

**CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**ART & ARTISTS**

**Name:** Dean Sewell

**Date:** 15 May 2013

**Place:** Cardigan Street, Stanmore

**Interviewer:** Deborah Beck

**TRANSCRIPT**

0.00 **DB:** This is an interview with photographer, Dean Sewell. My name is Deborah Beck and the interview is taking place in my studio in Cardigan Street, Stanmore. It's the 15th of May 2013. The interview is part of the Art & Artists in Sydney Oral History Project

**which is being conducted on behalf of the City of Sydney's History Programme.**

**So in 2012 you and five other photographers decided to install some of your photographs on the side of an ugly city carpark and called it the 'Elizabeth Street Gallery Project'. As you didn't have council approval at the time it's been labelled as a "guerrilla gallery". Can you tell me how long ago it was planned and who came up with the idea?**

DS: The initial concept for the idea, I guess, I would attribute to myself. I'd seen this space for some time – I'm talking years - I've travelled past that destination for probably over twenty years. When I first saw it it was similar to Central Station where they had murals. I think the '80s produced a lot of mural work around Sydney which I think dated very quickly and it looked very shabby and over the following years all those works that were in those recessed brickwork that ran down between Goulburn Street and the next street which made up that block on Elizabeth Street, they became increasingly empty. And as I became more aware of sort of public art I thought that might be a really good idea, it'd be a great idea to put photographs into because you could put stuff into the public domain but like there was a security about the works, being recessed.

**DB: Did you say there was something there before?**

DS: There were sort of like murals but it seemed as though they were maybe commissioned from primary schools or secondary school and they seemed the collective works of kind of children, that type of work.

2.11 And they gradually sort of disappeared, fell out, vandalised, pulled out by the council or whoever, to a point where it became empty and it was empty for years. I guess my interest in public work sort of was spawned after a four year project that I was working on as a documentary photographer photographing a group of culture jammers in Sydney and I spent like the good part of four years photographing their practices.

**DB: So what's a culture jammer?**

DS: Culture jamming is about, I guess, subverting, taking advertisement and subverting it. The concept is about jamming up the messages that advertisers are trying to put into people's minds. It's about reclaiming the public space and the mental environment of the people that live around those sorts of things. So it's often clever, it's witty, it uses a lot of satire to subvert a given message. Like for example it could be an

underwear campaign and that could be turned around into like a really powerful anti-war message or a telco - - -

**DB: It's like BUGA-UP [acronym for 'Billboard Utilising Graffitist Against Unhealthy Promotions'], really, is it?**

DS: Yes, it was similar to BUGA-UP but it took it just like so many levels higher. These guys, in terms of culture jamming it was probably amongst the biggest logistically complex sort of actions done anywhere in the world. These guys were seasoned forest campaigners; they did a lot of stuff around old growth logging in Tasmania.

4.03

So a lot of their works initially were about the Gunns Limited, the company that was clear-felling Tasmania, and then it progressed into sort of anti-war messaging and other things, banks and financial institutions and so forth. But having spent that time with these guys I sort of – how would you say it – I took on their practice basically and I knew how easy it was; I'd become as brazen as they were in terms of putting things up. So once they sort of disbanded the group, because a couple of them were lawyers they could no longer continue their activities once they'd got admitted into the legal fraternity, so that group sort of disintegrated a bit but I guess for me it was a crossing of the line as a documentary photographer from becoming sort of a passive observer to an active participant; I actually became a part of the group myself. In the long run I just took those practices and then started using my own work instead of documenting the work of others and putting my own work into the public arena.

**DB: What about the other five artists? Were they working with you already or did you just gather them together?**

DS: I gathered them together. I knew they're good photographers in their own right so it would guarantee we'd have like serious content; the works that we'd put up would be like serious photography and also they didn't mind getting up to a bit of mischief in the night or in the middle of the day or morning or whenever it might take place. So you need people, I guess, for public art projects, particularly if they're sort of guerillaesque in nature, to not be scared or put off by possible arrest at the worst.

6.11

You're not going to be shot or killed; we're not in the Gaza Strip or something like that. So, yes, it might mean a slap on the wrist or a fine or something or whatever like that, but certainly you couldn't be intimidated by that.

**DB: So it must have been really well organised. Some of the photos – well, they're all big. Are they all the same size, the photographs?**

DS: Yes. Most of them on Elizabeth Street were around two metres; some of them are a bit longer. We measured up the spaces and funny enough they were all different.

**DB: Really?**

DS: They varied like maybe by ten, twenty, thirty centimetres which seemed a bit crazy for the guys who were building it, who initially built that building and wall. To the naked eye they all look pretty the same - - -

**DB: They look the same.**

DS: - - - and you'd sort of think they would be but they did vary a bit but that wasn't so much a problem. Logistically, it was a pretty big project, like it did take us a lot of work. The biggest problem was finding a material, something to print on that was going to be durable and weatherproof and so forth. And then we had to find how we were going to adhere it to the wall, so there was issues of glue, the backing that we'd put the photographs onto, how we'd put them on there because we were using like unconventional papers. They were sort of like poly based sort of papers so then we had issues of sticking, because of the nature of the materials we had issues of sticking them and it was an economic thing too. I mean it was fairly costly, it wasn't too bad. Between six of us I think it cost I think five thousand dollars but we had to find something that was going to be durable that would last.

8.07 **DB: How did you actually print them?**

DS: They were printed through a fairly conventional print house - like there's plenty around Sydney.

**DB: The big ones.**

DS: Yes, there's lots of big ones around so it's a fairly conventional printing sort of process but not like art papers, not if you were exhibiting in a gallery where you'd have a nice, maybe a cotton base, you had paper or something. These were like poly based.

**DB: So did you stick them onto the backing boards and then stick them to the wall? How did you physically do it?**

DS: Yes. Well, we had to do that. Like it wasn't till we'd actually done it all that we realised there were much simpler processes and that was perhaps an issue with the printers, the printers not understanding completely what we were actually doing with them. Not that we were

withholding information or being dishonest, it just wasn't conveyed to them that we had to put them onto backing and then stick them onto a wall, in which case these guys would have said "Hey, we can print on the same paper but you have a contact base and pull apart a sticky base. It would have been cheaper and saved us a lot of work in the end but as it was we got it all done in the end.

