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reality check

**a photographic investigation of space, presence
and “the real”**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Car parks are highly trafficked yet largely disregarded public spaces. Their functionality renders them almost invisible. This thesis questions the nature of space and presence in locations designed for temporary vehicle storage, and examines how “the real” assumes photographic shape in such locations. Space, presence and “the real” are the three key terms guiding my photographic investigation. For my project, I focused exclusively on the Marion Street car park, which I revisited throughout the year. This location could be considered a non-place. According to Marc Augé a non-place is a public space where people circulate, consume and communicate. Augé’s theory helped contextualise my practice within the field of current thought on photography and its subject-matter. The writings of Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard clarified for me the relationship between photography and “the real.” I developed my approach to space, presence and “the real” by researching the practices of Uta Barth, Rut Blees Luxemburg, Seton Smith, Wim Wenders and Andreas Gefeller. In my photographic investigation I alternated sharp and blurred shots, which, at first, I presented as single images and later as composites – digital collages of overlaid and juxtaposed sharp and blurred repetitive shots. The composite images I am currently producing bring together multiple perspectives, layering space and time, and hinting to narrative and suspense. This type of work recomposes and thus questions space, presence and “the real,” proposing a view of the world from a personal yet multidimensional perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

My research this year questions the illusions that pragmatism puts in place. The aim of my research project for 2010 is to reclaim different kinds of visibility for car parks. Car parks are highly trafficked yet largely disregarded public spaces. They are carefully designed, sometimes beautifully so, to fulfil their pragmatic role. People comply with pre-set conventions for the use of car parks; car park visitors do not notice the space of the car park itself, because they do not need to pay attention to it. Not paying attention becomes a comfortable part of the daily routine. Comfort, and not noticing, in the end, both reshape the perception of reality.

Throughout my theoretical and practical investigations, I inquire into how notions of space, presence and “the real” all become visible in car parks – which I regard as “non-places,” on the basis of Marc Augé’s book, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (2008).

Generally, car parks are uneventful areas open to many. Due to their functional role, car parks become almost invisible to their users – much like other communal spaces listed by Augé, such as airports, railway stations and bridges (2008, p. 63). Places like Ground Zero – the site of the New York World Trade Centre where the September 11 attack took place in 2001 – can become the subjects of photojournalistic photography. In contrast, Augé’s non-places reveal themselves more slowly, attracting photographic explorations characterized by patient looking and repetition. I employ focused observation and repetition-based photographic exploration in my process, aiming to reclaim the visibility of car parks.

To summarise, my investigation-based research from 2010 explores the visual potential of car parks, non-places where functionality becomes a main cause of their relative invisibility.

PHOTOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATIONS

Three terms recur throughout my thesis: space, presence and “the real.” I enlist the term “space” to refer to actual locations as recorded in my photographs. “Presence” is a term which I am using to indicate qualities of space. In this thesis, the term “presence” will not necessarily be associated with human presence but will account for traces of human activity as observed on location.

“The real” is a concept with many philosophical undertones. I am referring to “the real” without employing quotation marks when discussing the diverse theoretical works of writers Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Marc Augé. By contrast, I will employ the term between quotation marks when referring to my own photographic investigations.

For the purposes of the practical part of my project, I am approaching “the real” from a perspective that takes into account a postmodern vision of reality. Nevertheless, I am also discussing modern texts on photography in order to chart how the concept of the real has been addressed from the 1970s onwards.

In relation to my current photographic work, I am referring to “the real” in alignment with Jean Baudrillard’s and Marc Augé’s approach to this concept. For both Baudrillard (1998, p. 236) and Augé, the real is not defined in terms of the sensory connection with the world. These theorists write about the real in terms of media and mediation. Both Baudrillard and Augé assert that we live in a system that replaces reality with ideology. In this system, the image “screens the reality.” According to Augé, “[t]hat system serves as its own ideology; it functions like a set of instructions for use; it quite literally *screens* reality for which it is substituting itself or rather whose place it is taking” (2008, p. XVIII).

For me, “the real” is what becomes visible through the mediation of the camera. My approach to “the real” involves not intervening in the location I photograph. There is no staging involved in my process; I access the car park as visitor walking through it and carefully observing. My presence in the car park is never imposing. I access the location, observe and record, like Baudrillard proposes for the practice of photography (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 236).

Photographic technique supports my questioning of space, presence and “the real.” When photographing, I employ a 1/3 stop auto bracketing technique and alternate between sharp and blurred images. Sharp images record detail and present a photographic mediation of reality. Blurring acts as a further mediation: it dissolves detail, and makes form visible.

At the beginning of my project, I started photographing car parks with the intention of focusing on movement. A series of photographs I took in a Christchurch car park in 2009 (Fig.1) sought a cinematic quality. Blurred images suggested motion; in my opinion, this helped to communicate the idea of time passing. I thought that the passage of time became emphasized in a space such as a car park, itself designed for temporary vehicle storage and transit. This observation helped to shape my most recent project. I planned to record the passage of time within the context of still images and to create a body of work showing an exploration of public car parks in Wellington City. This inquiry aimed to photographically record the passage of time as revealed in construction materials and through repeated, voluntary or accidental human activity.

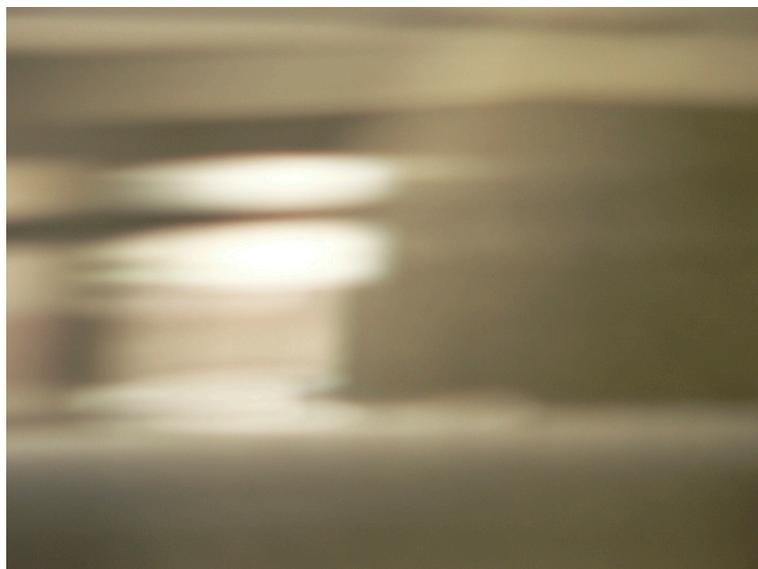


Figure 1. Helga Goran. *post meridiem 11*. 2009.

After the first photo session in a Wellington City car park, I realized that I was responding differently than I had expected to the new location. The photographs I took at the beginning of the year emphasized space (Fig. 2). Although no people were photographed, the empty space of the car park developed its own particular

quality of presence (Fig. 3). This change in emphasis led me to modify my research intentions for 2010. Therefore I directed my inquiry towards texts that engage with the notions of space and presence in photography, as well as toward the relationship between photography and “the real.” I thus changed my research question to: “How do space, presence and “the real” become visible in car parks?”



