

The National Photography History Centre

A NATIONAL ARCHIVE of AUSTRALIA'S CONTEMPORARY VISUAL HISTORY

The National Photographic Visual History Centre is an initiative developed by a quorum of Photographers Curators and Experts meeting over a three year in Sydney.

National Photography Research Group

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Purpose

Photography as an seminal art form has not been well supported as an important art form in Australia generally. As a result our VISUAL HISTORY as a Nation is not being collected or encouraged as well as it could be. This puts at risk a vitally important cultural asset, and a powerful art form which is recognised and forms an important part of major collections in museums around the world.

Occasionally there are brilliant exhibitions at NGV such as the present exhibition 'Women Photographers 1900-1975: A Legacy of Light', or AGNSW's highly successful exhibition 'The Photograph and Australia' in 2015, though it is sadly noted that the Art Gallery of New South Wales has not had a Photography Curator for many years. This is an indication of the kind of neglect the medium suffers in Australian Cultural Landscape as opposed to major role Photography has in many major Culture in UK, USA, Europe and Japan.

IN order to address these critical issues, I brought together the best and most experienced minds in my medium for several years as an advisory organisation. Our discussions over a four-year period form the basis of this paper.

Here are the suggestions we came up with to address this situation.

The Establishment of the National Visual History Photographic Archive as a Major Cultural Asset for the Nation

Juno Gemes Chair NPHC

Establishing the National Photographic Visual History Centre will be to create a living portal; of our visual history through the work of our finest Photographers. This will be an enduring resource and legacy for the nation; a new, revitalized economy for the sector; an enduring archive of the nation's culture that will provide ongoing work for photographers, archivists, historians, curators, publishers and website developers through which works by Australia's greatest photographers will illuminate Australia's present, past and - most importantly - the lives of coming generations.

This would create for the first time a vast repository of excellent photographs from which the Great Narratives of our nation could be shared with audiences both in Australia and internationally, through exhibitions and publications of excellence. In hard copy and online.

It is envisaged that a major partner and host for this project could be an established institution such as The National Library of Australia or The State Library of New South Wales- In tandem with State Libraries in every state of the nation.

Rationale

Photography presents a profound and accessible medium for sharing our visual history, and reflections on our major concerns and personal experiences during our time.

Photographers witness and document our visual history- this is a basic tenant of our project. The National [Visual/ Photography] History Centre will preserve the works of distinguished Australian contemporary photographers as our National Visual History Heritage – that is the core aim of our project : we also aim to commission young photographers to document the currents of daily life and ongoing changes in Australian society.

Whenever a photographic exhibition dealing with Australian contemporary life tours the country it is noticeable how much citizens value it, in Australia where our history is diverse and complex.

In my own work I have devoted fifty years to making visible the history of the movement for Indigenous rights, *Until Justice Comes* was published by Upswell Press in 2025, supported by Create NSW. Aboriginal Leaders have advised me through this period of the seminal importance of Australians having access to a truthful and inclusive history. These concerns are at the heart of this project.

This is a bold and urgently needed innovative strategy whose aim is to organize, preserve and share our photographic legacy by firstly assisting photographers to work with archivists before their archives are transferred to our National Institutions as part of this National Visual History archive which can be shared with the nation and the world through exhibitions and publications that reflect the great narratives for our own people, their struggles and achievements. These are stories that needs to be told, and can be done so powerfully, when told through the great collection of the nation's own visual history as created by the finest photographers of their time. These important photography collections, centrally collected and organised and digitized, will enable the production of exhibitions and publications enriching and deepening the nation's knowledge and understanding of our history and national identity for those to come.

Method

The collaboration between photographers and Archivists working with host institutions is vital in this process. Institutions greatly value organized photographic material, specifically prepared for their collections. This work is a vital part of our process, and it needs to be funded.

Photography is a very particular medium, while the Arts Council of Great Britain has had a Photography Board since the 1980s, it has often been noted that there has never been a Photography Board as part of any form of the Australia Council. This needs to be remedied. While I was grateful to be the recipient on a Grant from The Photography Board of the Arts Council of Great Britain to attend the Oxford Photography Workshop in 1978 – I repeat there has never yet been a Photography Board anywhere in the Australian Arts Networks of state or federal funding.

