The photographic practice of Anne Zahalka, one of the most prominent artists associated with Australian postmodernism in the 1980s, explores the border between documentary photography and theatrical artifice. Often from within the conventions of documentary photography, her work has questioned stereotypes and explored the sometimes blurry line between the natural and artificial, particularly as reflected in the culture of tourism. From her earliest work she showed an interest in subverting images of Australia using a humorous and critical voice. Diverse in style, her work has ranged from re-readings of Australian colonial painting to the restaging of Bondi beach archetypes, from small collages to large scale images of Australian leisure. The postcard, the panorama and large-scale digital imagery have all been explored by Zahalka. Portraiture has also been an important and ongoing dimension of her practice.

Zahalka has consistently and self-consciously exploited the conventions of documentary photography, and its claims to represent the truth. Consider one of her best known images, The Sunbather (1989). This photograph depicts a slim young redhead lying on the beach against a blue sky. But the low angle and pose appropriates and playfully parodies what is undoubtedly Australia’s most iconic and well loved photograph, The Bathers (1937) by McCubbin, a three-part painting reflecting on Australia’s historical development – and one of a select group of images that have played a significant role in creating a mythology that links Australian national identity and history to the bush. Zahalka’s image is composed of images of a Greek family, taken from a friend’s family album, against a bush background taken from a reproduction of McCubbin’s painting. As such, she recasts Australian history by replacing the bush characters with immigrants, and expanding the female role. Zahalka’s interest in immigrants, and the political power of images of people and places reflects her own life as the daughter of refugees (A Jewish Austrian mother and Catholic Czech father). An earlier version, The Immigrants No.1 (1985), from the series The Landscape Re-presented, is a reworking of The Arnolfini Portrait (1434) by Jan van Eyck, a painting that is extensively reproduced and valued for its realism and symbolism. Zahalka’s interest in art history is also visible. In one large image, The Bathers, she takes inspiration from the celebrated Charles Meere painting Australian Beach Posters (1938-40). Like Meere’s painting, the people in her photograph are not ‘individuals’ but generic types. But unlike Meere’s original, Zahalka presents a cast of people who more accurately reflect the multicultural nature of contemporary Australia. Moreover, Zahalka draws attention to the constructedness of her imagery, setting her photographs in a studio setting, importing sand, furniture and beach paraphernalia, and using an obviously artificial, painted backdrop whose edges are clearly visible. Other images in the series examine the cultural stereotypes that define the visual history of Bondi – beach inspectors, council workers, Asian surfers and migrants. This series, made during a period in which Australia was more officially enthusiastic in its embrace of multi-culturalism, are both satirical and affectionate about the Australian beach experience and about our changing notions of the bronzed male hero and the all white nuclear family.

Anne Zahalka’s earliest photographs were a form of photomontage. The Immigrants No.2 (1985), from the series The Landscape Re-presented, is a reworking of The Arnolfini Portrait by Frederick McCubbin, a three-part painting reflecting on Australia’s historical development – and one of a select group of images that have played a significant role in creating a mythology that links Australian national identity and history to the bush. Zahalka’s image is composed of images of a Greek family, taken from a friend’s family album, against a bush background taken from a reproduction of McCubbin’s painting. As such, she recasts Australian history by replacing the bush characters with immigrants, and expanding the female role. Zahalka’s interest in immigrants, and the political power of images of people and places reflects her own life as the daughter of refugees (A Jewish Austrian mother and Catholic Czech father). An earlier version, The Immigrants No.1, was an autobiographical reworking of the painting, telling the story of her parents’ migration to Australian shores. In interviews Zahalka has spoken about her family history influencing her reflections on the lack of representation of migrants within dominant images and texts about Australia.

