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**The Essential is in the Incidental: A Re-mediation of Urban  
Experience**

**An exegesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts**

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**2016**

## Abstract

I drink coffee, take photos, and I would like to be a florist.



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## The Beginning

“The city is overflowing, and with the flood of material things a revolt is beginning” (qtd. in Prichard 88).

For me, the above quote<sup>1</sup> by Japanese theorist-photographer, Takuma Nakahira (1938-2015), is an historical placeholder for photography that reorients the mass media spectacle of the urban environment towards a new image of the city. It is an image that documents the everyday imbued with subjective engagement of the city.

Nakahira was instrumental in founding the influential photography collective, *Provoke*, whose eponymous and short-lived magazine<sup>2</sup> is currently having a resurgence of interest in the West<sup>3</sup>. Subtitled *Provocative Materials for Thought*, *Provoke* had an explosive impact on the status quo of Japanese photography at the time and has reverberated through to current day practices of urban engagement with the camera. Much in the same way Debord’s *Theory of the Derive* informed artists who actively interrupted the mainstream flow of experience within a city, *Provoke* agitated thought around photographic representation of urban experience (Witkovsky 469). Through his dialectical wanderings around Tokyo, Nakahira contributed to what was known in Japan at the time as “Landscape Discourse”, which rejected didactic depiction, interrogated media practices and “sought to move beyond the existing geopolitical ‘imaginary’ of oppositional political thought” (Prichard 84).

A significant effect of producing imagery that reflects everyday occurrences is that the established reading of popular imagery is brought into question, by this I mean, photographing the quotidian potentially produces an affront to the elevated experiences and products seen in advertising photography. It is this process of subjective re-mediation of urban experience through photography that is central to my MFA thesis.

In her essay, *Bodies-Cities*, Elizabeth Grosz writes that, “Corporeality can be seen as the material condition of subjectivity” (Grosz 381). This is, of course, in opposition to the subjectivity of the mind - which Grosz problematises by considering how body and mind produce each other (Grosz 381). But to be clear, it is the relationship between the embodied human subject<sup>4</sup> - augmented by the camera - and the city that I am interested in exploring. In the 21st century there is an escalating tension between maintaining our physical humanity - by having embodied, material experiences, and potentially becoming a network of discarnate societies - a society of disembodied beings existing on the computer network - metaphorically referred to as “The Cloud”.

I would like to argue that many examples of urban (and suburban) architectures produce hypertrophic experiences that disembody the individual in much the same way that virtual spaces, such as those of the internet, separate the experience of the mind from that of the body; online gaming is a popular example. Photography feels like a natural tool to address the dialectic between social space<sup>5</sup> and mental space, because it synthesises them. Therefore, through photography I aim to highlight this tension between the actual and virtual, problematise the dichotomy of both “spaces”. Both can be experienced, represented or re-mediated through photography by emphasising subjective experience. The context of epoch and place is what informs my use of tools and concerns, in that I understand the 21st century city is both actual and virtual. Photography is fundamentally, though not exclusively, about seeing - or not seeing, in the case of some camera-less photography - and no doubt my way of seeing and making photographs is refracted through my experience of the virtual spaces found on the Internet. The techniques I have used aim to highlight this new way of seeing through photography, and explore how explicit use of Photoshop manipulations has influenced how I see and make “straight” un-manipulated photographs. The Photoshop gradients and digital interventions aim to signal an

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<sup>1</sup> Originally from Nakahira’s Book *Why an Illustrated Botanical Dictionary?*. Tokyo: Shobun-sha. 1973.

<sup>2</sup> *Provoke - Provocative Materials for Thought* ran for 3 issues between November 1968 and August 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Besides original *Provoke* Era material, The two recent retrospective sources I have drawn on are exhibition/publication *For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography 1968-1979* (Nakamori), and *Provoke - Between Protest and Performance* (Dufour, et al), published in 2015 and 2016 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> “The City provides the order and organisation that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies: It is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced” (Grosz 382).

<sup>5</sup> “The city is a reflection, projection, or product of bodies” (Grosz 382).

awareness of contemporary visuality, and disrupt familiar viewing patterns, i.e. the way we read a photograph is very similar to how we read unmediated reality. And so this conventional mode of looking must be disrupted in order to explore new ways of seeing. In *The Virtual Window*, Anne Friedberg examines the window of the computer screen as “an opening to a dematerialised reality,” and defines ‘the virtual’ as that which “appears functionally or effectively but not formally of the same materiality as what it represents” (Friedberg 11). By which the framed photograph becomes a conceptual window to the virtual. In this sense the allusions of the frame become significant to how the representation is understood.

Setting about a contemporary photography practice in New Zealand might seem a like a quantum leap from 1960s Japan, but there is a pertinent thread around how we exist within cities worldwide, and throughout history. Dominant media narratives instruct us on how cities are conceptualised<sup>6</sup>, they are generalised for easy consumption, unfolding towards a pseudo-world, to the benefit of vested interests<sup>7</sup>. Whether it is tourist imagery that focuses on the lifestyle aspects of a city, or a particular event in history, which might be considered good in the case of, say, a thriving economy or great architecture, or bad, in the case of a devastating war, the dominant narrative around a regional set of issues often defines how we see our city, and how we see ourselves within the city. I’m not asking for a more objective image of the city to be broadcast, instead, I would like to explore how subjectivity can be utilised to combat and reorient the emphasis of the dominant image of the city towards a personal vision encompassing the desires of the individual. The Provoke photographers took subjectivity in photography to its limits through the technique of *are-bure-boke* (grainy, blurry, and out-of-focus), depicting their own internal dialogue and struggle they were having with the city. And so, through my practice of photography and research, I ask how subjectivity can be emphasised to record my own observations within the context of a 21st century city. An epoch so far largely defined by mass migration to cities - and the associated problems of limited space and resources within urban boundaries - and the globalising effects of the Internet and telecommunication technology. I hope, through my practice as a photographer, that I can address urban issues from a personal perspective, that may contribute to a wider discourse around emerging urban mythologies and the politics of how we all live together in and *as* cities. Because I understand that collectively, we *are* the city.