**DB: Just explain the installation. You did it at night or when did you do it?**

DS: We started in the morning. Yes, we figured that if we started 'round six o'clock in the morning – when you put on high-vis vests and we've collected sort of barricades and bollards and witch hats and some signage which we sort of appropriated from the City of Sydney and put all that up and down the street so we made sure the OH&S was in place and we knew that the pedestrian traffic at that time would be minimal and we knew if we were dressed like that then no one's going to ask a question.

10.09 By the time we unloaded all the prints and had them up and down the street in place ready to go on – there was a team of about eight people working – the police were driving past.

**DB: They looked official.**

DS: Yes, looked official. You wouldn't think what was going on was illegal, being that it's not that we're hurting anything or anybody.

**DB: And so because they're placed in the recesses they feel like windows, it's got that feeling of looking at parts of the city, really. The images are of the city, are they?**

DS: Yes. The images all were sort of extracts, I guess, from bigger bodies of work that each photographer has procured and they were essentially what we'd loosely put into the genre of like street photography, I guess. Yes, most of it was essentially street photography.

**DB: How many of the recesses were there?**

DS: There were forty two spaces, I think, and six photographers - I think around that number. So we thought that that street photography was a good genre to put back onto the street: since we'd harvested them images from the street that it's only appropriate that we put them back there for people to see.

**DB: Yes, good idea. I noticed you'd attached a list of artists next to them on the wall. So did you find people reading them and looking at them in that way?**

DS: It's hard to say because it's hard to gauge, really, how people perceive it because you can't be there all day, every day, and by and large it's amazing that some people – we stood there on some days and went back a couple of days just to observe and to check in the initial days how the prints were holding up.

12.15 We'd go down there every couple of days and make sure that things were - - -

**DB: The glue would work and everything.**

DS: - - - yes, everything was in place and the glue set fine and everything and it's amazing how many people just walk past and don't even look sideways but then some people they will sort of notice it. I mean, some people just walk around with blinkers on, it seems like, through their entire lives, they won't look this way or that way, and for those types, well, it wouldn't matter if there was an exhibition there or not. But other people you see will take the time and go "Oh, there's something actually" – they've probably walked up and down for years and finally it clicks to them that there's actually something there of cultural worth. And then there'll be people – because we got fairly good press with that exhibition – so people were actually actively going there because they'd seen it in the [*Sydney Morning Herald*] or perhaps listened to it on Radio National or something like that and so they were actively going there just purely to have a look at it.

**DB: Did you organise the press?**

DS: Yes.

**DB: Yes, it was a good way to get it seen.**

DS: That's right. Working in the press myself I know how to kind of manipulate it to your benefits at times and it's pretty easy to get press if you want it. And not that it was so controversial but I think the reason why we got good press is because we did something really - - -

**DB: Interesting, yes.**

DS: - - - interesting for the community.

**DB: So the City of Sydney Council didn't ask you to remove them. In fact, they authorised them within, was it twelve hours or something?**

DS: Yes.

**DB: Was that also you telling them or how did that happen?**

DS: Well, yes. Because one of the photographers, his girlfriend she works in those circles and she knows a lot of people from Council so she took on a role of like being like a spokesperson almost for us in explaining it to them.

14.17

And they saw it immediately and there's little they could say. They were really good about it and we were happy that they took such a stance because they could have just easily have gone "Well, this is coming off" and just ripped it down but they saw little reason in doing that. In fact, we'd added to the city with that.

**DB: Of course. So did they give you a length of time?**

DS: Well, they asked us questions about how long we expect it to be there for and, you know, philosophically I don't think any street art should be permanent and we didn't expect it ever to be permanent but at least we thought if it could last there for a few months that'd be really good. But then after being in contact with the City of Sydney we talked with them and they said "Well, let's get together and talk about it" because they wanted to know our long term plans for the space. And we did have plans for it and one of the ideas that we thought of was taking on almost a curatorial custodianship of that space where we would put it forward to them that if we could manage it with help from the Council and some help with funding then we could have rolling exhibitions that could turn over every six months.

**DB: Great idea, yes.**

DS: That's the idea. It's like the murals you see along Central Station, they seemed to linger for way too long. The passageway that cuts across from Elizabeth Street to Broadway, I think in thirty years they've only changed the murals in there twice.

16.09

**DB: Yes.**

DS: I don't walk through there often these days but I understand the murals that exist there they were done like probably fifteen years ago or a long time ago.

**DB: And when you walk past you lose interest because you've seen them, you know, "Can't look any more".**

DS: Yes. There's no reason why they can't have a higher rotation for things like that and that's what we believe in. The idea of heritage listing

graffiti is a crazy idea in my view. I don't think any sort of graffiti or public art should be heritage listed. It's a transient art form and it should go, be replaced, make room for new and upcoming people to occupy them spaces.

**DB: So how did the council react to that idea of curating the space?**

DS: They were really open to it, they were great.

**DB: Will it happen, do you think?**

DS: Absolutely. We've already entered a meeting; we submitted a grant [application] with their help. I think they're excited by it. They contacted us because a lot of the works had become vandalised through tagging.

**DB: Did that happen long after they were installed?**

DS: Somebody just went past probably within a couple of weeks and started with something like a pen or something and did some scratches along some of them and then bit by bit some tagging started to end up on some of them and the council tried to remove – they're equipped with all these solvents and things but they weren't too sure how to approach those works, not fully understanding the printing process and what was being used.

18.02 So what they're actually doing is replacing them and they're putting them onto aluminium backing with a special type of print which I'm unfamiliar with but they're going to have a graffiti proof coating of sorts.

**DB: Like they do on buildings, yes.**

DS: Yes. And then if they become tagged again then they'll have some solvent just to wipe it clean like a whiteboard.

**DB: Come off easy – that's great.**

DS: So that's going to be happening within, I guess, the next couple of weeks. So that initial Elizabeth Street Gallery will remain there for another, I think, four months and then in four months' time we're going to curate and put up another exhibition. Now, that may be selecting six – it won't be our works; we want to pull in other photographers – it could be six photographers, it could be three photographers or in time we may just run the works of one artist. It will all depend and we'll see how we go as time unfolds.

**DB: So you feel that they've contributed to the city, that sort of image is helping with the look of the city, do you think, in that place?**

DS: Well, I think so, I think so, because street photography as a genre, there's no real home for it anywhere. Like commercial galleries are not really interested in street photography unless you're dead and you were shooting street photography a hundred years ago. Like the New South Wales Art Gallery, they'll run shows from like Henry Cartier-Bresson.

