

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

---

Stepping into Social Waters

Photography Performed as Moving Image

---

An extended essay presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

At Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Johanna Mechen

## **Contents**

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Prelude: Waiwhetu, The Waters That Reflect The Stars

Introduction

Representation, Agency and the Photographic Document

The Expanding Field, The Video Essay and Transitionality

Performativity, Instructionally and Reconstruction

Reference list

Illustration list

Bibliography

---

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help, information and guidance of those in the community of Waiwhetu and the greater Lower Hutt. Especially Teri Puketapu, Marilyn Merrett, Henry Steel and the Friends of the Waiwhetu Stream. Also, Emily Benefield, Dionne Ward, Kirsty Anderson and the many residents, children and visitors to the stream – with names unrecorded who chatted to me and told me stories while I worked. I would also like to thank the staff and my fellow MFA cohort at Massey University, and in particular my supervisors, Ann Shelton and Marcus Moore. Finally, to my partner Adam, who has been an enduring support person for me, both technical and emotional.

## Abstract

*Stepping into Social Waters: A Video Essay on the Waiwhetu Stream*, is a photographically derived micro history - an imaginative weaving of moving image - of fact and fiction, which begins with the story of a group of volunteers working in the Waiwhetu Stream. A practice in parallel is created and described by the photographer, a visual mining of a site is undertaken. Ecological and cultural injustices are excavated along with collective historical memory. There is collecting and filming of found stream refuse and reconstructing and re-staging of discarded objects that only exist in story form. The instructional and indexical framework of the project borrows from the greater field of social sciences, visual and material culture, anthropology and archaeology. Cataloguing, numbering, photographing and plotting on a map. Stories are extracted from stream volunteers and local residents, some anecdotal and some archival or historical; these along with the objects found, dictate what is re-staged and re-presented - in a way which is at times uneasy and deliberately plays with the slipperiness of photographic truth and fiction. The photographer transitions the evidential research performativity, by way of selective re-enactment into the Video Essay. A metaphorical and poetic version of that process is described, edited and presented.

My studio submission, *Stepping into Social Waters: a Video Essay on the Waiwhetu Stream*; a 21 minute moving image work, is the culmination of a year's dialogue with a stream and with those connected to it.