Anne Zahalka’s reputation as a significant artist was secured with the Resemblance series, produced in 1986 during a residency at the Kunsthalle in Berlin. A series of costume dramas, it also borrows knowingly from the canon of art history. One of its key images, Marriage of Convenience, is based directly on The Arnolfini Portrait (1434) by Van Eyck, a painting that is extensively reproduced and valued for its realism and symbolism. Zahalka loosely mimics the poses and drapes of the original, and its famous convex mirror is replaced with a large silver ball in the foreground providing a reflection of the room. But the portrait is
The Sunbather #2 1989
photograph materials details
size x size cm

The Immigrants #6 19??
type of photograph
size x size cm
also a modern image of two artists married for very contemporary visa-related reasons, reflected in the full title of the work. Contemporary details such as a radio and camera remind us that this is a conscious play upon histories of representation.

Most of the images in Resemblance are based on seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings. ‘The Cleaner’, ‘The Cook’ and ‘The Readers’ are staged with the accoutrements of their trade. The cook stands over a table filled with vegetables, with pots hanging behind him, and slices a fish head. In several of the images there are paintings on the wall that reference the earlier art historical period. The particular tilted perspective offered by the square format photographs is also highly reminiscent of Dutch painting.

The image of the cleaner even includes a black-and-white tiled floor, associated with Vermeer. But at the same time, the figure is a contemporary late-twentieth-century portrait, as she wears headphones around her neck. Thus the images, with their art-historical citations, function on one hand as formal portraits of real people, but in a pastiche style quoting a genre of painting that has been functionally redundant for centuries. As Martin Jolly observed, these images effectively ‘stretched the assumptions underpinning our conventions of candid portraiture’. Zahalka’s selection of source images can also be seen as a comment on the role that European art, and the values associated with it, have played in Australian culture. Meanwhile, the display format – large cibachrome prints mounted onto Perspex, so favoured by photo artists working within the precepts of postmodernism – provide the artificially rich colours and gloss surface to rival the photograph, a private life is laid before us, inviting us to scrutinise a domestic interior as if it were a stage set and speculate about what we see. But while the subjects display themselves as if they are oblivious to our gaze, Zahalka lends the composition a certain theatricality by carefully arranging the objects and posing the figures. Drawing again on the language of genre painting but now fusing it with TV sitcoms, the familiarity and intimacy of the private interiors jars in fact with their public display, instilling a sense of the uncanny. Our voyeuristic gaze cannot penetrate the surface, particularly as the domestic tableaux are so exposed in the lightbox format, characteristic of the duratrans used in bus-stop advertising. ‘The series of transparencies suggests that both photography and everyday life invite a form of performance.

If Resemblance and Open House ask us to question the authenticity in the pose, the images also draw attention to the importance of gesture. Zahalka explored this theme more fully in her two most unconventional series, Details (1993) and Gesture (1995), produced as part of her Masters degree. Perhaps the most overtly theatrical of Zahalka’s projects, and least documentary in appearance, these series sampled and collaged together small samples of paintings and other pre-existing imagery. Gesture is comprised of a series of photographic details of paintings, given titles such as Aristocrat, The Explorer, The Saint, The Gentleman and so on. The faces in these images are mysteriously smudged out, giving the disembodied arms and hands a surreal quality. Zahalka also sampled August Sander’s photographs in another set of images. Most strikingly, the series includes a set of digital image collages with words such as ‘assertive’, ‘feminine’, ‘alluring’, ‘confident’, ‘honest’ and ‘proud’ included as part of the image, forming a kind of typology of hand movements and exploring the space between language and images. Overall, this series of images points to the social constructedness of what are taken to be natural signs – our embeddedness within codes of representation, right down to the level of the way we move our hands. Zahalka’s appropriation technique and interest in gender and the gaze was familiar from postmodernist artists such as Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, but the deconstructive form also shows her exploration of digital imaging at a time of its recent emergence in the early 1990s.

The series combine everyday scenes of urban Sydney with images of the Sydney skyline, Zahalka appears to suggest that office workers are as captive as zoo animals, and the environment no less artificial. An image of a lone graffiti in a bare enclosure at the zoo looking over the harbour at the distant spires of the city establishes a dialogue with another image of a man walking across a concrete walkway towards the same spires. ‘Photographed late in the day, the city takes on a particular strangeness. It was in this series that Zahalka first used lightboxes (later reused in Open House), giving the images a hyperreal quality and linking them to the work of Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, who Zahalka acknowledges as an influence. The lightbox format, appropriated from its advertising context, redoubles the spectacular articules of the modern city.

