ART OR PORN? WHAT BECAME OF THE SUBJECT?

by

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Abstract

An exhibition of Bill Henson’s photographs in Australia in May 2008 resulted in wide-spread media, political and community debate. Prior to the exhibition’s opening police removed nude photographs of a 12-13 year-old girl and boy pending investigation of child pornography and indecent publication charges. The debates that followed were emotional, and prolonged. The debates focussed on the arguments of childhood innocence and vulnerability, consent and exploitation of young girls and, in defence, focussed on the position of an internationally respected artist.

The aim of this paper is to consider how the 12-13 year-old girl’s subjective understanding of her place in the photographs was largely ignored. To consider her position I will briefly explore the discourses of childhood innocence, vulnerability, sexualisation, commodification and exploitation. The significance of the body will be introduced to suggest possible subjective positions for the girl in the Henson photographs. A discussion of the comments and opinions that were played out in the media-based debates will consider how the social construction of contemporary Australian childhood, and concerns around the sexualisation and exploitation of children, made it impossible to consider the subjective position of the 12-13 year-old girl in the photographs.

Key Words: childhood, innocence, photography, girls, sexualisation, subjectivity
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‘Look at the eyes. It is as if we are looking at them, but they are seeing us’

(Beattie 1988)

Introduction

In Australia during May 2008 (and subsequent months) a media, political and community debate raged about whether photographs exhibited by world renowned Australian photographer Bill Henson were art, or exploitative child pornography. The debates began when concerned citizens viewed nude photographs of a 12-13 year-old girl and boy on a gallery website promoting the Henson exhibition, and contacted police. With concerns that the Henson photographs could fall under the charge of child pornography and indecent publication in the NSW Crimes Act, the police removed the children’s photographs from the exhibition pending investigation. The opening of the exhibition was postponed and the debates that followed were emotional and widespread, as Guy Rundle (2008) suggests in recapping the events, ‘for those who fell down a mineshaft’, it was almost impossible to ignore the media-based debates. The Australian Prime Minister, State Premiers, actor Cate Blanchett, author Germaine Greer, psychologists, academics, professionals and citizens had an opinion about the photographs and openly voiced them in the media.

It could be argued that the timing of Bill Henson’s exhibition including nude photographs of 12 or 13 year-old models in Sydney in May 2008 was a coincidence. Or perhaps Henson orchestrated his exhibition to coincide with the Senate Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment. Without a detailed knowledge of the availability of exhibition space and Bill Henson’s intentions it is difficult to do more than
question whether there was a connection. However, it can be argued that the sexualisation of young children in Australia is an emotional and widely debated issue. Both the Henson photographs and the Senate Inquiry resulted in significant public and media input into these debates. Whilst the Senate Inquiry encouraged public, community and organisational comment through written submissions and public hearings, the Bill Henson photographs resulted in prolonged and emotional media-based, public debates. Yet Bill Henson’s photographs do not stem from the consumer media; his photographs are art and he is an internationally renowned and respected artist. However art does not function outside the cultural environment within which it is exhibited and it is appropriate to consider Bill Henson’s photographs in line with community concerns about the sexualisation of children.

Much has been written about whether Bill Henson’s photographs were art or pornography, whether the models were capable of giving consent and whether the parents acted responsibly. In this paper I would like to focus on the female model in the photographs and consider her position as the object of social perceptions of contemporary childhood, pornography and art in these debates. The aim of this paper is to consider how the debates that followed the removal of Bill Henson’s photographs ignored the model’s subjective understandings of her place in the photographs and focused instead on the discourses of childhood, sexuality, exploitation and high art in Australian society.

From the outset I would like to bring myself into this analysis, as I am a member of the Australian public who experienced the public outcry and furore of the Bill Henson exhibition. I am also an early year’s researcher of this age group of girls, with a focus on exploring girls subjective understandings of developing a sense of self. Furthermore I am the mother of a 12 year-old daughter. As John Law suggests, there is a role for the personal in research:
Subject-positions, the positions that constitute us as knowing subjects, are relevant if we want to understand the performativity of stories, to understand how distributions are being made (2000, p. 26).