Figure 2. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 1-18*. 2010.

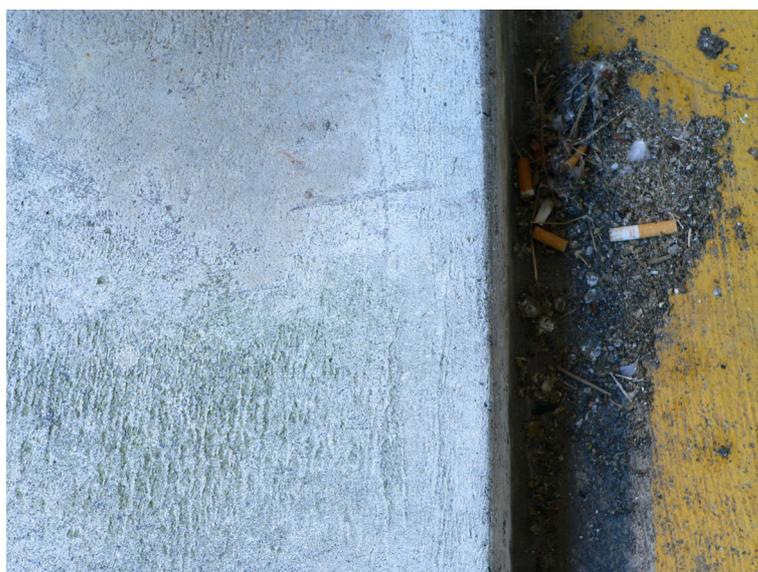


Figure 3. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 3-1*. 2010.

In the following paragraphs I will briefly introduce the artists and theorists whose work has had an impact on my research and practice. I thus intend to contextualise my work within the field of current thought on and practice of photography.

One of the most significant artists I have researched as background information for my own project is Stephen Shore, a contemporary American photographer. During his trips across the USA, in between 1973 and 1979, Shore photographed everyday places, landscapes, interiors, architecture and people he encountered with a large format camera. A selection of this vast collection of images was published for the first time in 1982; it was revised and republished in 2004 under the title *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works*. In the *Artist's Note* (2004, p. 6), Shore states that his trips were “essentially journeys of exploration” of changing American culture.

In a conversation with Lynne Tillman (2004, pp. 182-183), Shore explains that the use of large format camera, or view camera, requires the photographer to work in a slow and deliberate manner while making conscious decisions regarding composition or camera position. According to Shore, the use of the view camera also communicates “what the world looks like in a state of heightened awareness” (Shore, 2004, p. 6).

In *Sambo's, US 101, Eureka, CA, July 29, 1973* (Fig. 4) Shore records the reality of the everyday. The space in Shore's image is saturated with details and with the potential of narrative. In his photographs, Shore seems to always maintain a noticeable distance from his subjects, perhaps in order to portray and describe them richly and accurately.

In contrast, in my own approach I am employing both blurring and sharpness in my images: this helps me to reveal differing aspects of reality. For example, the blurred *Marion Street car park 2-4* (Fig. 5) image asserts form and presence in space rather than detail. Edges do not separate forms into individual units, but blend with the environment. Space thus becomes continuous in a different way than in sharp photographs.

Over the course of my research this year, I closely examined various texts by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard. The writings of Sontag,

Barthes and Baudrillard inquire into the relationship between photography and the real, and investigate the surreal aspects, the essence and illusions of photographic recording.



Figure 4. Stephen Shore. Sambo's, US 101, Eureka, CA, July 29, 1973.



Figure 5. Helga Goran. Marion Street car park 2-4. 2010.

Reality transformed: Susan Sontag and Rut Blees Luxemburg

In her much celebrated collection of essays *On Photography* (2002), first published in 1977, Sontag employs critical commentary to address the then-current state of photographic practice. Supplying a limited number of concrete examples, Sontag brings to the attention of her readers key moments in the American and European history of photography. She then formulates her decisive opinions on the role of photography in the cultural field. In Sontag's view, towards the end of the twentieth century photography lost its exclusivity to photographers and became a domain open to all.

Sontag connects Surrealism and photography in the chapter entitled *Melancholy Objects*. Addressing this theme briefly, Sontag is critical of Surrealism as a movement. However, she finds that the surrealist approach to reality is deeply relevant for photography. Sontag argues that the photographic recording of the real produces surreal results because photography narrows the field of vision, focuses on a given subject and reinvents reality. In Sontag's words:

Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. The less doctored, the less patiently crafted, the more naïve – the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be (Sontag, 2002, p. 52).

Sontag believes that spontaneity in photographing a subject produces powerful and engaging results. Her views on photographic technique bring to my mind the insistence on spontaneity characteristic for the photojournalistic approach. However, despite Sontag's linking of photography with spontaneity, she shows that the premise of photographic practice is in fact surreal, since reality appears in the second degree in photographs. At the same time, Sontag believes that photographic techniques still aim to capture the real. Sontag further addresses this paradox in a chapter entitled *The Image-World*, in which she discusses the relationship between reality and the interpretation of the real.

In *The Image-World*, the sixth chapter of her book *On Photography*, Sontag reinforces the idea that reality is actually interpreted through images. The photographic image occupies a privileged position because of its impact on society. According to Sontag,

a photographic image not only communicates about the real, it also contains traces of the real. For Sontag a photograph becomes an imprint of reality: an image which contains interpretation but also a record of physical presence. Sontag writes:

Such images [i. e., photographic images] are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects) – a material vestige of its subject in a way that no paintings can be (Sontag, 2002, p. 154).

For Sontag, reality is contained in a photographic image in first and second degrees of removal from the physical world. She conducts her explanation along Platonic lines (2002, pp. 154-155). Sontag mentions that a photograph captures reflections of light waves emitted by objects. As such, the photograph stands only once removed from reality, and is capable of gathering objective evidence about the real. But Sontag also shows that the photograph partially interprets the real; this implies a second degree of removal from reality.¹

For Sontag, therefore, a photograph transforms the real and at the same time contains traces of reality. This transformation of the real, according to Sontag, is characteristic of photography, and connects photography to surrealism. The photographs of contemporary German artist Rut Blees Luxemburg can be interpreted along the lines of Sontag's understanding of the photographic image. By photographing at night time and using light as available on location, the everyday, uninteresting places on which Blees Luxemburg focuses transform into surreal spaces. Even though location is specific in Blees Luxemburg's series of photographs, her process emphasizes that the features which individualize a particular city by day disappear at night.

