



construction

carla feltham | michelle maartensz | martin trew

We know that behind every image revealed, there is another image more faithful to reality, and in the back of that image there is another and yet another behind the last one, and so on, up to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that no one will ever see. Michelangelo Antonioni

Three photographers - Carla Feltham, Michelle Maartensz and Martin Trew - were invited to photographically record the construction of the new Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG). All three are Hunter based artists and thus the task of visiting, and visiting again as the building took on its particular form was not too difficult. Each came at a different time and, although they knew about each other's projects and purposes, they worked alone and very quietly on *Construction*. I almost never saw them in or near the site - probably a good thing, as I had ideas of what I would have liked to record about the construction as it developed. The result is that each has created a final photographic essay, and collectively an exhibition that captures different views, senses and responses to the structure taking shape, as the new MRAG.

The aim of *Construction* is to capture and document the formal beauty [and perhaps the ugliness] of newly created spaces and areas as they take shape and become a recognisable reality. It is not necessarily to photograph

what could be claimed as major milestones in the construction cycle. In this way the individual images have become an artistic record of how the final building site and the completed art gallery came into being.

The photographs in *Construction* therefore tell the story of the building through three sets of image makers in a more direct fashion, than words could describe. They capture different responses to various stages of the construction. Importantly, each image is also a work of art and as such stands - or rather hangs, to be viewed alone, taken through a lens and seen through the eyes of an artist.

The images in *Construction* combine geometric forms with constant movement in the hands of a multitude of tradesmen and workers. It is worth noting that few of these men - and there are only men on this project - the construction workers, are interested in the building in the same way as are the photographers. For them, they are working on a construction, each focusing on particular aspects of their jobs: laying cement, punching gyprock, wiring electricity, laying tiles and a myriad of other tasks which individually are often far, far removed from the final outcome or outlook of the new art gallery.

The workers involved with the site were not particularly interested in the photographers and their mission. They

may have liked to pose like anyone spying a camera but they were not particularly keen on sharing their environment while working and involved with construction material. For those operating on the site whether labourer or manager it is their place of work. Much more can be said about the photographers because their connection and that of the builders working at the construction site ends there - as in the final result, their operational missions are separate.

The photographer's concern is about lighting, composition angles and overall subject matter, as each is ultimately responsible for the completed product. The labourer is more involved in his own space of work knowing that someone else is responsible for the final outcome, look and functionality of the building. Perhaps it's for this reason that workers are not overtly represented in the images which make up *Construction*.

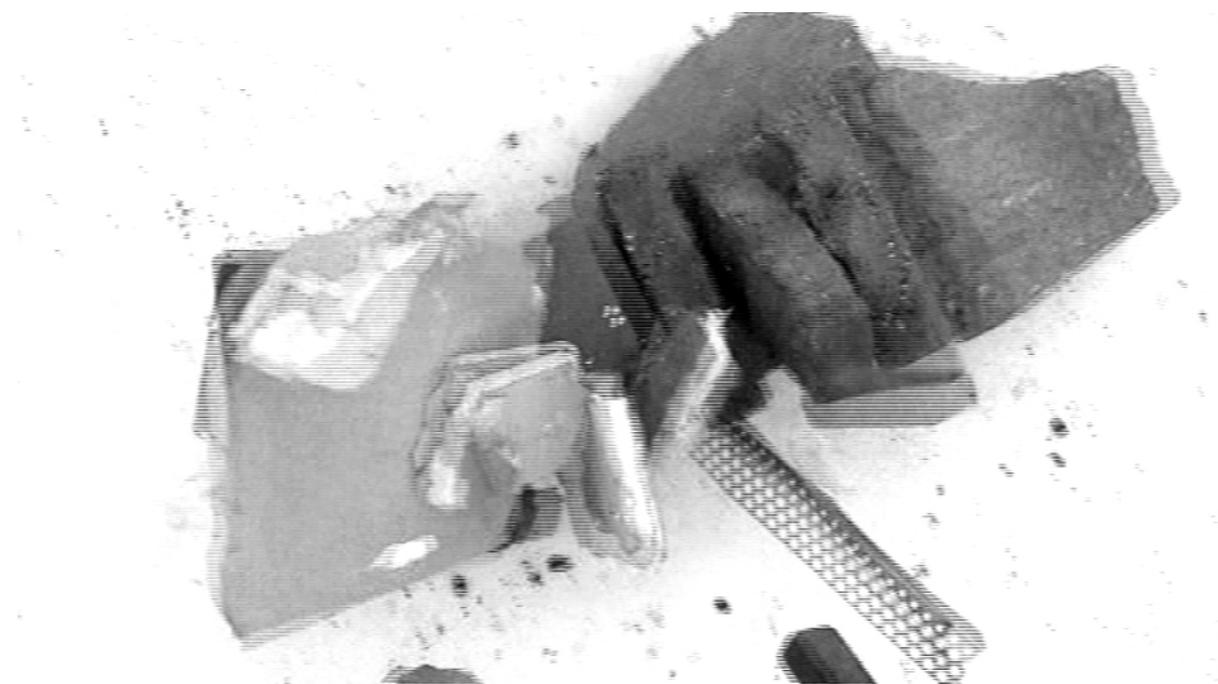
It is this aspect of the photographers' task in how the building came into being, joining two old buildings creating a new art gallery which speak with their own singular and particular specific voices. In viewing the images we, the viewers, will hopefully understand how the completed products, both *Construction* and the construction, reached their individual and ultimate conclusions.

