

*Saar (and Subjectivity) Section 2*, 2014. Detail. One drawing and two photographs, 213 x 113cm each. Courtesy the artist.

# DENISE GREEN

SEMANTIC AMPLITUDE  
INGRID PERIZ

Two orders of marks: the photographic and the graphic, or rather, the graphemic, a looping doodle, a curlicue of o's circling back and round on itself before venturing further. In painter Denise Green's *Ardennes Uncovered Forays 1* (2015), a black-and-white photograph of the Ardennes forest is interspersed with excised strips of a multi-coloured drawing. The two kinds of marks coexist in random stripes, the circles of white enclosed by coloured pencil offering a false homology—the fallacy of isomorphism—with the photographed spots of lichen on the trees' darker bark. What are we to make of this similarity, and how might we understand the place of the photographic mark within a self-theorised painting practice that has long privileged private meaning?

It is now almost forty years since Green was categorised generationally and formally when her work was included in the Whitney Museum's *New Image Painting* exhibition in 1978. A temporary grouping of ten painters whose approaches would subsequently diverge, the exhibition catalogued an ongoing effort to maintain painting's viability in the face of minimalist and conceptual challenges. Green's work fitted the general New Image schema of reduced forms placed against typically monochromatic but painterly backgrounds, and while New Image painters' continued engagement with painting was

soon eclipsed by neo-expressionism and a broader return to figuration, her own work moved for some time towards greater abstraction.<sup>1</sup> She developed a repertoire of shapes, some of which had featured in work in the Whitney show, among them the house, the amphora, the fan, and the rose and it was clear that these images functioned less as representations than as something like symbols.

Green's painting has been informed by both her graduate work at Hunter College with Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell as well as her familiarity with the burgeoning scene of what would come to be called French theory in New York in the seventies. (She worked, with filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow, on



from left: *New Image Painting*. Installation view, Whitney Museum, New York City, 1978; Installation View, PS1 MoMA, New York, 1999. Left: *Chair*, 1976. Also included in exhibition *From Icon To Symbol*, Blum Helmen Gallery, New York City, 1986. Courtesy the artist.

the 1978 'Schizo-Culture' issue of *Semiotext(e)*.<sup>2</sup> In written statements about her work she has repeatedly invoked the capacity of painting to register subjectivity, obedient to the ethos of her Abstract Expressionist teachers while fully aware of more recent efforts to undo the human subject as linchpin of meaning. Experiences far outside New York, her home since 1969, have marked her understanding of painting just as indelibly. The first of these was a visit to the Aboriginal rock art at Ku-ring-gai National Park, outside Sydney, in 1977. Organised by Daniel Thomas, the visit impressed upon Green the power of Indigenous art along with its radical otherness to what she was seeing in New York.<sup>3</sup> She would later link this to a retrospective recognition of the significance of the traditional Aboriginal art she had seen at the Queensland Museum as a child in Brisbane.<sup>4</sup> Two residencies in India in the '80s extended her interest in non-Western art and introduced her to the work of poet and scholar A.K. Ramanujan, whose essay 'Is there an Indian way of Thinking?' (1989) in particular, would prove decisive to her conception of painting.

Green's *Metonymy in Contemporary Art* (2005) articulated that conception in a combination of art-critical and philosophical approaches from European and non-Western traditions in order to re-fashion painting as a fusion of inner states and outer form. 'Metonymic thinking in art', Green wrote, 'implies that one must take into account the inner world of the artist ... this inner state of mind can be metonymically conveyed in a painting.'<sup>5</sup> Echoing Ramanujan's arguments for the importance of contextual relationships over universal principles and reiterating his anti-dualism, she wrote that in a metonymic view of man in nature, '...man is continuous with the context in which he finds himself ... nature and culture are not opposed to each other ... they are parts of the same continuum'.<sup>6</sup> This contiguity was exemplified in Aboriginal art, 'From my

