

# missing presumed dead

the loss of the referent?

education kit

# education kit outline

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for CAST Touring Program 2012

# section one

## introduction to this education kit

This education kit accompanies the exhibition *Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* presented by Devonport Regional Gallery, Devonport, and supported through the CAST Exhibition Development Fund. *Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* was first presented at Devonport Regional Gallery from 2 December 2011 – 15 January 2012. It tours to Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania (CAST), Caloundra Regional Gallery, Bunbury Regional Gallery and Geraldton Regional Gallery during 2012 and 2013.

This education kit is designed to provide teachers with a framework to approach *Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* as an educational resource of relevance in several subject areas. Activities are designed to assist teachers and students engage meaningfully with art works, place the works within a broader cultural context and interpret the exhibition as a whole.

Due to the themes explored, this exhibition may be more suitable for students in secondary school and years 11-12. Questions and activities have been designed with this student group in mind. However, material can be adapted for use with younger age groups.

All information about artists' works and the exhibition have been drawn from the *Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* exhibition catalogue, press release and from discussions with the curator. Any definitions have been taken from the Australian Oxford Concise Dictionary. The catalogue can be obtained from the gallery or by contacting Devonport Regional Gallery on (03) 6424 8296.

This kit contains four sections: the introduction, activities to complete before viewing the exhibition, information and questions to consider while visiting the gallery and post-visit activities.

Teachers may choose to select all or sections of this education kit according to their requirements.

## introduction to the exhibition

*Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* explores the complex relationship between realism and abstraction in contemporary photography through the work of seven photographic artists both national and international.

Curator Paul Snell identifies a gap that remains relatively unaddressed in the history of photographic exhibitions. He proposes that there is a lack of recognition and importance given to photography that is non-representational, or abstract. Historically, the medium of photography has been assigned to the role of quickly and accurately capturing real life events – to *taking* pictures. Although a more experimental kind of photography has existed since the medium was invented, it has always taken second place in relation to photographs that depict a recognisable reality.

For *Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* Snell has chosen artists whose work shifts this emphasis. Their work challenges us to question the role of our own perceptions, and highlights the creative processes of picture *making* instead of picture *taking*. Rather than transporting reality, these artists are creating it, building on a visual language that operates somewhere between photography and painting.

Comprised mainly of digitally produced artworks, *Missing Presumed Dead* also explores the rapidly developing technologies of the photographic medium and investigates the idea that photography's value as a process-based and experimental art form continues as the medium evolves.

The exhibition calls into question our own subjectivities and perceptions, highlighting the viewer's experience as primary and key to formulating 'meaning' in the artwork. *Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* foregrounds aesthetics and the aesthetic experience as the subject matter itself.

Central to all the work is the idea that these images exist in varying degrees as self-referential objects. What the work loses in representation it gains in pictorial power, free and autonomous from representational limitations.

# section two

## before visiting the exhibition

before visiting the exhibition, students should be familiar with some key themes and concepts.

The Australian Oxford Concise Dictionary states:

### photography

noun

the art or practice of taking and processing photographs

The word has Greek origins, where *photo* = *light*, and *graphy* = *drawing*. So literally, *photography* means *drawing with light*.

Make a short list of the elements you think are essential to making a photograph. How do these elements relate to human vision and the mechanisms of the eye, and how are they different?

Research the history of photography and the different ways photographs are made, from earlier analogue techniques through to contemporary digital methods (consider: pin-hole photography, darkroom techniques, camera-less photographs, negative and positive imaging, and the different strategies for making photos.)

Photography has historically become associated with capturing reality and documenting events. Why do you think this is? If we think of photography literally as *drawing with light*, can you think about other ways it could be used?

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Research colour-field and abstract paintings and consider the ways these paintings challenge us to look at them in a different way to realist or representational paintings. (Recommended painters to research include Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Helen Frankenthaler, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Ad Reinhardt and Jackson Pollock).