In many ways, Leisureland (1998–2001) can be viewed as a natural extension of Fortresses and Frontiers. This series was the result of several years spent photographing scenes of leisure and sport – casinos, sports stadiums, cinemas, aquariums, gyms, a bingo hall, a rock-climbing centre, a beach swimming race, and so on. These technologicalised sites of mass organised leisure are photographed in bright colour, objectively from a distance,
and presented as detailed gigantic prints. At one level, these images are the closest Zahalka has come to pure documentariness, showing the central place of artifice within Australian leisure culture. But there is also a hyperreal quality to the giant images and their frenetic figures engaged in the huge modern-day leisure industry, composed of controlled environments, often involving artificial forms of nature (fake volcanoes, artificial oceans, indoor mountains and the like). Monumentalised for our scrutiny, the scenes become absurd, slightly surreal. In images like Open Air Cinema (1999), this strangeness is manifest by the artist in the decision to leave the cinema screen white, so that an audience appears to be watching a glowing blankness. We also learn, though it is not crucial to their effect, that some of the images have been cleaned up or otherwise improved through digital imaging. In a couple of instances the images are digitally composed, yet a documentary intention remains paramount in this series.

Grund, the diamond-like in scale, Leisureland’s most obvious reference point is the colour photography of German artist Andreas Gursky, who became well known in the 1990s for his colossal new objective-style of large colour images of the spaces of global capital. However, Zahalka’s images are warmer, and often contain traces of humour. They are both affectionate and critical images of a national culture known for its love of physical activity. In what is perhaps the most iconic image of the series, Colo Christmas (1999), a swimming race, the Australia scene par excellence is presented as an amusingly overcrowded array of multi-coloured swimming caps. Images of casinos and other zones of commodified leisure are less serene or simply bizarre. Showing organised leisure in all its forms and for all classes, Zahalka even photographs a lecture given by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida at the Sydney Town Hall, drawing attention to the spectacle of the event as his image is projected on the stage behind. Leisureland was immediately popular, and Zahalka received an Australia Council Fellowship to continue the series in regional New South Wales, in which, at least in part, the extravagance of urban casino gave way to street parades and boys playing cricket in Murrumbidgee River, Wagga Wagga.

Both the Fortresses and Frontiers and Leisureland series reinvent the picture postcard, and especially those pre-digital attempts to enhance the tourist scene, as a space of drama. The postcard, of course, has played a huge role in the culture of self-display, as the postcard genre. However, Zahalka’s images are warmer, and often contain traces of humour. They are both affectionate and critical images of a national culture known for its love of physical activity. In what is perhaps the most iconic image of the series, Colo Christmas (1999), a swimming race, the Australia scene par excellence is presented as an amusingly overcrowded array of multi-coloured swimming caps. Images of casinos and other zones of commodified leisure are less serene or simply bizarre. Showing organised leisure in all its forms and for all classes, Zahalka even photographs a lecture given by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida at the Sydney Town Hall, drawing attention to the spectacle of the event as his image is projected on the stage behind. Leisureland was immediately popular, and Zahalka received an Australia Council Fellowship to continue the series in regional New South Wales, in which, at least in part, the extravagance of urban casino gave way to street parades and boys playing cricket in Murrumbidgee River, Wagga Wagga.