For me this event was personal. It challenged me to consider the decisions we constantly make as parents that directly influence our children. It challenged me to consider whether I would allow my daughter to be photographed naked by an artist, and even, whether I believed she would agree to participate. These are personal questions which I will not directly answer in this paper but which inform my analysis of how the media and public were unable to consider the female model’s subjective position in the debates that followed.

To explore and analyse the absence of the young female model’s voice in the Henson debates I will present a necessarily succinct overview of the discourses of childhood innocence in contemporary society. A brief exploration of the commodification, exploitation and sexualisation of young girls will follow, highlighting the significance of the body. A discussion of media comments and opinions that were played out in the media-based debates will consider how the social construction of contemporary Australian childhood, and concerns around the exploitation and sexualisation of children, made it impossible to consider the female model’s subjective position in these debates.

**Childhood Innocence**

Confronted with images of the Henson photographs Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, stated his desire to ‘just allow kids to be kids, you know’ (2008). The difficulty with this statement is not with its intent, as I suggest that Mr Rudd conveyed what many Australian’s were thinking at that time, but the question it evokes: What does it mean to be a ‘kid’ of 12 or 13 in Australia? Mr Rudd’s statement engenders images of an Australian childhood that is a
time of innocence and happiness, a time to be creative and to play with little or no responsibility (Tucci, et al. 2006; Wyness 2006).

In the background of these 21st century discourses of childhood are concerns that children should not be exposed to all knowledge if their innocence and vulnerability are to be protected. These concerns have their origins in the history of the social construction of Western childhood. Theorists such as Philippe Aries (1962) suggest that from the 18th century childhood developed a status separate from adults and adults began to remove, censor and guard information they considered inappropriate for children. As social perceptions of childhood altered, governments introduced laws to protect the rights of the child. Increasingly childhood developed a status separate from adulthood, with associated rights for protection, education and a separate social status. At the same time parents became increasingly aware of social expectations that they would provide a supportive childhood (Cunningham 1995; Postman 1994).

The discourse of childhood innocence and vulnerability continues at the beginning of the 21st century. The rights of the child are recognised in the United Nations convention, as well as in Australian Federal and State laws and childhood is arguably defined by adult’s perceptions of children’s needs. Adding to adult concerns about the status of contemporary childhood is the view that children are growing up too fast as their social environment lacks stability and is rapidly changing (Elkind 1989; Mason and Fattore 2005; Tucci, et al. 2006). This creates an additional problem for adults faced with protecting children’s innocence and vulnerability; the problem of defining an age range for contemporary childhood. A 12 or 13 year-old girl is still considered a child in terms of the law but the influences of technology, the consumer
market and the media are blurring the boundaries of childhood (Kenway and Bullen 2001; Wyness 2006).

**Exploitation, Commodification and Sexualisation of Australian Childhood**

In this section I will briefly explore the issues of sexualisation of children together with the exploitation and commodification of childhood by focussing on the influences of the consumer-media. The discussion here is necessarily limited and I acknowledge that this focus will leave out discussions that would explore important social and cultural changes to families and work practices that have impacted on children and childhood in Australia at the beginning of the 21st century.

Kenway and Bullen (2001) argue that a ‘consumer-media culture’ has established itself as one of the greatest influences over children in contemporary society. Their voices are not alone, social theorists, commentators and parents recognise the influence of the media, technology and the consumer market over children. Immersed in a consumer-media culture from birth it is suggested that by the time they reach 12-13 years of age children have become astute consumers (Buckingham 2000; Linn 2004; Livingstone 2002; Shoebridge 2004; Wyness 2006). Consumers who are not just focussed on the consumer goods and services that are available from the consumer-media but also the images and messages that they receive (Holland 1992; Hopkins 2002; Reist 2008, Rush and La Nauze 2006). The consumer-media holds an overwhelming position of power in this relationship and as Patricia Edgar (2007) argues, ‘we are seeing a much younger generation targeted, and softened up for exploitation’.
In October 2007 the Australian Psychological Society (APA) released a tip sheet offering advice to parents in ‘Helping girls develop a positive self image’. The tip sheet begins with a message that highlights the scope of the consumer-media’s influence:

