

## SIMRYN GILL: 32 VOLUMES

The most powerful space in a photograph resides in its peripheral space and the blank space, the glow, extending around, beyond the frame. This is the space of accidents, 'failures', social movement, contemplation. It is in the peripheral space that images turn into language...

Murat Nemet-Nejat<sup>1</sup>

Playful and thoughtful, Simryn Gill's use of photography is rarely straightforward. Discarded everyday objects and plant material are as likely to feature in her exhibitions as photographs, and her methods have also included object making and the use of collections. Nevertheless, photography has been an important dimension within her practice – often recording some performative intervention into the world. This new installation marks an original extension of her practice, in which 'found' photographs provide a context for exploring the pictorial medium burdened with representing the world to itself.

Gill is perhaps best known in Australia for two bodies of work. *Roadkill* (2000) is an installation of everyday objects and fragments run over by cars, which the artist collected on the roads of several cities over a number of years. Each of these flattened objects is mounted on a set of miniature toy wheels and then released into the gallery. Gill speaks about the work in terms of the commodity cycle, when objects are spat out, their job is done.<sup>2</sup> The work also raises questions about the origins and movements of objects within particular cultures. Likewise, the forty photographic portraits that make up *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (1999–2000), taken in the artist's hometown in Malaysia, depict a subtle displacement and entangling of nature and culture.<sup>3</sup> Figures are shown in their everyday environments, yet their heads are obscured by exotic fruit. The large colour images evoke the Western tendency to view the ethnic 'other' as an embodiment of nature – and thus implicitly inferior – while also standing as a quirky description of personal cultural space.<sup>4</sup>

Gill's interest in collecting and knowledge systems extends to her photographic method. It is never one photograph that matters in her work; the single image is only a fragment from the whole. For example, in *Dalam* (2001), Gill asked 260 strangers across the Malaysian Peninsula if she could enter their houses to photograph their living rooms. She was interested in the question, equally pertinent to this project, "Do lots of people held together by geography add up to the idea of a nation or single unified group?"<sup>5</sup> In *Standing Still* (2000–03), Gill produced a series of 116 photographs in her native land in the wake of the financial crisis that shook the Asia Pacific region in 1997, leaving unfinished buildings abandoned to the jungle. Through these accumulative works, Gill explores how human constructions fold into the natural landscape of a place, and histories become naturalised.

Books have long been part of Gill's practice, offering a readymade vehicle to explore how we order and describe the world around us. She has carved and sliced into old books to create makeshift shrines in *Pooja/Loot* (1992), and created paper leaves for lush tropical foliage from the pages of classic books dealing with human exploration and botanical evolution in *Forest* (1996–98) – which she then photographed. Nature, the latter suggests, is always culturally inscribed. For *Pearls*, an ongoing project since 2000, Gill asks people to nominate a book or text of personal importance, from which she uses every page as the material to create bead necklaces. As one writer put it, "[w]ith their words, phrases and images now only partially visible, the transformed books are returned to their owners to wear like precious jewels or powerful fetishes."<sup>6</sup>

Books have provided the raw material for Gill to tease out new meanings, and to evoke "the complexities of world histories through the ways that the English language has filtered into different places."<sup>7</sup> At Tate Modern earlier this year, her installation *Untitled* (2006) featured a collection of books assembled over many years, with words selectively and carefully torn out of their pages.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the word 'because' filled three plastic

bags. As the curator of the project observed, Gill's work "encourages the viewer to reject a rigid classification of their surroundings in favour of arrangements which offer uncertainty, disturbance and new possibilities."<sup>9</sup>

As an installation, *32 Volumes* resembles a rare-books section of a library, with its, table, stools and white gloves. However, the book's hard covers are smooth, blank white surfaces. Opening up these featureless slabs, we find an array of photographic images that we can identify as having been taken in the mid-to-late twentieth century. They show a diverse range of landscapes and life in the faded black and white and colour tones of a seemingly more innocent era. The books contain no text at all, not one word that might identify the pictures. But because we are familiar with the notion of the coffee-table travel book, we suspect that each of these books 'covers' a part of the world. The convention of the 'armchair traveller' – born in the nineteenth century almost immediately with photography – remains a process of cataloguing the world into its physical features, knowing it virtually by its picturesque images.