It is essential that photographers of long experience and expertise form a peer assessment panel to further and deliver these aims.

There has been support for the work of photographers at our State and National Libraries, State Galleries and Museums through the collection of their work – yet there has been no umbrella organization to oversee the width and breath of the kind Collection we envisage here.

It will be essential for an organization such as the National Photography History Centre to be closely affiliated with an established government organizations of impeccable, archival credentials - such as the National Library of Australia.

Robert McFarlane - writer, photography critic *Sydney Morning Herald* and photographer

Challenges

Not even the National Library of Australia (NLA) has the funds, or the staff to manage this volume of photographic material, nor has it had the ability to employ archivists to work in an ongoing way with major photographers, nor has any national institution ever had sufficient funding to collect the works of our finest photographers on this scale.

Costings

Human capital:

- ## new full time photographic archivist positions at a host national institution such as NLA to receive, maintain and make available collections from the photographers' life work, including reference to notebooks, reference material, catalogues and other historical texts, thematically organized for the use of Curators and researchers and publishers.
- Infrastructure within host institutions for the safeguarding of analog film work. It is to be noted that most important libraries have digitizing facilities now which can be utilized in making accessible this work.
- ## fellowships to be granted annually to eminent photographers, chosen by a committee of their peers in concert with the Photography department of the host institution
These fellowships, each of \$60,000, will stipulate that \$30,000 of it is to pay an archivist to work with each photographer and to each photographer to document, notate and prepare their archive, to be comprehensively prepared to be received by the host Institution.
- A director of exhibition programs and publications within the host organisations.

Exhibition programs:

These exhibitions will be offered to the public via the existing host institutions, excellent Regional Gallery network. Exhibitions and publications may also be offered to international photography festivals in partnership with them. These major exhibitions will also be offered to the public via website developments with the host institution.

Capital investment: Rehousing archives, notation on Data base of their content

The National Photography History Centre: Staff 2-4, as required

- Archival storage facilities
- Archival management of collections
- Digitizing expertise
- Liaison with photographers and publishers
- Copyright management – possible income source from bequests
- Copyright liaison with Viscopy

Associated costs:

- Exhibition Conception, design, material elements, prints, framing, signage, catalogue or publication
- Digital form of exhibitions
- Digital representation of archive on various platforms

Potential income streams

Photographers' copyright in their work is a valuable ongoing financial resource - both for photographers and for the host institution. The National Photography History Centre will negotiate copyright agreements in the work with each photographer.

Photographers receiving fellowships will be encouraged to donate or assign their copyright to the host Institution in perpetuity so their collections can be easily accessible, across the nation.

Photographers selected by the National Photography History Centre Peer Assessment Review panel will also be able to offer assessment of their archive for donation by them to the host institution via the Cultural Gifts program.

As a photographer whose work has been collected by The National Library of Australia and The State Library of New South Wales I can vouch for the fact that an income stream is developed by the sale of my work through these institutions.

It is possible that large and viable income streams from the production of photographic work in postcards, posters, publications, and sale to other publishers will provide a serious income stream for the host institutions. There is a financial value to photographic work as an ongoing national resource that has never been properly explored.

This program to establish The National Visual History Centre has been developed with the input of Margie Burns who was at that time Deputy Director of The National Library of Australia .

We estimate that \$3 million Dollars would establish the Centre and set up the processes we have developed .

The project could also welcome philanthropic benefactors (outside of government) who will commit to the project for a number of years. The possible development of further exhibiting and publication can be explored, such as film history TV programming with ABC or SBS which can be on sold to the world broadcasting.

We envisage that the whole process will also create considerable employment at all levels of the sector. And bring money making exhibition, publications and in valuable assets to our national Culture and to the Nation. A country which does not know it's visual history, it's heroes and heroines, the complexity of its stories, including the complex histories of its relationship with First Nations People can not really know itself.

We offer this project to The National Cultural Policy in the hope that you will support this project, recognizing the brilliant opportunities it offers to Artist Photographers, Archivist, Historians, Visual Historians and the People of Australia in making available to them their own visual history as a vital component of national identity.

Yours Sincerely,

Juno Gemes

Photographer, Archivist, Writer, Publisher
Chair of The Australian Visual History Archive Centre

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April 2026