*Girls get many messages about how they should look and behave. These messages can start when girls are very young, and not all of these are healthy messages. Girls may be told that what matters is how “hot”, or how “sexy” they look or dress. These messages are evident on TV and across the Internet, in song lyrics and music videos. You see it in movies, electronic games, and clothing stores. They are powerful messages.*

The APA here focuses on the influence of the media, yet the media works in tandem with the consumer market to advertise its products. Concerns expressed by parents, academics, politicians and social commentators about the sexualisation and exploitation of childhood focus both on the products that are being sold for children – including push-up bras for 6 year-olds - and the images that advertise and create the desire for the product (Kenway and Bullen 2001; Linn 2004; Rush and La Nauze 2006; Wyness 2006). The images of children dressed in clothing designed to mimic adult styles - the tank top, short skirt, high heels, jewellery and make-up – raise concerns. As do the poses of children:

*She adopts the female full frontal pose which is familiar to us from images of adult women models – the head is tilted and turned to one side, the shoulders are tilted one way and the hips the other* (Rush and La Nauze 2006, p.vii).

As the parent of a 12 year-old daughter I find much to agree with in these arguments because the images presented to her by the consumer-media concern me. But I want to take up Holland’s argument that ‘pictures on a page call up images in our minds’ (1992, p.10) and suggest that our adult interpretations and anxieties cloud our ability to recognise a 12-13
year-olds subjective understandings of who she is, or wants to be. I want to argue that it is our minds, our adult interpretations of these pictures, which assume a child posing in a particular way can have the same meaning as an adult posing in a similar fashion (Lumby and Albury 2008). I want to suggest that adults do not understand enough about how 12-13 year-old girls interpret these images to assign the same meanings on their behalf.

12-13 Year-old Girls – The Significance of the Body

The body is widely recognised as playing a significant role in the formation of feminine identities. These theories are pertinent to this argument and I would like to introduce Bordo’s view that ‘we are obsessed with our bodies, but we are hardly accepting of them’ (1993, p.15). Research indicates that one of the greatest concerns of young girls at the beginning of the 21st century is body image. These concerns are reflected in community and medical debates around the incidence of bulimia and anorexia in young girls; body image is often expressed through the desire to be thin. However, body image is also recognised as playing a major role in how young girls inform others of who they are (Sands and Wardle 2003; Smolak 2004).

Anthony Giddens suggests that individuals mobilise their bodies in a variety of ways, depending on the activity or social event they are participating in. Their intention, Giddens claims, is to communicate a message about themselves to others (1991, pp.99-102). Giddens’ claim holds particular significance for young girls as research suggests that for many girls the need for control during an important stage of identity formation is maintained through their bodies and appearance (Hopkins 2002; Smolak 2004). The significance of the body and its role in informing others of who they are is reflected in advice and information being provided
to young girls. This advice comes from many sources; families, peers, health and education professionals and the consumer-media:

‘Love your body. So we all have bodies what’s the problem’ (Somazone 2008)¹

Girls are being encouraged to value their bodies, to appreciate them for what they are and at the same time are being encouraged to:

_Challenge yourself to try new things, proving to yourself that you are up to any challenge is a great confidence booster_’ (Indigo4girls 2008)²

For me these messages are not related, but perhaps for a 12-13 year-old girl they are. As Law suggests:

_It is itself wrong, a confusion, a self-indulgence, to forget that the body is a site, an important site, where modes and the subjectivities of interpellations produce effects that are strange and beautiful and terrible, effects that might make a difference if we were able to attend to their interferences_ (2000, p.28).

Perhaps the 12-13 year-old female model in Bill Henson’s photographs intended to send a message, to communicate her desire to challenge herself and to inform others of who she is through her body. The opportunity for us to appreciate her subjective understandings of her

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¹ Somazone is a website developed by young people for young people. It is a program of the Australian Drug Foundation and promotes itself as a valuable resource for young people. Answers to questions posed on this website are answered by health professionals.