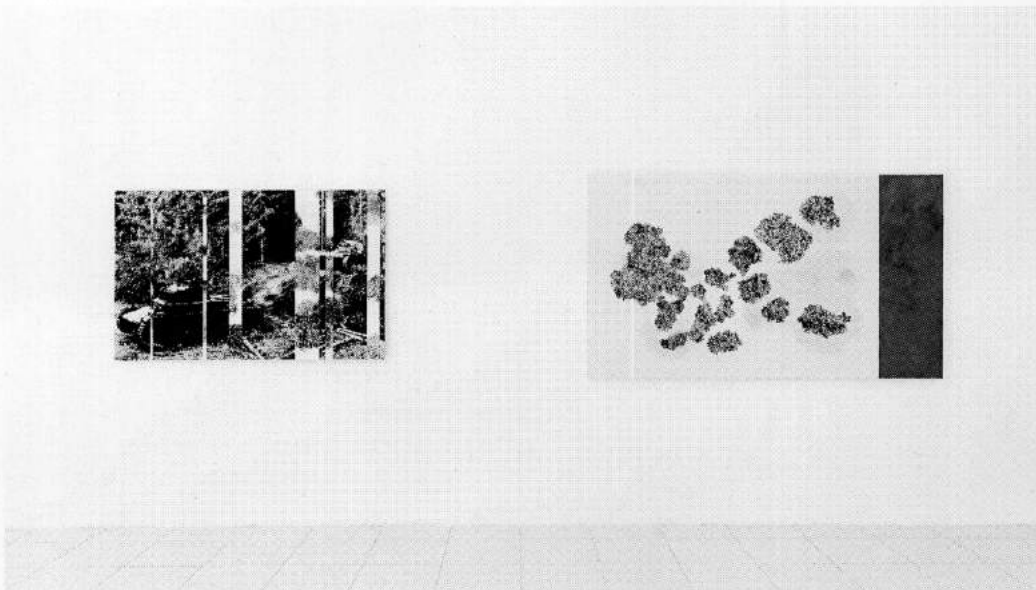
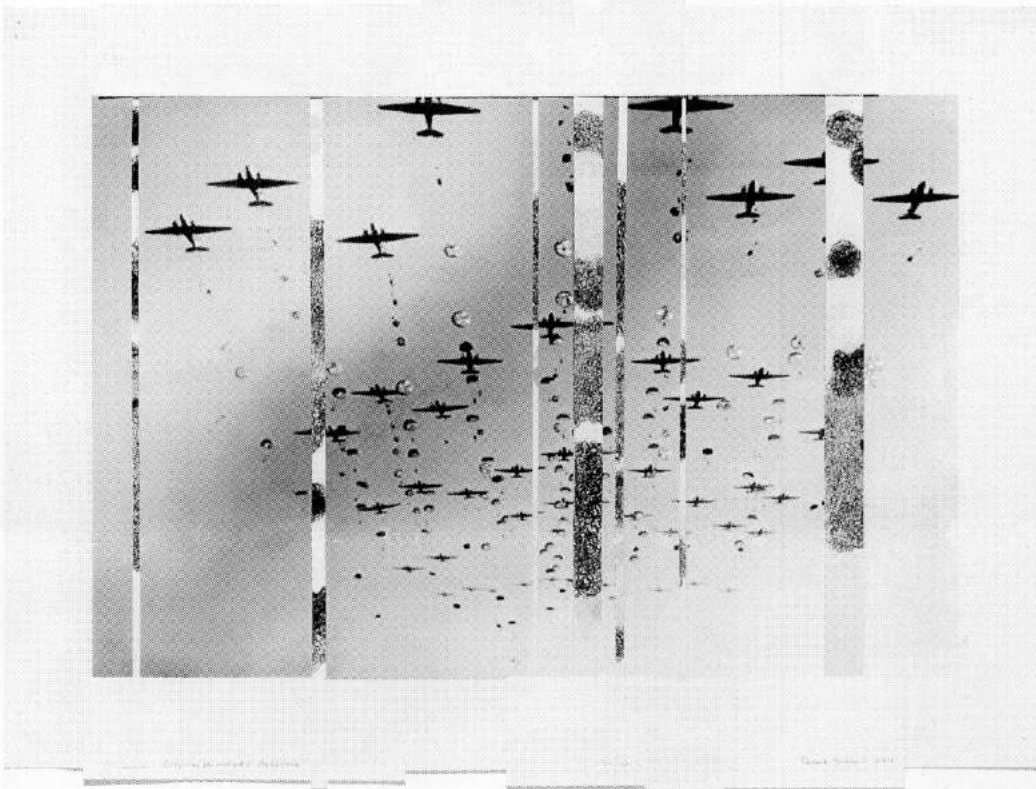
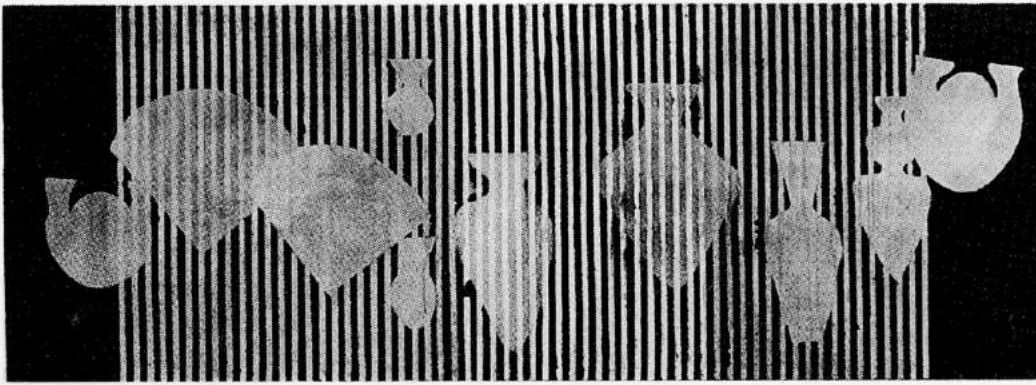
perspective, the abstract dimension of a painting is metonymically integrated with an inner reality—as is found in Aboriginal art works'.<sup>7</sup>

