

ART

Civilization: The Way We Live Now

National Gallery of Victoria

Reviewed by Alison Stieven-Taylor (/arts-update/author/10012-alisonstieventaylor) •

ABR Arts (/abr-arts)

In the age of the image, photography being omnipresent, what can pictures tell us about ourselves as individuals and about the human race? What does an image of the constructed world reveal about our relationship to one another? Does our pursuit of tomorrow render the present expendable? Has avariciousness, the lust for the new, for more of everything, consumed the consumer? Are our ever-expanding, networked cities creating a chasm that leaves us alone and disconnected? These are some of the questions that the exhibition *Civilization: The Way We Live Now*, at the National Gallery of Victoria, asks the viewer to consider.

Through the enquiring minds of more than one hundred photographers from around the world, *Civilization* holds a mirror to society, its scope ranging wide to create a rich visual tapestry that conveys the wonder of humankind's capacity to innovate, nurture, and adapt. But this collection, which features more than two hundred works, also acts as a warning, reminding us that, in the rush to embrace the next thing, we are in jeopardy of losing our humanity, and our planet.

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Born as a collaborative project between the Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography (Switzerland) and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (Korea), *Civilization* is an international touring exhibition comprising imagery from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, and Europe. Each iteration is unique, curated to fit specific spaces and to reflect the host country's photographic contribution to this global conversation. It is the summer drawcard at the Ian Potter Gallery, and the Melbourne version has a unique local flavour with a number of prominent Australian photographers included, such as Anne Zahalka, Trent Parke, Adam Ferguson, Ashley Gilbertson, Daniel Berehulak, and Rosemary Laing. There are works by international luminaries also including Richard Mosse, Lee Friedlander, Amalia Ulman, Edward Burtynsky, Dona Schwartz, Lauren Greenfield, and Michael Wolf, to name a few.

Curators William Ewing and Holly Roussell perused ‘hundreds of thousands of images’, the selection process informed by the affecting capacity of each image. ‘We were looking for pictures that convey something very strong to you,’ says Roussell. ‘Even if you are not aware of the situation before you read the caption, the image draws you in.’ Pictures that invited a dialogue, prompted questions, or sparked curiosity rose to the surface. As the collection began to take shape, the pair noticed the emergence of thematic groupings that were representative of the social concerns and interests of the

photographers. These areas of investigation inform the presentation of the work, which is segmented into eight themes –

Hive, Alonetogether, Flow, Persuasion, Control, Rupture, Escape, and Next.



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Untitled, Cyril Porchet, 2014, from the series *Crowd*, inkjet print, 139.0 x 169.0 x 3.5 cm, © Cyril Porchet (photograph via the NGV)

Taking direction from the curators, I decide to navigate *Civilization* by engaging with the first pictures in each thematic that capture my attention, from both an aesthetic viewpoint and narrative depth. In *Hive* it is Cyril Porchet's lyrical picture of a swirling mass of humanity from his series *Crowd*. This image is almost painterly, the movement of those gathered

creating swathes of colour that are swept across the canvas as if by the stroke of a brush. This untitled image with its ambiguous beauty invites me to ponder why these people have gathered, why some are animated and others are still as if in a meditative trance, why red and yellow are the dominant colours. Is this a cultural celebration, a sporting event, a religious gathering? It is an exhilarating first encounter with *Civilization*.

The next thematic is *Alonetogether*; here, I find myself drawn to several images. Australian Cherine Fahd's *The Chosen* series taken in Paris during the heatwave of 2003 captures individuals in rapturous repose as they find escape from the sweltering conditions. These moments of surrender are exquisite. Then there is American Dona Schwartz's *Expecting Parents*: couples are pictured in the nurseries they have created for their child. Juxtaposing these images is her series *Empty Nesters*, where parents are photographed in what was a child's bedroom. Hung together, these works create a powerful narrative about changing identities, parental love, and hope for the future. Australian Adam Ferguson's portraits of soldiers Skyping home, their faces illuminated by the computer screen, the only light in the dark, exemplifies how we can be connected and disconnected at once.