In order to conceptualise the post modern city, I will explore clashes of the physical with the digital, reality with imagination, consider how hybridity affects subjectivity, and research evolving theories around the importance of the incidental occurrence to the subconscious. The chosen tools are significant for their respective histories and socio-cultural baggage. Photography and its associated material and digital tools shape the way we conceptualise the spaces we inhabit. Therefore, this project deals with photography as both medium and subject, by acknowledging that photography has been instrumental in how we perceive cities, and so can be re-oriented using the same, common medium<sup>8</sup>, of 21st century visual culture. On the relevance of shared visual culture enabled by the mass circulation of online imagery, photography curator and critic, Charlotte Cotton observes, “Cubist artists have been credited with a collective aim to create work that had the power to recalibrate cultural perception by embodying the frenetic visual tempo of the time; today’s artists might be considered as constructing equivalent entry points with their work, interpreting existing viewing behaviours into the dynamic of their practice” (Cotton 16).

This thesis tracks a quiet resistance to the dominant image, and the domination of space over the individual. It conceptualises the city as an interface to an alternate reality, enabled by virtuality, imagination, memories, and dreams (In later sections, I will discuss a dream-like methodology in relation to Sigmund Freud’s theories outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams*).

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<sup>6</sup> “New Zealand, despite being one of the world’s most urbanised, or at least suburbanised, places, does not draw its self-image and its myths from its cities. It’s imaginary has continued like that of other new world societies to be drawn from an idealised or now historically remote version of rural life. The wool-shed and the bach are the icons that signify this in architectural terms” (Gatley 7).

<sup>7</sup> “Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency toward the specialisation of images of the world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life” (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, entry 2).

<sup>8</sup> Smartphones and social media accounts have turned us all into photographers and publishers.

## Flower Influence

Japanese photography from the late 1960s is significant for its subjective engagement with city life. In particular, the photographers Tokuo Nakahira, Daido Moriyama, and Yutaka Takamashi who produced avant-garde magazine, *Provoke*, and challenged pre-existing conventions around photography practices at the time. Nakahira and other *Provoke* era Japanese photographers are notable for their provocative engagement with individual experience (Tormey 183). Nakahira's objective was to describe "sensation in visual language" (Tormey 186), through the technique of *are-bure-boke*, resulting in an aesthetic that appears "exclusive and hostile to the outside world" (Nakamori 27).

Nakahira and the *Provoke* photographers emphasised the visibility of the camera technology as much as their own<sup>9</sup>, "By reflecting the difference between their own eye and the eye of the camera in the photos in an extreme manner, the *Provoke* photographers were in search for a way of capturing the form of the world that was eluding them" (Kohara 1).

I am less invested in the relationship between my own eye and the "eye of the camera", than in the relationship between body and camera. My use of a compact camera, and various camera positions related to the movement of the body, makes for an apparent physical engagement with the city (fig. 1). My digital camera has no traditional viewfinder, instead, an LCD display screen which allows for a live image of what lies in front of the lens, and is viewable from positions only limited by my arm's reach. The technical aesthetic I have adopted is smooth, sharp, and in-focus - the inherent qualities of a high-resolution digital camera - resulting in an observational dialectic with the city. Compared to the *Provoke* photographers, this allows for an *apparent* truth-claim and acceptance of how things look, and how things are.



Fig. 1, Untitled, Photograph by Daniel Rose.

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<sup>9</sup> First printed in the first issue of *Provoke* magazine, 1968, the *Provoke* manifesto called for a "liberation from photography that merely illustrated preconceived meanings, thus provoking "a language to come" (qtd. in Dufour 275).



Like photographers of any generation, the *Provoke* aesthetic was somewhat influenced by the available photography technology at the time - chemicals, grainy film, and hand-made photo-prints. 60 years later, my relationship with contemporary visual culture is the same - resulting in a visuality influenced by digital software, ultra-portable hardware, and the preponderance of natively digital photographs circulating online, mediated by the computer display.

Later in the mid-1970s Nakahira turned his back on his lyrical black-and-white photographs (this wasn't posturing - he burnt most of his negatives), declaring that they had failed to communicate what they had intended by imposing his personal visions on the viewer (Kohara 1). He announced that he intended to suppress his own subjectivity and use the photographic apparatus to only capture "the light emanating from things" (Kohara 1). This was followed by a period of hospitalisation brought on by a nervous breakdown, and subsequent loss of memory. He restarted his practice with *Why and Illustrated Botanical Dictionary?*, a book of prosaic photographs in full colour, simple factual statements - a radical departure from his expressive black-and-white early work.

It is this moment in the history of Japanese photography that I consider to be a point of departure for my own work - conceptually plucking a flower from Nakahira's *Why an illustrated Botanical Dictionary?* and mentally projecting it onto my local urban landscape, resulting in my own flower photographs (fig. 2), channeling Nakahira's spirit. To me, my flower photographs are imbued with a sense of Nakahira's loss, yet the actual flowers still fulfil their practical duty to brighten up and mitigate the environmental effects of urban spaces on the human psyche. The flower, also, is literally a conspicuous sexual organ, perhaps a metaphor of desire for what is offered on the urban marketplace? The city, after all, is a confluence of human desires.



Figure 2, *Nakahira's Flower*, Photograph by Daniel Rose, 2016.

## The Post Modern City

In order to explore a productive engagement with a city through photography, It is important for me to consider what a city is, i.e. what constitutes a contemporary city? Or, for the purposes of my photography practice, how can I best conceptualise a contemporary city in order to move discourse around photography and the city forward? Urban theorist, Jane Tormey, characterises the postmodern city using the following terms: globalisation, mass communication, simulation and hybridity (Tormey 155). The relationship between the city and the internet interests me because they are symbiotic. While they are both physically and socially constructed, the city is represented in actual space<sup>10</sup> and the Internet is represented in “cyberspace”<sup>11</sup>. I can imagine the disruption caused by having one without the other would be socially and economically devastating. Cities have obviously existed for millennia prior to the Internet, but connected global imperatives have now radically moved the contemporary city into a new epoch, as a site for services that rely on mass communication for their economies to flourish.