This model of metonymy may be idiosyncratic and its connection to Aboriginal art too simply drawn; nevertheless Green's argument about abstract painting and subjectivity in *Metonymy* is inseparable from a larger claim about the mechanics of meaning in art more generally.<sup>8</sup> In the book she uses work from a range of artists, among them Frank Stella, Mark Rothko, Dorothea Rockburne, to buttress her statement that abstraction 'fuses' inner states and outer form. Critical engagement with her own repertoire of reduced, abstracted forms—houses, fans, chairs, amphorae, sleds, roses—has addressed this fusion variously. Anthony Bond, surveying the work from its beginning, calls these forms 'ideograms', 'icons', close to but not quite 'hieroglyphs', neither are they fully archetypes; he elaborates, 'Green [is] stimulating the idea of a thing that is not of a specific time and place but exists only in the mind of the viewer'.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging the influence of semiotics, Bond notes that the scriptural embellishments often accompanying her paintings constitute 'a form of automatic writing referencing text but not delimited by specific meaning', and noting Green's 'outlines' that may connect with a viewer's 'repertoire of stored recollection', he alludes to a density of meaning that is not immediately accessible, a meaning that is private, individualised, and ultimately resistant to semiotic analysis.<sup>10</sup>

Whitney curator Richard Marshall had called the meanings of new image paintings ambiguous, a consequence of the late seventies' combination of figuration and abstraction which produced images that fluctuated, in his words, between abstract and real. When ten years later curator Peter Freeman reprised Marshall's exercise with the same group of artists in the exhibition *From Icon to Symbol*, Roberta Smith discerned in the work a continuing mindset of 'partially legible meanings and their communicativeness'.<sup>11</sup> She noted the works' 'evocative and poetic' effects, adding 'one senses that these artists were attempting to open reservoirs of feeling long sealed over by presenting familiar forms in a reduced hieratic format'.<sup>12</sup> Let us note several things. The efforts to categorise the kind of image in operation—icon, symbol, ideogram, etcetera—along with references to legibility, text, and communicativeness, show critics intuited that Green, along with other artists associated with *New Image Painting*, were involved in an effort to engage with meaning, indeed with the mechanics of meaning. This was not semiotics, and not the old expressionism either, but an aspiration toward a non-specific semantic amplitude that had been held in check by minimalism. In 1978 Green had called the images in her work 'vessels' of emotions and ideas, characterising the image as bearer rather than inscription. Even as Green's work changed subtly through the eighties and nineties when those scriptural elements noted by Bond assumed greater prominence, this characterisation held. Introducing a retrospective of her work to a German audience in 2006, Roland Mönig titled his remarks, 'The image as a vessel'.<sup>13</sup>

