The Translative Space of Art
By Chris Barry

In 1987 I started photographing members of my immediate family in Poland. This was a means of trying to decipher my entry into another cultural schema—one that sat in stark contrast to my western, individuated, and economically secure world-view. Poland at the time was under the rule of a Communist regime responsible for decades of oppression, fear, and hardship. As a nation and state, this was a place of constant surveillance, informants, suspicion, paranoia, secured borders, political incarceration, religious suppression—a dehumanising of social values and behaviour, and the contamination of what is considered a free, normal life. Residents queued for basic necessities; there were food shortages and empty shelves, workplaces were inefficient and health care was inadequate and antiquated, as was industry. The economy was ineffective and a life of bribes rife. Yet it was not possible for most to leave. Hence, survival required perseverance and ingenuity. Therefore, to step into this environment and live amongst an extended familial network not only challenged my world-view, but initiated what Gayatri Spivak (1988) called 'subjective loss'—an inability to comprehend because of my comparative privilege. The camera, then, became the mediating device between two contrasting and colliding world-views.

Through this act of imaging, I was able to explore the paradox of living under a political regime and living amongst my extended family and kin, the dialectic between a desired home-coming and the estrangement consistent with a displaced world-view: the dichotomy of being simultaneously inside and outside of culture. In the quest for familial reunion, the homeland became a vexed proposition. From the perspective of my relatives, my intrusion was also one of interpellation—as a westerner—replete with American dollars (wealth) and a life of choices (freedom) thus making my presence exotic and highly desirable. I used this interpellative space to juxtapose the tropes of capitalism against the tropes of Communism—through ambivalence (*Occidental Tourist*, *Nocturne,* and *Train to Hollywood*). However, beyond my western identity, I was immersed in a sociality, a network of related kin, who were contingent to, and constituents of, the regimes of a foreign political power (*Puppet*). The other aspect to this 'home-coming' was the absence of the Jewish community.

As in the *Encountering Culture* series (2006), the suite of photographs that comprise *Lost in Translation* (1992) and *Atonement* (2002) can also be read within the tenets of performance since, they, too, are consciously staged for the camera and are part of the dramaturgy that is Communist Poland. Subjects are photographed in situ, in their doorways, in front of their dwellings, and in their living rooms, see portraits in *Polska Zlota Jesien/A Golden Polish Autumn.* As well, I photographed the streets, buildings, intersections, and facades of Lodz, the city of my ancestors and the place where relatives lived, not to mention, the place where the Jewish community once lived as well (*Polska Zlota Jesien/A Golden Polish Autumn*). Once again, I placed my camera 'amongst the co-ordinates of ordinary life' (Burns, 2006).

It is important to note here that *Atonement* is the original body of black and white photographs taken in 1987 and later in 1992. The technical and aesthetic qualities of those photographs were immediately obvious to me and therefore only some images were used to create *Lost in Translation.* The photographs that comprise *Lost in Translation* continued my methodology of disassembling and re-assembling images via cutting up, colouring in, and re-photographing (re-photography) in order to create new interpretations of place and identity. My objective at the time was to position the quest for familial connection in theatrical terms—through re-staging, re-construction, and the creation of fictions, seen in billboards, props, stage sets, and rubble, for instance.

However in 2002 I was approached by the Director of the Jewish Museum of Australia, Dr. Helen Light, to 're-present' this work in its original form, that is, as black and white documents, and as a commissioning exhibition/installation created specifically for the Museum. I called this exhibition *Atonement*. Included amongst these images were a suite of photographs taken of the Jewish Cemetery of Lodz, one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in Central Europe and the resting place of Jewish industrialists, those who fuelled the Industrial

Revolution through the textile industries of Lodz. Lodz was also the location of one of the largest Jewish Ghettoes during the German Occupation of Poland. Hence familial and collective narratives of place and belonging were revisited and repositioned, this time within the context of the absence of the Jewish community. This was inferred through a methodology of gaps and silences—images of doorways, empty streets and laneways, public squares, building facades, and apartments. However, a set of portraits created an incision through the installation, mainly of children, and, in fact, my extended family. Their presence signalled the potential and future possibilities for reconciliation and it is in those images that the gesture of atonement is offered. These images also symbolised the actuality of those who stayed behind.