The artist group *Abstraction-Création* was formed in Paris in 1931. They suggested two ways abstract artworks could be made:

1. reducing nature to basic shapes and patterns
2. arranging basic shapes and colour combinations together without referencing nature.

Think about how you would use these two techniques to make two different abstract photographs. Look at Man Ray's photogram artworks, and the photo-media work of Wolfgang Tillmans. Which of the two *Abstraction-Création* categories would you put each of these artists in and why?

When photography was newly invented, prints would have been expensive and time-consuming to produce. There would have been times when the photographer made mistakes during the many stages of the photographic process. How can mistakes be useful when making art? Can you think of how you could incorporate a mistake into your artwork?

What is the significance of the exhibition title? In what context is this phrase usually used and what might it mean in relation to our expectations about photographs?

What is a *referent* in the context of photography, and what is meant by the term *self-referential*?

# section three

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during the exhibition visit

general exhibition exercises

Ask students to walk through the gallery and write down some initial responses to the artworks, taking note of what they see – colours, forms, compositions.

Discuss as a group what the images have in common, and what some of the differences are. Brainstorm the ways some of the artworks might have been made.

Take a closer look at the way the artworks have been hung and assembled in the gallery space, and the lighting of the gallery. All of these elements are important to our interpretation and understanding of the artwork. What is unique about the hanging here? Think about how the artworks might function differently if they were framed.

Think again about the title of the exhibition and brainstorm what seems to be “missing” in these photographic images.

All of the artworks in this exhibition were made by people who consider themselves *artists using photography* rather than *photographers*. What is the difference?

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## individual artist exercises

these can be completed during and after  
visiting the exhibition.

### Jens Waldenmaier

Jens Waldenmaier is a German artist whose works deal with the way we experience space as a fluid duration. He visualises this 'spatial duration' by capturing layered moments in a single image. Opening the shutter of his camera lens, Waldenmaier exposes film over a period of time, moving the camera rhythmically in response to ambient sound. The effect is something like a painting or drawing with light itself.



Jens Waldenmaier, *Untitled 5, 7, 2 & 1*, 2009, archival pigment ink  
on Hahnemule pearl fibre paper, 110 x 110 cm

#### To think about...

Try to imagine the spaces Waldenmaier has used in making these photographs. Are there any visual clues in the images as to their origins? How can you imagine these marks being made? Think about negative imaging techniques and how these might have played a part in the making of these pictures. How do these artworks challenge the historical traditions of photography? What can you notice about the way you look at these images? How can we understand them differently if we think about photography as picture making instead of picture taking?



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## Anthony Curtis

Anthony Curtis is a Tasmanian-based artist who defines his work as *photo-media art*. Throwing himself open to experimentation and the creative process, the finished works in turn are open to interpretation – liberated from any narrative or representation. The artworks are simply pictures of light, referring to the most basic aspect of photography itself. Curtis is interested in the way the images can immerse the viewer in colour, rhythm and space to create a contemplative sensory experience.



Anthony Curtis, *Untitled Lumingram #4, 12, 14 & 23*, 2011, inkjet print, 115 x 90 cm

### To think about...

Think about the similarities between these photographs and some abstract colour-field paintings (eg. Mark Rothko). Stand in front of one of them for a full minute (or longer) and note down what you feel, think or imagine when looking at it. Consider its qualities of colour, rhythm and space, and write down your observations of these qualities. These works are portrait format, which is different to most of the others in the exhibition. How does this change the way you experience them? Curtis states that his artworks do not represent anything and have no narrative. Given your experience standing in front of them, what do you think the subject of these images is?

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## Penelope Davis

Australian artist Penelope Davis doesn't use a camera at all in her work, but her images are still classified as being photographic. In this work she has cast and moulded clear resin around objects to produce transparent copies. The resin casts are then placed on photographic paper and exposed to coloured light, creating what is called a *photogram*. These photograms are the record of a process, tracing the steps along the way and containing all the information that has led to making the image we see now.