20.04 Fifteen years ago now or a bit more they had 'Magnum in our time' which was essentially photojournalists. Magnum was a documentary, photography, photojournalists. I mean that was one of the biggest exhibitions ever at the New South Wales Art Gallery but do you see anything from today like on contemporary documentary practice or street photography? Nothing. And you won't see it in art galleries. It's all conceptualised, essentially work that sells in commercial galleries.

**DB: What about 'Head On'? Because that does sort of come out a little bit into the streets occasionally, the 'Head On' Festival.**

DS: Yes. I have my own personal reasons I don't go anywhere near 'Head On'. There's another festival coming up – they're called 'Reportage' - this year, which is going to be a big thing. But I mean they're still basically works in galleries and there might be the odd projection or something outside of that but it's all very orchestrated and legal and you have to go through a process to have your work in that where this -  
- -

**DB: It's immediate. That's the lovely thing about it.**

DS: Yes, we do what we want where we like.

**DB: So have you got any plans for any others in Sydney in other places?**

DS: Well, funny enough off the back of the Elizabeth Street Project there's a big print house just down the road here on Parramatta Road, some guys who own a business, I think called 'Look Print' or something. You may have seen the building – it's on Parramatta Road here.

**DB: At Annandale?**

DS: Yes, I think so. And they were in contact with us and they said "Could you do something on Parramatta Road?" They have virtually almost a block of shopfront, those guys, and we said "Sure" and they were really open-ended. They said "Well, put up what you want". So in the next week you'll see that appear on Parramatta Road.

22.11 **DB: Great.**

DS: Now, that's going to coincide with also 'Reportage', so that's going to be almost an official gallery as well of I think it's about nine photographs for about four metres along Parramatta Road. We've curated that with a theme this time on automobiles because we thought it was quite apt being on Parramatta Road, the busy traffic route.

**DB: Of course.**

DS: And also further along down Parramatta Road used to be referred to as "Auto Alley" so we thought cars were a good sort of theme to put onto Parramatta Road so all the imagery will be based around cars. And then there's another pub we're going to do in the next week as well, the Palisades Hotel.

**DB: I know the Palisades Hotel.**

DS: Yes. Well, it's been like boarded up for two or three years.

**DB: The Rocks.**

DS: Yes. And I was doing a story up there on Barangaroo for the [*Sydney Morning Herald*] because we used to go and drink there Friday nights and it was great because you pull your ute up there and drop the tray down and it was like being in the old days and you could just sit out on the gutter and drink and it was a relatively quiet pub, no one really knew about it. But as it sits now it's just like a freestanding pub, free of advertisement or any visual interference and it's all boarded up. So we're putting an exhibition on the pub before it relaunches and again it's curated around the actual suburb itself or that tiny area and all the imagery has been procured from that immediate district.

**DB: Yes, great. Is that in the pub or around the outside of the pub you're displaying the works?**

24.04 DS: Outside because they're actually inside, renovating it at the moment and they have been for some time. I talked to one of the local residents only recently and he said they've been in there for ages but he understands that the guys they ran out of money or they're doing it bit by bit when they get money so it's taken them a long time to renovate it. So all the windows are boarded up, so we've measured it up and we're going to throw up an exhibition on the pub. So come 'Reportage', the festival, when that starts next week we'll have Elizabeth Street running, we'll have the Palisades Hotel and Parramatta Road, three outdoor curated exhibitions.

**DB: Great. What about, there's other images put up in the city. I notice there's that one of the seagulls around the corner near**

**Central Station, great big, huge sort of images of gulls across there, facing the station. Do you think they help the look of the city or what do you think about those sort of images?**

DS: I'm trying to think of – are they - - -

**DB: It's fairly new. It's around the corner from the Elizabeth Street one sort of facing across Central.**

DS: O.K.

**DB: You haven't seen that one?**

DS: No.

**DB: It's just sort of multiple images of gulls and it looks like a blown-up photograph to me but anyway.**

DS: O.K. I can't speak on that specifically because I haven't seen it but you see a lot of paste-up, like black and white paste-up work of attempts at photography in the street and most of it's pretty, you know, mundane, I must say. Quite often it's very simplistic portraits of faces. And like you would have seen one they put on the old brewery.

**DB: A series of those, yes.**

DS: A series of portraits and that's about as far as most people have taken photography and quite often what you see – you rarely see photography that is procured by professionals that are much more complex in nature, and serious documentary work, end up in the street.

26.15 **DB: And I think linking them to the sites where you're doing them is great. I think that's going to work really well. It'll be interesting to see the Palisades one. So I might just change over now and talk a bit about your background and how you became a photographer.**

DS: Sure.

**DB: So you finished school in the 1980s and I read that you got a job straight away on the *Sydney Morning Herald*. So what had been your experience with photography before that?**

DS: It was quite minimal. My father was, I wouldn't say a *keen* amateur but, he was an amateur and I guess as a younger man he used a twin reflex Yashica and he'd do some sort of whacky sort of photos - he had a bit of a whacky sort of mind – and as a child like I'd watch him but it wasn't as though I had this lifetime dream that one day I'd become a

photographer like boys might, you know, “I want to be a fireman” or something like that. I really had no idea what I wanted to do.

**DB: Could you do photography at school?**

DS: I did. When I was in Year 11 I took a one unit course. One of our art teachers also, she did photography and she started a photographic course within the school.

**DB: What school was it?**

DS: South Sydney High in Maroubra Junction and that was Mrs Borenstein [?]. And I took that subject not even knowing that I was going to do photography but I thought “That might be interesting”. And my father at the time, he’d just bought a new Nikon camera.