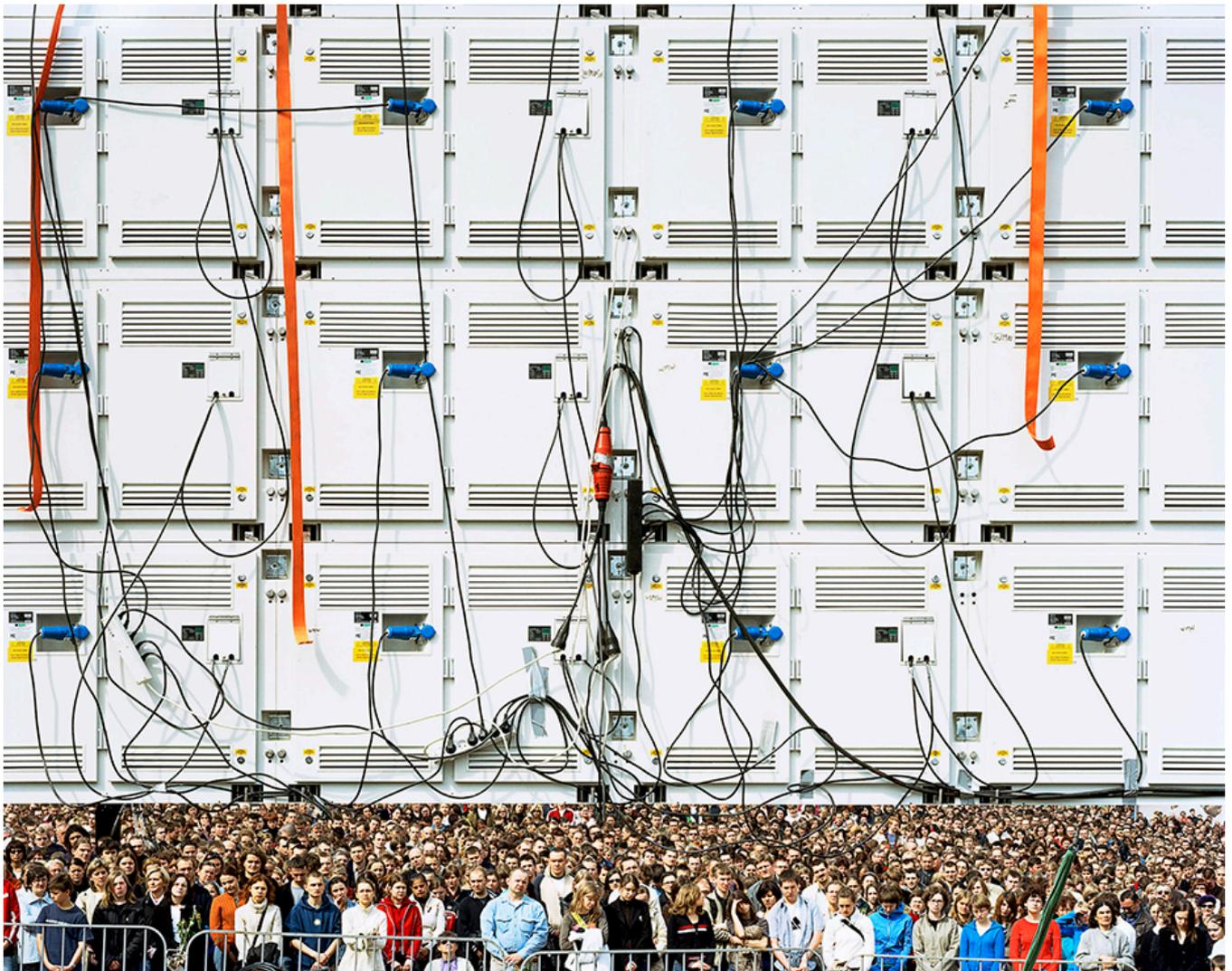
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Bobby and Kevin, Waiting to Adopt, Dona Schwartz, 2012, from the *Expecting Parents* series, type C photograph, 57.3 x 67.5 x 3.5 cm, courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto, © Dona Schwartz (photograph via the NGV)

In *flow*, the late Michael Wolf's *Architecture of Density* conveys the aesthetic beauty of high-rise structures in Hong Kong, while raising questions about what it must be like to live in spaces that soar ever higher as the population outstrips the landmass. Christoph Gielen's aerial views of Arizona suburbs are almost kaleidoscopic in their patterns, the ordered repetition of these urban environs creating a homogenous landscape that is both picturesque and soulless.