The books are modifications of the *Life World Library*, a series produced in great number in the mid-1960s, circulated around the world, and now gathering dust in second-hand shops. A portfolio celebrating human civilisation, its thirty-two volumes aim to represent the world in its entirety. There are volumes on Mexico, China, France and Ireland. Australia and New Zealand are collected together. So are South East Asia, Central America and 'The Low Countries'. Israel has its own volume, while 'The Arab Lands' are collected together. There are vague tones of optimistic postwar, postcolonial international harmony, but the whole system reflects the ideology of the Cold War and the US view of the world: thus Russia, rather than the Soviet Union. And Africa is divided into South and Tropical, along old colonial demarcations.

Like other erasure projects in the history of art, Gill's far from destructive act invites an ambiguous and

shifting 'reading' of the original text.<sup>10</sup> Their once colourful covers – featuring stereotypical visions such as Australian sheep, German citizenry and US skyscrapers – have been coated with gesso. Inside, with the aid of four assistants, every word of text has been systematically erased by hand using stone sand paper.<sup>11</sup> Where the original text might have spoken in loaded terms of "Islam's hold on millions", or "brooding huts" created by "untutored architects", the images now float free on the page. Liberated from captions proclaiming the merits of the 'free world', their politics become more ambiguous. Released from overt proclamations, the photographs now fail to illustrate anything except their own status as (often beautiful) representations.

After World War II, photojournalists fought to have their images properly captioned. The Magnum photography agency was at the front line of a desire by photographers to control the way their images were used, with each photograph sent out with a stamp on the back stating "This photograph can be reproduced only with the accompanying caption or with text ... in the spirit of this caption." Photographs are polysemic, and captions help to anchor or constrain their meaning. But as Roland Barthes argued, the principal function of such anchorage is ideological, to direct our reading of images in specific ways.<sup>12</sup> Captions make up for photography's mute status, typically presenting themselves as neutral labels for what self-evidently exists in the depicted world whilst actually serving to define the terms of reference.

In *32 Volumes*, the *Life* images become – interpretively speaking – utopian. Like a personal photo-album, the books resonate with *The Family of Man* (1955), the most popular photographic exhibition and book in history, which toured to nineteen countries including Australia. Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* was conceived as "a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life – as a mirror of essential oneness of mankind throughout the world."<sup>13</sup> Through division into categories such as 'work' and 'birth', and the insertion of quotes from the

Old Testament and ancient proverbs, it simulated a community of world harmony while ignoring the determining weight of historical injustice underlying the generalised 'human' condition on show.<sup>14</sup> If Gill's books come to resemble *The Family of Man*, this is because several of the photographers in the *Life World Library* series were shown in that exhibition. Some of the best photojournalism by the most talented photographers in the postwar period were included in these books; pictures that originally circulated as a form of journalism, then became pictures in books. But in *32 Volumes*, the names of the contributing photographers (normally listed at the back of the books) have also been erased. Thus the images are floating free of linguistic or authorial support. They become fragile traces (literally, in some cases, as some of the images are themselves beginning to become physically unstuck). We come to realise their melancholy beauty – not, Martin Parr-like, as a process of redeeming vernacular images, but as a time-disjointed interrogation of the Western imaginary. Today, the humanism of the *Life World Library* seems like one more ruin of colonialism, seeking vainly to naturalise an already jaded Eurocentric ideology.