28.00 He’d upgraded and bought this, from an old Yashica twin reflex to a relatively new model auto focus Nikon camera, and so I’d played around a bit with that and for school he let me take it out and take some photographs. And I think it was some time in Year 11 that we were taken off part of an excursion, to a careers market, at the old Sydney Showgrounds, one of those things you can wander ‘round and you’re meant to be able to have a taste of different careers. And I just happened upon a *Sydney Morning Herald* stand and it just said “Want to be a writer, photographer or cartoonist?” It’s as simple as that, and I thought “That could be interesting”. And I had a fairly political upbringing - my father was quite political – and I thought “Working on a newspaper might be a good way to engage in life” or whatever and photography, I thought “Wow, that could be quite interesting”. So then I spent Year 12 then taking photographs; I had to build a portfolio. At some point, it must have been the beginning of Year 12, I went for an interview – I can’t even remember now, some time when I was in Year 12 - I went for an interview with the *Herald* and I took on a portfolio and they said “O.K, go away for a few months, come back and show us what you’ve done in three months’ time”. And so I went away and I came back and I think I shot about maybe three rolls of film. But like a lot of amateurs they might go – pre-digital – they might go and they’ll take one photograph of something and they’ll stop and the film will remain your camera for maybe a month or weeks at a time.

30.03 And so I took it back to them and they said “Is this all you’ve done?” and I said “Well, yeah. How much would you expect me to do?” Later on in life I realised, you know, on a single job for the *Herald* you might shoot fifteen rolls of film. And then it clicked later on and I thought “Wow, no wonder they were so unimpressed by having shot three rolls of film in three months’ time”. So it came down to a point anyway

they've selected five people. There was two and a half thousand people went for the job at the time; I was shortlisted to five and two people were going to get a job. And so I went off to Queensland, I went surfing with friends after school, and I rang them up because I thought "I want to know if I've got the job". I rang up and they said "Look, we're really sorry. You've come third". And I thought "That's my luck", that's just so typical that I would come third. Like why couldn't it be fourth or fifth or not even be shortlisted? And I thought "Well, I'm not going to let it interfere with my holiday". And I'd put all my eggs into one basket. I was so disillusioned with the education system, high school knocked it out of me, and I just wasn't going to university. Like I'd made my mind up "I've had enough of this". I had battles with teachers and what have you and I thought "I can't do this again. I can't do another level of this. It's going to get worse and heavier" and so I thought "I'm not doing that"; I went for the *Herald* alone; that was it. Before I got too worried about it I thought "What am I going to do?" Like here I am, I've finished high school with no prospects, no nothing, no idea, and they've said "Sorry, you've come third". Then so a week later I was still up there and my mum called – we were staying in an apartment – my mum called and she said "*The Herald*, the guy from there's trying to get in touch with you. Can you give him a call?"

32.04

So I gave him a call back and they said "Are you still interested in that job?" I said "Well, yeah, of course I am". They said "Well, when can you start?" I said "I don't know. Next week?" and they said "O.K, good, next week's it". And what had happened is the two people that got the job there that year, there was a guy called Paul Jones; he's still a photographer, he's living down Wollongong way, I think, and they gave the second place to some woman or girl and the day that she was meant to start she just didn't turn up. She didn't ring in, they never saw her again. So I owe my career to this girl - - -

**DB: That you don't know.**

DS: - - - that I have no idea who she is. And they were sort of laughing at work when I started because they thought "Why wouldn't you?" - because at the time the *Herald* was a really amazing newspaper, the late '80s.

**DB: It's an honour to be asked.**

DS: Yes, it was something worthwhile to work on, not like today. But, yes, so I owe it all to her. It was just a whole series of lucky events that happened.

**DB: And how did you start working there? Did they give you an assignment straight away?**

DS: No, I spent two years in the darkroom because it was all black and white, you had to print, and the first thing was to get you up to speed to printing. So, yes, more or less I was printing in the darkroom all day.

**DB: Had you done any printing before that?**

DS: A little bit at high school. We learnt the basic fundamentals how to print but it was a different ballgame here. You had to be brought up to speed very quickly because things were very fast.

**DB: We were talking about your first job and the fact that you were working in the darkroom and you'd done a little bit at school.**

33.59 DS: So, yes, I was printing. The photographers were printing their own day to day assignments. What we had going at the time was what they called public photo sales. So members of the public would ring in, they saw a page one picture they really liked and they'd say "I would like to buy that picture" and the order would come through a process and it would end up with us and we'd take it. The negatives would be put together by someone, the order form, the size, whether it be a ten by eight [inches], a ten, twelve, sixteen, twenty, and print it up. So that's how we were taught how to print.

**DB: They'd be all black and white at that stage?**

DS: All black and white, yes, there was no colour. And there was a couple of guys there that was like darkroom technicians and printers and they were really good and so for the first two years I was essentially kept in the dark. And I actually loved the job and it became my whole life, working at the *Herald*. I didn't take a day off in three years. Sorry, I barely left the building and even on my days off I was in there because all the people in there and it's all the young guys like me we'd all become friends so it was like a social hub as well. Yes, on my days off like I didn't know what to do so I'd just go in there and - - -

**DB: Keep working.**

DS: Yes, I would go to the pub and drink with them or whatever. Yes, so I was there for full-on three years; I didn't take a day off.

**DB: And when did they let you go out and start doing photographs?**

DS: Around about after about two years, maybe even a bit less. I might have been there for maybe eighteen months in the darkroom but by about late '90, 1990, I guess I was starting to be sent out onto the road.

They'd allow us to do little things in the studio; it was all just the things that no one else wanted to do, stuff that was just given to the cadets, all the garbage work like photographing a teapot or something for one of the pages, something like that, just pretty simple stuff, put a light on it.

36.09

So we'd do all that stuff in the studio but as for going on actual assignments and heading out into the real world, yes, about 1990, I think. So around about eighteen months I was coping with that.

**DB: So that still would have been all film, you were still shooting on film at that stage?**

DS: Yes. So I had about four years on film, probably, shooting black and white. I think we started shooting colour film – let me think – we started shooting colour film in about '94, probably, '94, '95, something like that. So I had about four years shooting black and white and printing but I did become a good printer if I can say so myself.

**DB: It's a long time to do it every day of the week.**

DS: Yes, that's all I did. Like some things we had to print there'd be two of us and we'd have to print maybe about eight hundred prints in an afternoon, like eight by tens.

**DB: Huge numbers, yes.**

DS: *The Herald* had all these weird things: like we'd go to the races on certain days. Like the Spring Carnival it was like Ladies Day or something like that they have out there, and there'd be a photographer out there shooting all these women in their frocks or whatever and hats and all these rolls and then all he had to do, the photographer or the photographers out there, would be shoot, shoot, shoot all these women, put the film in bags. They'd be run back by drivers to us and we'd have to process and print it all and have all these prints done, give it back to the drivers, they'd take it back out there and hand out all these prints to people.

