

# WOLFGANG SIEVERS

## WOLFGANG SIEVERS, CCP MEMBER AND ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST TWENTIETH CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHERS, REFLECTS ON A COURAGEOUS PROTEST DISPLAY HE MADE IN 1967 AT A PARTICULAR TIME IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY AND WITH SURPRISING RELEVANCE TODAY.

Born in Germany in 1913, Wolfgang Sievers trained and then taught at the Contempora School for Applied Arts in Berlin, an off-shoot of the famous Bauhaus School, closed by the Nazis. He took architectural photographs for his father's books on Berlin's historical buildings. In 1938 Sievers was called up as an aerial photographer to the Nazi Luftwaffe and managed to escape the same day to England and from there to Australia. During WW2 Sievers served 4 years in the Australian Army. In 1946 Sievers re-opened his own studio in Melbourne and continued to practice photography commercially for several decades, specialising in industry and architecture.

Over the years Sievers has been commissioned by Australia's largest industrial names and renowned architectural firms. He also received a major commission in the 1950s from the then Department of Overseas Trade with the brief to change Australia's image from a land of 'sheep and wool' to an image of a sophisticated industrial and manufacturing nation. He is perhaps best known for his 1967 photograph, *Gears for Mining Industry, Vickers Ruwolt*, which was a highlight in CCP's *Stellar* fundraising auction in 2003.

The following text is based on a discussion at the photographer's home in May 2004. Wolfgang began by talking about his experience in the 1930s as "a total failure" in the Spanish Civil War. He had caught pneumonia while helping the Republicans against Franco, and was arrested by the Gestapo on his return to Germany. Our conversation also stretched to his relationships with other great Australian photographers such as David Moore, Max Dupain, Athol Shmith and Helmut Newton. Sievers describes himself as a friend of Newton until, in his words "our friendship broke up when Newton refused to assist his cancer stricken business partner Henry Talbot (their studio was called Newton and Talbot) and I was appalled." Sievers also talked about his research in the 1980s on war criminals in Australia. In between, he spoke about this photograph and its role in his life.

Daniel Palmer

I'd like to talk about a political statement of mine, because most other photographs have been talked about to death with the same things said time and time again. There are certain photographs of mine that are not being talked about for political reasons, and it is this I would like to discuss. As far as I know, I am the only Australian photographer that has been politically active and is still very much involved.

The story behind my use of this Vietnam war protest is that I had a showcase at the Collins Street entrance of the Australia Arcade, which today no longer exists. The showcase was very large, about 2 x 1.5m, with one display in the centre and two small ones on the side. I changed displays as often as I could. Sometimes I included unusual subjects – once I displayed photographs by my son, who was sixteen at the time and visiting Greece.

When the Vietnam War came with its many protests I put this photograph into my showcase with the smaller side showcases draped in black. In the centre I had this horrifying image of an American soldier holding the head of a slain Vietnamese. This came from a *Life* magazine. Next to the image I placed my personal declaration.

As my studio was in a prominent position in central Melbourne, and the showcase received much attention, people were talking about the display and I was fully aware of the possible consequences, which did in fact happen. As a result of this protest display I lost 60% of my industrial clients!

I know that a lot of photographers are just photographers, but to me this profession is also about not forgetting where I come from and what is happening in the world. I've always been a political animal and this photograph and text was a good example for a strong declaration against the war in Vietnam. Given my experiences I was justified in protesting. Indeed, I believe I had a duty to protest. At this time there was also the compulsory military service by lottery, forcing people to go to kill in Vietnam. It was unbelievable! So there are times in your life when one must have the courage to speak up.

image: Anti-Vietnam War protest by Wolfgang Sievers in his Australia Arcade showcase, Melbourne 1967.



I, WOLFGANG SIEVERS:  
VICTIM OF NAZI PERSECUTION —  
PRISONER OF THE GESTAPO —  
VOLUNTEER AIF AND RAAF 1939 —  
VOLUNTEER AUSTRALIAN ARMY 1942 — 1946

PROTEST

AGAINST THIS UNDECLARED WAR —  
AGAINST CONSCRIPTION BY LOTTERY —  
AGAINST IMPRISONMENT  
OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS  
WHOSE JUST STAND HAS BEEN LAID DOWN  
AT THE NUREMBURG TRIALS  
TO BE THE DUTY OF ALL MEN.