On the relevance and need of virtuality in the 21st century, James Monaco writes, “In an overcrowded world, there isn’t enough reality to go around” (Monaco 617). And it’s true. Whether it be the codified spaces of shopping malls, the internet, urban designed public spaces, furniture that looks like it’s made from real wood, but isn’t, this is the paradigm in the 21st century in which I operate. The contemporary city comprises both spatial and virtual networks, it is where “virtuality and cartography often meet” (Morse 75). The post-internet city is like that of pre-Internet, in the sense that basic human needs have not changed. The difference is that what we might consider a luxury, has. Material reality has gained new status as something that takes up actual time and physical space; both are limited resources. In contrast, digitised virtuality is reproducible at low or no cost.

Contemporary notions of subjectivity have, of course, come along way since the *Provoke* photographers were rallying against conventions of photography at the time, which were largely based around impartial social documentary practices. Tormey writes about, “The Notion of the ‘cyborg’ as a form of hybrid subjectivity which provides focus for rethinking a condition that interacts with external reality via the computer” (Tormey 203). The cyborg, therefore, manifests another alternative to the mind/body division. Photographers are cyborgs, using digital cameras, connected to computers which are connected to the Internet. The extension of self from physical space to cyberspace is fundamental to how we interact with each other and cities. As actual and virtual spaces conflate into hyperreality, and both spaces increase in their vastitude, the notion of a vanishing body becomes more and more naturalised. This provokes me to explore the importance of the body in relation to the city, to return to matter - the corporeal position - despite the inherent terror in Nakahira’s “overflow of material things”.

“Cities during the Renaissance were spaces with a singular perspective, based on a reality of humanity as a ‘public square. Contemporary cities are spaces filled with multiple realities and perspectives called ‘interchanges’ with matter. Crushed, the core of the humanistic montage/perspective has lost its divine powers and the only way to recover this lost viewpoint is through an anti-perspectival collage made from walking and searching on your own.” (Yutaka, 460)

If I interpret Takahashi correctly, he's positing that the only way to achieve this humanist “singular perspective” of a city is to define it ourselves. The best way to conceptualise the contemporary city is to establish our own reality of city experience, perhaps using methods such as walking and subjective map making techniques, outlined in Debord’s *Theory of Derive* (to be discussed in the following section), which may have influenced the *Provoke* photographers in their awareness of the psychological impact of cities. On the importance of memory in relation to subjective engagement with the urban landscape, photographer Daido Moriyama talks about the “original landscape” (Moriyama, 178), referring to the first landscape one has seen, or believes to have seen.

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch introduces the idea of the city : “Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time. City design is therefore a temporal art, but it can rarely use the controlled and limited sequences of other temporal arts like music. On different occasions and for different people, the sequences are reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across. It is seen in all lights and all weathers” (Lynch 1).

<sup>11</sup> From Wikipedia, credited to Don Slater, Cyberspace is described as “sense of a social setting that exists purely within a space of representation and communication... it exists entirely within a computer space, distributed across increasingly complex and fluid networks.”

And, with a camera, searches out an embodiment of this “home town dream”. But this landscape only exists in memory (Fritsch, 187), or perhaps in photographs too?

On a recent visit to Wainuiomata Shopping Mall - one of New Zealand’s first malls, now in decline, the sparsely populated community notice board piqued my interest (fig.3). Notable because such displays are usually overflowing with vernacular advertising. The casual juxtaposition of wine lovers club, and other lifestyle promotions, with the ‘Missing since Tuesday Evening’ notice, struck me as poignant. The un-curated pastiche of localised daily life is in stark contrast to the ambition of the globalised architecture of conspicuous consumption that is shopping mall. Yet, while a missing persons notice might seem uncanny elsewhere, it is poignantly congruous within the hypertrophic space of the shopping mall - the embodied soul has been subsumed. In a low socio-economic community, the community notice board becomes a mood board of dispossession.



Figure 3, Untitled, Photograph by Daniel Rose, 2016.

In *TRACK - A Contemporary City Conversation*, Boris Groys writes that the only permanence in our cities is the constant renewal the city undergoes as preparation for a permanent future state, of ongoing repairs and piecemeal adjustments to new necessities” (Groys 100). In this sense the city is temporal, a process with no fixed outcome. This leads me to point out that the piecemeal adjustments to old spaces for new necessities, is precisely the moment in the production of the city that I am interested in. Here, I’m targeting a moment in space where a confluence of flailing historical needs and desires meet new needs and desires - a moment of historical and spacial contingency where *symptoms* of dominant systems are manifest in marginal sites. This may not be so blatant as where old meets new, rather, where a change has occurred through human interaction in urban space that holds potential to provide emotional or metaphorical resonance towards my “original landscape”. In this sense, the photograph becomes evidence of the flow of history, a temporal pastiche of occurrences, contingency and desires. This can be seen in the hybridised neighbourhood of Newtown, Wellington. Embracing hybrid urbanism (fig.4) - Newtown is home to Ethiopian cafe, *Mother of Coffee*, one of many migrant businesses that breathe new life into an old colonial burrow. Newtown, once largely vacated by the middle class fleeing to the suburbs, is now re-colonised by small-business owning migrants, and the sons and daughters of middle class suburbanites. This infusion of Other creates an aesthetic of Other which opens up possibilities for hybridisation to occur. To what extent this aesthetic of Other is authentic or parody is unclear.

On Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of desire, Elizabeth Wright explains, “Desire is primarily a desire for love, to be shown essentially in recognition of one’s identity by the Other. It is therefore designated as ‘the desire of the Other’” (Wright 68). By proximity and connectivity, the hybridised city facilitates desire of the Other and the need to be desired by the Other.