**DB: On the day?**

DS: Yes.

**DB: Wow.**

DS: So they were getting them in the afternoon.

**DB: That's like the old street photographers, I suppose.**

DS: Yes. So there would be two of us printing and we'd have six enlargers going simultaneously and we had these massive industrial processors that would just accept like volumes of prints running through them.

38.07 But as you learnt really quickly you could print quick. You could just look at the negative, you knew the exposure. You got to learn, you knew like "This is like grade three at six seconds" and virtually you'd have a bit of tweaking, a bit of burning and dodging and you had good prints.

**DB: Done, yes. Well, it wasn't long after that you started getting awards. I think it was '94 when you were awarded Australian Press Photographer of the Year, is that right?**

DS: Yes, that was the first.

**DB: That was the first one?**

DS: Yes. I was very ambitious, I must say, yes, and I was doing news photography. Like photographers then were able to sort of start to gravitate towards where their interests were. Press photography by and large was, you had to be an all-rounder. Like one day you could be shooting a building fire and then you could be like the prime minister in the afternoon, another day you're shooting a sporting match, a fashion shoot, all this. So by around about that time or early '90s we saw specialisation come into newspapers – well, certainly on the *Herald* anyway – where guys started to move into sports and just dedicated sports photographers. Anyway, I did hard news, what we called hard news, so it was all the murder, death, mayhem and all that sort of stuff and I just felt like for years I was never asleep at night.

**DB: You had to be on call, I suppose, for things.**

DS: We didn't have to be on call but we sort of were and even when I wasn't working I was listening to police scanners.

**DB: Were you?**

DS: Like there was a few of us so we had a life of listening to police scanners. And some nights, even on Saturday nights, I might just cruise the streets with the scanner on. There was a few of us around doing that sort of stuff.

40.02 There's still lunatics doing that now but they only do it for their own voyeuristic purposes but we just lived by police scanners in all hours of the night.

**DB: So when you won that first award was that for one photo or a body of work?**

DS: At the time it seemed like a really big important award. It was for the time.

**DB: It would be when you've just been starting.**

DS: Yes, it was Nikon Australian Press Awards but it was for images, which doesn't really tell a lot about anything. You can't express a proper story in-depth. So it was just for random images. It could be a sports picture and a news picture and a softer picture or something like that.

**DB: I see.**

DS: But obviously all mine were news pictures and it was a fairly strong portfolio for the year, I guess, or enough to win anyway.

**DB: What about the other ones? So you've got the World Press Photo Awards as well, you've won quite a few of those. They're obviously worldwide awards.**

DS: Yes. Well, I won the Nikon Press Awards again in '98, the Australian ones, and that's around the time that I decided to leave the *Herald*. I'd had enough because I was moving more towards into photojournalism where like press photography more or less even today is producing a single picture for a page but I was looking more at narrative and storytelling and that's what photojournalism is more, it's more in-depth. It's like say what *A Current Affair* [commercial television current affairs program] is to news – well, what it should be - like it's not what it really is because *A Current Affair's* just garbage but real current affairs.

**DB: Say 'Four Corners' [ABC television current affairs] or something?**

DS: Yes, Four Corners. It's an in-depth analysis of an issue that probably runs for the news as well and so I went more into that. That's why I became freelance, so I could pick and choose what stories I wanted to cover, do more serious stories than was obviously being offered to me at the time and I could pursue them in-depth and produce photo essays.

42.20 And so I won a few World Press Awards which, I guess, they're almost the peak industry awards globally.

**DB: Yes.**

DS: And I'd won for work on bushfires that I've covered in Australia. I did a decade of bushfires, covering bushfires, working in East Timor after the

referendum and the violence that followed that, and the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Aceh in '94/95 [wrong date?], I think.

**DB: So as you're a freelance did you just go to those places yourself?**

DS: Yes.

**DB: So somebody didn't send you, O.K.**

DS: It's an expensive way to work and there's some sad misconceptions about that type of work. People think that disaster and covering those sorts of issues it makes money, like we're leeches because we just chase death and mayhem but it actually costs you money. You don't make money from it, it costs you and it costs you dearly. Like in Aceh – 2004, sorry – when that happened I knew I had to get there immediately and it was important because the Indonesian military had thrown any impartial observer, all journalists, out of Aceh because they were pursuing the Free Aceh Movement and they basically wanted no one there or anyone witnessing what was going on so they could go ahead and clean them out. The earthquake and tsunami put an end to that for the Indonesian military: anyone who wanted to get into Aceh just flew in there and they couldn't contain people. So journalists and NGOs and human rights observers, the floodgates were opened and we all got in there.

44.20 **DB: Because I suppose the most well-known award that you've received in Australia is the Moran Contemporary Photography Prize – it was 2009, so it was fairly recent – was that for the photos from Aceh or what was that for?**

DS: No, because I won that twice back to back.

**DB: Have you? I didn't realise that.**

DS: Yes, 2009/2010 and I was lucky.

**DB: Great.**

DS: The image that won in 2009 was an image I took down in the lower reaches of the Murray River down near Adelaide and I'd taken that while doing a project. I got a position with a group of artists and academics in the Canberra University. An artist, there was a guy called John Reid who was part of the art school in Canberra, and he got a huge grant to do this project called 'Engaging Visions' which was a three year project looking at the Murray Darling Basin in full. And it was great because he worked in the field studies branch of the art school so he liked the idea of taking artists out into the field for

inspiration and then to come back and produce work. So his big idea for this thing on the Murray Darling, he wanted to examine whether visual arts had a role in informing people about the bigger issues, issues that he thought were hijacked by again academics and bureaucrats and politicians and he wanted to empower ordinary people but through the visual arts.

46.12 So what he'd do is they isolated four different areas, one in each of the states that contain either the Murray or the Darling Rivers, so we went to Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. And through their studies they picked similar demographics and all the other issues that gave them those places to go to and then the artists would all go there on a series of field trips back and forth and they'd produce works either on site or back in their studios and then when all the artworks were complete then we'd take the artworks back out to where we were. So instead of just artists going and finding inspiration way out in the bush and then their works ending up in galleries in cities away from those people, he wanted to take the artworks back out there. So what we would do is we'd find like pop-up galleries before pop-up became trendy. Like take St George for example in south-western Queensland – that's where one of the field studies took place – and that's pretty remote sort of country out that way. It was out near Cubbie Station near Dirranbandi and at the time because of the drought the population of St George dropped from about four thousand to about two thousand people. Half the shops in the street were derelict, boarded up, the economy was rock-bottom and so he figured out there was a host of buildings that we could convert into galleries. So we took an old shop – it looked like what might be an IGA or something – and we approached the council "Could we have this for two weeks to set up a gallery?" and they said yes, they agreed to it.