Blees Luxemburg explores the urban landscape. She presents uninhabited places at night time, which she photographs in available light conditions. Blees Luxemburg's process involves taking long walks through the city at night. During these walks,

¹ For a detailed discussion on the degrees of removal from reality see Plato (c. 360 BCE, pp. 457-462).

she identifies her subject-locations, which she later returns to photograph with a large-format camera. Preliminary research leads Blees Luxemburg to establish and pre-edit compositions: she assesses perspective, light conditions and the position of the camera. She takes long exposure shots: these do not reveal human presence and at the same time allow chance to contribute to her process. Blees Luxemburg does not include people in her photographs: she intends to enable the viewer to have an individual experience of the spaces she photographs. As the artist mentions, “I want it to be possible for the viewer to make that mental leap of inhabiting the spaces themselves” (McCarthy, 2001).



Figure 6. Rut Blees Luxemburg. Enges Bretterhaus/Narrow stage (Liebeslied) 1998.

Blees Luxemburg’s work, *Enges Bretterhaus/Narrow stage* 1998 (Fig. 6), from the series *Liebeslied*, exemplifies how the artist transforms an everyday place into a stage-like space. In this photograph, an open storage container becomes the protagonist of the shot. The artist seems to have carefully considered the placement of the camera in order to allow the street lights to create depth of field. Blees Luxemburg emphasizes foreground but also background, and allows street light to generate a surreal atmosphere. The metal container echoes the shape of the building behind it. Although the inhabitants of the building cannot be seen, the lit windows indicate their presence. At the same time, the doors of the container are open, revealing traces of human activity – almost inviting further inquiry – and thus providing the possibility of narrative. The atmosphere in this photograph reminds me of Caspar David Friedrich’s approach to Romantic landscape

painting. Nevertheless, Blee Luxemburg does not aim to capture the sublime from a Romantic perspective. In Luxemburg's own words, "...it's not fictions which I create in the studio or around me; it's finding and concentrating on what is already there" (McCarthy, 2001).

Photographing places as they are, without staging interventions or modifying the environment is also characteristic of my practice. I often choose to work with locations that do not necessarily fit the traditionally accepted definitions of beauty², highlighting photography's ability to aid the visual rediscovery of these places.

For instance, the Marion Street car park is a place designed to answer objective needs.³ It is built with functionality rather than visual attractiveness in mind. However, to me this car park appears as a large stage where the cars and the space itself become protagonists in a series of ever-changing performances.

In the process of photographing the Marion Street car park, I started questioning "the real" by employing blurring and soft focus. The surreal qualities of the car park space thus came to the fore. Close-up shots emphasized atmosphere, and shots from a distance drew attention to form and colour rather than recognizable detail.

The surreal aspect of "the real" becomes apparent in blurred shots such as *Marion Street car park 1-19* (Fig. 7). A previously recognizable cityscape acquires uncanny qualities: it seems to dissolve in front of the lens and becomes defamiliarized. Two horizontal black bars frame the image, shortening the depth of field, further adding to the surreal aspect of this photograph, and contributing to its stage-like look.

Light and the presence of everyday objects sometimes generate a surreal atmosphere, enhanced by blurring. In *Marion Street car park 2-25* (Fig. 8), a Pay-and-Display machine anchors the gaze, becoming a structural element in the shot. The functionality of the machine de-emphasized. Due to the blurring in the shot, light appears to have an almost material quality.

² For example, Immanuel Kant defines beauty as that which is generally and effortlessly pleasing. See Kant (2000, p.104).

³ The official name of the Marion Street car park is Tournament Parking Marion Street. In this thesis, I am going to refer to this car park as the Marion Street car park the same way Wellingtonians refer to it.

Marion Street car park 2-25 is a shot taken in daylight conditions, while in *Marion Street car park 3-42* (Fig. 9) natural light is indirectly reflected onto the subject. This makes *Marion Street car park 3-42* look spatially expansive, although the image only captures a corner of the car park from a relatively short distance. The apparent emptiness of this composition means that the lack of colour in this shot is highlighted. Further, blurring transforms the empty car park corner into a painterly scene, where the protagonist becomes space itself.

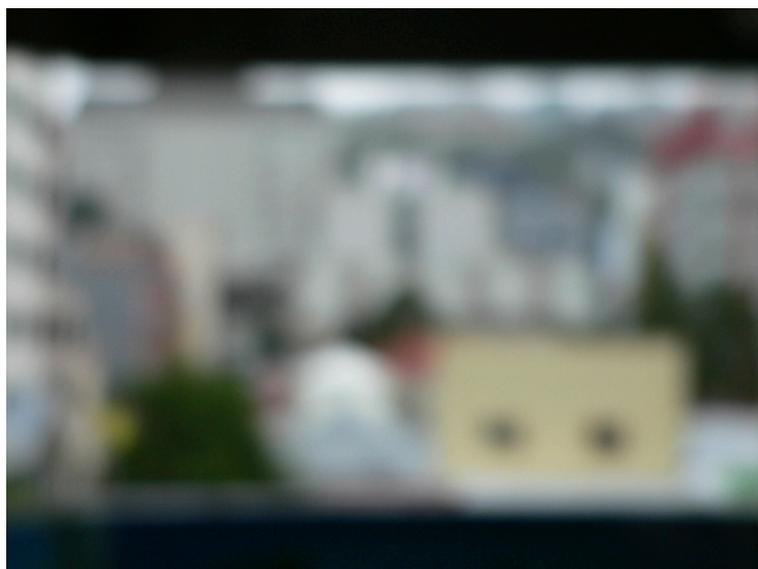


Figure 7. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 1-19*. 2010.



Figure 8. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 2-25*. 2010.



Figure 9. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 3-42*. 2010.

Seeing through photographs: Roland Barthes and Uta Barth

Roland Barthes wrote *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) to provide an answer to his personal inquiries into what photography is and how photography distinguishes itself from other forms of art. A weaving of theory and personal discoveries about the photographic medium, *Camera Lucida* questions a wide variety of aspects of the photographic image. In contrast with Sontag's approach, which focuses on critical commentary, Barthes takes time to analyse specific photographs, gently guiding the reader through his inquiry. Barthes asks questions about photography and particular photographs thus opening new fields of vision and understanding.

In the second chapter of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes establishes that photographs are unclassifiable. According to Barthes, none of the empirical, rhetorical or aesthetic categories applied to the classification of photographic images can account for the essence of a photograph. Further in his analysis, Barthes points out the difference between a Photograph and Photography (he capitalises these terms throughout his text). I find that the capitalisation of the terms "Photograph" and "Photography" draws attention to each term individually, and at the same time distinguishes them as concepts. Barthes observes that it is impossible to discuss a photograph in

philosophical terms. He concludes the second chapter with a refusal to succumb to then-current classifications employed in books on photography, and re-asserts the need to continue his inquiry.

Barthes states that every photograph records a unique moment in time and that it is physically impossible to repeat that same moment in reality. This is why, according to Barthes, we can only speak in terms of a “Photograph” and not of “Photography.” In Barthes’s own words:

What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see: it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the This (this photograph, and not Photography), in short what Lacan calls *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression (Barthes, 1981, p. 4).