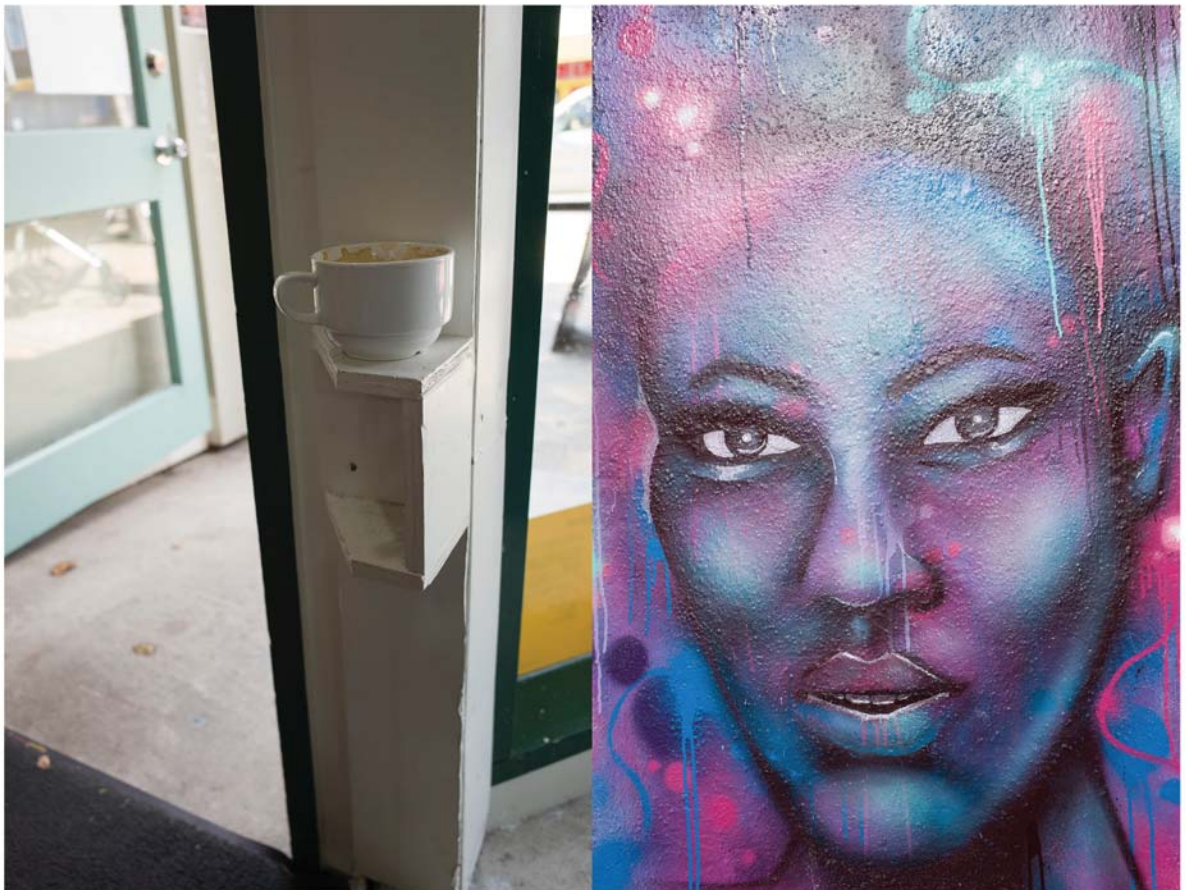


Figure 4, Untitled, Photograph by Daniel Rose, 2016.

## Derive Extended

Guy Debord is credited as a key figure in the establishment of psychogeography, and his *Theory of the Derive* describes “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances”. Debord is careful to distinguish *The Derive* (literally, ‘Drifting’) from classic notions of journey or stroll, by highlighting “an awareness of the psychogeographical effects” (Debord 2) of physical environments. It must be noted, Debord’s theories have, more recently, been expanded by feminist theory to encompass embodied subjectivity<sup>12</sup>. Drifting is to avoid being programmed by the city; it is to subvert urban design or other psychogeographical impacts. It is a search for an experience of the city beyond general political, cultural and economic interests - developing a personal infrastructure and mental map of the city.

Through my own praxis as research I have outlined a simple mode to explore and interact with the city using simple tools and minimal resources to produce an effect that might reverberate beyond initial inputs, and which employs the following items:

- Compact camera
- Small computer
- Notebook
- Coffee as a tool for thinking

Personally, I begin all photo-shoots in a cafe. Coffee is intensely aesthetic, it is a psychoactive substance and preparing and drinking coffee is a sensory experience. Coffee is the perfect drug to enhance my engagement with the urban environment. The drinking of coffee in a cafe is performative component of my photography practice, in the sense that, as a city dweller I am indeed transitioned from observer to participant<sup>13</sup>. Urban social relations are established through participation in cafe culture, and a sense of synergy with the urban fabric is achieved. The cafe can also become the studio space, which mobile computer technology and network connectivity facilitates. By visiting cafes, and walking through a city, a personal urban infrastructure is established, a way-finding system that is more meaningful than any objective map. It’s a use of body to locate the mind. This a mode of research and production that works for me.

On 21st century “deterritorialised” mobility, Venka Purushothaman writes, “It is a moment where art seeks contingency over agency, mobility over fixity” (Purushothaman 1). The mode of image production I have chosen is based around the interplay between the contingency of the city environment, and my own perceived agency. Not contriving situations unless chance would allow, yet actively seeking out images in places with an elevated degree of potentiality.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord describes urbanism as the tool in which capitalism exerts its domination of separation, and safeguards class power.

*The society that molds all of its surroundings has developed a special technique for shaping its very territory, the solid ground of this collection of tasks. Urbanism is capitalism's seizure of the natural and human environment; developing logically into absolute domination, capitalism can and must now remake the totality of space into its own setting.*

Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, entry 169.