48.09 So we moved in with paint and everything and created an authentic gallery experience, what you'd see in Paddington, you know, white walls, clean and tidy and opening night and all the artworks up, and invite the town.

**DB: How did they react?**

DS: Really positive but it was quite obvious that some people like didn't know what to do about an opening. Like in the city people know you go to an opening, it's all chit-chat and drinking a couple of glasses of wine and that's it and out there all these people are like looking in the window and guys would go out and say "Come on in". They're all "What's this for?" They would say "It's for you. You're the audience" and they found that kind of challenging, that that was the reason for it.

But in St George I think about a thousand people turned up to the gallery. That was like half the populace so it was fairly successful. You might not even have a thousand people shuffle through Tim Olsen Gallery in the time a show's up.

**DB: Yes, that's true.**

DS: I mean, sure you have an opening night and everyone who wants to - -  
-

**DB: But it wouldn't be a thousand people on opening night.**

DS: Yes, so it was really good. And then on certain days it was explained to certain people about what the purpose of the show and we wanted to give people an opportunity to make informed judgements about complex issues that often get obfuscated by the political process.

**DB: And one of those photographs won the Moran?**

DS: Yes. So that was a picture. Mannum, I think the town was, in South Australia, down near the Coorong and that's where that image came from.

50.02 **DB: So in 2000 you were a founding member of the Photography Collective. Oculi, is that how you say it?**

DS: Oculi.

**DB: Oculi, O.K.**

DS: In Europe it might be Oculi, like whatever comes out.

**DB: O.K. So how does it work, that group? Do you hold exhibitions or what do you do?**

DS: Yes, we do a lot of things. I mean, it's a collective to start with. It started with a whole lot of disenfranchised members like myself. Around that time there was a big exodus of photographers from newspapers. The whole newspaper/media world was changing and we became sort of frustrated, I guess, at the inability of the media we worked for to run the stories and the issues and that. And the photography that we were doing, we were progressing photography in many ways, in style, from a philosophical point of view how we were conducting our practice, what we were producing and many other things and it's like the media here in Australia had failed to keep up with us. So we thought "Well, with the internet" – at the time the internet, I was only just sort of discovering the internet around that time – we decided we'd create a collective to get our brand of photography

international. And it has been very successful the whole time but it was extremely so in the first few years, which we put ourselves on the map internationally.

**DB: So that was done on the internet at that stage?**

DS: Yes.

**DB: O.K, so it's early, yes.**

DS: So Trent Parker was one of the original members. It was like a year after the formation of Oculi he was invited to join Magnum, the first Australian photographer to join the Magnum collective.

52.03 **DB: Great.**

DS: And we collectively had won a massive amount of international awards. At least four of us had secured two or three World Press Photo Awards in four or five years of its inception. So really the world had gone "Wow". I think it's the first time that an Australian group of photographers had opened the eyes of the rest of the world about what Australian photographers were doing here because prior to that no one really knew about Australia that much or the photographers of our sort of ilk and standing, like they weren't looking into Australia very much and there wasn't a lot of ways to have the work get out. Like before us, the generation before us and prior to us or even a couple of generations before us, they had to go overseas with their work and if you wanted someone to see something you'd take yourself to Europe with a whole heap of slides and present them; if you wanted to work on an international level that's what you had to do. It was a costly and time-consuming process to get yourself out there beyond the shores of Australia. The internet just opened that completely up and within two or three years of the formation of Oculi we had some of the biggest agencies wanting to affiliate us into their workings.

**DB: Fantastic. So have you done work overseas as a result of that?**

DS: Yes.

**DB: You've won the awards of it, yes.**

DS: Today, we have two really big agencies that we're affiliated with. One of the most prestigious which is called Agence VU – they're in Paris – and they pedal our work for us, so we have a representation on our whole collective and whenever we take on a new photographer into Oculi they're immediately absorbed into Agence VU and they have

some of the bigger names in contemporary sort of documentary practice.

52.22 And we like them because they are very much along the philosophical lines as Oculi where we're sort of a hybrid between traditional documentary practice and more sort of art-based or avant garde sort of practice.

**DB: And how does that work with you? Are you still represented by Charles Hewitt Gallery? Do you have exhibitions or essays?**

DS: No. I thought with Charles Hewitt that was a bit of an experiment, like more so for them than I and in hindsight I would never have gone, I should never have gone with that.

**DB: Because you'd rather not have a gallery representing you?**

DS: No, I like the idea of gallery representation, I'm not completely shut off to it, but Charles Hewitt was just not the gallery for me. Like his clientele were an older clientele that have followed him through his forty-odd years or whatever of galleries and so he has a fairly conservative buying crowd, I believe anyway, that are really more after traditional like painting, oils, landscape kind of stuff. I think he brought on Larry Macdonald who's the gallery manager. I think Larry tried hard to contemporise that to mixed success, I think. I was a bit of a litmus test because my work was a bit too radical for his audiences, particularly with something like colour work which is a little bit too much. Like it just didn't sell commercially; it was a disaster.

56.18 **DB: Photography in galleries is hard unless it's particularly Stills Gallery but even they have trouble, I think, selling photographs. It's quite tricky.**

DS: Yes, they do. But I think photography's become more acceptable these days because with the financial ebb and flow like they want to be able to offer to people, like who are up and coming art collectors, it offers them a cheaper foray into collecting. So you can buy great works from really good photographers around about that from two and a half thousand dollar range to four thousand dollar range which is pretty good. You have a similar level painter, for example, their works might be going for eight or twelve thousand dollars. So it's relative but look at someone like Guy Maestri [painter]. You know, try and buy his works now. Like they're twelve grand or more, probably something like that but a photographer of similar standing in their respective field their works will go for three thousand dollars.

