

## TEXTUAL THRESHOLDS: THE UNCOMFORTABLE NATURE OF TITLES IN 'BOOKS ON A WHITE BACKGROUND'

By Kate Warren

Aliza Levi's research-based photographic project, *Books on a White Background* (2012), confronts the viewer with an array that is at once visually compelling and profoundly difficult to look at. The precise regularity of her photographic compositions, the 'grid-like' repetition of these images' installation, the consistent form and shape of her subject matter, and the contrast between the stark white background and the darker shadows thrown, all create a compelling visual plane that immediately draws the viewer's attention.

But look closer. In the situation that Levi presents us with, the seductive nature of the visual cannot escape the immediacy of language. The force of their titles—often starkly confronting and potentially upsetting—leaves the embossing, decoration and materiality of the books themselves as an ironic supplement.

This is not a 'library'. Although developed from Levi's archival research, the final photographic project is not an 'archive'. Rather than displaying the original books themselves as *objets trouvés*, Levi disavows their materiality and tactility. Photographing the books' 'spines', she not only flattens but removes entirely from view their 'flesh'—the pages and the content—and in doing so opens up a liminal space that can accommodate and illuminate a multiplicity of (sometimes uncomfortable) meanings and connections between the past and the present.

In the human form, our spines form the connection between the psychical realm of our brains and the physicality of our bodies; between our 'inner' subjectivity' and our 'outer' ability to move, communicate and interact with our surroundings. Likewise in the case of the books that Levi photographs; the spines and titles are liminal spaces that mediate their content and the cultural and historical contexts in which they exist. Gérard Genette calls this the 'paratext', the 'fringe [which] constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public'. Levi's project works at this juncture. By denying access to the detailed substance and content of these books she denies their overt 'authority', yet at the same time she reveals uncomfortable legacies that persist and cannot be wholly escaped.

The various 'post' discourses (post-colonialism, post-structuralism, post-modernism) and their influential theorists and practitioners have done enormous amounts of work to deconstruct and destabilise dominant narrative and histories. The process is necessarily ongoing and open-ended; because although many narratives that were once unquestioned have been removed from their dominance and acceptability, it is often through language that their traces and legacies remain. Thus in the selection of Australian books included in this exhibition, there emerges jarring and disturbing contrasts between titles that clearly belie values that are no longer widely accepted (such as 'The Aboriginal as Human Being'), and other titles which still resonate with national myths (such as 'Australia the Land of Promise'). Other titles like 'Ourselves Writ Large' and 'The Gulf Between' become more ambiguous; for without access to the specificities of their content, these books' paratexts are revealed in Levi's project as (necessarily) multifaceted signifiers. They immediately open up a 'zone of transaction' that reveals the past as an immanent presence, constantly transformed by and transforming of the present. These now abstracted titles retain a force and power to reveal uncomfortable truths and forgotten narrative tropes, speaking to the way that Australian history and presumed cultural values are constructed and repeated in our contemporary life.

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Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p2.