The *Life World Library* series represents an extension of the ambitions of *Life* magazine, which began publication in 1936 with the recognition of the rhetorical possibilities of photography in print. Its founding publisher, Henry Robinson Luce, wanted to "edit pictures into a coherent story – to make an effective mosaic out of the fragmentary documents". Luce recognised the significance of the camera to the success of his magazine in *Life's* prospectus:

To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things... to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed; thus to see, and to be shown, is now the will and new expectancy of half mankind.<sup>15</sup>

Towards these tellingly inflated image-world ambitions, photographers such as Margaret Bourke-

White, Robert Capa and Lee Miller were dispatched to every corner of the globe. The success of *Life* was unprecedented; it is arguably the most important magazine ever published in the US, on a scale difficult to appreciate in the context of today's fragmented magazine market and the age of 24-7 satellite TV and the Internet.<sup>16</sup> Positioning itself as America's family photo album – however white and middle class – it offered essayistic photographs printed on high quality glossy paper stock.<sup>17</sup> *Life* is credited for establishing a new visual code in the US, its pictorial style playing a key role in shaping American national identity from the Great Depression through to the Vietnam War.<sup>18</sup>

Although photography literally deals with the surface of the world, Gill finds ways to penetrate beneath the pictorial layer. *32 Volumes* opens up the Western view to multiple readings, opening to doubt its power to confer authenticity. John Berger once suggested that "[w]hen we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and future".<sup>19</sup> Such narrative projection is invited here – viewing these images is a work of empathy and imagination. Gill's modified books are a reminder that nations, like identities, are a product of history – an agglomeration of clichés that we invest in to varying degree, imposed on us by geography, politics and history. Like the family set of second-hand brown and cream covered World Book encyclopaedias I relied on as a child for all my school assignments, its Nixon-era ideology as dated as the gold-spine lettering, the magical abundance of knowledge turns out to have been fatally flawed. *32 Volumes* is neither nostalgic for simpler times nor looking back with snide superiority, but a reminder of how photographs satisfy our need for familiarity in an uncertain world. Gill's installation offers a timely space for critical contemplation, to reflect on how photographs shape our sense of what is worth our gaze and what we have a right to look at, not to mention the spaces that always surround the image.

**Dr Daniel Palmer**  
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1. Murat Nemet-Nejat, *The Peripheral Space of Photography* (København: Green Integer, 2003), 37.
2. Conversation with the artist, July 2006.
3. Gill has lived and worked in and out of Australia since 1987.
4. In *Vegetation* (1999), a small series of black and white photographs, Gill disguised herself as local flora.
5. See the website of the Art Gallery of New South Wales on the occasion of their 2002 survey of Gill's work: [http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media\\_archives\\_2002/simryn\\_gill](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media_archives_2002/simryn_gill)
6. Juliet Bingham, *Simryn Gill*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Modern, 2006), unpaginated.
7. Bingham, *Simryn Gill*
8. The books were arranged (and listed in the catalogue) in an associative way, ending with Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). In that seminal book, produced in the wake of the Farm Security Administration documentation of rural poverty in the US, all of Evans' images famously appear in the front of the book, without captions, before Agee's text. In this way, the images do not illustrate the words, and instead a gap is opened up between them.
9. See Tate Modern's website description of the project: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/gill/>
10. The most famous instance of erasure is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). This was made by using rubber erasers to literally rub-out a drawing that he had persuaded de Kooning to give him specifically for that purpose. The work apparently took a month and about forty erasers to erase/make. Melbourne artist Christian Capurro produced a mass collaborative erasure project, *Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette 1999 – 2005 +*, dealing with "disparities of value and exchange within a critique of contemporary image culture", in which a 246 page issue of *Vogue Homme* was completely rubbed out by 260-odd volunteers. See [www.christiancapurro.com](http://www.christiancapurro.com)
11. Gill employed four young men to erase the text in the books. They took the books away, returning once erased, and in every case this act involved engaged discussions about the process (some text slid off, some was more stubbornly fixed).