**DB: So can you make a living as a freelance photographer now?**

60.00 DS: You do. I mean, you survive but like I'm in that much debt. I'd say I live but like financially I'm a disaster and I'm just waiting for the ATO to lock me up. I can't afford to pay tax. I don't pay tax; I can't, I can't afford to. It sounds crazy but all my money has gone into photography, it's all channelled into photography. Like I don't like an exorbitant life, I don't have this yuppie lifestyle living in the eastern suburbs with a fancy car, cocaine addiction; I've got none of that sort of nonsense. I've got two kids, I look after them and I do photography and that's about it.

**DB: Do you still print any of your own work or do you get that done commercially now?**

DS: All commercially. It's all like digital processing now. Like I still shoot on negative because then I have the option if later on in life I want to have a darkroom and tinker in a darkroom or something like that it's all on negative.

**DB: So you don't have a darkroom at home at all?**

DS: No. So I shoot on negative and we've got scanners so we scan everything in. And still you can see film because even through the scanning process - - -

**DB: It's still much better, isn't it?**

DS: Yes. It's just an aesthetic that you can either understand visually or you don't but it's just a richer feeling. It's like explaining to people the difference between vinyl and CD. Like you have a much deeper, richer sound through vinyl than this clinical like sound that comes out of digital, just plain digital music on CDs and stuff.

**DB: How about colour versus black and white? Do you have a preference at all?**

DS: Well, I shoot a lot of colour; I like colour. But when I talk of colour I mean like there's colour and there's colour. Like some people they see themselves as colour photographers purely because they use colour film but there's real colourists and people understand good colour photography.

60.07 And we've got a few of those people in Oculi – that's what I like about it – and I'm really pedantic and specific about colour, how I should colour. I normally reserve my more social based work for black and white because I like stripping back all the peripheral information that's irrelevant so people don't become confused about nice, beautiful colour or something like that. Like you show them something really important and they go, "Look at the colour, look at the sunset in the background"

or something like that, so you eliminate all that so they're forced to take in the issue that you're presenting. So stuff that I do that's social based I normally put onto black and white film and then I shoot colour.

**DB: So your partner, Tamara Dean, is also a photojournalist. Do you work on projects together at all?**

DS: Well, we did. Like we're no longer together any more so you might have some outdated information – we broke up a couple of years ago – but we did a lot of stuff together. In our early years together we did quite a lot of projects. We produced a book from Hill End, we did an artist's residency in Hill End or a couple of them – I've done two, she's done I think three now out at the Hill End and we produced a book off the back of our first artist's residence in Hill End and we loved that but we drifted apart. She was going in one direction and she wanted to pursue more sort of art based work and I was in between sort of - - -

**DB: More documentary.**

DS: Sort of doing both, really. My photography like it's very broad what I do, like it's extremely broad. Most people would not understand that because most people don't watch what you're doing anyway or pay any attention to what you're really doing.

62.09 They take a body of work that you've produced like fifteen years ago or more and that just sticks in their minds and they don't know I've been taking photos fifteen years beyond that project. Like I've done probably thirty-odd projects that you haven't even bothered to look at.

**DB: Well, it'd be great to see a retrospective of your work. I mean, when you think about all those things together how would you feel about that? It'd be good to sort of see all the things over time?**

DS: Yes, it would be. It'd be daunting, though. I become overwhelmed by my own work sometimes; I can't even get it out. I'm a hopeless freelancer but I had no choice.

**DB: You mean with your time or how you organise yourself?**

DS: Yes, I just can't manage, I'm just unorganised. Like no matter how much I sort of make attempts to organise myself I just remain completely shambolic, everything from finances to my work. Like I produce stories and I don't even get them out there. Like I just produce them and I look at them and I go "O.K." and then move onto something else because something else has arisen. And a good freelancer would have them out somewhere, making money from them while I'm sitting

in this debt. You know, like there is work that just sits there on hard drives that is - - -

**DB: Could be seen somewhere.**

DS: - - - yes, is timely but then you become disillusioned. There's just nowhere left in Australia. I just sort of gave up here just even trying to push essays onto people or photo stories that I produce because it just wastes your time because you just run into a brick wall.

**DB: Well, it sounds like the collective and the city work that you're doing is actually really now going places, which is really interesting.**

64.00 DS: Well, that's right. That's where a lot of my energy's actually going at the moment. I sort of like that because it is kind of ad hoc. Like it's just a bunch of people trying to organise ourselves and everyone's sort of slack and for some reason that sort of fits well with me, I don't know why.

**DB: You said you're disorganised but you must have been so organised to do that Elizabeth Street .....**

DS: Yes, it was. Well, there was one before that which I might just tell you about because it was kind of funny and it was really good.

**DB: Tell me, yes.**

DS: But it was the first foray into putting photography into the streets and after doing the culture jamming, like a documentary that I did, so I saw this building in town. I was walking past it one day and it was on the corner of King and George Street.

**DB: Right in the centre, yes.**

DS: Yes, right in the middle of things and there was a building there, a façade which just had nothing on it at all, just a plain building. I thought "That's really weird to see in the middle of a city, a building like that" but it had four great big windows but like you couldn't see through them, they had a film on them to cover it up so it was just a blank façade. I thought "Perfect. We'll put some photos on here. This is a great place to have a gallery". And so I got Andrew Quilty and Nick Walker and James Alcock doing all this stuff with us. I told them, I said "This is perfect. Let's get some photography together and put them up here" and they said O.K. I'd worked out, I went and did some 'reccie' [reconnaissance], so I went and sat there like at five thirty in the morning across from it, having a coffee, and just observing; that's what

you've got to do for these things, just observe what goes on on any given day and you realise not much. A couple of street cleaners go past, a few people coming into the city and I said "Well, it'll take us about an hour and a half to get the pictures up so by the time the guys start work we'll have it up".

66.10 So we had all the things printed up. The images, I think they were about four metres by two and a half metres – they were pretty big.

