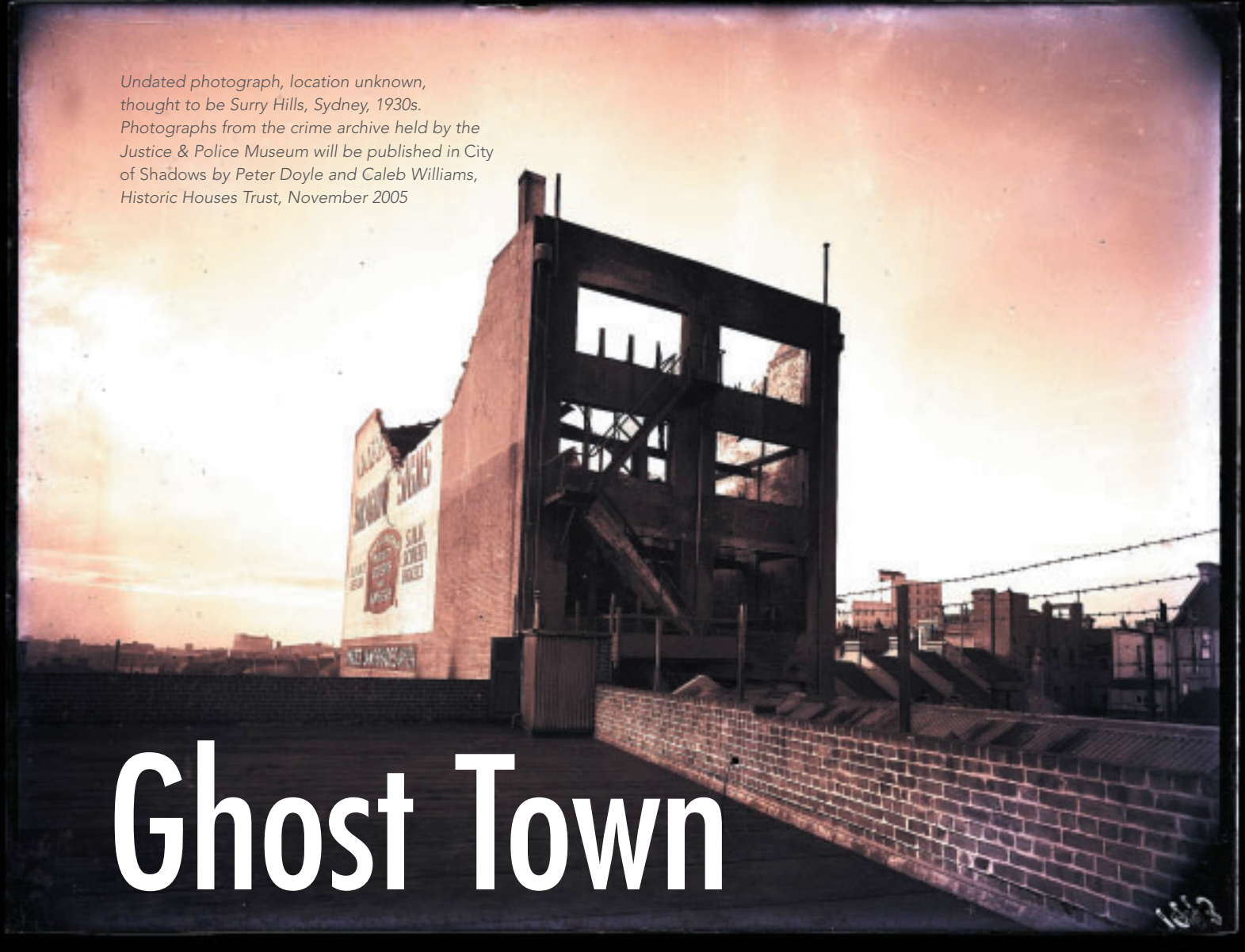


Undated photograph, location unknown, thought to be Surry Hills, Sydney, 1930s. Photographs from the crime archive held by the Justice & Police Museum will be published in *City of Shadows* by Peter Doyle and Caleb Williams, Historic Houses Trust, November 2005



Ghost Town

Ghost Town was a one-day symposium on archival research and the history of photography presented by Macquarie University Media Department. Here, John Potts introduces the keynote speaker, Luc Sante, whose book *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (1991) led to a renewed enthusiasm for lost histories of the modern city. His subsequent book *Evidence* (1992) helped create a worldwide interest in the archive forensic photograph

Ghost Town brings together practitioners working with image archives to explore some of the attractions and anxieties surrounding the uses of archive film and photographs. The symposium charts a dynamic field of cultural enquiry and production, which has engaged writers, researchers, historians and film-makers over the last 10 to fifteen years.