Penelope Davis, *Index*, 2007, type C photograph  
33 images, 37 x 29 cm, 1 image, 240 x 62 cm

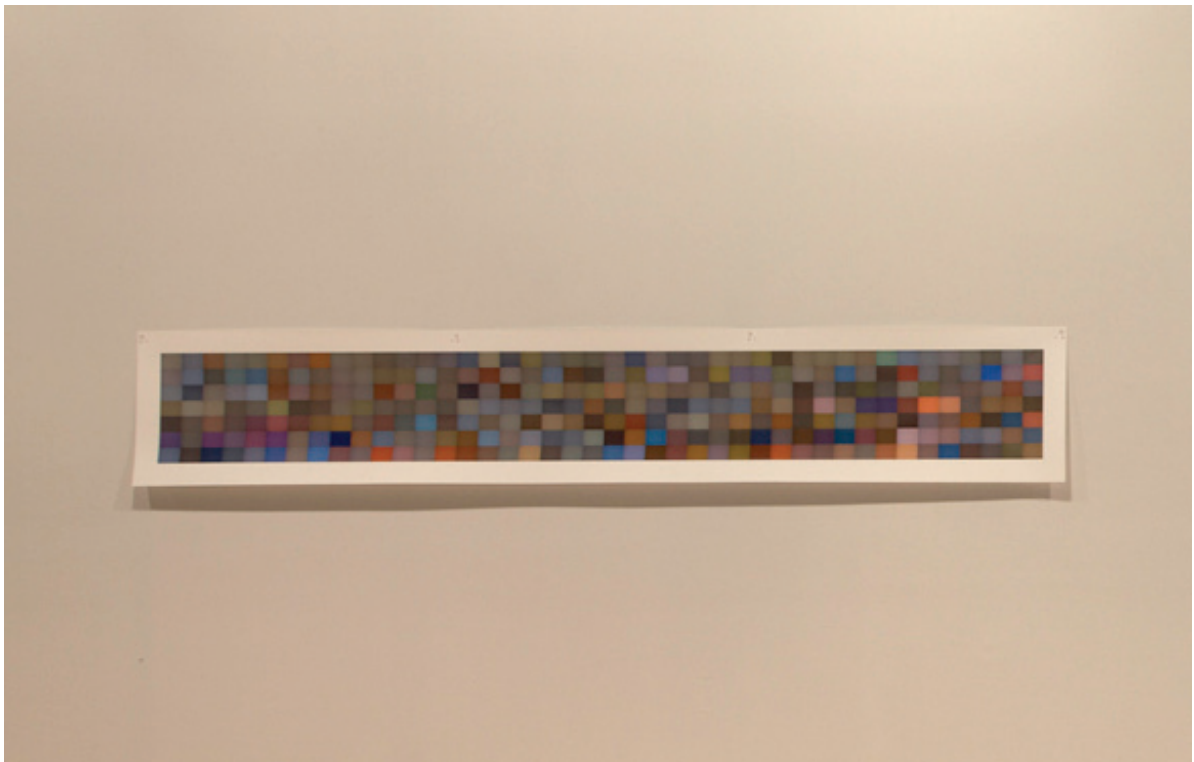
### To think about...

Look closely at the images that make up this work. There are some clues in the images that hint at the process they have undergone – what are these clues? Transformation and inversion are key to Davis' artistic process – how does this relate to some of the primary qualities of photography (like light, exposure and developing processes)? Why do you think the artist has chosen to work with books in this artwork? Can you think of any similarities between the making and reading of books, and the making and viewing of photographs?

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## Rita Maas

Rita Maas lives and works in New York and her work is a response to the saturation of information that we are exposed to 24/7 in contemporary society, and the cult of the media that abounds. She suggests that because we consume increasingly more data at an increasingly rapid rate, our ability to comprehend and process this data is somewhat numbed. In her works she has photographed the light emitted from a TV screen as it fell on a white wall. The images form a strip of coloured pixels, abstracting the original source while simultaneously referring to it.



