of the greater, complex, and very dynamic world beyond the shores of the island continent, itself only recently formed as a federated country and in the midst of a very conservative, bigoted, and insulated era.

And of course the war affected Sydney on a micro scale: in the physical and psychic scars of the survivors, who brought their experiences and changed consciousness to the wealthy harbourside suburbs, the inner city, Chinatown, the industrial port areas, the garden suburbs, and to the edge of town. The city pulsed with emotions, scams, and unruly behaviour learned during the war—refusals of staid civility. The photographs of this turbulent period chosen for our database cover about 300 crimes, ranging from drug use, autoeroticism, murder, sexual assault, and car accidents to bestiality, suicide, train derailment, and robbery.

During this postwar period, as forensic photography was beginning to focus on crime scenes rather than portraits of victims and criminals, and before it

Figure 3: Murder, Balmain, 1959

became formulaic, there was a necessary period of experimentation, of testing the graphic, aesthetic, and evidentiary powers of photography. The forensic detectives who took these photos, first arrivals on the scene and master semioticians, used their intuition, experience, and technical ingenuity to document and interpret the site, to uncover the vestiges of a mean or desperate act, to map the collisions of force, passion, folly, and desperation at the root of a crime. In interviews with surviving detectives, they described moving into the space from perimeter to interior, to collect physical evidence and take photographs as they went. In this way the detectives were creating a speculative re-presentation of their first intuitive response to the crime scene. What has happened here? What is significant? What traces remain? How is the place speaking to us? What forces were active here; how have they left their mark? These original photographs constituted an analogue dataset that the detectives would work with for months or years—interrogating, recombining, re-examining the images and the evidence until they presented the case in court. A scene could be covered by as few as two images or as many as 25.

The images were all taken by forensic detectives in Sydney, many of them ex-servicemen previously engaged in technical, "visionary" work as radar operators, gunsight adjusters, mapmakers, and air traffic controllers. They brought with them a military attitude to photographing the space of a crime scene and an understanding of territory in terms of external threat and internal security. A chaotic crime scene was to be scrutinized, decoded, and brought back to law and order.

Figure 4: Murder, Balmain, 1959

Interestingly, the ideal method was to shoot the photos without shadows and with a very great depth of field, to show as much detail as possible and to produce technically "objective" images, without internal emphasis created by lens or shadow (Figure 2). On the one hand, the resulting photographs are often architecturally theatrical and evocative of classical cinematic conventions; on the other, the multiplicity of photographs of the same scene break cinematic rules that seek to construct an emotionally coherent diegetic space. As data to be used in a court of law and to guide an investigation, they act as coordinates in a set of ever-fluctuating circumstances. The resulting perspectives in the photographs are complex and heterological—open to interpretation—and thus without any hegemonic meaning as singular images.

As the abstract *space* is photographed, becoming a specific *place,* the detectives create an anamorphic record of multiple and shifting points of view of the scene. This process of anamorphosis, of embodied vision in which the point of view is always shifting, requires vision and thought to issue from an active body, rather than a disembodied, distanced, and monocular "eye/I." It operates from a basis that is arguably corporeal. This corporeality was very appropriate, considering the material they were working with, these detectives as data-collectors. Their senses on high alert, and at each moment reinterpreting what has already been seen or collected, the detectives are mobile, embodied, performative agents acting in the real world of objects (Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5).

Figure 5: Murder, Balmain, 1959

The resulting visual anamorphosis helps us to understand subjectivity as a dynamic condition. The innate shifting subjectivities in the photographic crime scenes also translate well into digital aesthetics. This proliferation of images of the same scene from multiple points of view has informed our design strategies for *Life After Wartime* in terms of how people interface with virtual environments and engage with interactive storytelling.

Because we don't know the "back story" to the crimes, the stories or circumstances of the victims and perpetrators are also unknown to us. Even the eventual legal definition of the crime is uncertain—for the notes on these envelopes represent only the *initial* speculation of the forensic detectives (Figure 6). We could have cross-referenced the crimes with newspaper reports to fill in this background, and indeed we did ask some of the retired detectives when we interviewed them. But for us, as media artists, this is one of the main attractions of the collection: we are intrigued by the nature of the photos as open texts. As Gibson has written: "We have nothing conclusive to tell about these pictures. But their richness, verging on sacredness, still shines through. Because they prompt speculation about a vast and vital range of human issues, we are compelled to come up with stories for them" (Gibson, 1999, p.2). Instead of attempting to tell audiences what really happened, to fix a narrative truth, Gibson has penned approximately 1,500 original short fictions in response to his background historical research for *Life After Wartime*.