The taking of the images for *Construction*, is not an esoteric

exercise about man and material, it is a demonstration of the mess, disruption, progress and development of a building site as it takes shape and becomes a functional facility. It is an exhibition by three photographers shaping images which like any works of art speak, to the public and make a specific world more comprehensible through unique eyes with the purpose of allowing us to enjoy and thus adding to our understanding and education.

The three photographers have certainly succeeded in this outcome. As viewers we come to understand, progress and movement with all of its subtle qualities. We see architecture and spaces move into shapes and other areas filling up and becoming operational spaces. Windows, doors, walls and a myriad of elements come from nothing and end up as working art gallery spaces, a retail area, a café and even bathrooms and toilets. At different times sunshine glints on steel, spaces are created by glass panels, walls are erected, floors become a reality. As importantly mistake, mess and disruption too are viewed like a glimpse of paint splashed on a tile glued to a wall, nails dropped in a corner, broken window panes and all forms of detritus found on a building site. All these aspects assist in making visual sense of a chaotic construction site.

Photography is about drama and Carla Feltham, Michelle Maartensz and Martin Trew capture it in *Construction* so



readily and vividly. All three have taken colour, line and texture and together with the various components of the construction site have created subject matter translated through photography which helps us to understand how a building comes into being. Much must have been omitted but what is lost is only known to the photographers.

In photographic stories or essays each photographer has revealed fascinating forms, fabrics and facades. The extraordinary beauty of an urban space - a construction site - has provided them and us with inspiration for a whole new way to look at a completed newly erected building. Thus something which began with very little, and made little sense and was perhaps even messy, has acquired a new visual quality which serves as an inspiration as it passes through the eyes and hands of photographers.

Construction is replete with complex qualities which are probably found in any construction site. Each photographer has, with precision and sharpness, transformed this construction site into shapes and forms which when inspected arrive at unique visual expressions. It is all about looking at moving images and how they have, on occasion, been frozen in time but still resonate with life and tell a story which is understandable and logical. It is a voyage which is new and unique to a construction site and which poses some questions which require

answers, making *Construction* a unique exhibition.

Construction ultimately focuses attention on the ordinary, the routine and the unexpected. It is about a construction site and how artists and the public are drawn to it like a mission with a purpose. We have all become urban explorers, viewing and analysing images which demonstrate, in their conclusion a specific response in the form of an exhibition. We view the form of a building taking shape from dirt and concrete to the last dab of paint and the handing over of the keys. The voyage we have travelled has been part of an exercise of much empty space and two old buildings morphing into a purpose formed building.

By and large we like to see expansion and the gradual development of a new building in our city, particularly one that already makes such a statement and will continue to do so well into the future. Different stages captured as images of this, help to make the final declaration more realistic because the various phases have been carefully documented and recorded and finally presented as an exhibition. *Construction* allows us to show the workings and making of the art gallery in Maitland, part of the visual world, which we can now call our own.

Joseph Eisenberg OAM
Cultural Director Maitland City Council

The young artist recorded, stone by stone, the cathedrals of Strasbourg and Reims in over a hundred different prints. Thanks to him we have climbed the steeples...what we never could have discovered through our own eyes, he has seen for us...the entire cathedral is reconstructed, layer on layer, in wonderful effects of sunlight, shadows and rain. M. Le Secq, too, has built this monument. H. de Lacretelle, in La Lumiere, March 20, 1852

Three photographers have 'climbed the steeples' and discovered in their own individual ways the 'traces of labour, the rhythm of construction, the noise, the debris, and the energy' culminating in the completion of construction of the new Maitland Regional Art Gallery.

These photographs, collectively called 'Construction', reveal much more than the final edifice and its unseen lofty details. These artists have documented the building process and have revealed dynamics, intricacies and secrets, which would otherwise be hidden in the completed building. However, these revelations do not demystify architecture but rather deepen our intimacy

with a complex and imprecise process of making. These photographs celebrate the ephemeral and the accidental.

Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation. Sontag, Susan in On Photography, Penguin, London 1977

Our photographs are our memory. Photographs are seen as the unchallenged empirical evidence of events and are used to ignite memories and confirm participation.

'Construction' on the other hand could be seen as merely documentation as we are once removed from the act of taking the picture and being in the place. So how is it that we are able to feel so intimate with an experience we did not have? The skill and penetrating gaze of the artist is at play here, as aspects of the building process are revealed to us in a unique and incisive collection of works.

So the choice of photography to bring us intimate and revealing detail of the construction of MRAG in turn personalises and allows us to participate in a ritual event usually hidden and rarely celebrated.

Carla Feltham speaks to us of 'photographing the signs and traces of labour and evidence of workforces present'. The coming and going of workers and machines, tools and materials that are the stuff of the construction process are revealed in an assembled wall of images. Feltham has also captured much of the unseen; the reality of an imperfect, sometimes even contradictory process. The work documents a process evolving over time with recognition of the formal architectural aspects only revealing themselves as construction nears completion.

Further to capturing an evolving process, notions of 'noise, debris and energy' are reflected in Martin Trew's work. The video piece reflects the 'ordered chaos' of activities on the building site. It shows the ebbing and flowing of objects in an almost hypnotic repetition; the frenzied and the still. Artefacts and waste from the building site dance to the rhythm and noise of construction. Individual elements move disrhythmically yet together the disparate pieces of debris climb to a balanced whole. Balance and order contrast with movement, unpredictability and dysfunction, a parody of the construction process.

Michelle Maartensz has created haunting night images

of the building under construction. These photographs become a stark contrast to the agitation and turmoil of the day. Voyeuristic, still, quiet, almost furtive these images subvert what we know of building. Peopled by a frenzied workforce by day, at night the site and incomplete building are at rest. These 'stolen' images note rhythms in construction, but dwell on the catch points or pauses, accentuated by the stillness of the night. Scaffolding features as a device, coming, going, moving, framing and enveloping but ultimately disappearing without trace.

Carla Feltham, Martin Trew and Michelle Maartensz have unmasked aspects of architecture not often revealed and hence have helped us all to see what a dynamic, fraught and ultimately exhilarating experience architecture can be. These three artists have intuitively gravitated to document the energy of construction, the hidden processes and elements, which are often stilled and unobserved in a work of architecture. This deeper engagement with the construction celebrates not only the completed architecture but also the people and processes employed.

Peter Poulet
Tasmanian State Architect

During the construction of the building, were your artistic ideas taken in new directions as a result of a changing building site? Is there an example of this in your work?

CF At the start of the project it felt like a real challenge and a totally foreign environment, probably a space that I wouldn't naturally be drawn to photograph. I deliberately threw aside any immediate concepts that came to mind because I knew that I wouldn't be responding to the site in an honest way, it would just be a fabrication that could belong to any building site anywhere. So as a result I really wanted to aim at being present and in the moment while I was shooting and just responding to things as I came across them. As a result for the first couple of months I was doing just that turning up and taking photographs and some days were more exciting or successful than others.

MM The original idea driving the approach to photographing the construction site was that of a childlike exploration of the evolution of the building.

I chose to photograph at night for a number of reasons, one being the surreal colour achieved through long exposures and artificial light sources. The changes in the construction were expected and didn't affect my initial intention.

MT My work was taken in a new direction by the changing building site. Whilst I had initially planned to make a more minimal video, on observing the building process with all its noise, debris and energy I felt that my work needed to reflect this. This change in direction is evident in the use of debris from the actual building sight as

well as the fact that sound is now a part of the installation. As an outsider to the building industry I saw a form of ordered chaos to the construction process that I wanted to reflect in my work.

Construction is a project that unites art and documentation. How thoughtful were you to how audiences would engage with your work? Did the documentary aspect of the project affect your approach?

CF To be honest the documentation part fits in perfectly with my practice as that is exactly what I revel in – capturing 'un-seen' environments whether it is because they are so common, plain or ugly or in this case not readily available to the public. While taking the photographs my main concern was that I enjoyed the process and while thinking of the production and presentation side of the work that was when I was considering the audience the most. Thinking of a mode of presentation that would look exciting and enticing on an immediate level and then provide through the photographs an opportunity to delve into the entire journey of the new gallery being built. So the documentary aspect of the project was really only unique in the fact that the 'event' being documented was over an extended period and that it had to succeed in delivery to as many people as possible the story of the building process.

MM When making photographs for exhibition I like to please myself more so than an audience though find if I am satisfied with the photographs myself there is usually some audience appeal. The technical aspect of photographing in low light gives an aesthetic quality that draws an interest from the audience.