Rita Maas, *The Biggest Loser*, October 12, 2010, pigment ink on archival Baryta Gloss, 43 x 259 cm

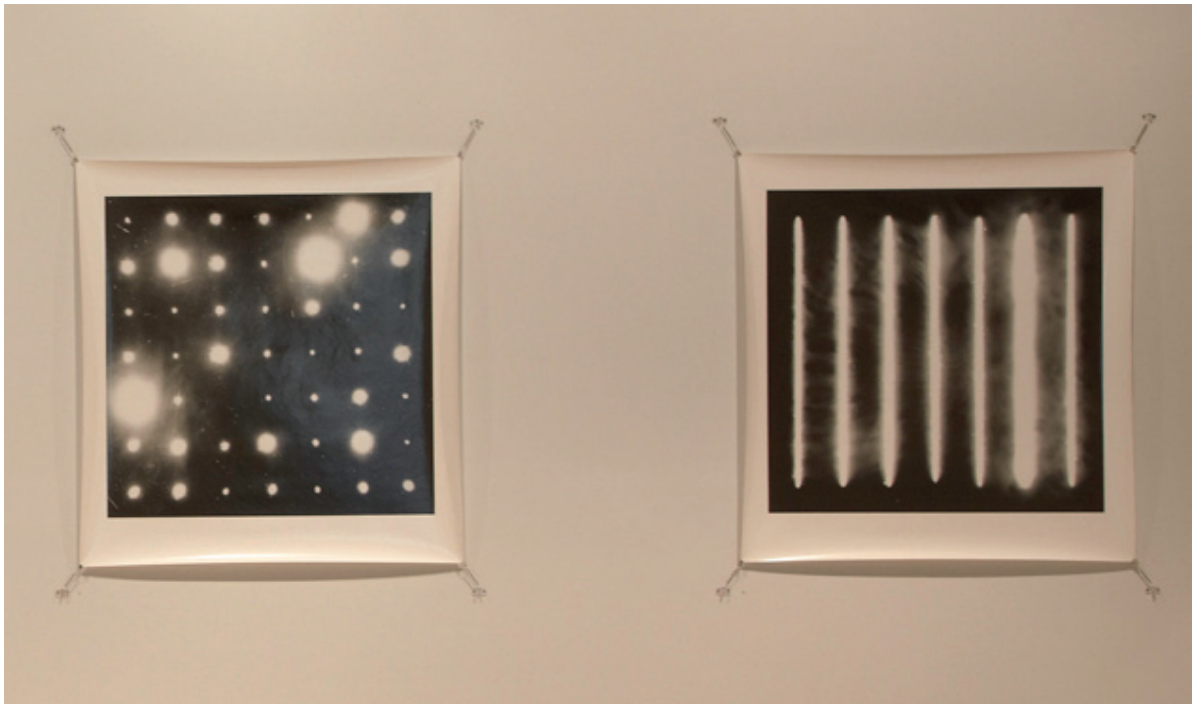
### To think about...

Although Maas has taken a direct photograph of something, what has she done to abstract the image so that it becomes ambiguous and unrecognisable? Do you find this lack of imagery frustrating? Whilst there is no direct reference to anything in particular, what does Maas' work prompt us to see instead? How do the titles of these works affect the way we interpret the images? What do the artworks prompt us to recognise about the way digital images are made, and the high level of information we consume in our media-saturated lives? Think about the ways you might be able to abstract everyday images in your own artwork.

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## David Martin

Tasmanian-based artist David Martin works with essential photographic principles, examining the intricate processes that constitute image-production. The focus of his work is on this process itself, and how the artists' actions define but don't necessarily limit the resultant image. Martin calls these works *camera-less photographs* because they are made using a very primitive photographic technique, simply exposing negatives to light through basic materials, and then subsequently exposing photographic paper to light over an extended period of time in the dark room.