In the domain of visual arts and curatorial practice, there have been several major exhibitions based on the forensic photograph in recent years, including the *Crime Scenes* exhibition at the Sydney Justice and Police Museum in 2000 and the 2003 exhibition in Los Angeles of LAPD crime scene photographs, mostly from the 1940s. In addition, archival crime

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photographs have featured on numerous websites and online galleries, and in books, journals, magazines and documentaries.

On the discursive plane, this field has produced its own mode of expression — a form of writing that blends analytical detail with theoretical meditations. Luc Sante is a pioneer of this territory, an influential and inspirational figure. This influence concerns both the direction of his research, focusing on archival police photography, and the style of his writing, which manages to be both artistic and forensic.

Time in its passing casts off particles of itself in the form of images, documents, relics, junk ...

Anyone who reads Luc Sante's work will be struck by its poetic register. *Evidence* begins: 'Time in its passing casts off particles of itself in the form of images, documents, relics, junk'. His books are beautifully written, yet paradoxically, the objects of his analysis are often confronting, gruesome, distressing. The photographs he studies often show murder victims, photographed in their bloody death positions by workmanlike police photographers, who were often policemen themselves. The locations 'define Banality': bedrooms, bars, alleys, vacant lots. But the images of death reach out to us across the decades.

Sante's analysis of these photographs of obscure and forgotten homicides proceeds on (at least) two levels. First, he provides a detailed dissection of each photograph, drawing significance from tiny details, contextualising the image where possible with what little is known of its immediate time and place. The second level is a more general reflection on mortality, as provoked by the instrument of photography. For Sante photography is a 'house of spooks', a 'conduit between the living and the world of spirits'. His writing combines the lyrical theorising of Roland Barthes, the cool empiricism of Dashiell Hammett and the elliptical meditations to be found in Walter Benjamin.

The field opened up by Luc Sante has its hazards as well as its challenges. As he remarks in *Evidence*, homicide photographs will 'unavoidably' and regrettably incite

'morbid fascination and dull voyeurism'. He acknowledges the 'act of disrespect' in the 'act of looking at them' — one component of the ethical complexity pertaining to archival research. These ethical questions are implicit in the full sweep of archival work: the thrill of the search, the shock and joy of discovery, the strange intimacy between researcher and object, issues of ownership and propriety, questions of respect, even the breaking of 'taboos', in re-presenting images of the dead.

In the introduction to his keynote address, titled 'Trespassing, or, the Ethics of Archives', Luc Sante evokes the puzzles and challenges experienced by researchers when they find themselves in the heart of the archive:

'When I came upon an archive of murder-scene photographs taken between 1914 and 1918, I was struck by the intimacy they conveyed. They gave access to countless small details of otherwise unrecorded lives. Of course, they also allowed a view of their subjects' final agonies. I immediately felt as though I were trespassing when I looked at them, and this sensation animated both ends of an attraction-repulsion mechanism.

Accordingly, it seemed ironic to me that the police, who hold one of the two sets of these pictures, keep them locked up because of the putative anguish they might cause to any living descendants nearly a century later. It seemed ironic in a different way that in the wake of my book, published in 1992, a veritable spate of similar books appeared, many of them vying with one another for sheer repulsiveness.

Do I bear some responsibility for contributing to a sort of necrophilic pornography? Are my qualms purely cultural, given that in countries such as Mexico and Brazil similar photos appear on the front pages of newspapers? Are my scruples merely a reflection of the sanitised distance from death that marks daily life in the West today? Do humans forsake all rights when they die? And how do we square such considerations with the employment of photographs in world conflicts today, with the recorded death of Daniel Pearl and the abuses at Abu Ghraib?'

The full text of Luc Sante's paper and the contributions of other *Ghost Town* presenters will be published in an issue of *Scan*, online journal of Macquarie University Media Department in 2005: <http://scan.net.au>

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Ghost Town was organised by Peter Doyle, writer, archivist and lecturer in writing at Macquarie University, and held at the Museum of Sydney in October 2004