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Metadata_Photography and the construction of meaning

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A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts to Massey University, College of Creative Arts,
School of Fine Arts , Wellington, New Zealand.
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For my family

I owe an immense debt to the generosity, patience and inspiration of the individuals who afforded this research to develop. I am profoundly grateful to my supervisors, Ann Shelton, Dr. Martin Patrick and Wayne Barrar without whose support I would have not been able to complete this thesis.

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Abstract

Metadata_Photography and the construction of meaning

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Photographic technology is increasingly respondent to a desire for the production and consumption of information. The current age of photography not only possesses the ability to capture the image, but also to capture photographic metadata as supplemental information. Engaging in the premise that the photographic image exists as an incomplete medium to the transfer of information, this research identifies the acquisition of data as a means to resolve interpretation and quantify the photographic image. Inhabiting a complex territory within this structure, the photographic image manifests multiplicity and operates as source, production, and capture of information. This work challenges the perceptions of how to engage with the dialogues created between the photographic image, and the externally appended metadata.

Keywords: photography, metadata, discourse, archive, supplementation, data

Foreword

The built environment is often considered to be a public domain, forming the borders and perimeters of modern society, which such boundaries both enclose and contain. The urban environment limits, encloses and contains. Constructed to gentrify and tame the unknown wilderness, architecture and urban environments are subsequently viewed as locations of familiarity; safe, known and quantifiable. However, actual construction sites and the processes they entail are in fact hidden, or incommunicable to the urban public. Thus, framed in this manner, construction sites operate as locations of uncertainty.

I have created this project *"Excavations"* through my photographic documentation and analysis on the construction site of New Zealand's largest communications and data-network provider. My initial presence on the construction site alerted me to the fact that a significant amount of documentation would be required to build a structure, corporations must adhere to law under national, local, and district jurisdictions, as well as following the resource management act, the building code, the health and safety act, and so on. In addition to these requirements, this site has voluntarily registered for an environmental sustainability program, under which, the entire energy and material consumption of the building will be recorded, vetted and finally allocated a performance value. All these forms of data need to be formalised, categorised, authorised and granted by regional authorities before any work on the site begins.

Finished buildings differ from the construction process itself, in all their minute permutations and transformations, many of which disappear into hidden territory through the processes of construction. Similarly, in photographic practice, the very act of exposing a photographic image is haunted by the act of creating metadata. In this case, the photographic image too, both conceals and encloses its inner processes, appending generally unseen digital metadata to the photographic image. My current project is an attempt to resurrect and make visible some of this hidden information embedded within the built environment, by closely investigating the notion of metadata.

Introduction

The process of capturing a scene or subject through photography has served to coerce, convey, and inform many sectors of society. The use of photographic image is widely embraced, and the technologies of the medium allow the photographic image to be easily and endlessly reproduced. Thoroughly permeated via the channels of the mass media, society increasingly relies on the use of photographic image. However contemporary photographic theory comments upon the fact that the photographic image is highly ambiguous. This ambiguity or obscurity produces a condition of unfulfilled expectation.

One such unfulfilled expectation manifests itself as an unyielding appetite for the production and consumption of information. This research asserts that photographic technology responds increasingly to this desire. Within photography this production of information takes the form of an entity called “metadata”. Currently photographic metadata exists as an appended file or supplementary store of information. It is captured and recorded at the same moment as the exposure of the photographic image. Invisibly linked to the photographic image, it becomes available only through the assistance of computer or camera. Described as the “data about data”, metadata facilitates and instills from “within” and “without” the photographic image, appending an additional store of information. This act counters both the ambiguity of the photograph, and supports society’s desire to quantify this ambiguity through the increased acquisition of information.

This research engages in the premise that the photographic image is an altogether uncertain communicator of information. While it is in fact a powerful tool to reproduce visual events, photography is an incomplete form of communication, as any image is dependent upon external factors for increased readability (Sekula, 1982: Sontag, 1978). Therefore could metadata be considered as an external mechanism? If so, is there a point at which I could re-conceptualise the use of metadata as a library or archive like source of information? Could this metadata also operate as a means to add complexity, clarity, and meaning as an appendage to the photographic image?