David Martin, *Burning Light*, 2010, gelatin-silver photograph, 125 x 114 cm

### To think about...

In these works, the artist uses different objects and materials to create different effects and results. Imagining the light passing through and around these objects, can you think what they might be? What is the subject of these photographs? Paul Snell writes about Martin's work as "photographs of photography." What do you think he means by that? Compare the look and texture of the paper to the other artworks in the exhibition. These artworks have been hung with a spring mechanism that allows the paper to expand and contract without buckling or tearing. This hanging makes us much more aware of the paper and the photograph as a physical object. Why do you think the artist would want that?

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## Gaston Bertin

Gaston Bertin is a Spanish artist who photographs paper cut-out collages in extreme soft focus. With no exact focal point, the images put the eyes to work as colours and forms vibrate off each other, so that what we are seeing is actually our own optical processes, rather than a picture in front of us. Despite this, the images have an inexplicable depth, and position the viewer in a complex interplay between their internal and external perceptions. Through his photography, Bertin is searching for things that do not exist but may emerge ambiguously through the viewing of the artwork.



Gaston Bertin, *Slow Now 1 & 2, White Now 3, 4 & 5*, 2008 - 2010  
inkjet print, 100 x 100 cm

### To think about...

Spend some time in front of each of these works. What do you notice about the way the colours and forms are interacting with each other and your own vision? Do the works draw you in, or are they jumping out at you? Describe how it is doing this, and write a few sentences about the visual sensations, feelings and emotions you experience when looking at them. Notice how these images have no white border around them. What effect does this have on you? Why do you think the artist might have chosen to present them this way?

## Scott Faulkner

Tasmanian artist Scott Faulkner's work is a series of simple reductive images. He feels that we live in world surrounded by images, so extreme in fact, that they engulf us, inundate and overwhelm us. In this artwork he is attempting to reclaim a kind of pure beauty that is free from a pictorial subject. The images are made entirely using a computer, another kind of *camera-less photography*. Using gradient hues of vibrant pigment these artworks are an invitation to sink deeper into the image, letting its gentle and subtle tonal shifts immerse and envelop us in luxurious waves of pure colour.



Scott Faulkner, *Untitled*, 2010, inkjet print, 70 x 70 cm

### To think about...

Compare these artworks to other works in the exhibition that have been made with a camera. What, if any, are the distinct differences between these? If they have been made without a camera or the use of light, do you think they can still be classified as photographic images? Why or why not? The curator refers to Faulkner's artworks as demonstrating "the first steps towards a new kind of photography" because they do not rely on any primary information, but create their own new aesthetic 'language'. What is the importance of pushing the boundaries of an artistic medium – what is lost and what is gained in this process?

# section four

## after visiting the exhibition

Read the catalogue essay by the curator, Paul Snell.

What are the basic ideas the curator is exploring in *Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)*

Why do you think the second part of the title is posed as a question rather than a statement? Make some suggestions as to what is meant by *the referent* and think about what else might have been gained through this loss.

In which ways has the exhibition challenged your ideas of what a photograph can be?

How has viewing the exhibition expanded your awareness of how we make meaning within abstract photographic images?

Give three examples of moments whilst viewing the exhibition where you were reminded of the processes used in the making of the photographs.

One of the curator's main aims is to re-position the viewer as the central subject in the work, to remind us of our own unique ways of looking. Do you agree with this kind of emphasis? Why or why not? How might this affect the way we feel when looking at abstract artwork?

Suggest your own strategies for making abstract photographs.

# DEVONPORT REGIONAL GALLERY



*Missing Presumed Dead (the loss of the referent?)* is an exhibition developed for CAST's Touring Program. The initiating gallery is Devonport Regional Gallery.

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and the National Touring Support Network.

CAST is supported by the Visual Arts and Crafts Strategy, an initiative of the Australian State and Territory Government.



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