Once again, my methodology for photographing was kept to a bare minimum, preferring a standard lens, no flash units, and available light. My presence was made palpable by using a slow, large-format camera, thus making the act of being photographed a mutually self-conscious, inter-active, and time-consuming event. Photo-shoots were caught on-the-run or when people made themselves available, a similar situation to that of Alice Springs—one of just 'being there' amongst relatives, on call, and available to that sociality. The importance of stating these similarities is to register the fact that my methodologies as a photographer and artist have not changed; that the same inter-cultural and inter-subjective conditions apply—technically, socially, and politically—albeit the city of Lodz or the township of Alice Springs. Hence, one could say that living in Poland, and producing artworks out of the experience, resembled the conditions of fieldwork.

However, what is interesting is the marked difference between the two groups of photographs. What emerged in Poland was a formalist aesthetic generally associated with classical portraiture techniques, in spite of the spontaneous and informal conditions that took place at the time of photographing. I argue that these photographs are aligned with a Polish aestheticism—ordered, fixed, and culturally specific—compared to the mobility, fluidity, and open-ended nature of Aboriginal life-ways. In fact, a Puritan aesthetic emerges out of our inter-subjective relations. Once again local domestic spaces become theatrical settings for the staging and performance of identity, localised and contingent—the 'storied lives' of place. Like the *Encountering Culture* series, the performative nature of the work, the re-presentation of subject-identities becomes a form of auto/biography, through self-presentation, and prompted by my interpellation as photographer, westerner, interloper, and extended family-member. Thus the act of photographing becomes the interpellative space that enables cultural translation to occur. It is also the marker of our difference, as well as the marker of our co-existence.

I argue that the experience of living in Poland and my engagement with another cultural schema, another world-view, is a precursor to my Alice Springs experience. The desire for cultural recovery, reparation, and repatriation enabled through the act of photographing—through the camera lens—was to become the catalyst for my entry into the Alice Springs community some seven years later. And, of course, the sub-text to this experience, the reciprocal exchange of conversation and the sociality inherent, living amongst a network of intra-cultural and inter-cultural relations, was the basis for the co-production of these photographs. Hence the photographs emerge out of a dense sociality and my position and relationship to this network of related kin.

I argue that the enactment of subject-identities through performance and conversation, the act of speaking and listening to each other, enables translation to occur between two world-views. However, this emergent translative space needs to acknowledge the contrapuntal gap between the two parties, and the polemical nature of enunciation and representation. Hence, the translation that's taking place is one of polyphony and inter-subjectivity—a heteroglossia of meanings that remain fluid, partial, and indeterminate—a space that is still *forming* and one that locates the tensions and complexities of our inter-cultural differences. This process of 'becoming' is the open-ended present that accommodates both the relations inherent and the production of art.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) project of 'going beyond' also marks our entry into the territory of the unknowable and unrepresentable, and the inability to return to a definable present which,

through this process, becomes disjunct and displaced (albeit Lodz or Alice Springs). Hence the desire to live beyond the border of our times disrupts our 'collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity', our 'synchronic presence', and, instead, we are thrown into its opposing forces, 'its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities' (Bhabha, 1994, p.4), the space of asymmetrical relations which needs to be addressed and realised—*together*. What becomes interesting, once again, is how those borderline engagements are brokered between the two parties. This entails a remaking of the boundaries, which I have positioned as the space of translation, '(one) that emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present' (Bhabha, 1994, p.219).

Text extracted from thesis chapter: 'Performance, conversation and translation (and the desire to go beyond)' in *The Encounter of Culture: A Shared Space or Out of Place? Dismantling the Self in Central Australia.*