- Gill suggests the task was a curiously bodily introduction to twentieth-century US ideology.
12. In 'The Rhetoric of the Image', Roland Barthes notes that captions provide linguistic 'anchorage' between text and image. The linguistic elements serve 'to fix the floating chain of signifieds' (39). He describes two different functions of the caption in relation to a still image: a caption *anchors* the image when it selectively elucidates its meaning; when it sets out meanings not found in the image itself, in a complementary text-image relationship such as a comic strip, it acts as a *relay* (41). See Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 32–51.
  13. Edward Steichen, 'Introduction' from *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 4–5.
  14. For the most concise critique of *The Family of Man*, see Roland Barthes, 'The Great Family of Man' [1957] in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), 100–102.
  15. Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine: An Inside History of LIFE* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 33.
  16. For critical essays on the range of topics covered by *Life*, from gender to race to the atomic bomb, see Erika Doss (ed.), *Looking at LIFE Magazine* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).
  17. *Life* supported a comfortable middle-class ideology, with a focus on middle-class 'family values'. See Wendy Kozol, *LIFE's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
  18. *Life* was published weekly until dwindling circulations for magazines as a whole, coupled with declining advertising revenues in the wake of the rise of television, caused the magazine to print its final weekly issue on December 29, 1972. It has been reborn in various incarnations, but none so influential.
  19. John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (Cambridge: Granta, 1989), 89.



## SIMRYN GILL 32 VOLUMES



## INTRODUCTION

As the crow flies, Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG) and Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) are worlds apart, approximately 1030 kilometres indeed. Simryn Gill's installation *32 Volumes* brings our galleries a little closer, in intention at least. MRAG and CCP are delighted to be presenting a new body of work by this significant Australian artist.

In the past two years, Maitland Regional Art Gallery has moved into a newly renovated heritage building and during the next two years will have over six million dollars spent on developing the precinct. With part of the new gallery already established, MRAG has begun to focus on national and international artists. Centre for Contemporary Photography is a membership organisation and contemporary art space, which has been exhibiting and developing photo-based arts since 1986 and has recently located to new purpose-built premises in Fitzroy, Melbourne.

*32 Volumes* has been achieved through welcome financial support from MRAG, through Arts NSW, for the making and transport of Gill's work. The Highpoint Property Group has been pivotal in achieving the exhibition catalogue and we are grateful to both Debbie Dadon and Highpoint Property Group for enabling this publication, extending the life of *32 Volumes* beyond its installation in 2006.

The origin of *32 Volumes*, for CCP at least, was a conversation between Simryn Gill and CCP's then Curator of Projects, Dr Daniel Palmer. The origin of the exhibition for MRAG began almost two years ago in discussions with Simryn about an appropriate exhibition. We thank all involved for this initiative and we are particularly grateful to Simryn for her skilful navigation of the continent in bringing together MRAG and CCP. We thank Daniel Palmer for his engaging essay and Karra Rees (CCP) and Kim Blunt (MRAG).

During the 19th and early 20th centuries oak and brass boxes of leather bound books were travelled across the country from State Libraries, to regional and rural centres. Far removed from capital cities – individuals, families and groups subscribed to this service and for decades many imaginations were sustained by travelling texts and images. In *32 Volumes*, Simryn Gill invites us to look at a series of books of photographs published some 40 years ago. Taken by some of the world's most prominent photojournalists of the time, the images, from the New York offices of *Life* magazine, give a powerful sense of how they viewed the world, and more subtly, the politics of the visualisation of world events.

We congratulate and thank Simryn Gill for her timely and provocative new project.

**Naomi Cass** Director  
Centre for Contemporary Photography  
**Joe Eisenberg** Director  
Maitland Regional Art Gallery

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Thank you to Joe Eisenberg and Daniel Palmer for their separate invitations, nearly two years ago, to show and perhaps make new work for them. Thank you to Kim Blunt from MRAG and Karra Rees from CCP for their wonderful patience and persistence in bringing the project together. Thank you to Barbara Flynn for her support.

## BIOGRAPHY

Simryn Gill works with a range of methods including collecting, transforming, assembling, writing and photographing, with materials as varied as debris, books, photographs, plant matter, texts and ruins. In recent years she has held solo exhibitions at Galeri Petronas, Kuala Lumpur (2001), Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney (2002), Shiseido Gallery, Tokyo (2004), UC Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley (2004), and Tate Modern, London (2006). In June this year she participated in the exhibition 'To see the world, to feel with your eyes', held in Svolvær in the Lofoten Islands in Norway. Later this year she will present a new project at the Singapore Biennale. She divides her time between Sydney and Port Dickson, Malaysia.



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