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covered pine forest at night. There is nothing natural about these images; in fact, Zahalka sampled her own archive of photographs to produce the digital collages (the Japanese women were taken at Disney Sea in Tokyo). The work suggests that in an age of global tourism and digitally enhanced advertising, place and fantasy have become thoroughly confused. This theme is articulated even more forcefully in Wild Life (2007), wherein Zahalka fuses her digital archive with photographs taken at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. While the uncanny re-envisaging of natural-history displays via photography has been a commonplace since Surrealism (most recently in Hirsch’s Sugimoto’s work), Zahalka inserts traces of the realities of contemporary global tourism into the images. Thus in Alpine Scene (2007), a crushed plastic water bottle and helicopter surround a mountain scene with three bighorn sheep. As usual, Zahalka challenges the idealised historical displays and produces a uniquely fascinating simulation that comes to resemble a surreal children’s book. One might say that if visual representations are ideological because they turn history into myth, as Roland Barthes suggested, Zahalka might say that if visual representations are ideological because they turn history into myth, as Roland Barthes suggested, Zahalka returns myth to history.5

NOTES
1 The Anomaly exhibition toured to numerous institutions in Australia in 1987, including the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane and Gertrude Street Gallery in Melbourne, as well as Camerawork in London.
3 As Jolly suggests, the images are something of a “visual anthropology of some Sydney’s domestic spaces”. See Jolly, ‘Spurs of the Moment’, p. 64.
4 As Jolly puts it, “brutally illuminated by fluorescent light, the domestic tableaux are almost iconically overpoposed”. Jolly, ‘Spurs of the Moment’, p. 64.
5 Jolly, ‘Spurs of the Moment’, p. 64.
6 See the exhibition catalogue written by David Ellison for Leiceland (Melbourne: Anna Schwartz Gallery, 1997).
7 Zahalka is a particular fan of the heightened colour in the portraits of British photographer John Hinde produced during the 1950s and 1960s. Photographers and collector Martin Parr has recently helped bring Hinde’s work to widespread attention.
8 Welcome to Australia was acquired by the Museum of Sydney and exhibited there in 2006–2007.
9 See the press release for Natural Wonders, Rodun Oakley Gallery, September 2004.
10 See Karra Rees, ‘Anne Zahalka: Wild Life’, Portfolio 79, Summer 2007, pp. 48–55. Zahalka reverses photographers idealisation of exotic scenes, inverting, for instance, Edward Curtis’s removal of all signs of modern Western civilisation, such as coke bottles, in his large, romanticised series of North American Indians at the turn of the twentieth century.

FURTHER READING
Anne O’Reilly, ‘Anne Zahalka: How Did We Get to be Here?’, Art and Australia 41/3, 2004

BIOGRAPHY
Anne Zahalka is a Sydney-based artist who has been exhibiting her photographs in Australia and overseas for over twenty years. Zahalka studied at Sydney College of the Arts and later completed a Masters of Visual Arts degree at the College of Fine Arts. Since achieving success with Anomaly (1987), she has held regular solo exhibitions at Rodun Oakley Gallery in Sydney and Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne, and exhibitions of her two Leiceland series (1999–2001) have been held touring extensively within regional Australia. Zahalka’s work has been included in numerous international exhibitions, including Project – Photography in Contemporary Art at Frankfurt Kunsthalle in 1996, Photographica Australis at ARCO in Madrid in 2001 (organised by the Australian Centre for Photography, which also toured Anne in 2002), Supernatural/Artifical at the Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Tokyo in 2004, and Photo Espafia in 2006. In 2003 Zahalka completed a public art commission for Sydney airport called Welcome to Sydney. In 2005 she was the recipient of the Lapidus Fund/Grant awarded at the Photography Resource Centre in Boston and in 2007 a survey of her portraiture was held at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne. Her works are held in most major public collections in Australia.

Denis Wilkie, Crow Cook 2006
from the Wardour series
type c photograph
25.5 x 43.75 cm

7
from the series Fortresses and Frontiers
duratrans transparency, acrylic, melamine box
text: 156 x 166 x 20cm

above:
Title 1997
TBA
type c photograph
127 x 180cm

pages xx and xx:
Penrith Panthers (interactive gaming) 1998
from the series Leisureland
TBA
type c photograph
115 x 145cm

pages xx and xx:
Cole Classic 1998
from the series Leisureland
TBA
type c photograph
115 x 145cm
The Girls # 2, Cronulla Girls 2007

Type C photograph

? x ?cm