But disruptions to this totalitarian order can be seen in parts of the city that have either been temporarily abandoned to the lower order of design i.e. a personalised bricolage of urban intervention. In this way the

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<sup>12</sup> “Feminist thinking has reinvigorated understanding of subjectivity - and of women in particular - asserted alternative ways of thinking to one defined by a rational and unified subjectivity. It has restored the significance of the individual and the body - particularly with regard to the role of corporeality as being crucial to psychical experience” (Tormey 197).

<sup>13</sup> In his book, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch writes that, “We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns” (Lynch 2).

innovator who moves into a low value area or building, becomes the consumer of gentrification. An important component of revitalisation, the artist or startup entrepreneur consumes the low value space, and produces a higher value space, for the prime benefit of the property owner. These “leftover” spaces are “not representative of infrastructure or institution, and refer obliquely to the absence of governmental management of space” (Tormey 114).

Perhaps less openly hostile, than Debord, to the urban situation, though equally subversive, is New Zealand artist, Kate Newby, who alters the urban landscape in order to encourage “a different kind of attention to his or her surroundings” (Hopkinson, 23). Each of her cast object works, such as small, textured ceramic rocks with titles such as *Incredible Feeling*, is a “talisman for a passing thought” (Hopkinson 23). Much in the same way vernacular photography is often an attempt to capture a felt emotion at the moment of its formation, as opposed to a more premeditated and perhaps considered photograph with a defined outcome. Hopkinson positions Newby in relation to her urban interventions, as an artist who encourages an “expanded field of actions” (Hopkinson 33) within an urban context. Defined more by a way of living than “institutional codes... her research is in the acts of daily living, walking, talking with people, observing simple structures and rhythms in a home or on a street” (Hopkinson 33).

Hopkinson relates Newby’s work to that pioneered by The Situationists:

“The transformative potential attributed to the act of walking in Newby’s work is reminiscent of the *derive*, the Situationist ‘spatialising action’ that projects bodies into a spatial and temporal realm as a way of transforming the environment. To Derive is to walk in the city with no fixed end-point, open and aware of its psycho-geography; to inhabit the city in a new way and in doing so reveal and disrupt its ideological character” (Hopkinson 23).

When I think Newby’s urban interventions and cast objects, It is the sheer uncanny immediateness of her work that is what excites me. It seems to embody an emotive response to her surroundings - an emotion that has returned to matter, as in, manifested itself in simple material form, which for me is a fundamental element for building and conceptualising our cities. The material condition of the city exerts psychogeographical force outwards, which I then return by projecting memories<sup>14</sup> refracted through the camera’s lens onto that same matter. It is this disorienting struggle between memory, emotion, and matter that informs my conception of the city. The work is a projection of mental imagery in response to these psychological impacts.

## The Spectacle

Author, Raymond Carver, said it was possible to “write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language and endow these things - a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring - with immense, even startling power” (Carver 218).

There’s an atmospheric tension - stark moments of human interaction that are harrowing yet achingly beautiful - in the scenes and minor events that take place in Carver’s collection of short stories, *Cathedral*. The characters portrayed feel powerless within a system that seems to have closed down options for self-fulfilment, they henceforth live vicariously through the *spectacle*<sup>15</sup>, dreams, and imagination beyond their everyday reality.

From time to time, he’d turn his blind face toward me, put his hand under his beard, ask me something. How long had I been in my present position? (Three years). Did I like my work? (I didn’t). Was I going to stay with it? (What were the options?). Finally, when I thought he was beginning to run down, I got up and turned on the TV.

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<sup>14</sup> “In this sense, there is the camera as the hardware, and there is the photographer as the software, projecting reality called memory towards the subject. Moreover, the photograph and the actual place inextricably involve an individual who can’t be omitted” (Moriyama, 178)

<sup>15</sup> “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, entry 1).

My wife looked at me with irritation. She was heading toward a boil. Then she looked at the blind man and said, “Robert, do you have a TV?”

“The blind man said, “My dear, I have two TVs. I have a colour set and a black-and-white thing, an old relic. It’s funny, but if I turn the TV on, and I’m always turning it on, I turn on the colour set. It’s funny don’t you think?”

I don’t know what to say to that. I had absolutely nothing to say to that. No opinion. So I watched the news program and tried to listen to what the announcer was saying.

“This is a colour TV”, the blind man said. “Don’t ask me how, but I can tell.”

“We traded up a while ago”, I said.

Excerpt from *Cathedral* (Carver 205).

The above captures a fragile moment. Getting up to turn the TV on. It’s a way of saying, through simple gesture, “I am not satisfied with this reality. I need to escape to something else for a while”. There is, due to Carver’s ability as a writer, profound poetry in the way the blind man expresses his preference for tuning into the colour TV, despite only being able to produce mental images to accompany the audio. But it is, Carver’s protagonist, his indifferent disposition that makes him a prime target for Debord’s *spectacle* in this case through the mass communication of his television in his own living space.

*These imperatives pursue the isolated individual right into the family cell, where the generalised use of receivers of the spectacle's message ensures that his isolation is filled with the dominant images, images that indeed attain their full force only by virtue of this isolation.*

Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, entry 172.

Carver’s characters exhibit a poignant surrender to the determinism of the *spectacle*. They lack the cultural capital that might provide an effective outlet for expression of the self. Mass media provides an escape from this loss of self, without actually producing the self. Working class world views have been socially inscribed to embrace class solidarity by not distinguishing oneself by identifying with other groups<sup>16</sup>. And Carver captures this well. I too search for this social position manifested in urban situations, buildings and objects.