Green has produced several suites of work prompted by trauma—the 9/11 attacks on New York, the death of her mother, and the Allied bombing of Dresden—and in these works the semantic amplitude of *New Image Painting* undergoes a refinement; the forms chosen are more specific and now, given the length of her practice, they are charged with a larger load of biographical and autobiographical significance. Thus the striped towers of the World Trade Center, treated as alternating bands of colour in a series of paintings from 2001–2003 are linked to a recollection of the patterns of sunlight under the Queensland house in which she grew up and first began drawing. The motif further links past and





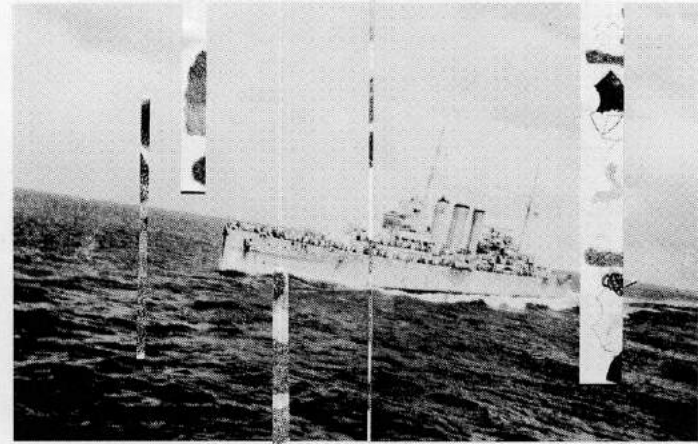
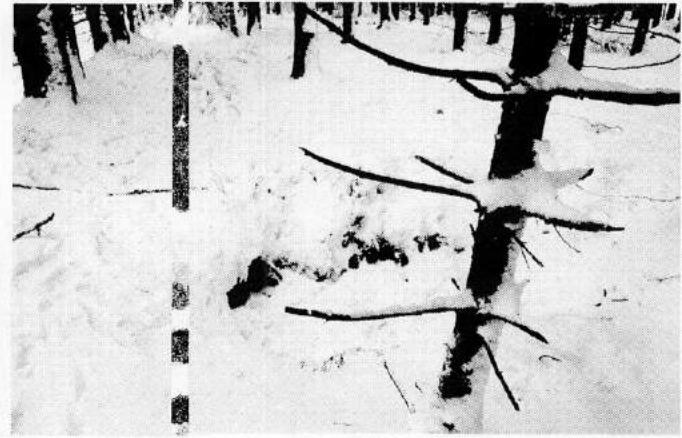
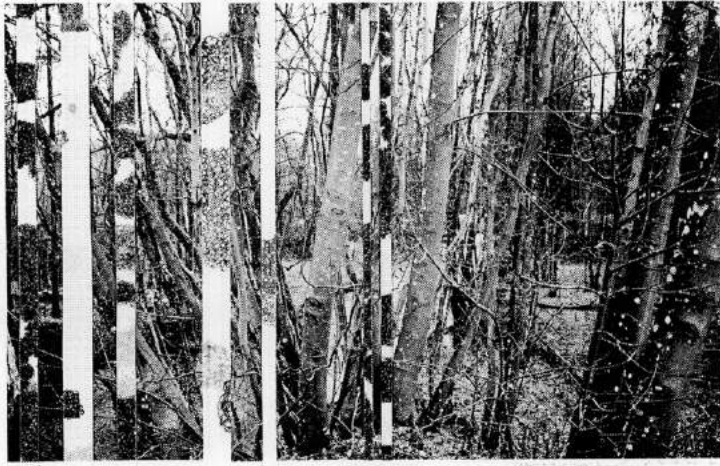
from top: *Re-Witnessing*, 2001. Detail. Acrylic on canvas, diptych, 112 x 316cm. Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth; *Ardennes Uncovered: Airborne*, 2015. One photograph and seven drawings, 56.5 x 72cm; Installation view, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Belgium. Left: *Ardennes Uncovered: Invasion*, 2016. One photograph and five drawings, 44 x 58cm. Courtesy the artist.

present autobiographically. Green witnessed the collapse of both World Trade Center towers from her studio window in Tribeca; the building was the subject of a 1972 watercolour. Treatment also registers semantic significance in works featuring roses and dedicated to Green's mother. Here the rose often appears repeated and fading, denoting life's transience, a treatment based on the Ramanujan idea of sequential encompassment. In the last of these works inspired by trauma, the *Square Column Series*, produced for her retrospective in Kleve, Germany in 2006, Green used a simplified rendering of a stone fragment from the Frauenkirche in Dresden, an eighteenth century Baroque church destroyed by Allied bombing in early 1945. (The fragment had been given to her very shortly after 9/11 by a worker on the Frauenkirche reconstruction site.) Nominally three dimensional in her depiction where its form can suggest an architectural model, this fragment recurs, centrally positioned on a monochrome ground, over the multiple panels that comprise the work and were installed in Kleve in columns of four and five.

