Roger Fay – What a Life!

‘What a Life’ – with or without the exclamation mark – is an ambiguous phrase. It can be deprecating almost as much as it can be commendatory. For those who know something of Roger Fay himself, that ambiguity, and the self-deprecation it suggests, will rarely seem appropriate. Roger is not an unambiguous individual, nor would one expect a presentation of his life, even his professional life, to be such.

‘What a life’ may also be thought ambiguous or equivocal in another way – as mere exclamation of astonishment or deprecation, but as embodying an implicit question: what sort of life is it that is portrayed here, that appears in such a range of materials, and across such a variety of interests, activities, and accomplishments? Understood in this way ‘What a life’ asks the way in which the life at issue might be seen as a whole, and so also as a single life, after how it might be seen as unwhole.

The exhibition includes photographic images, drawings, plans, scholarly papers, records of university service. It encompasses four, or perhaps five, main areas: architectural practice, photography, university teaching, research, and institutional development. This is indeed a professional life – albeit with glimpses of the personal showing through – but it is not a life bound to one profession or professional focus alone. The diversity of this life is symbolised by the diversity of the photographic subjects who take up a large section of the exhibition: entertainers, friends, places, and institutions. Clearly, Roger likes to make pictures, and has been doing so, as part of his professional work, and more generally, for a very long time.

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If ‘What a Life’ asks the way in which the life at issue might be seen as a whole, it is also, perhaps, to a certain sheer astonishment. Such a life will always be diverse and varied, but it will also be committed; and if it is self-deprecating, it will be so because it is always given to self-questioning – and also, perhaps, to a certain sheer astonishment.

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The exhibition is to reveal what might otherwise be omitted from our ordinary seeing or what might otherwise go unseen. Although not focussed towards a design response as such, a similar sort of ‘seeing’ is surely at issue for the photographer too – there is a matter of seeing the photographic subject as a whole when the aim is to reveal what might otherwise be omitted from our ordinary seeing or what might otherwise go unseen.

The very title of this exhibition, in all of its ambiguity, suggests the same concern with ‘leaving the whole’ – a concern present in the astonishment and the question, as well as any possible deprecation, that the exclamation ‘What a life’ may embody. Moreover, if this exhibition allows a particular professional ‘life to be seen’ as a whole (which does not mean that every element of that life is visible, but rather that its integrity is somehow made visible), then it allows a life to be seen in its concern with the whole, a mode of seeing that tries always to grasp the whole, and to communicate that grasp.

What is a life? and more pertinently perhaps, what is an academic/professional life? Surely it can only be a life that is given over to the attempt to ‘see the whole’ in the way suggested here, and so also a life that is thereby given over to a thoughtful and productive practice, a practice concerned with its own integrity as well as the integrity of that with which it is engaged. Such a life will always be diverse and varied, but it will always be committed, and if it is self-deprecating, it will be so because it is always given to self-questioning – and also, perhaps, to a certain sheer astonishment.

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Roger Fay was a Professor at the School of Architecture & Design, University of Tasmania and is now an Honorary Associate in the School of Architecture & Design and a Research Associate at the Wicking Dementia Research and Education Centre. He has a BArch(Hons) (Melb), GradDipEd(Hawthorn) and a PhD from The University of Melbourne. He has taught at Deakin University and RMIT as well as practicing as an architect in Australia and the UK. Roger is a Registered Architect and a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Architects. Professor Fay taught design and building technology, with a major research focus on sustainable design and the environmental performance of buildings through the application of design knowledge and creative problem-solving skills. More recently, he has been involved in research concerned with design for people with dementia. He continues to contribute to the university through his research and guest lectures and design studio involvement. As Professor at the School of Architecture & Design, University of Tasmania, Roger managed the realisation of the new building for the School of Architecture & Design at the Inveresk campus.

Professor Fay’s exhibition is presented as part of the NEW Gallery Showcase Program that aims to profile and highlight the achievements of UTAS academics.