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Camera Obscured: Photographic Documentation & the Public Museum

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O n A s s i g n m e n t

Camera Obscured

For seven years, Vid Ingelevics sifted through the kind of photographs museums keep to themselves. The result: a remarkable exhibition that approaches the status of art. By Dot Tuer

OPPOSITE: **Pierre Petit**
Copy of Pierre Petit's ca. 1880
photograph of the Galleries
of Comparative Anatomy, Le Muséum
National d'Histoire Naturelle
Resin coated print
Courtesy La Bibliothèque Centrale
du Muséum National d'Histoire
Naturelle, Paris

RIGHT: **Julius Kirschner**
Blind children studying a
hippopotamus, The American Museum
of Natural History 1914
Black and white gelatin silver print
Courtesy The American Museum
of Natural History, New York



In the old colonial city of Corrientes in northern Argentina, avocado and orange trees line the streets, passion flowers scent the night air and parrots flock amongst white mango blossoms. In their midst a vast neo-classical building houses a museum dedicated to ordering the natural world. Frozen in time, it is named after Aimé Bonpland, a botanist who, with Alexander Humboldt, scaled the Andes, traversed the Amazon and returned to Europe with a bounty of flora and fauna and an impression of America saturated in romantic hues. Stuffed mammals, with outstretched claws, fill room after room, alongside multi-coloured birds in glass cases and pinned butterflies with impossibly huge

wings. Handwritten labels identify each by its formal Latin name.

In the thoroughly postmodern city of Sydney, Australia, with its waterfront steel-and-glass towers and oyster-shaped opera house, another colonial façade houses a museum, animated with new technologies, that is dedicated to local history. At the entrance, aboriginal funeral poles are wired with interactive sound sensors. The foyer features a cinematic spectacle of the Australian landscape projected onto a two-storey screen. From here, as visitors enter a darkened room, movement triggers videodisc images of disembodied faces that recount memories of colonial experiences from the viewpoints of settlers, prisoners or first peoples. Or

In its nineteenth-century guise, the museum is a dusty place of scientific veneration, a secular temple



TOP: Charles Carpenter
Visitors walking through dirt fields towards the newly constructed Field Museum of Natural History, Grant Park, Chicago ca. 1921
Black and white gelatin silver print
Courtesy The Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

INSET: Installation view of
"Camera Obscured: Photographic Documentation and the Public Museum," at Gallery TPW 1998

visitors can climb the stairs to the second floor and explore a mock archive in which a contemporary artist has filled hundreds of tiny drawers with anonymous debris of the past.

Museums, in their nineteenth-century guise, are dusty places of scientific veneration, a secular temple for the spoils of empire in which religious relics of saint's bones and sacred shrouds are replaced by fossils and profane artifacts. In its current incarnation, the museum struggles against its dubious inheritance as a guardian of Enlightenment values, seeking penance for a civilizing mission that kept the barbarians at the gates yet their heritage within the vaults. Surely no institutional monument carries such a paradoxical

Alex J. Rota
Working on Flying Bird Group
 in Sanford Hall, The American Museum
 of Natural History 1947
 Black and white gelatin silver print
 Courtesy The American Museum
 of Natural History, New York



legacy: to render static that which is dynamic and to claim neutrality while constructing a hierarchy of peoples and things. Both outside and inside the museum's walls, this legacy has become a critical site of inquiry for scholars and artists, spawning installation works, weighty tomes and curatorial projects. One such project, a recent exhibition of photographs culled from museum archives by Vid Ingelevics, at the Toronto Photographers Workshop, brilliantly captures the complexity, and poignancy, of the museum's representational history.

For seven years, Ingelevics travelled to museums in Europe and North America, sifting through hundreds of old glass-

plates and negatives that recorded the everyday and, sometimes, extraordinary activities of running a museum. The result of this extensive archeological quest is "Camera Obscured: Photographic Documentation and the Public Museum," an exhibition remarkable not only for the assembled wealth and breadth of images (eighty-nine in total), but for the way in which Ingelevics turns a site of critical inquiry—the museum—back upon itself. Dating from the eighteen-fifties to the nineteen-sixties, the photographs are grouped into subtle thematic sections. These range from behind-the-scenes glimpses of workers preparing natural-history dioramas to desolate gallery rooms filled with empty frames