*Square Column Series* suspends that New Image Painting generality outlined by Bond, that 'idea of a thing that is not of a specific time and place but exists only in the mind of the viewer', for some large ambitions that combine both biography and wider histories. The Frauenkirche fragment Green depicts is not atemporal or atopic, and its duplication and vertical arrangement in the Kleve Kurhaus Museum served precise ends. The vertical arrangement echoed the colonnaded space in which it was installed; this association 'affirming' in Green's words, construction and reconstruction rather than simply memorialising the firebombing's victims.<sup>14</sup> Kleve, like Dresden, suffered extensive damage from Allied aerial bombing in World War II and both cities have since been extensively rebuilt. Witnessing New York's air attack in 2001, Green understood the resonance of this affirmative aspiration.

This series is critical for some of her most recent work which is informed by an interest in intergenerational trauma. Prompted initially by her own family's struggles with a father who had returned from World War II irreparably changed, it has also drawn on European travel, particularly to Belgium and Germany, and the works of W.G. Sebald. Green's interest is not memorial or recuperative, rather her concern is with the way the past inheres in the present. The *Square Column Series'* themes of historical memory and devastation along with the function of site and ruin can be understood as necessary precursors here. Equally significant was her choice of abstracted image, the Frauenkirche remnant that is both symbol and synecdoche. This density differentiates it from all Green's previous image choices—the house, the amphora, the fan, the rose—and helps elucidate the way photography functions in her recent work.

Green first used photography for private memorial associations, using images of the Saar River loop in an eponymously titled 2014 series to recall a recently deceased acquaintance who had been



clockwise from top left: *Ardennes Uncovered: Forays*, 2015. One photograph and six drawings, 43 x 68cm; *Siegfried Line: Foxholes*, 2016. One photograph and one drawing, 44.5 x 57cm; *HMS Canberra Leaving Convoy*, 2016. One photograph and five drawings, 48 x 56cm; *Italian POW- Long Long Trail*, 2016. One photograph and four drawings, 58 x 44cm. Courtesy the artist.