The documentary aspect drew my attention to the merging of the

old with the new and the distinct difference in architectural styles. I wanted to include both in some of the photographs.

MT I had the aim of making an artwork that was interesting on a conceptual level that was also entertaining and enjoyable on a purely visual level. The documentary aspect of the project affected my approach to making the artwork in that it was a foundation for my various explorations. I was mindful of the fact that the final result needed to reflect in some way the reality of the building process. The objects used to make the video are artefacts from the actual building site and in this sense the video provides a type of document of the remnants of debris that accumulated during the construction. The sound also aims to document the atmosphere of the building site.

Buildings are wealthy in areas of interest for photography and video, such as the contrast of glass and steel; the repetition of tiles or building blocks; or the interesting features of a building's façade. Have any of the principles of design (balance; gradation; repetition; contrast; harmony; dominance; unity) emerged as strong aspects of interest for you?

CF I agree that they are wealthy in materials and aspects literally taking shape but at the same time these elements can present a challenge because they are not yet beautiful or complete and it's the human element or dimension that makes them interesting. So I enjoyed photographing the signs and traces of labour and evidence of work forces presence, even in daggy things like empty coke bottles, flannelette shirts, commercial radio blaring, lunch boxes and of course 'smoko' time. I have been interested in watching a few pieces of each of the old buildings stand still as a new one emerges

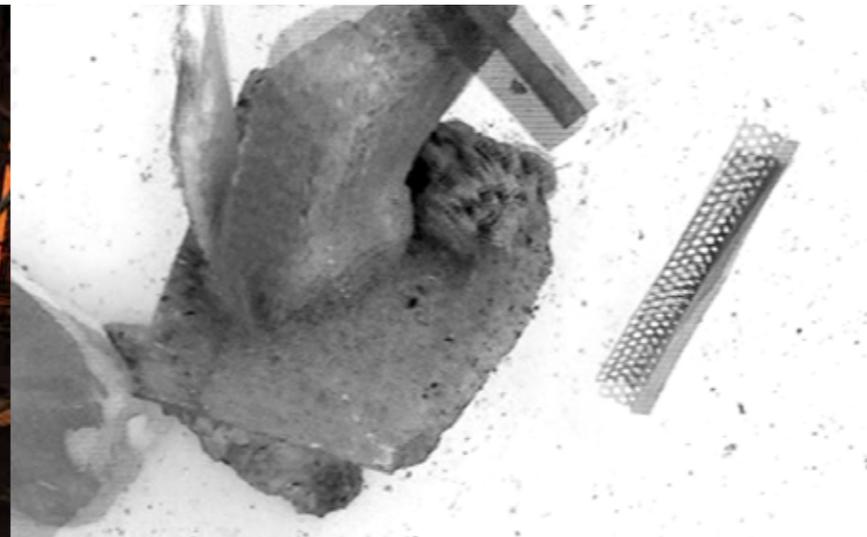
between - things like an old green light on the exterior of one and the fire alarm also on the exterior of the original one. And I guess in the end the fact that there is so much concrete on the site and the material is used so much, drastically changed the way I saw the images in the end, so much so that I actually shot in colour the whole way (as I normally do) and in the end I enjoyed them on the whole more in black and white as the formal aspects of the building were brought to the fore more so. So this was something un-expected, as I hadn't been thinking that at all while shooting.

MM Elements of design come into play with the visual elements of almost any photograph. I found the construction site to be an inspiring place at different stages, causing me to use leading lines and repetition as the main visual elements.

The repetition of the scaffolding in the limited light was of particular interest to me.

The scaffolding was in constant movement going up and then being pulled down. When the building is finished there will be no sign of it being there at all, though it is a crucial element in the construction.

MT Various principles of design emerged as areas of interest during the art making process. It was important to me that the work has a sense of balance as well as an element of unpredictability. There is a visual balance in the work in the way that the rubble climbs to the centre of the frame and this is in contrast to the movement of the individual pieces in motion. I selected different types of debris with different visual qualities (different tones and textures) as this contrast made the video more varied and chaotic.



list of works

cover
 michelle maartensz
untitled 2008
 digital lambda print
 50.8 x 76.2 cm

page 4
 martin trew
 still from
deconstructions 2009
 10 minute looped DVD

page 11
 left: carla feltham
 from *bedrock* 2008
 black & white photograph
 on archival paper
 26 x 21 cm

page 11
 right: michelle maartensz
untitled 2008
 digital lambda print
 50.8 x 76.2 cm

this page
 martin trew
 still from
deconstructions 2009
 10 minute looped DVD

back cover
 carla feltham
 from *bedrock* 2008
 black & white photograph
 on archival paper
 26 x 21 cm

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