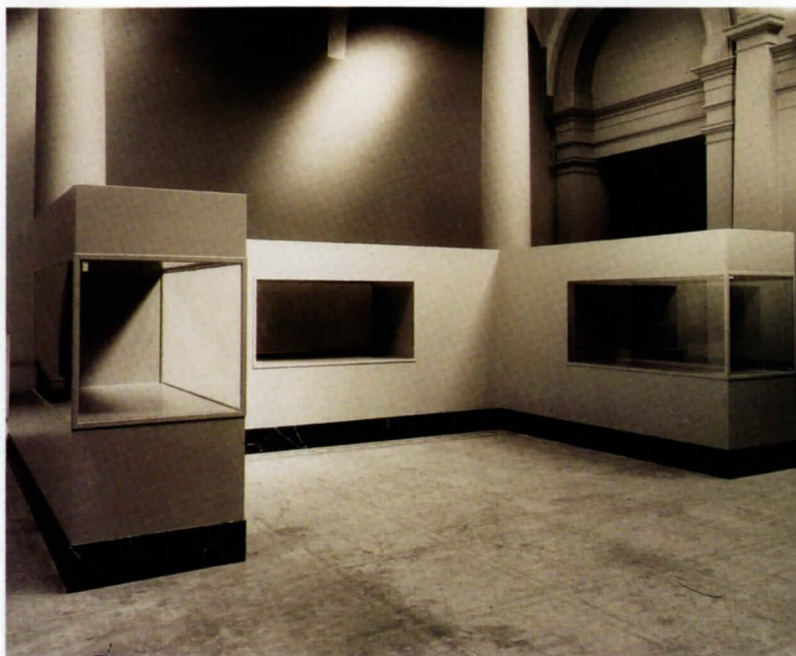
Alex J. Rota
 TOP: Ray de Lucia installing models,
The Forest Floor in Hall of Forests,
The American Museum of Natural History
 1958 Black and white gelatin silver print
 Courtesy The American Museum
 of Natural History, New York

Donald Macbeth
 BOTTOM: *An Ethnographical Gallery,*
The British Museum 1905
 Black and white gelatin silver print
 Courtesy the Central Archives,
 The British Museum, London



J. Otis Wheelock
Preparing background of Wild Turkey
Habitat Group, The American Museum
of Natural History 1907
 Black and white gelatin silver print
 Courtesy The American Museum
 of Natural History, New York

Considered technicians **not artists,** the photographers often remained as anonymous as the night cleaners



Photographer unknown

LEFT: *Modern display cabinets, Room 42, The Victoria and Albert Museum 1949*
Black and white gelatin silver print

James Stevenson

RIGHT: *Photograph #378, ca. 1856–72, a document of ornate mirror and frame, from the pages of the Guard Books (photographic records) 1997*

Both images courtesy the Photographic Studio and Trustees of The Victoria and Albert Museum, London

and sandbagged walls (awaiting the onslaught of war), to pre-1872 photographic collection records stored in the crumbling “guard books” of London’s Albert and Victoria Museum.

For the most part, we are witnesses to museums caught in the act of erecting barricades against disorder. Like the Bonpland Museum in Argentina, they appear frozen in time: revealing an ossifying impulse to tame unruly Nature through modelling and preservation. In an 1880 photograph at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris, we see an anatomy study of an adult man, arm raised like a heroic statue, who leads a fossil-skeleton battalion of Darwinian ancestors. In a 1914 photograph from The American Museum of Natural History, two blind children study a hippopotamus. One stands on a dais and hugs a life-size replica; the other sits on a stool and strokes a doll-sized model. Given the context for these photographs, the tensions that emerge between realism and artifice, gesture and stasis are all the more resonant. It is one thing for a contemporary photographer, schooled in postmodernism, to expose the mechanisms of representation, but quite another for a staff photographer to do so (whether self-consciously, or not) in an era when the photograph, like the museum, was assumed to be the purveyor of objectivity and truth.

Despite the sophistication and eloquence of the images, the photographers who took them were considered technicians, not artists, often as anonymous as the unidentified night cleaners and preparatory workers they documented. Casting a critical eye towards this anonymity, Ingelevics devotes a thematic section of “Camera Obscured” to the work of British photographer Roger

Fenton. Famous for the haunting portrayal of the Crimean War, in which a desolate landscape denuded of human traces becomes a metaphysical mediation on human carnage, Fenton’s work is zealously catalogued and studied. Yet in the course of Ingelevics’s research, he discovered Fenton’s short-lived career as the first staff photographer at the British Museum, the photographs now languishing forgotten and neglected in the guard books of The Victoria and Albert Museum. For the exhibition, Ingelevics rephotographs a page from a guard book that contains a 1857 photograph by Fenton, and juxtaposes it against his 1855 *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, calling into question the hierarchical ordering of images as well as peoples and things.

As a practitioner and a scholar of photography, Ingelevics’s concern with the distinction between artistic expression and documentary evidence provides an important conceptual framework. The strength of his exhibition lies in the careful dialectic he exposes between the museum and the photograph as arbitrators of cultural values. Coming of age when each was entrusted with the task of guarding the boundaries between the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of memory, both face an uncertain future, one in which digitalization now blurs the lines between fact and fiction. By constructing a visual history of the museum based on old-fashioned—some might say nostalgic—large-format photographs, “Camera Obscured” reminds us that questions of how nature and culture are represented, images manipulated and values shaped, are not just ones for a postmodern age, but are as old as the museum itself. ■

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Retain No. 378



378 Mirror in embossed paper
date about 1660-70
L. 14 1/2 in. H. 14 1/2 in.