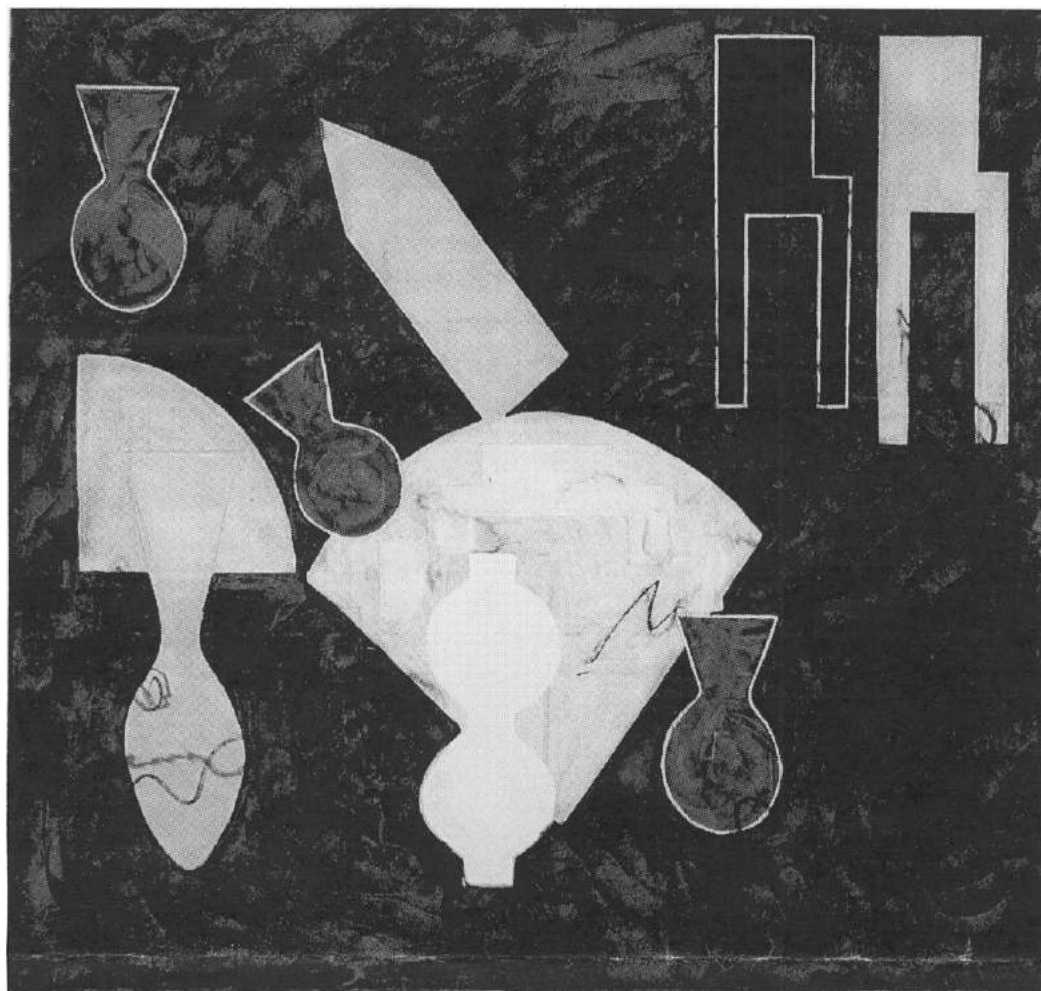
associated with the area. In these *Saar* works photographs were flanked by identically sized drawings featuring shaded areas of closely worked curlicues and occasionally featuring the fan-like or 'wipe' shape she has been using for several decades. Although the Saar region was heavily bombed during WWII its wartime history was incidental to Green's choice. The Ardennes series, all of which incorporate photographs of the Ardennes forest, is different. The site of the bloody Battle of the Bulge in the closing months of WWII, the forest's battleground history is now almost invisible. Nevertheless it was this history that determined Green's choice of location. It might be said that in these works Green's use of photography begins to approximate contemporary photography's ongoing engagement with what Kitty Hauser has called 'the conceit of a land-

scape haunted by history', the result in Hauser's view, of the contemporary 'obsession' with memory and given fullest form in photography 'which highlights the gap between the present appearance of a site and the events that took place there'.<sup>15</sup>

Hauser makes these claims in *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology and the British Landscape 1925-1951*, her study of how the 'archeological imagination' invested meaning in the British landscape, particularly the photographed landscape. Hauser shows how photography, in spite of its love of surfaces, became the vehicle for the architectural imagination's 'love of immanent depth' by framing landscape and other subjects as site, as a place where something has happened.<sup>16</sup> It did so by revealing traces, such as Roman ruins or remnants of bombed buildings from which past actions or events could be inferred. The meaning of such photographs is less any specific iconic content than the fact of their registering that something had been there.

Hauser's 'conceit' constitutes a subgenre of contemporary art. Photographers working within this representational 'gap' include, among others, Tomoko Yoneda and Kimsooja. In Yoneda's ongoing 'scene' series, anodyne, large format photographs of a sandy path and a suburban baseball ground are labeled, respectively, *Path-Path to the cliff where Japanese committed suicide after the American landings, Saipan* (2003) and *Baseball Ground, formerly a Kamikaze base until the end of the Second World War, Chiran* (2000). Kimsooja's, *Bottari-Alfa Beach* (2001) a single-channel video projection showing





*Azzuro Di Cobalto Puro*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 183 x 172cm. Collection of The University of Queensland, Brisbane. Courtesy the artist.

the departure point of slave ships in Nigeria, hints at the atrocity of the site by showing the landscape of beach, sea and sky inverted, but this inversion is the only mark of the conceit alluded to by Hauser. History's 'haunting' of the landscape, a visually undistinguished strand, remains unseen. By contrast, but still working largely within the register of invisible traces, Ricky Maynard's work is a continuing effort to maintain the memorial meanings of specific places, places known to him as a member of the Ben Lomond and Cape Portland peoples of Tasmania. Landscapes are shown to be marked, physically, as in *Flintstone sculpture* and *Coolamon tree carving* (both 2003), where 'incidental' marks of nature are revealed to be the work of Indigenous hands (largely through the title), or resonant in the memory of a particular people, in which case Maynard accompanies the images with more expansive text.<sup>17</sup> Here it is perhaps more correct to say that memory itself etches the landscape but that would be to extend an analogy—Hauser's 'conceit'—that for Maynard does not exist. Memory for him is contiguous with, ultimately inextricable from, the landscape.