Persuasion reveals one of the most provocative images in the exhibition, Mark Power's picture of the live broadcast in Poland of Pope John Paul II's funeral. This composite image shows a monolithic wall of technology dwarfing the mourners as it seemingly directs their grief. The defining lines between humans and machines blur, technology becomes the master, ever-present even in the most human of moments.

After *Persuasion* comes *Control*, which features Australian Ashley Gilbertson's photograph of 1,215 American soldiers praying en masse in Iraq before pledging to re-enlist. Noh Suntag's *Red House 1* presents a tableaux vivant of the choreographed movements of hundreds of North Korean soldiers performing with their weapons at Pyongyang stadium. These events create spectacular visual patterns, but there is something chilling about these narratives of conformity.



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*The funeral of Pope John Paul II broadcast live from the Vatican. Warsaw, Poland, 2005, from the series *The Sound of Two Songs*, 2004– 09, type C photograph, 106.7 x 134.0 x 4.4 cm, courtesy of Magnum Photos London, © Mark Power / Magnum Photos (photograph via the NGV)*

As a thematic, *Control's* military tone holds the least interest from a visual standpoint, whereas I find *Rupture* fascinating. Taryn Simon's *The Contraband* series is extraordinary. Over five days in November 2009, Simon photographed items that were seized by US Customs at JFK Airport including weapons, rotting food riddled with maggots, and illicit drugs. A selection of more than one thousand images she took is presented in its own gallery within the exhibition space. They are framed in boxes, suggesting that these are precious artefacts; a closer inspection reveals a collection that is both banal and bizarre.

Again my eye is drawn to Michael Wolf's work. *Tokyo Compression* features portraits of commuters crammed into underground trains, their anguished faces framed by the windows they are pressed up against, the condensation on the glass further emphasising their discomfort. These pictures talk to concepts of power and authority, subservience and resignation. Here is the treadmill that is the modern urban existence. This is one of my favourite bodies of work, the book a prized possession, so it is exhilarating to see these images in the gallery.

Rupture also conveys narratives of displacement and inequity. Richard Mosse's brilliant *Heat Maps* features panoramic vistas of European migrant camps. Each large-scale photograph is made by assembling a thousand smaller images taken with a thermographic camera. These panoramas are designed to engage the viewer in a dialogue about the way society treats those fleeing conflict and persecution. In these dark, inhospitable camps where migrants are herded like animals, the heat signatures are the only signs of life. While Mosse's approach to the migrant crisis is more conceptual, *Rupture* also features the work of visual journalists Francesco Zizola, Sergey Ponomarev, and Gjorgji Lichovski, whose images capture the anguish of migrants as they traverse sea and land in search of a brighter future. *Rupture* is the most photojournalistic of themes and includes powerful imagery from Australian Daniel Berehulak, whose work on the Ebola crisis in Liberia in 2014 brings an important human dimension to the crisis.

After *Rupture* comes *Escape*, where images remind us that desire often comes at the cost of liberty. Sheng-Wen Lo's *White Bear* conveys this sentiment in a single heart-wrenching image of a polar bear in captivity. Richard Misrach's *On the Beach*, where a tiny figure floats in a vast expanse of turquoise sea, captures our apparent insignificance when faced with the majesty of nature. Edward Burtynsky's series *OIL* depicts our reliance on fuel for leisure pursuits, the Kiss concert parking lot in South Dakota a sea of motorbikes, the Truckers Jamboree in Iowa a showcase of gas-guzzlers.

Reluctantly, I make my way to *Next*, the desire to retrace my steps to spend more time with the images I've passed by slowing my pace. This is not an exhibition to breeze through; it warrants consideration of thought, which means spending time.