**DB: Big.**

DS: In printing them, in Photoshop you break up the image into strips of one metre because that's how you print onto one metre strips and it was like low quality black and white works but from a distance it's like the same principle as a billboard. They look great from a distance but when you get up like that it's just a whole series of dots. So we had them printed up, we rocked up in the morning, put all our stuff, City of Sydney signage along the streets and everything, and we'd almost completed it, we were like three quarters of the way through it and then I was approached by these two guys, building guys, and they're going "Who are you guys?" And I said "Well, who are you?" and they said "We're the building managers in here". I said "O.K." because we sort of foresaw this – we went through a drill in case this sort of situation arose – so I told the guys "You keep on putting the images up. Don't stop. I'll drag these guys away and I'll deal with it". O.K, and I was rehearsed and ready and we told them that it was part of 'Art & About' [festival in Sydney], like whatever lies you have to say, we don't care, because it's not damaging or we don't think it is anyway. But we told them it was part of 'Art & About' and they're going "What's that?" We knew they had no idea about anything going on culturally so I knew I could spin a few fibs and I said "It's 'Art & About'. We're contractors hired by the Council". They're going "Well, if you've got permission, a permission slip". I said "Yeah, sure. We've got the paperwork. It's in the car". We go, "Oh, damn, Johnno's got the car". "Where's Johnno?" "Oh, Johnno's gone down to the other site we're working on. We're also down the other end of town in Central, doing a similar thing and he's taking down some stuff".

68.01 And they're sort of scratching their heads and they go "Well, do you have the name of the person that has given you authorisation from the council?" And these guys are drilling me. Like they kind of knew we were sort of – well, they had a thing but they couldn't prove it but it was sort of frustrating them. And the first name that came to my mind was Christine Westwood who's a picture editor for the *Australian Magazine* and I thought "No, I can't use her name. Like this is where I will get

myself into trouble, if I start saying names of people living so close to the city". And then my brain was just thinking – it seemed like I was there for a week, thinking – but then what name came out was Vivienne Westwood because I thought "I'll use Westwood but just put Vivienne" and I wasn't even thinking of Vivienne Westwood but it just came out of me. I said "Vivienne Westwood" and they go "Who's that? Have you got her number?" And I thought "Thank God they haven't cottoned on to this". So I gave them my telephone number because I don't have a voicebank on it so I know it'll just ring out, so I gave them my number. So the guy's there, going "Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding", my phone's buzzing in my pocket and he's on the phone and it's kind of bizarre. I'm sort of like hoping he doesn't hear a vibration but it kind of is vibrating, the phone in my pocket, and he's trying to answer it and he goes "It just rang out". I said "Well, it is six thirty in the morning so they're probably not going to be awake". And I said "We're just contractors, eh". I said "We're really busy and I appreciate this". He goes, "Do you realise whose building this is?" and I said "No". I said "Whose is it?" and we really didn't know. He said "Louis Vuitton" and I almost smirked. I went, "Really? Louis Vuitton", I said "who's that?" and he goes "Oh, come on. If you don't know Louis Vuitton". I said "Well, you don't know Vivienne Westwood". And these guys still comprehend what I was going on about so I thought I could throw this at him.

70.02

And he goes "Anyway, if this was being commissioned by Louis Vuitton there'd be some beautiful girl with a handbag, not this ugly chick sitting in a car" - like it's actually my picture which I thought was quite beautiful. And this went on for about half an hour, these guys trying to unravel me.

**DB: Meanwhile your guys are finishing off the job.**

DS: Yes, and they'd packed up and I'd sort of look over my shoulder and Andrew Quilty's sort of gesturing me, like "Come on, let's go" and I said "O.K, listen. You guys going to be here for a while". I said "Let me go to the car. Johnno, I think he's just parked up on the corner. He should be there by now. I'll get you the paperwork. I'll come back to you". They go "O.K". So I walked around the corner and we just bolted and jumped in the car and took off. So that lasted for I think about three hours.

**DB: It was only up for that long?**

DS: Yes. But we had it all photographed and documented so we were happy with it and I was so pleased that it was on Louis Vuitton's building.

**DB: That's great, yes.**

DS: I thought “Excellent” because it was like I'd combined culture jam, like my previous project on culture jamming with my new personal photography thing and we called that ‘King George Gallery’. So that’s like when we had the Elizabeth Street Gallery we had this gallery thing happening. Then we sort of thought “We should be doing more of this and perhaps every six months or a year we should be looking at a possible gallery”. And I want to take art right into the heart of the city. Like I know around the peripheral suburbs like Newtown it’s too easy and the city, the immediate CBD area, I saw as a cultural void. For me I see it as a place where art should be going more so. Like “How do we get it?”

72.03 **DB: You see so much advertising but very little art.**

DS: That’s right. You're saturated with imagery that’s connected with advertisement but nothing that’s just free and for the pleasure of people and that’s why we’ve tried so hard to isolate spots as close as we can into the city, not like Surry Hills where there’s a lot of street art popping up here and there but it’s kind of I like the challenge of getting stuff up in the middle of the day in the most open places but putting it there to enliven the city because it’s pretty dreary, I think. Outside of the big, you know, the Art & About – I mean they're fabulous things what the City of Sydney does – but outside of Vivid and Art & About and those big sort of festivals they create in the city in the times in between them there’s not a lot of art that’s happening right in the middle of the city and that’s where the Elizabeth Street came into it, that we thought “This is perfect”.

**DB: Well, also being photographs too, they're usually large-scale so more people will see them. A lot of sculptures and things can be quite small and people walk past them and the photographs are quite big.**

DS: Yes.

**DB: It must have been very impressive on that one in the Louis Vuitton building.**

DS: It was. It looked really good too. I can't believe Louis Vuitton didn't leave it up there. If they were smart they would have. It even had them in a spin because they were actually trying to track us down; they didn't know how to find us because we'd left nothing for them to go off. The Herald did a little story about it on the back page, about that Louis Vuitton action.

**DB: What year was that that you did that, do you remember?**

DS: That was only like probably a year ago, a year and a half ago - it wasn't so long ago. But Louis Vuitton in all their paranoia, they thought that we were some rogue advertising firm doing some stunt, advertising stunt, which they couldn't work out quite what it was because they couldn't just see it as art for art's sake, just adhering images onto an empty façade, they thought it was something far more sinister.

74.25 One of the women who's in Oculi, Tamara Voninski, she also works on the [*Australian*] *Financial Review* as a photographer and she was photographing the Louis Vuitton people and she got just talking to them about that thing and they admitted – didn't so much admit to it but they told her that they were trying to hunt down the perpetrators of that action because they're not going to tolerate people riding on their coattails.

**DB: Yes ..... Well, I think that's probably as much as we need at the moment. So that's fantastic, Dean. Thank you very much for your help with this.**

DS: You're welcome.

**DB: And we'll leave it there.**

**Interview ends**