With the single exception of the Ardennes series, Green chooses sites because of personal rather than historical associations; her use of photography cannot be said to highlight the distance between the present appearance of a site and its historical significance. And, as she avoids the contextualising labels favoured by other artists working this terrain, any site's historical resonance is left to the vagaries of individual reception. (To this extent historical knowledge becomes a form of private meaning.) If Green's turn to photography does not mine that 'gap' noted by Hauser, her use of it nevertheless shares with that work a sense of landscape as bearer of immanent meaning, however much she might disrupt the photograph through excision and striated juxtaposition. This sense of landscape, suffused with a meaning that is palpable, able to be worked abstractly, may be the longest lasting legacy of her visit to Ku-ring-gai. ●

#### Notes

1. Tiffany Bell, writing on the occasion of Green's P.S.1 retrospective in 1999, 'Language and Intuition', *Art in America*, October 1999, p.138.
2. This was a record of the Columbia University conference of the same name organized by Felix Guattari in November 1975. Green attended the conference and recalls, 'My memory of it was pretty chaotic. Anything with Guattari was like performance art'. 'Schizo-Culture' was re-issued as *The Book: 1978* by MIT Press in 2014. Green also worked on some early translations of Lacan for the Semiotext(e) imprint. Denise Green, conversation with the author 11 December 2014.
3. Thomas, who moved to Canberra in early 1978 to take up the position of Senior Curator of Australian Art at the Australian National Gallery after his post as Chief Curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, has called these drives to Ku-ring-gai, 'standard entertainment for artists and curators of the exhibitions that reached us', and lists among them Gilbert & George, Nam June Paik, Henry Geldzahler, William Wegman, Keith Sonnier, and many others. Daniel Thomas, correspondence with the author, 15 December 2015.
4. At the time of writing, it has not been possible to identify the Groote Eylandt works that Green recalls seeing in the Queensland Museum in her youth. It may be that the works were in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, which was also housed in the Museum building at that time.
5. Denise Green, *Metonymy in Contemporary Art: A New Paradigm*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005, p.25.
6. Green, *Metonymy in Contemporary Art*, *ibid.*, p.9.
7. Green, *Metonymy in Contemporary Art*, *ibid.*, p.12.
8. Too simply put because the political stakes of deploying Aboriginal art in this way are not considered. Green opens *Metonymy* with a critique of both Greenbergian formalism and the Benjaminian notion of aura.
9. Anthony Bond, 'Ontology is at the Heart of It' in *Denise Green: An Artist's Odyssey*, University of Minnesota Press/Macmillan, Minneapolis/Melbourne, 2012, pp.48-52.
10. Bond, 'Ontology is at the Heart of It', *ibid.*, p.48.
11. Roberta Smith, 'Art: In the Mid-70's, Exploring the Image', *New York Times*, 12 December 1986. See <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/12/arts/art-in-the-mid-70-s-exploring-the-image.html?pagewanted=all>. Accessed 15 December 2015.
12. Smith, 'Art: In the Mid-70's, Exploring the Image', *ibid.*
13. Roland Mönig, 'Das Bild als Gefäß/The image as a vessel', *Denise Green (ex. cat.)*, Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Kleve, 2006, p.10.
14. Denise Green, conversation with the author, 11 December 2014.
15. Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology and the British Landscape 1925-1951*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, pp.58, 94.
16. Hauser, *ibid.*, pp.58, 62.
17. Maynard's *Traitor*, from the series 'Portrait of a Distant Land' shows a sylvan glade, but the tree at its centre marks the site of the fatal agreement between chief Manggalargenna and George Augustus Robinson where in Maynard's words, his ancestors 'were double-crossed' and tricked into re-settlement on Flinders Island.

Ingrid Periz is an art historian and critic based in New Jersey.