In Barthes’s opinion, a photograph is an instance of particularity, and stands connected to the real. It has the power to show reality, but at the same time retain its innocence, or even indifference, as a medium. Although a photograph presents the real, it remains almost invisible from a material point of view. For Barthes a photograph, in its particularity and almost non-material embodiment, contains the essence of the real. Further on in the second chapter of his book, Barthes extends his inquiry to the philosophical aspects of photographic recording. Barthes argues that a photograph cannot be approached philosophically because we do not see a photograph, we only see what a photograph represents. A photograph becomes, according to Barthes, a transparent envelope indistinguishable from its essence, from what it represents, from its meaning which becomes the real.

Differences emerge at this point between Sontag’s and Barthes’s views of photography. For Sontag a photograph does not only contain traces of the real – it also interprets the real. Sontag regards photographs as material evidence of recorded reality. According to her, photography reinvents reality, while at the same time preserving its imprint. I find that Sontag approaches photography from an artistic perspective that emphasises the subjectivity of the photographic act more than the objectivity with which photography is

generally expected to associate. In Sontag's *On Photography*, the photographic image becomes an object in itself, and as such physically independent from the reality it is supposed to re-present.

On the other hand, for Barthes, the materiality of a photograph as such is almost invisible, and what matters is what we see in the photograph. The physical carrier of recorded reality thus becomes transparent in the act of viewing. In this way, it is the image that becomes the real. According to Barthes, a photograph presents the world; it does not reinvent reality, as Sontag asserts. Barthes sees photography as an instance of the real, and as such defines a narrower scope for his investigation. However, his approach to photography is question-driven and open-minded, an inquisitive and inviting exploration, an extraordinary research project driven by sincerity, analysis and personal involvement. Barthes's *Camera Lucida* stands out as an individual journey that leads the writer from asking "What is photography?" to experiencing photography in the absence of the act of photographing.

Contemporary German photographer Uta Barth asserts that her photographs "quite literally inhabit the space between the viewers and the piece hanging on the wall and they do transfer one's visual attention beyond the edges of the picture, onto the wall it is hanging on, into the room as a whole..." (Conkelton, 1996, p. 14). This brings to my mind Roland Barthes's argument that we do not see a photograph, we only see what a photograph represents, thus asserting the connection of the photograph to the real.

For the past few years, I have followed with interest the work of Uta Barth. Barth makes the viewer aware of the act of looking – this is a key aspect of her practice. In *Ground*, her ongoing series of photographs started in 1994, Barth addresses the subject of space. Some of the photographs from this series are landscapes and some are interior shots. They are sharp, blurred or slightly out of focus and always deal with light and space. According to Barth, the blurring of her images suggests that "the camera's attention is somewhere else" and that the subject of the image is nothing in particular (Conkelton, 1996, p. 14). Although blurring contributes to the pictorial quality of Barth's images, the viewer is provided with clear visual connections to the real. The vast majority of Barth's images include recognizable subject matter.



Figure 10. Uta Barth. *Ground #38*, 1994.

In *Ground #38* 1994 (Fig. 10) Barth photographs a white wall. This image resonates with the visual legacy of Minimalist artists working with light and space (Marzona & Grosenick, 2004, pp. 6-7). Barth's shot also includes a comparatively small, yet visually significant, fragment of a window. The window has a double function in this image: firstly, it is a source of light and secondly, by introducing perspective, it gives the image a sense of space. Barth's composition transforms photographic space into spatial presence, and the act of looking into the act of participating. The viewer is not looking at a photograph of a white wall anymore, but is standing in front of a white wall.

My photographs of the Marion Street car park often represent architectural structures. They focus on repetitive rhythms and uninflected markings, drawing attention to the minimalist qualities of this space. Like in Uta Barth's practice blurring dissolves detail and gives space a continuous quality in my photographs.

To me the Marion Street car park appears as a large Minimalist site. To start with, it is built from prefabricated concrete elements that give the car park a raw industrial look. Textures vary from smooth to rough to the touch; the uneven qualities reveal traces of human activity introduced through the moulding and fabrication process. The unevenness of the floor becomes particularly visible when wet.

The colours of the car park are largely made up of tints and shades of gray, modified in places by artificial lighting to shades of yellowish-green. This emphasizes an unnatural look in particular areas of the car park. In addition, through the oxidation of metal reinforcements, joints and fasteners, colour oozes out through the surface of the concrete. Pipes that run along the support structures introduce further horizontal and vertical colour accents. In *Marion Street car park 1-45* (Fig. 11), light and shadows reintroduce an atmospheric quality into the recording of “the real.” This quality is enhanced by blurring. Nevertheless, road markings point to the functional nature of this space.

The support for this image, be it either a printed page or a wall, makes the photograph oscillate between materiality and dematerialization. On one hand, the photograph is transparent, offering a view of the car park ground; on the other hand, the photograph has an opacity given to it by blurring, which brings a material quality to an otherwise weightless surface.

Marion Street car park 3-75 (Fig. 12) is an image of a metal roller fence dividing public and private car park areas. The repetitiveness of bars brings Minimalism to mind. Behind the fence, space is suggested by the direction of the falling light. This lighting gives the image an airy quality. The space between the ribs of the fence renders its structure almost transparent; however, the fence remains materially asserted.

A sharp image, *Marion Street car park 4-34* (Fig. 13) emphasizes the solidity of structure. A concrete wall and floor occupy the image; their materiality is softened by the presence of light. Road markings, signage, oil traces on the floor and erased tagging on the wall bring to my attention the repetitiveness characteristic of this industrial space. This image records reality as observed; however, in the absence of cars and visitors, repeated elements give the car park space an abstract quality.



Figure 11. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 1-45*. 2010.



Figure 12. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 3-75*. 2010



Figure 13. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 4-34*. 2010.

Illusion and reality: Jean Baudrillard and Seton Smith

Jean Baudrillard writes about the relationship between reality and the photographic image in an essay entitled *For Illusion Is Not the Opposite of Reality* (1998). I find Baudrillard's writing at once both simple and difficult. Baudrillard drives his text from one key idea to another, allowing the pace of his own argument to create meaning as the writing progresses. Each paragraph seems to become a micro-text, and contains its own self-sufficient argument.

Baudrillard argues that the world wants to be photographed in order to divert the viewer from meaning. He regards photography as a solitary activity. According to Baudrillard, the photographer should be absolutely objective and record images without commentary. The photographed objects are simultaneously present and absent for Baudrillard: their presence is recorded by the photographic image, which makes the objects actually disappear. Through the act of disappearance, the objects become estranged from themselves and change. This is how illusion is created. According to Baudrillard:

Objects are such that, in themselves, their disappearance changes them. It is in this sense that they deceive us, that they generate illusion. But it is in this sense too that they are faithful to themselves, and we must be faithful to them: in their minute detail, in their exact figuration, in the sensuous illusion

of their appearance and connectedness. For illusion is not the opposite of reality, but another *more subtle reality* which enwraps the former kind in the sign of its disappearance (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 236).