Figure 6: Typical envelope used for storing the negatives for each crime

There are five overlapping projects within the *LAW* suite. Although each project utilizes different computational, metamorphic, and design strategies to prompt specific user response, all projects in the suite exhibit principles of emergent behaviours so that complex narrative, aesthetic, and semantic patterns emerge out of simple rules and an intuitively accessible interface. *The Life After Wartime* CD-ROM is the parent project: it is a story engine that encourages the player to choose images and their ascribed texts. The choices made by the player influence the consequent flow of images and texts, using a fuzzy logic of ascription, attraction, and repulsion. Loosely woven around 12 fictional characters and locations in an unnamed portside city just after World War II are two scenes, between which the player moves at will. The first scene is conceived of as a haunting—the images are seemingly random and come at you from the darkness. Users are enticed to choose and rack up images as they stipple in the darkness, working on some intuitive logic. Which image appeals? Which is significant? After three choices are made, the image sequence automatically plays, accompanied by Gibson's short written texts that were ascribed to the images (Figure 7).

We have created a simple story engine called Darkness Loiters for this purpose. Designed for group exhibitions, where visitors may spend only a short amount of time with each artwork, Darkness Loiters can generate an almost infinite array of sequences, and people have been known to play it for hours in a gallery. Moving to the second scene of the *LAW* CD-ROM, the user sees how their intuitive choices in the first section have informed the construction of a web of characters and locations. Stories, interwoven and inconclusive, are unfolding. The

Figure 7: Screen capture from *Life After Wartime* CD-ROM, first scene

Static electricity sparking on chilled skin.
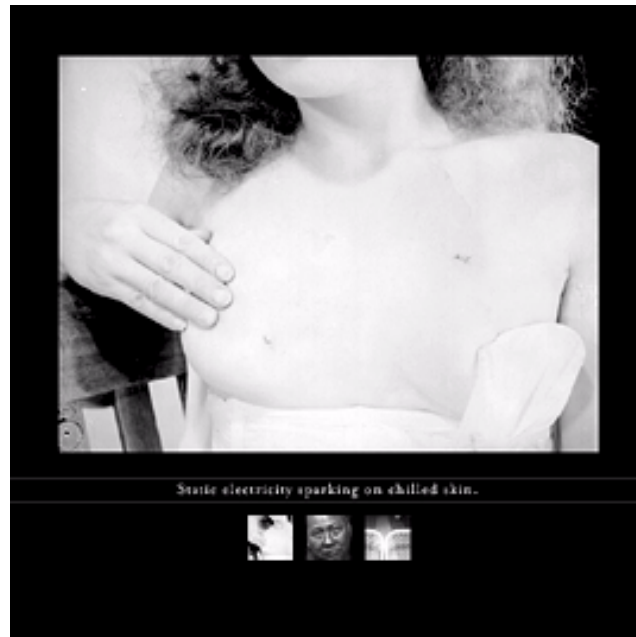
player is building up their version of an open meta-narrative. There is no final narrative resolution or closure as each player constructs their own version of the meta-narrative by the sequences they create through the images that they choose. Returning to the first scene, however, the player begins to see patterns and trends in their choices.

Crime Scene, another of the five projects in the *LAW* suite, is an exhibition of approximately 100 prints from the collection. It also includes a mini database of images and research texts and a generative soundscape. There are two distinct spaces within the exhibition. The main part of the gallery, which displays the photographs, is painted black to convey a feeling similar to that of being at a crime scene. As spectators walk round the room, texts by Gibson, printed as glossy vinyl letters, are revealed against the matt black walls (Figure 8).