## **Fictive Dreams / Second Reality**

For two weeks during July and August this year, I participated in *Tropical Lab*, an intensive international art camp in Singapore, hosted by Lasalle College of the Arts. Twenty eight MFA students from major international art schools gathered for an event that aims to stimulate creative thinking, consciousness, imaginations, and much more. This year’s theme was *Fictive Dreams*, which was a significant reason for my personal participation, given my desire to explore a dream-like methodology for documenting urban experience. For me, dreams, memory, and photography are a tight unit of conceptual tools for art production. All provoke and evoke each other - photographs evoke memory and memory provides content for the dream. Dreaming produces memories which can be projected onto reality with the camera.

*Tropical Lab* culminated in a group exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore based around the theme of *Fictive Dreams*. In hindsight, prior to making work in Singapore, I was operating on low-level

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<sup>16</sup> “The low interest which legitimate working-class people show in the works of legitimate culture to which they could have access - especially through television - is not solely the effect of a lack of competence and familiarity: just as supposedly vulgar subjects, such as television, are banished from bourgeois conversation, so the favourite subjects of bourgeois conversation, exhibitions, theatre, concerts or even cinema, are excluded, defect and de sure, from working class conversation, in which they could only express the pretension to distinguish oneself” (Bourdieu 381).

boredom, due to familiarity with my surroundings. While I was aware of my own boredom I was reactively attempting to convert dulled sensitivity into overactive sensation. I was attempting to make desensitisation generative by focussing my camera on blank facades, non-places, and other spaces that offered a low-level environmental image<sup>17</sup>. But in Singapore, I was activated.

“The eye does not see things but images of things... signs of other things... Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse...”

(Calvino 14).

If, before Singapore, I was turning my lens away from things, upon returning to my own city, I now directed my camera towards happenings, things and signs of things. I was reading the city as an image, walking, seeking out its content. Albeit my interest is in the secondary<sup>18</sup>; a re-thinking of the quotidian, visual content that is somewhat removed from the dominant narrative of the city, yet contains essential information about lived experience in the city. The incidental is fundamental to Sigmund Freud’s theory of dream interpretation. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes, “It (the dream) recalls not essential and important, but subordinate and disregarded things” (Freud 57). The major events of the previous day are subordinated by the incidental objects, happenings and other subtle interactions with people and things.

Freud argues that the conscious mind censors the subconscious, and in order to overcome this structural authoritarianism, the subconscious distorts the representation of the dream imagery in order to make it acceptable for the conscious mind censor. The latent meaning must therefore be decoded and interpreted (Freud 50). Only the incidental is able to bypass the censorship of the conscious mind. There is an analogy between incidental content in photography and in dreams. Both function as an attempt to infiltrate the censorship of the conscious mind. Roland Barthes would call this second function of a photograph which disrupts the literal or denotive reading, the *punctum*<sup>19</sup>. In this sense, the essential is in the incidental.

How is the dreaming related to the city? Expressing her sense of wonderment of contemporary reality in an interview for Tate Shots, German artist, Hito Steyerl, concedes, “I couldn’t have come up with it, in the sense that if you don’t deploy fiction then you’re probably not truthful enough”. Dreaming engages the imagination, literal descriptions and interpretations are replaced with both fancy and genuine new methods of understanding, which might be applied to engaging with the city through photography. Dreams, memory, and photography form a nexus for the imagination to generate incidental realities that inform a personalised vision of the city. Therefore, I began to conceptualise the city as a lucid dream space, which can be embodied. And by documenting this dream space with a camera, its image is materialised, by the photographic process, into, “a second reality”.<sup>20</sup>

Freud’s evaluation of dream-content being indifferent, and that the expression is disguised - “allusions instead of by direct assertions” (Freud 51) - is not dissimilar to the way in which photography is produced and interpreted. My photographs document the everyday in the sense that I photograph what I am aware of when circulating through urban spaces. *Flowers with Borer* (fig. 5) indexes a bouquet of flowers dressing a window in the Wellington suburb of Newtown. I photographed this particular display because I felt there was a haunting quality to the way in which it was arranged, with obvious intent yet it felt uncontrived. Perhaps naive in a way, naivety, of course, can contain pathos. Making up the denoted content and perhaps even more “everyday” than the flower arrangement are the tiny tunnels left by borer, boring their way through the sapwood of the native timber flooring. There is a constellation of small events and histories contained within the photograph’s frame,

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<sup>17</sup> “Any given form, a fine vase or a lump of clay, will have a high or a low probability of evoking a strong image among various observers” (Lynch 7).

<sup>18</sup> From the manifesto of *Science of the Secondary*, “When speaking of the term ‘secondary’, we are referring to conditions and sensations that human beings are not conscious of in their day-to-day interaction with things and the immediate surroundings”.

<sup>19</sup> “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me but also bruise me, is poignant to me” (Barthes 27).

<sup>20</sup> “It is not reality itself but a second reality that has been transformed and made subjective by my confrontation with it. This is what an image is” (Nakahira, 387).



but each component of the composition supports a simple connotation. The seemingly incidental nature of the image, in the Freudian sense, represents not so much an objective thing, but a mental image manifested. The experience of the city mediated by the camera and my own subjectivity result in a *correspondence* with reality<sup>21</sup> as much as a representation of reality. In this sense I am highlighting what I am aware of, what my perspective is, and what my city looks like. I am interested in how photography can transform things, on the periphery<sup>22</sup>, shifting attention towards the edge of everyday vision. Of course, what is peripheral depends on one's vantage point. By focussing on the singular object or incident, the camera can extract the essential from the incidental, redirecting conscious thought.

Depending on one's world view, and considering the gallery context in which *Flowers with Borer* will likely be experienced, the content of the photograph could be read as a sublimation of dispossession - an elevation of working-class practicalities<sup>23</sup>. The flower feels like it is exhibited in the shop window because it is "the done thing", with little regard beyond its practical function as decoration. I am personally drawn to the rationalism inherent in this mode of aesthetic awareness, or perhaps, low-level of aesthetic concern. The photograph is a study of the interplay between the flowers, reflections, tracks left by borer, and foreground fluorescent lighting; It's a Raymond Carver moment. What causes this resonance? This tension between myself and the content of the city is my struggle with matter - a desire to embrace the aesthetic Other, to co-opt it by using the multifarious city space as a device to cultivate a hybrid identity in order to extend my subjectivity. The camera can be used to highlight difference, and create separation, but it can also be used to bring the peripheral into full-frontal vision so it can no longer be ignored.