Baudrillard perceives the illusion generated through photographic recording as a deception. At the same time, creating this illusion actually relies on the opposite of deception: namely on commitment to the real. The created illusion allows the objects themselves to remain self-consistent. In this case, the achievement of illusion through the act of photographing requires an objective, attentive approach. In Baudrillard's view, the illusion generated through photography functions as a reality in itself. This illusion is overlaid on the real. As such, it is the photographic image that meets our gaze first, and not the real. The photographic image introduces itself to the viewer as a less assertive, but no less powerful, form of reality.

Baudrillard's views on the nature of the real are in partial agreement with the way Barthes approaches reality as present in photographs. Barthes believes that a photographed event should not be transcended for the sake of reasons external to the act of photographing. For Barthes, a Photograph records the real, and becomes the Real. In other words, Barthes believes that photographs contain the essence of reality. Baudrillard concurs, but builds further on this observation. For Baudrillard, the real changes through photographic recording into the illusion of the real. However, Baudrillard finds that, in order to achieve the illusion of the real, the photographic act must be objective. Objectivity is a necessary condition of photographic recording for both Baudrillard and Barthes.

On the other hand, the claims for objectivity made by Baudrillard stand in contrast with Sontag's observations regarding the relationship between photography and reality. For Sontag, the photograph reinvents reality, and at the same time contains traces of the real. In Sontag's view, a photograph changes the real, transforming it into the surreal: this process actually modifies the object being photographed. Baudrillard argues that the photographed object remains unchanged, yet disappears, and is overlaid by its image. In Baudrillard's view, the photographic image is the illusion of the real, which is no less real in itself, and which requires objective commitment. Where Sontag takes a subjective stance towards photography, Baudrillard is objective. Sontag and Baudrillard assume different positions in the interpretation

of the relationship between photography and reality. However, I believe that their positions support theoretically different fields of photographic practice, and are not exclusive of each other.

Baudrillard writes that photographic images create an illusion of reality which envelops the real and ultimately takes the place of the real. I find Baudrillard's words applicable to the photographs of contemporary American artist Seton Smith. In Smith's work, a subtle shift in the perception of the real occurs: light appears materialised, the objects appear dematerialised, and the viewer is invited to experience illusion as reality.

Smith considers that her images create spaces which allow the viewer to access personal memories and past visual experiences. In Smith's own words, her photographs "... are propositions of spaces that may provoke our memories or connect to the inventory of spaces we have encountered" (Aschheim, 2008). Smith also explains that her photographs question the boundaries between the real and the unreal (Ibid.). Smith's comment reminds me of Baudrillard's approach to reality and illusion.

Smith's practice is mainly concerned with space – more precisely, architectural interior spaces. In Smith's photographs interiors and objects are rendered in a semi-abstract, cinematic way. The artist is concerned with the space surrounding the objects rather than the objects themselves. Smith treats space as a presence, thus transforming space into the subject of her photographs. When photographing space Smith is always on the inside. She takes images with a handheld camera and uses long exposures. The result of this technical decision is that Smith achieves slightly blurred and highly saturated images (Aschheim, 2008). This allows Smith to emphasise colour as presence in her photographs. Smith's images also have a cinematic quality: with their colour slightly shifted, the images appear as transitional shots that make the viewer feel uncertain about what is going to happen next, if anything.

Smith's diptych *Y Chicago Series* 2000 (Fig. 14) consists of two images of the same window taken from a slightly different angle. Filled with light and silence, these juxtaposed photographs offer a vision of altered reality. The monochromatic range of tones makes the glass of the windows simultaneously appear as both tangible and non-existent. Photographed glass thus becomes a form of colour

and a quality of light rather than a transparent material. Smith manages to preserve a balance between the materiality of “the real” and its dematerialization.



Figure 14. Seton Smith. *Y Chicago Series* 2000.

While photographing in the Marion Street car park, I was interested in examining the relationship between materiality and illusion. I have researched minimal art for previous projects and have been interested in the material qualities of objects. At present, my photographic practice has led me to consider materiality alongside lighting conditions and aspects of location, two factors which have an impact on the perception of materiality.

In the Marion Street car park, I have focused on recording solid structures but also transitory presences. I have noticed that car owners do not necessarily park in the same spot, at the same time of the day. Natural light also varies, making space appear different at different moments. Sometimes cars are parked in such a way that cityscapes or views from within the car park reflect in their surfaces. These reflections are visible only for as long as the car is there, although their quality transforms with lighting conditions and with changes in the position of the observer.

Reflections present the environment in a mediated form. “The real” is mediated twice: once by the reflective surface, and the second time by the camera. Nevertheless, the first mediation is questionable, since reflections as forms of presence actually materialize on the surfaces of the cars. These forms of materialization exist only on

the surfaces where they are seen. Reflections in car surfaces are imperfect yet recognizable; they are ambiguously placed in between reality and illusion.

Marion Street car park 4-3 (Fig. 15) contains a fragment of cityscape twice reflected. Buildings, windows, vegetation, roofs are recognizable, although this image is a reflection of the side window of a car in a car door next to it. The convex metal surface curves the reflection but the elements of the reality reflected remain recognizable, even though the photograph is taken in soft focus.

Another reflection in metal appears in *Marion Street car park 4-57* (Fig. 16). Actually taken on the corner of a car's rear side, near the lights, this ambiguous photograph seems to show a convex surface. However, viewers have commented on the concave quality of this image until knowing how the photograph was taken.

Marion Street car park 5-67 (Fig. 17) is a photograph of a reflection in a car's rear window. The car park space and its windows are reflected in a transparent glass surface. Due to the transparency of glass, the reflection is superimposed on the space inside the car. This creates a complex visual rhythm of horizontals. In this image, formal elements are open to multiple readings. Although the photograph records reality, it comes closer to illusion and abstraction than the previous shots.

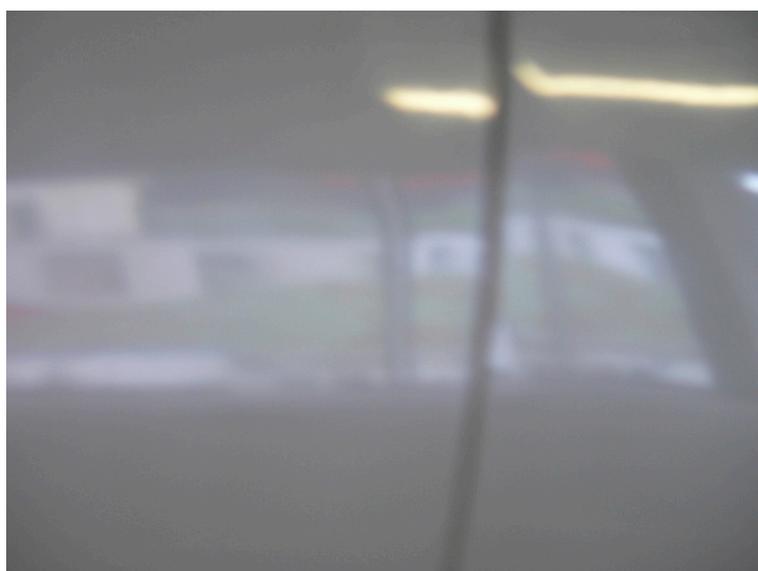


Figure 15. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 4-3*. 2010.