² Indigo Magazine is a new magazine for the 'tween' girls market which aims to reflect the real lives and concerns of young Australian girls. Indigo is published by a group of Victorian women and girls which has the slogan of "Giving Girls a Voice".
position in the photographs was lost though in the debates that followed the removal of the Henson photographs.

**Discussion**

When confronted with community concerns about his photographs being considered child pornography, artist Bill Henson reportedly stated that he was interested in exploring intimacy and ‘something which is absolutely inviolate and unknowable’ (Westwood 2008). I admit to knowing little about Bill Henson before this debate, and most of my knowledge is informed by the media-based debates, yet I suggest that his intention to explore something unknowable overlaps with community concerns surrounding the boundaries of childhood, and this particular age group, in Australian society. However, his desire to explore something that is absolutely inviolate – unaltered, something kept pure, untouched and unblemished – ignores or chooses to, the influences of society, family and community on a 12-13 year-old girl. In a non-sexual sense the 12-13 year-old girl in these photographs is not untouched or unblemished. She is a product of the family, community and society in which she lives. She is also an individual who possesses thoughts, feelings, emotions and an understanding of her decision to pose nude for an internationally renowned and respected artist; a family friend.

The female model’s subjective position in the Henson photographs was overlooked by the majority of citizens, academics, health professionals and social commentators who chose to position her as an object in the media-based debates that followed the removal of the photographs. She became the object of social perceptions of childhood and pornography in these debates, and was deemed to be:

‘not of an age to fully understand and appreciate all the implications of sex, life, the world, mankind and so on’ (Guest 2008).
She also had to endure the often derogatory comments about her photographs, Kevin Rudd, declared her photographs to be ‘revolting’, Carol Oliver suggested they were ‘too creepy’ and Steve Biddulph declared that ‘photographing teenage children naked and exposed ... takes their power and their privacy away and lets the world in. It’s using them’ (Biddulph 2008; Oliver 2008; Rudd 2008). Opinions on her parents inability to protect her were also openly expressed, ‘it’s tragic when parents fail to protect their children’ (Biddulph 2008) and to hear the artist she trusted to take her photograph accused of ‘child pornography’ (Biddulph 2008).

Yet even those who chose to support the photographs focussed on Henson’s rights as an internationally renowned artist and failed to recognise the model’s subjective position:

‘the potential prosecution of one of our most respected artists is no way to build a creative Australia’ (Blanchett et al. 2008).

Even lawyers who acknowledged her presence in the debates chose to focus on her vulnerability and right for protection. For example, law professor and former judge, Professor George Hampel claimed that;

The girl photographed naked by artist Bill Henson might be able to sue for damages as an adult if she feels hurt by the experience’ (Kissane 2008).

One of the few contributions to recognise the 12-13 year-old girl as a subject rather than an object in these debates came from her mother, who provided this insight into the 12-13 year-old model:

she is a ‘self-aware teenager with a keen interest in the arts’ (Farouque 2008).
Conclusion

The Henson debates continued for weeks, and the subjective position of the 12-13 year-old girl was barely acknowledged. In this paper I have highlighted that 12-13 year-old girls are capable of a subjective understanding of their position in society and the decisions that they make. By analysing the lack of recognition of the subjective position of a 12-13 year-old female model in the Henson debates I have highlighted how discourses of childhood innocence, vulnerability and sexuality cloud our ability to consider 12-13 year-old girls as active and reflective participants in their own lives. A position, I suggest, that will continue to limit adult’s ability to understand the influences and difficulties facing young girls growing up in Australia at the beginning of the 21st century. In conclusion I would like to highlight that the Henson debates also reminded us of the separate discourses of female and male childhood sexuality, innocence and vulnerability, as the Bill Henson exhibition also included photographs of a 12-13 year-old boy. His presence in the exhibition disappeared almost immediately from the debates.

World Count: 3000 plus references

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