The things I photograph often evoke a sense of neglect. I find myself drawn to the subtle entropic changes that take place when things, or people are not physically or mentally maintained. With neglect also comes revealed truths, as physical and mental barriers erode, a deeper reality is revealed. On discussing why he selects blurry, out-of-focus images of people over conventionally correct images, photographer and *Provoke* contributor Taki Koji explains, "Such photographs would acquire meaning once we understand that our own existence is defective, and realise that we should not be passionate about the things that constitute the world, but rather recognise the world's imperfections and feel a deep attachment to them" (Koji 350). The dominant mode of image production is destabilised, and the immaterial is materialised as a photograph.

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<sup>21</sup> "Images are always images of something; an image fixed to film that refers existing here and now. It is not reality itself, but at most emerges from a veritable relation of correspondence with reality. Thus, no matter how much an image 'does not resemble' reality, the relation with 'it' is always narrowly retained" (Nakahira 386).

<sup>22</sup> In 1979, On "shocking" the bourgeois by transgressing ever more radically the ethical censorship by bourgeois sensibilities, in the way many artists do with both their lifestyles and art outputs, Bourdieu writes, "... or, more subtly, it is done by conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time, or on objects that are given aesthetic status by dominant 'aesthetics'." (Bourdieu 47).

<sup>23</sup> "Although working-class practices may seem deduced directly from their economic conditions, since they ensure a saving of money, time and effort that would in any case be of low profitability, they stem from a choice of the necessary ('That's not for us'), both in the sense of what is technically necessary, 'practical' (or, as others would say, functional), i.e. needed in order to 'get by', to do 'the proper thing and no more', and of what is imposed by an economic and social necessity condemning 'simple' 'modest' people to 'simple', 'modest' tastes" (Bourdieu 379).



Figure 5, *Flowers with Borer*, Photograph by Daniel Rose, 2016.

## The Contingency of Shopping at Bunnings Warehouse

Experimenting with presentation options, I spent time deliberating over whether or not to paint the white wall of the gallery, in order to domesticate the space, to transform the non-space, into a place. To begin experimenting I went to Bunnings Warehouse and selected a colour swatch that reminded me of an affordable South East Asian restaurant. *Splice of Life* it was called. Perhaps an apt name for this thesis?<sup>24</sup> I chose the colour because of the socio-cultural connotations embedded in this colour. Perhaps it's simply a cliché, but the aesthetic of the South East Asian restaurant seems authentic in the sense that is apparent the interior design was taken care of by friends and family of the owner. The concerns are practical, again "the done thing", drives design choices. In *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu writes, "As objective distance from necessity grows, lifestyle increasingly becomes the product of a 'stylisation of life'" (Bourdieu 57). I'm using photographic practice to find a conceptual space where necessity and lifestyle meet, where they are one and same. So perhaps bringing some of the logic of the affordable South East Asian restaurant into the gallery space will help me further this enquiry. However, upon opening the purchased test pot of *Splice of Life*, curiously it was a very different green than that indicated on the swatch. It was a lighter pastel green, reminiscent of the 1950s Kiwi bach, or Grey Lynn villa circa 2007. This wasn't *Splice of Life* at all. Contingency had its way. And so I have embraced it, I had used my agency to shop at Bunnings, and this was the result (fig. 6).



Figure 6, Bunnings test pot, process document by Daniel Rose, 2016.

## Emerging from the Interface

Install materials:

- Tape and small nails for installing prints
- One test pot of paint to domesticate gallery space
- Any easily accessed discarded materials and detritus that might extend the visibility of the images into the physical gallery space
- Photographs

Some of the photographs are printed on a type of paper that simulates the traditional fibre-based paper used for hand-made darkroom prints. When the photographic process is, referenced, exposed, or made explicit, the underlying reality of things is revealed, It can no longer be hidden as something it is not. That is why I have acknowledged photography as part of the subject matter - to remind people they are looking at photographs, which are cultural artefacts with their own history separate to what is depicted in the photograph. This is

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<sup>24</sup> Joke.

important because people often read a photograph like they would read everyday unmediated life. In *How to Read a Film*, James Monaco writes, “The closer we come to the full reproduction of reality, the more we lose the dialectic between art and its subject” (Monaco 616). It is the dialectic between photography and the city I am engaged with.

By appropriating screen-based visual codes, such as DIY desktop publishing inspired gradients, I have returned digital thinking, to matter. I have explored the material possibilities of digital imaging software, as seen in the 3 dimensional folded shapes inspired by the 3D module of Photoshop, thus bringing the logic of digital algorithms into the material world. In *An Essay on the New Aesthetic*, Bruce Sterling writes, “The new aesthetic concerns itself with an eruption of the digital into the physical” (Sterling 1). This interests me to the extent that it has provided a re-thinking of materiality in relation to the aesthetics of network culture.

How should the work emerge from the digital interface? Photography educator-critic, Charlotte Cotton questions the validity of some of the more literal responses to the renewed appreciation of photography's materiality but does acknowledge, "It is of course true that the tangible form of the photographic print has become much more charged in this moment of screen-based image circulation" (Cotton 13).

Reading through *The Interpretation of Dreams*, it became apparent to me there is a parallel between the structure of dreams, and non-linear montage used in film, and more recently photographic display. Freud writes, “It is true that a dream will make a beginning in that direction, but the next link is wanting; it appears in a different form, or is replaced by something entirely novel. The dream gives us only fragmentary reproductions; this is so far the rule that it permits of a theoretical generalisation” (Freud 9). Dreams tend to contain strange yet familiar situations, often fragmented into several locations, or several real-life locations combined into one. Because my work is largely non-narrative and non-linear in its display, the viewer is forced to physically as well as mentally move and orient oneself in relation to the visual material. The viewer must move their body to a position within the space that corresponds with their own thought processes, which feels like a natural way to structure a system of visual representation, “The structure of ideas is never sequential, and indeed, our thought processes are not very sequential either” (Nelson 1/16). Viewing the work, therefore, emphasises an embodied experience. It involves a performative reading of the work - to build meaningful connections through mental recombination of the imagery.