Figure 16. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 4-57*. 2010.

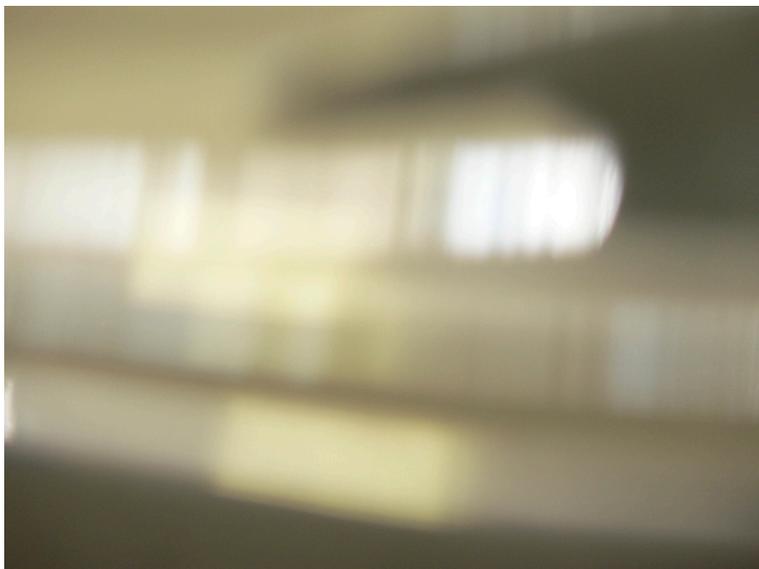


Figure 17. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 5-67*. 2010.

Completing place: non-place and its whereabouts

Marc Augé, a contemporary French anthropologist, writes about places and non-places in his book *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (2008), first published in 1995. According to him, the difference between a place and non-place is based on identity, relations and history. Augé writes:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical or concerned with identity will be a non-place. ...Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten (Augé, 2008, pp. 63-64).

A place is always specific. It is named, it is a space where events take place, it is inhabited by individuals living in a context of their own history and, in a way, static. A non-place is usually a public space. It is a place where people circulate, consume and communicate; it has a dynamic nature. Because non-places are highly user-oriented, places and non-places are never separated but rather overlap each other in our experience of the everyday.

Contemporary film director and photographer Wim Wenders photographs open spaces, landscapes, car parks, street scenes. His subjects almost ideally fit the description that Marc Augé provides for non-places. Wenders' images actually show the overlapping of place and non-place. His photographs act as enclosures which emphasize the differences between the eternal time of the photograph and the time of the viewer. For Wenders, the viewer is always on the outside – observing, much like the photographer himself. Cinematic in their qualities, Wenders' photographs present the world which was there before viewing and will be there after viewing. Wenders seems to suggest that the viewers are just passers-by in the world.



Figure 18. Wim Wenders. Two Cars and a Woman Waiting. Houston, Texas, 1983.

Wenders' *Pictures from the surface of the Earth* is an on-going photographic series of images that he records during his travels. Working with panoramic or large-format cameras (Patrick & Thatcher, 2003, p. 43), Wenders captures unique qualities of presence in the spaces he photographs, revealing the potential for movement and narrative that these spaces contain. Believing that every place has its own story to tell, Wenders makes the place the main character of his photographs. If people are present at all in Wenders' images, they are stripped of personalising features and transformed into characters who support and participate in the story, or history, of the place. As Wenders explains: "I take these pictures with the hope that these places will remember us, not vice versa" (Ibid., p. 46).

Wenders' *Two Cars and a Woman Waiting, Houston, Texas* 1983 (Fig. 18) is a photograph of a street scene in harsh midday light. This harsh light gives the image a strangely surreal look. Wenders' image is constructed so as to place the viewer in the position of the photographer looking through a rectangular opening that runs diagonally through the image. This creates a strong frame for the street scene Wim Wenders presents. Two spaces are clearly identified in the image: inside (dark) and outside (light). The woman in the image becomes a silhouette; the image compresses the two large cars to model size. Both human protagonist and cars seem to be waiting for a "go" light. The atmosphere Wenders creates becomes suggestive of stillness and time compression. The harsh light reduces the colour palette and introduces strong value

contrast, lending the image a painterly feel, as in the work of Edward Hopper. The diagonal opening through which the scene is photographed acts like a frame and suggests spatial continuity to the left and to the right. What Wenders compresses is time rather than space. Space, presence and “the real” are masterfully recorded in this haunting image.

Augé lists airports, bridges, railway stations as examples of non-place. After reading Augé’s book, *Non-Places*, and researching Wim Wenders’ photographs, I realized that car parks could fit his definition of non-place. According to Augé, non-places are communal spaces, where specific forms of exchange occur. In a non-place such as the Marion Street car park, car owners come to temporarily park their vehicles. The car park provides temporary shelter, much like an airport, but the only permanence it supports is the one of its own presence.

The official name of the Marion Street car park is Tournament Parking Marion Street. The car park bears the name of the company that owns it alongside the name of the street where the car park is located. As such, the Marion Street car park is identified in point of ownership and location, but has no specific name itself. This suggested to me that Marion Street car park is perceived as a non-place.

My investigations of the Marion Street car park have often made me think of the car park as a film set, more animated than it actually seems. Although people were hardly present at the times when I took my photographs, the environment of the car park constantly reminded me of their actions, decisions, and views on the urban environment. The way I approached the subjects of my photographs also took this presence-oriented focus.

Like a setting designed to follow the principles of Minimalism, the Marion Street car park emphasizes presence, materiality and transit. The structure actually makes movement visible, transforming cars into characters. For instance, in *Marion Street car park 4-1* (Fig. 19), a car parked away from all the others suggested to me the social stance of its owner: I photographed it so as to draw attention to the possible connections between the placement of an object and the attitude of the person who claims it as property.

When taking another photograph, *Marion Street car park 2-28* (Fig. 20), my looking out towards busy architectural forms from a dark, almost empty interior emphasized

the relationship between distance and proximity. I noticed that, paradoxically, my shots show that inner spaces may contain much more distance than outer spaces.

On the other hand, looking in from the outside in *Marion Street car park 7-34* (Fig. 21) revealed to me how static form may suggest movement. The flowing contour of an outer wall makes a partially visible car appear to be moving, further its position and visibility suggesting possible parallels with human postures and intentions.

