## Foreward

The low-lying islands of Tuvalu are a watery barometer for rising sea levels resulting from global warming. Subject of international curiosity and some compassion, the islands form an armature for Tim Silver's The Tuvaluan Project.

Silver plays with a range of stereotypical references to consumption, quite literally from cannibalism to the ubiquity of photography from documentary through to tourist brochures. Silver casts the island, along with himself and local non-actors who inhabit fictional characters, the sense of which is left up to the viewer to construct. With little intervention on the island, such as wardrobe or location, Silver stages what is at hand, with reference to the edifice of existing cliché and with the environmental crisis lurking in the distance.

Reuben Keehan's splendid essay Wondering who the real cannibals are: Tim Silver's The Tuvaluan Project provides a context for Silver's reference to Italian Cannibal Cycle films and addresses photography's alliance between documentation and exploitation.

Catalogues, like tides deliver important evidence of artist's work, images and critical texts that exist long after the exhibition. This catalogue has been generously supported by the Besen Family Foundation. I thank the Foundation for enabling *The Tuvaluan Project* to persist beyond its exhibition at Centre for Contemporary Photography.

Silver Untitled

photograph

Tuvaluan Project) 2007

ntographs: Jamie North

Naomi Cass Director Centre for Contemporary Photography





## Wondering who the real cannibals are: Tim Silver's The Tuvaluan Project

Let's start with a conclusion: Tim Silver's The Tuvaluan Project is an exercise in critical exploitation.

How is such a thing possible? How can one exploit, with all the connotations of uneven power relations that the word throws up, and do it critically? Perhaps a more precise descriptor for Silver's undertaking would be 'reflexive exploitation', but the syllabic doubling, especially crew faking and ultimately provoking acts of when spoken aloud—'-ex- ex-' —is a little unwieldy. The other alternative, 'self-critical exploitation', has an oddly psychoanalytic tone to it, and an altogether unhelpful one at that. Perhaps it is better, then, to look more deeply at the history of exploitation in reproductive media, particularly as one of its moments forms the operative model for *The Tuvaluan Project*.

The exemplary moment of critical exploitation.

as it pertains to Silver's project and, I would

realisation, innovatively played out through

found, first-person footage of a documentary

savagery from a primitive tribe, to demonstrate

just how atrocious and exploitative cinema, and

be. 2 It is at once a critique of representation and

commercialised violence, and the worst example

of it, a double reflexivity that makes the film's

brutality all the more compelling. For Silver, having

already alluded to the closely related genre of

Italian zombie cinema with his earlier work Killing

Me Softly, this discursive complexity, along with

The object of Silver's exploitation is the

viewing audience. Without travelling to Tuvalu,

perception operates in relation to those prior

representations. Or else representations frame

the actual experience of place, substituting for

it as in that strangely performative tolerance

of cliché that seems to accompany tourism,

the tendency to visit what has already been

such representations are the only way to

by association all forms of representation, can

the guirks of cannibal cycle as a whole, would argue, to cinematic exploitation in general, is serve as the critical lens for the cultural encounter the highly specific sub-genre of Italian horror enacted in The Tuvaluan Project. cinema known as the 'cannibal cycle', and its most extraordinary work, Ruggero Deodato's Cannibal Holocaust (1980), Produced between titular Pacific nation of Tuvalu. A former British the mid-1970s and early 1980s as discrete colony, Tuvalu is made up of no more than a entities, these films are nonetheless unified handful of reefs and atolls, whose highest point by a complex and largely unintentional interis a mere two metres above sea level. Such a textuality, sharing themes, imagery, plot lines, low elevation has made Tuvalu exceptionally vulnerable to global warming, with frequent casts, crew, sets, soundtracks, footage and in some cases even entire scenes. Drawing on the storms and the slightest change in water dynamics and techniques of 'Mondo' shockulevels threatening to render the country unmentaries of the mid-1960s, the cannibal cycle inhabitable. Journalistic representations of is accordingly characterised by its po-faced Tuvalu, particularly through photography and television, have tended to focus on this aspect moralising, brutal and voyeuristic depiction of violence, frequent scenes of graphic animal of the country, figuring storm damage and cruelty, and stereotyping of non-European flooding alongside more traditional idyllic island people that was exoticising at best and, at worst, paradise imagery as key registers for the sinking downright racist. In keeping with much Italian islands in the Western cultural imagination. horror of the period, narrative is treated either as Whatever the truth of the images, or the nobility a device for stringing together a series of grisly of the intentions of those who produce and set pieces, or jettisoned altogether, while found distribute them—the place is sinking, after all—they nevertheless function as tropes in a footage and appropriated imagery abound. If you handle that sort of thing (and there is a lot to lexicon of cultural mediation, reproductions that program a sense of place in a privileged

handle), they are also wonderfully entertaining. Standing head and shoulders above the rest of the cycle is Cannibal Holocaust, transcending its generic limitations—though these remain understand it; even if we do make the trip, our apparent—through a rare mixture of cinematic invention, touches of quality (particularly in the areas of cinematography and soundtrack), disturbingly realistic violence, and a complex, almost irresolvable, self-questioning. The film's brilliant central conceit, quite aside from its

ostensible moral concerning the savagery inherphotographed and photograph it, or 'the chance be Silver's point. The Tuvaluan Project is to go and see what has already been made trite', not so much a process of mediation, but of ent in modern civilisation, is its problematising of the documentary form, the very capacity of as Guy Debord so famously put it.3 reproductive media, in this case film itself, to convey objective truth. It then creates a further landscape, people and ecological fragility of problematic by deploying this sophisticated