As I enter the final thematic, I feel the life force of the other photographs desert me as I am propelled into a future that seems stark, somewhat soulless and confronting. Images of people clothed in space suits, hooked up to machines by long cables; robotic faces and limbs that are frighteningly real; and gardens of metal trees. This feels like a world designed to exist without a human pulse. Here, I encounter what is, for me, one of the most profound images in *Civilization*, and the last picture before the exit. German photographer Michael Najjar's photograph of a rocket launching into space may, on first viewing, be an innocent statement about human innovation, the mastery of science, and our desire to go where no one has been before. But it also suggests that, having abused Earth, we are now searching for another planet to inhabit. I find this image both exhilarating and depressing as I contemplate the rocket as a symbol of achievement and defeat.

My reading of the images in this fascinating exhibition may not be the same as yours; that is what is so appealing about *Civilization*. In the complexity of the visual narratives presented is the sum of who we are as human beings at this moment in time. The collection is provocative, exhilarating, and at times terrifying. It does exactly what art is meant to, and asks society to consider how we can live together in greater harmony with one another and the planet. Through the coalescence of individual thought may come a collective response that allows a deeper dialogue around what we want next. And that's a conversation worth having.

Civilization: The Way We Live Now

(<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/civilization/>) is being exhibited at the National Gallery of Victoria from September 13 to February 2 2019.

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Alison Stieven-Taylor is an international commentator and journalist specialising in photography and specifically social documentary. She writes for various newspapers and magazines and publishes the blog Photojournalism Now (<https://photojournalismnow43738385.wordpress.com/>). She has written two books, including *Rock Chicks: The hottest female rockers from the 1960s to now* (Second Edition, Rockpool Publishing, 2011). Presently a lecturer in journalism at Monash University, Alison is also writing her PhD on photography as social change.

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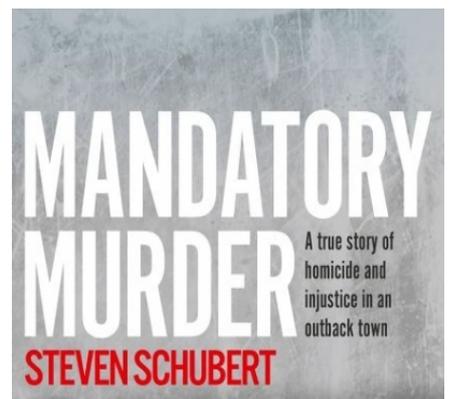
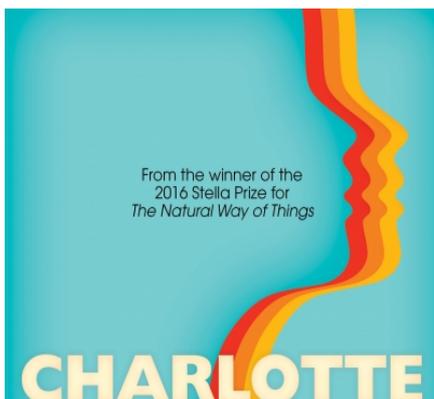
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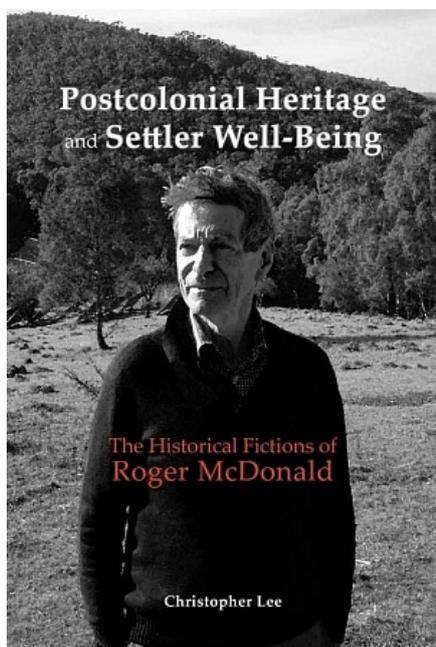
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