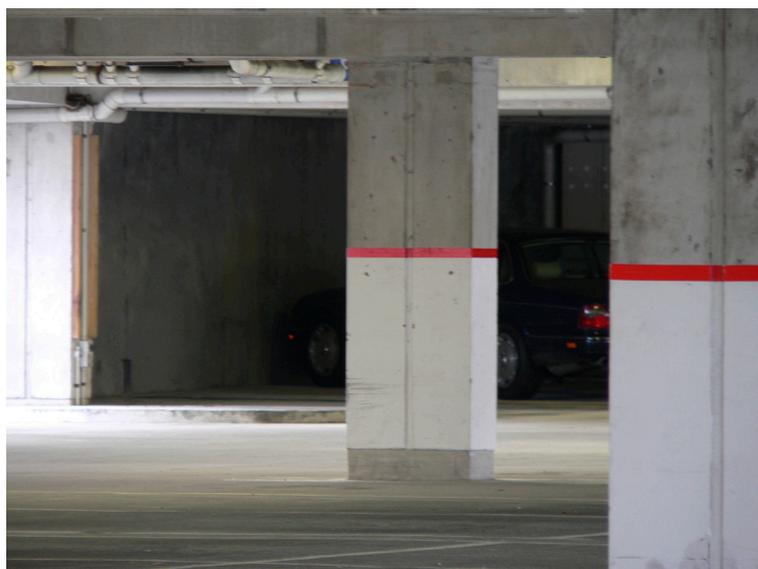


Figure 19. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 4-1*. 2010.

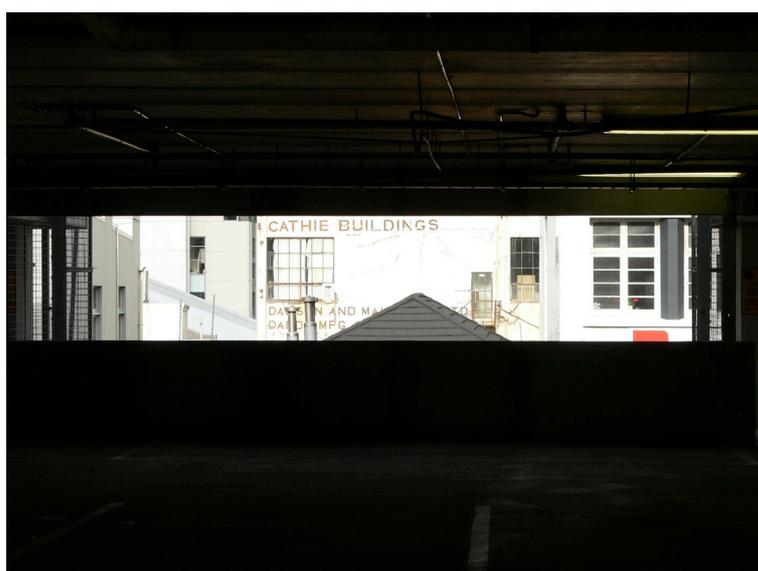


Figure 20. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 2-28*. 2010.

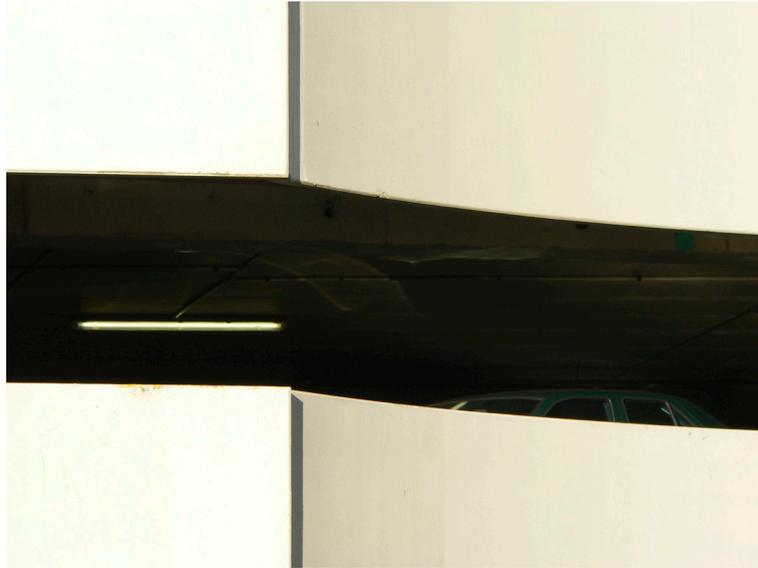


Figure 21. Helga Goran. *Marion Street car park 7-34*. 2010.

Sequencing “the real”: composites, or repetition in progress

After I photographed the inner space of the Marion car park for several sessions, I decided to start shooting outside the car park as well. The same bracketing technique combined with the alternation of sharp and blurred images was applied. I took images from the street level looking up, and also while walking around the car park. I recorded several series of three bracketed shots from the same viewpoint, alternating sharp and blurred images. Shooting handheld created a sense of movement in the images; this gave me the idea of animating these images and extending my project towards a moving image context.

Before the composites, I had worked with individual images. These images had captured colour, form, reflections, the interior of the car park and the relationship between inside and outside. Once I started photographing the exterior of the car park, I realized that the façade of the car park could be approached in terms of repetition and seriality. I started walking along the building and took consecutive shots of cars as well as structural elements of the car park building. Upon revision of the shots, photographic sessions started to reveal continuities in space and time. My next step was to bring these images together in photographic composites. I wanted the composites to reflect the horizontality of the car park levels, therefore I combined similar shots taken from slightly different viewpoints at different moments in time.

The composites form a different relationship between space, presence and “the real,” the three key terms of my investigation. In composites, I recompose space by overlaying or juxtaposing shots previously taken in a sequence. The composites are questioning and readdressing the presentation of “the real” by photographic means. While no human beings are visible in the actual images, windows, cars or buildings remind of human presence. The linearity of time is interrupted in composites. The composites are built with still images but use the cinematic technique of montage. While shooting inside the car park, I was observing and recording. At present, I am constructing non-narrative sequences that could hint to narrative or metaphor. The sequences are not connected to each other but can relate to each other when displayed. Consequently, the composites can either be grouped together or can be displayed on their own.

Andreas Gefeller, a contemporary German photographer, also works with compositing images. However, Gefeller mounts his camera on a tripod attached to his body in order to map a location step by step by taking hundreds of images from around two meters above the ground. He later digitally assembles these photographs in one large image.