A smaller space in the gallery houses the interactive displays, including an interactive touch screen I produced from several hours of oral histories in which some of the detectives talk about methodologies, specific cases, their careers, and the personal impact of their detective work on their lives and their families. This space serves a different purpose from the first. If the first space is meant to elicit an intuitive response to elements taken from the original crime scene, the second part of the installation is more akin to the detective's office, where these first responses would be subjected to a more rigorous analysis (Figure 9).

**Figure 8: Main gallery, Crime Scene exhibition,
Justice and Police Museum, Sydney, 1999**

To supplement this original material we created an online portal to about six contemporary forensic websites. This is no longer online, but it provided an effective contrast with the culture and processes of postwar forensics. Of course, today there is extensive use of 3-D modelling in crime re-creation, and the industry is partly private sector, at least in North America. Crime Scene has been visited by thousands and has been continuously on display in various locations since 1999.

Another element in the *Life After Wartime* suite is a performance that features images and texts from our database in a synaesthetic relationship to the minimalist jazz music of a group called *The Necks*. The performance combines an intuitive interplay between improvised storytelling and *The Necks'* hypnotic, improvised musical compositions to explore the formalist riddle of synaesthesia—how can aesthetic principles mysteriously and productively migrate from one medium to another? While this has been of interest in the West for years and is fundamental to many devotional improvisation traditions in the East, modern computational processes enable us to apply musical theories to live, visual sequencing and minimalist storytelling (Figure 10). This version of *LAW* uses VJ software with midi keyboard interfaces, enabling us to follow intuitively any of the narrative threads organized in the database, seeking out a larger cohesion that allows the work to hold form. At each performance, rhythm, pacing, aesthetic structure, and narrative emphasis evolved differently across the 90-minute duration of the performance.

Bystander, the most recent work in the suite, is an immersive multichannel installation finished in early 2006. Using an authoring environment of Max MSP and C++, we are specifically exploring emergent ecologies of narrative and aes-

**Figure 9: Screen shot from a database of images produced for the Crime
Scene exhibition, Justice and Police Museum, Sydney, 1999**
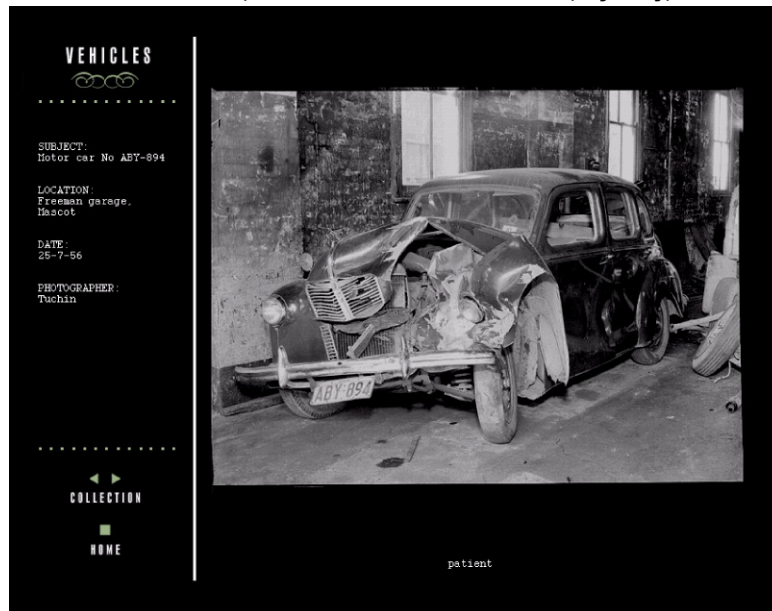
thetic behaviours. The installation features a seven-metre-wide pentagonal room
comprised of five projection screens and surround-sound audio that visitors enter
—up to 12 at once (Figure 11). All round them, a spirit world of images, texts, and
sound gets composed in response to their movement, mass, and attentiveness. The
room is a kind of performative story-generator. Depending on the behaviour of
visitors, a variable and volatile world of audiovisual narrative evolves endlessly
but cogently.

For the visitor, Bystander comprises three elements. The most kinaesthetic
element is a "flock" of constantly moving animated particles that appear on the
inside walls of the pentagonal installation. It responds to audience data very
quickly, becoming more agitated, compressed, and erratic as the audience is dis-
turbed, jittery, or moving. When the audience is quiet, the flock moves closer to
them, loosens up, and slows down somewhat. The second elements are the texts
and image clusters that the flock "reveals" as it traverses the virtual space
(Figure 12).