Silver, on the other hand, filters the culture, Tuvalu through an alternative to these standard reproductive technology that it then goes on to photojournalistic representations. He reflects on his role as a privileged observer by deploying, undercut by the validity of its own criticism—in perhaps surprisingly, that most exploitative of this sense the film can be said to cannibalise cinematic trope systems, the cannibal cycle. His itself. Likewise, Silver uses an acknowledgment process was appropriately cinematic, scouting of the power relations implicit in the process of locations, sourcing 'actors' and drawing up a storyboard to be executed photographically. This generic narrative, apparently involving the destabilising arrival of a stranger in paradise, was, for the artist, purely structural; in public presentation, the images are arranged out of chronological order. This nod to the utilitarian, often incoherent plot developments in Italian horror is reflected in the nature of the images themselves, as Silver apes the found footage and shamelessly copied imagery of cannibal cycle films with a dizzying array of appropriations work's self-cannibalising critical exploitation. from Western culture. These are drawn, as might be expected, from certain scenes within Reuben Keehan the cycle itself, but equally from a wide variety of sources, referencing other cinematic genres touristic snapshots, commercial advertising and recent art history. Importantly, even the standard photojournalistic framing of Tuvalu is represented in one photograph of a storm-<sup>1</sup>There is some contention among genre aficionados as to

ravaged beach. The crucial difference between *The Tuvaluan Project* and the cannibal cycle is one of tone. Where most Italian cannibal films are drenched in sleaze, or in the case of Cannibal Holocaust. genuinely, transgressively disturbing, Silver's work has an engaging campness. This emerges from the fun the local Tuvaluan non-actors seem to be having hamming up their roles, but more importantly in the sense of the amusement produced in the process of recognising parodied cultural objects. Camp, of course, relies for its effect on a competent reading subject, viewers literate in the historical meaning of any symbols being appropriated. It is highly doubtful that Silver's jibe at photographic tableaux in a reconstruction of Tracey Moffatt's Something More, for example, would make as much sense to the Tuvaluan actors involved as it would to an audience in an Australian gallery.

But this uneven reception of the language of representation seems in many ways to

remediation, of mediating that which has already been mediated. 4 Cannibal Holocaust offers a reflection on the exploitative possibilities of exploit, but in such a way that this exploitation is photographic representation and reproduction as the point of departure for a body of work utilising that very process. This is why the work can be considered critical and exploitative at once, or more appropriately, critically exploitative, thoroughly aware of its place in the representation of place. In the spirit of the heavyhanded morality of the cannibal cycle. Silver offers himself as the cannibal, both in the sole 'bloody' image that makes it into *The Tuvaluan Project*, and in the very methodology of his

whether Umberto Lenzi's Man from Deep River (1972) or Deodato's Jungle Holocaust (1977) constitutes the first entr in the cycle. In any case, after Jungle Holocaust, the films came thick and fast. Deodato's imagery predictably found its way into a number of subsequent entries within the cycle, most notably Lenzi's Cannibal Ferox (1981), as well as, somewhat less predictably, outside it, as in Oliver Stone's Platoon (1986). But it was the faux-verité innovation and four footage mythology that would prove most enduring and lucrative in popular cinema, exploited without acknowledge ment in The Blair Witch Project (1999), and with a tacit nod in t more recent Cloverfield (20) Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, 1994, p. 120. <sup>4</sup> My thanks to Sydney-based theorist and art historian T J. Berghuis for this insight.



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## Biography

Tim Silver is a Sydney-based artist working across media, through photography, video, sculpture and ephemeral installation, his work reflects and embodies the impermanence and instability of the world in which we live, providing a poetic perspective on contemporary anxieties. His work is concerned with the idea of entropy; the theory that all forms and systems are in a constant state of decay/change. This idea permeates both his objects and installations, themselves captured in this process of decomposition through photo-narratives.

Silver holds a Master of Fine Arts and a Bachelor of Visual Arts with first class honours, he has exhibited across Australia, and also participated in exhibitions in Belgrade, Serbia, Christchurch, New Zealand and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, In 2005, 2006 and 2007 he was nominated one of Australia's 50 most collectible artists in Australian Art Collector, and in 2002 was included in MCA's *Primavera*. His work is held in the collections of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Queensland Art Gallery and private collections both nationally and internationally. Later this year Silver will undertake a residency at Tokyo Wonder Site, engaging with Japanese artists in preparation for a major exhibition in Tokyo, September 2008, which will culminate in a group show at Artspace in March 2009. Following that Silver will be completing an Asialink residency in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for four months.

Tim Silver received support from the Australia Council to travel to Tuvalu to achieve this exhibition.







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