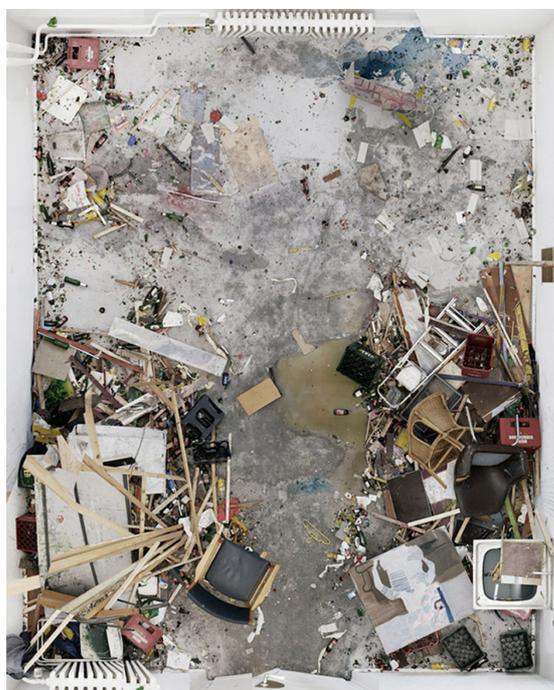


Figure 22. Andreas Gefeller. *Untitled (Academy of Arts, R 209)*. Düsseldorf, 2009.

Untitled (Academy of Arts, R 209) (Fig. 22) is one such digital collage in which every image is basically a snapshot of “the real.” Numerous discarded objects act as indexes: they remind of human presence although the photograph does not include it. The site is recognizable while an immense amount of detail is recorded. Gefeller stitches together hundreds of individual records of “the real,” space and presence. His images hover strangely between the realms of reality and invention.

The juxtaposition and overlaying of images utilised in my works recompose location within them. These composites emphasize the experience of looking and the coexistence of recordings made at different times. For instance, *composite 2* (Fig. 23) is a digital collage of juxtaposed images. It features a parked car and the structural elements of the Marion Street car park building, taken from the outside and looking up. This is the most linear and straightforward of my composites. There is a hint of narrative present in this image. The uninflected blocks of black bring to my mind the actual space between individual photographs – these passages of flatness also contribute to the creation of space in composites. Black bars help to associate the composites with a film negative. In this composite the space of the car park is recreated; the car stands in for human presence and the cropped segments of the building’s structural elements offer a photographic slice of “the real.”

In *composite 5* (Fig. 24), I have selected image slices from the inside of the car park looking outside, and have also included juxtaposed and overlaid images. Colour and formal elements were the guiding thought in building this sequence. Black bars act as moments of visual silence in this rhythmical composition. The space outside and “the real” are reinvented while the windows stand in for presence.

composite 6 (Fig. 25) has a graphic quality. I have arrived at this composition by responding to the formal qualities in photographs of a road and fence visible from inside the car park. By juxtaposing, overlaying and slicing images, multileveled spaces (spaces within spaces) are created and a sense of movement is introduced. The lines of the fence and the road seem syncopated but they still read continuously.

At first sight, *composite 9* (Fig. 26) could appear as an exercise in form. In fact, it is an attempt to remodel the inside space of the car park. Here I made full use of the presence of black in the composite and activated it as background. This background

could be interpreted as a “missing frame,” a visual pause between two shots or two thoughts, or a passage connecting two recreated architectural structures.

composite 8 (Fig. 28) is a slightly modified version of *composite 7-2* (Fig. 27). In both images I have asserted the black background as a participant to the articulation of space. The static quality of individual photographs proposes a new dynamic: it questions structure by means of fragmentation. The space of the car park is recreated to visually communicate the presence of many levels, and at the same time to digitally reassemble “real” structures in a novel way.



Figure 23. Helga Goran. *composite 2*. 2010.



Figure 24. Helga Goran. *composite 5*. 2010.



Figure 25. Helga Goran. *composite 6*. 2010.



Figure 26. Helga Goran. *composite 9*. 2010.



Figure 27. Helga Goran. composite 7-2. 2010.



Figure 28. Helga Goran. composite 8. 2010.

Composites in space

Photography has the capacity to simultaneously appear and disappear, especially in the installation stage. I have tested two methods of displaying my photographs for this project. At first, I employed nails to affix the printed composites to display surfaces. This gave the prints a sculptural quality, since the photographs sat at uneven distances from walls, casting shadows. Three-dimensionality was thus emphasized in the display of the composites, which were set in a field where physical objects and photographic illusions coexist.

Using nails to affix the composites to the wall also resonated with the nature of the place where the photographs were taken – it connected directly to the industrial characteristics and look of the car park, and highlighted the constructed nature of my composites.

The second display strategy involved the use of long pins to affix the composites to the wall. While the three-dimensionality of the prints was still asserted, in this case the photographic aspects came to the fore. Pins are less visible than nails, so the emphasis was placed on the intrinsic qualities of the composites, such as sharpness or softness of camera focus, colour range and visual rhythm.



Figure 29. Helga Goran. *composites installation test (detail)*. 2010.

When displaying my photographs, I carefully considered the allocated room. I affixed the prints to the wall so that the viewer could see only parts of the display at any point in space, without actually being able to survey the entire photographic installation at one glance. The viewers could thus reconstruct the relationships between sequences from different angles in space. For instance, I mounted a short sequence below a full size composite in order to encourage a visual connection with the sequence placed on a neighbouring wall. My intention was to activate the display space and at the same time to allow different relationships to emerge, in a three-dimensional context, between composites where individual images were repeated. The composites were hung at different heights to emphasize the viewpoint from which I had recorded individual images. Lastly, I wanted to contrast composites that included mainly soft focus images with composites where sharp focus images were brought together. Therefore I displayed two full-size composites and two shorter sequences in soft focus, as well as one full-size composite in sharp focus. This display test helped me to refine my ideas for the final presentation of work and thesis submission.

CONCLUSION

During my Master of Fine Arts project, the photographing of car parks has allowed me to explore the nature of space and presence in locations designed for temporary storage, and to examine how 'the real' assumes photographic shape in such locations. For the purposes of this project, I have focused on photographing the Marion Street car park in Wellington.

My project has also questioned space, presence and "the real" from a photographic perspective. As carefully designed parts of cityscape, car parks are spaces where the users comply with pre-set rules. The more specific the rules, the more they displace the need for paying attention. In order to reclaim the visibility of the car park in Marion Street, I have employed observation and repetition-based photographic exploration.

Car parks fit Marc Augé's vision of non-places: they are locations designed for transit, where identities, borders and functions overlap. Augé's vision of non-places has supported my recording of individual images of the Marion Street car park, as well as the creating of composites. To begin, I explored how space, presence and "the real" become articulated in individual photographs. I displayed these sharp, respectively blurred, images together to highlight photography's relationship with "the real". During this stage of my investigation, I studied the works of Uta Barth, Rut Blees Luxemburg, Seton Smith and Wim Wenders.

As my research progressed, I began experimenting with composites – digital collages of repetitive shots. The composites brought together sharp and blurred images as before, yet here the overlaying and juxtaposing of shots emphasized a new sense of space. A black background contributed to the flattening or, alternatively, to the enhancement of visual depth in each individual composition. The works of artists such as Andreas Gefeller have supported my interest in digitally assembled photographic images, as well as my investigation of space, presence and "the real" from the perspective of compositing. The composite images I am currently producing bring together multiple perspectives, layering space and time, and hinting to narrative and suspense. This type of work recomposes and thus questions space, presence and "the real," proposing a view of the world from a personal yet multidimensional perspective.

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