Audience data determines the images, texts, and their combination
(Figure 13). The third component of Bystander is audio generated from the pre-
programmed atmospheric tracks that are triggered by the spatial data derived from
audience movement in the installation. Music punctuates each cluster of images/
texts.

**Figure 10: Still from *Life After Wartime Live* with *The Necks*,
Sydney Opera House, February 2003**

**Figure 11: Still from Bystander 3-D animated model**

Figure 12: Screen capture direct from Bystander software

The central premise of Bystander is that it becomes more aesthetically coherent and semantically revealing as the audience becomes more quiet and attentive. Ideally visitors gain the "trust" of the space and perform a slow dance of intimacy within the installation matrix of image, text, and sound.

The primary emphasis in the *LAW* suite is not on signification, or meaning, but on the provocation of an affective, emotive sensory response from our audience to these materials. As a complex evolving project in constant mutation, *Life After Wartime* demonstrates a very contemporary shift from territorial, tangible, and object-oriented museology to an interactive ecology of flux, emergent behaviours, and the experience of disturbance. This shift from object-oriented museology to interactive ecology is enabled by the flexibility of digital data to be imprinted in different forms.

Figure 13: Screen capture direct from Bystander software
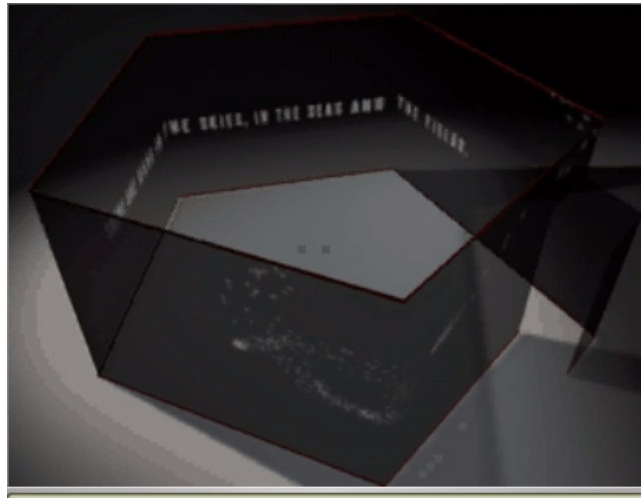
As an ongoing series of interrogative responses to the images, the texts, and hundreds of sound files, the *Life After Wartime* project harnesses the innate potential of the archive as a digitally encoded database. We understand data as abstract and ethereal. Like Derrida's take on writing, data is less an imprint *of* something than the principle of "being imprinted" (Derrida, 1976, p. 63). As Ann Finnegan explains, "The capacity for 'being-imprinted' is a variable" (Finnegan, 2002, p. 21) and can be mapped and configured across two, three, or four dimensions. Data, understood as "non-matter," can be manipulated, folded, compressed, expanded; its flow can be animated, made to swarm, flock, stagger, be still, disperse, and remass.

Freed from the constraints of the analogue archive, digital data can be mapped onto anything with the potential for being inscribed or imprinted. Treated as variable data, our archival material only has a tangential, mimetic relationship to the subject that was recorded and quantified at the initial moment of data collection. The data mass can behave as one but will also be comprised of its molecular components, each exhibiting its own behaviour in interaction with all of the elements that have been put into play at a given moment when it is used. Thus the capacity for emergence—pattern formation, recursive effect, complex and unexpected behaviours, densities and sparseness—are generated from a few simple rules both extracted from and applied to the data/photos.

In bringing these previously "lost" archival images into the public domain digitally, *Life After Wartime* recaptures a startling record of life, death, and folly, reflecting a period of great turmoil, repressed yearnings, and violent outbursts. It attempts to understand the deeper spiritual and metaphysical aspects of a traumatized society. This is, potentially, one of the humanizing aspects of the project: to meditate on and create art from the history of this unruly almanac. To do so is to

be reminded of the power, strangeness, and vulnerability of human life and the need to apprehend its infinite capacity for aberration.

References

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