The photographs are the result of a chanced encounter and then presented in a way that feels like it might adhere to the logic of an ad hoc urban context outside the institutional codes of the art gallery. This is so that the images feel alive with potentiality, as though they are in a transitional space. The degree of contingency captured in the photographs must be carried through to the mode of presentation. Having left the computer's interface, the work transitions from a field of digital possibilities and unfolds towards a new material experience. The spatial coordinates of the images within the space become important, relating the images to each other and to the architecture of the gallery space.

Some of the photographs have been explicitly manipulated using Photoshop's virtual tools (fig. 7). Most have been left largely as they came off the camera in their raw state - this kind of image is sometimes referred to as a “straight photograph”. The manipulated images have been “planted” amongst the “straight photographs” in an attempt to disrupt the viewing habits of the spectator. The disruptions - as in the photographs that have been manipulated, aim to alter the reading and therefore the meaning of the “straight photographs”, at which point leads to a question of how this parallel display of conflicting photographic modes might affect the visuality of everyday seeing. The aim is to use montage<sup>25</sup> to combine imagery in a way that does not produce so much juxtapositions as the merging of two or more discrete images into one contiguous image (fig. 8). An intersection of perceptual modes occur when two or more aesthetics collude in one visual field. The idea is to then be able to view the city and general reality as a representation based on a new kind of visuality, even when unmediated by art.

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<sup>25</sup> “(Walter) Benjamin's Arcade Project [1927-40] is a model of representation that attempts to sustain intersections of meaning, rather than close them down in a linear description or synthesis. Using montage, it gathers together a wealth of material, commentary and quotation in a way that promotes relationships between elements.” (Tormey 94).



Figure 7, Untitled, Photograph by Daniel Rose, 2016

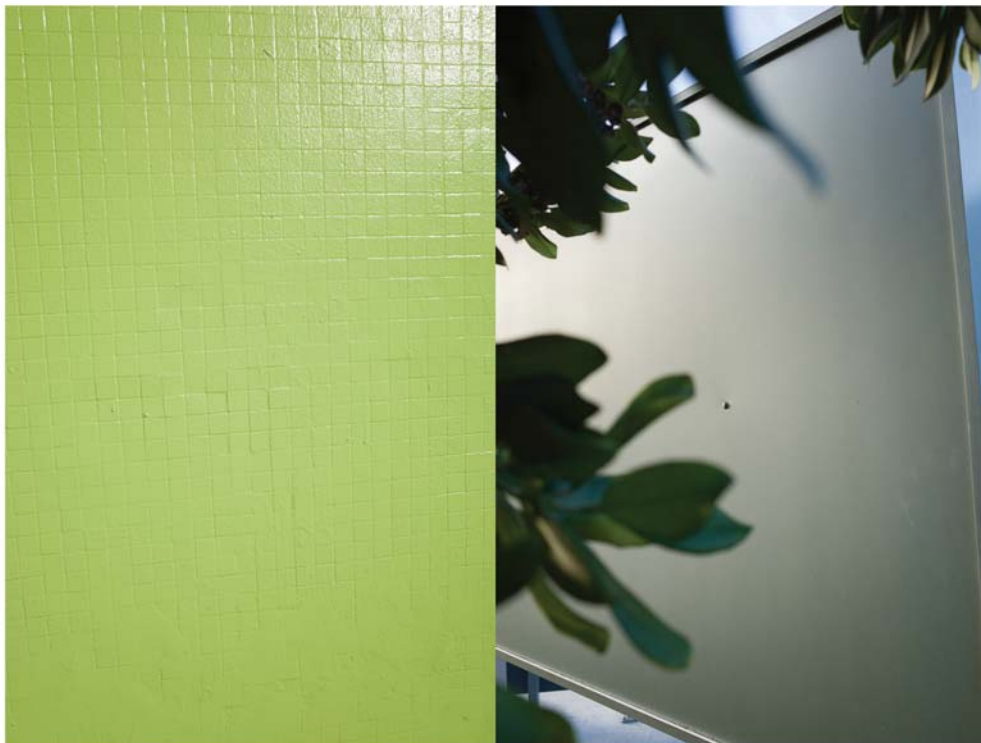


Figure 8, Untitled, Photograph by Daniel Rose, 2016.

## End

This MFA thesis has been a process of researching, making work, reflecting, interpreting, and applying a new understanding of my own urban experience to further iterations of photographic-based work. I have used the camera to interface with the city.

Most importantly, I have established a conceptual framework that acknowledges Freud's ideas around the importance of the incidental to the subconscious, and developed a methodology of dream-like non-narrative montage refracted through my own subjectivity.

With an awareness of the psychogeographical impacts of contemporary urban experience, I have embraced the city's ability to dis-locate the individual (fig.9) and tested how this can inform a new photographic visuality. I have used photography to re-orient the "spectacle" towards incidental moments, haunted by my own "original landscape".

In the Post Modern city, there is a tension between a liberation from the material self - potentially towards an egalitarian utopia of discarnate souls? - and a return to matter, where new understandings of embodied subjectivity can be applied. If the *Provoke* photographers main drive was to resist the dominant image of city-life by embracing a more general idea of subjective engagement with the city, the 21st century offers an exciting opportunity to embrace emerging digital technology, hybrid identities - whether virtual or real, and conceptualise the city as a lucid dream space. My aim has been to generate a pictorial vision of the city where the essential is in the incidental.



Figure 9, *Caroline is Digital*, Photograph by Daniel Rose, 2016.

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