---

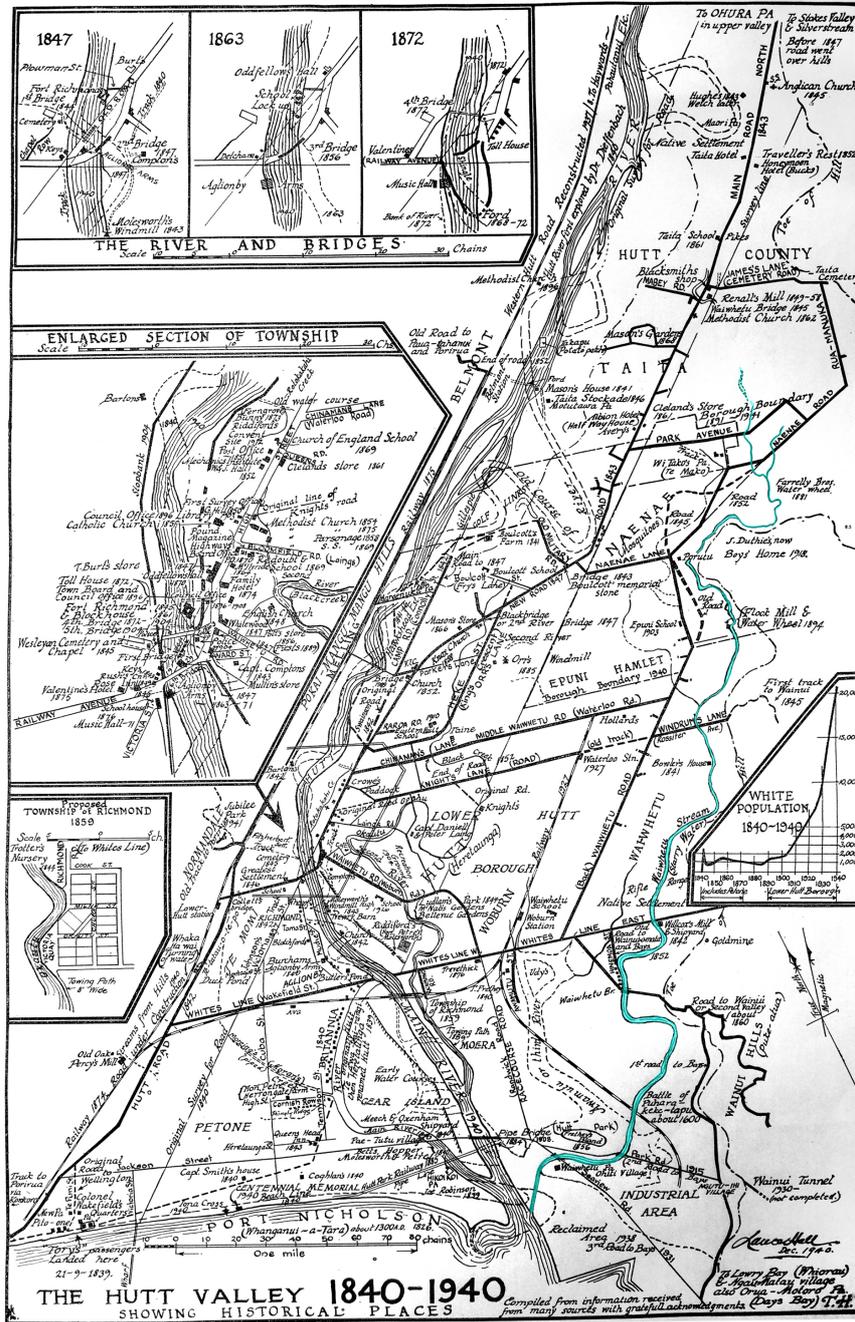


Fig 1, The Hutt Valley 1840-1940, Showing historic places, Compiled by Lance Hall

## Prelude

*"Ko ta te rino i wawahi ai  
Ma te rino ano hei honohono; Ko ta te kakaka i haehae ai  
Ma te kakaka ano hei tuitui."*

*"What the pakeha sought to disrupt, the pakeha will seek to restore;  
What the Maori has lost, the Māori, will strive to regain."<sup>1</sup>*

How to begin a dialogue is to acknowledge where the different points, different people start from. My camera is a passport to people and places. I have always written as well, often in poetic stanza, as a way to articulate how I view the world. The two become commensurate in telling stories that are social. To determine any narrative about a site is to consider how I arrived at it, how I approached it as a subject, then the manner in which it is constructed as a narrative. This can never be arrived at quickly; it is the result of a process of fermentation, like any creative endeavor. Engaging with historical and ecological concerns brought me to The Hutt Valley in 1997, because it was then the most polluted landscape in New Zealand. I went with my camera. There are many facts, thoughts and moments in this Prelude that exists in writing but not in video work. I like and appreciate the gaps this entertains. So this Prelude is a form that activates creative research, through creative writing, speaks to concrete matters as much as absences in the telling of any story.

Nothing can ever be fitted neatly in. Walking the length of any stream means things are both gained and passed by. But they can be returned to. This is both a methodology for this research, and an agency of mine that highlights a fundamental concern, to come to better understand how the transitions and threads and relational evidence of a subject are used to discursively hold narrative together in a creative practice. Many are part of this story, this Prelude seeks to address a site: its physical geography, its past, discoveries made within it that are latent and imaginative, true and real. All traces can inform a story. And I am in this telling; hence I position myself and use my voice to be telling. This validates what are ultimately my selected attentions of a place in regard to my authorship of a subject. This Prelude echoes the methods and treatments of the video essay itself as discursive structure and presents the findings of a stream, those that can become stories in a form of written research that also informed the final visual work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maori Prophecy, reproduce with permission of te Runanganui o Taranaki Whanui

## **Waiwhetu, The Waters which reflect the Stars.**

Teri Puketapu stands, the sun on his back in Te Māori, Whare waka.  
Holding an object wrapped in handee towels, he turns to me.  
As we walk to the table, he casually sweeps, from balanced on a plinth  
a long thin hīnaki under his free arm.  
These two things, set down on a table – a cup now unwrapped from the paper folds.  
Anxiety rises in me for the safety, without bubble wrap,  
of this quite large, delicate, blue and cream tea cup.  
Dug from the mud behind the Whare waka, and scraped clean,  
while laying the foundations of a foot bridge.  
There had been plates and bottles found,  
but he kept the cup, lost or discarded.  
He imagines, a Chinese market gardener tending plots along the stream bank,  
south of Whites Line East, running water, still crystal.  
The hīnaki, newly made by his cousin, never to be used here in Waiwhetu  
but a reminder of the stream's plentifulness, now gone.

*I gather speed - make discoveries, un-earth. Excavate.  
The Whites Line East is straight and steady,  
it tracks with a rhythm and seems to connect all finds.  
The measure, the funnel, wheel and hook.  
A familiar practice, in parallel –  
rocking backwards and forwards, side to side.  
And then it halts and rests for a long time.*

I had been moving towards this place slowly, named for another river,  
Avon Street, perched on the boundary line of Waiwhetu and Waterloo.  
Before my children, it was to photograph the factory district at Seaview,  
and the mouth of the Hutt River, lined with generations of industrial progression.  
Here I paired photographs with the early stories of the landscape.  
Stood where Geoff Park stood, yelling up to the bulldozer driver,  
'Have you found anything interesting?'  
We move here in 2004 and I find myself isolated and unprepared.  
A new mother in an unknown community, it was center less to me.

And here where, my Pakeha middle class family,  
escaping city cost but still privileged to own land,  
should not have seemed out of place.  
Here to, surely was connection and belonging,  
five kilometers from Port Nicolson, landing site of my ancestors.  
The Frasers and McKenzies, in 1840, aboard the 'Oriental' and 'Blenheim' respectively.  
Teri Puketapu's Te Ati Awa ancestors welcomed, protected these new settlers,  
who had found themselves 'cast – as it were –  
upon a barren dreary and inhospitable shore.'<sup>2</sup>  
Recited together with 'My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean',  
'The Skye Boat Song', sung by my father, was Ruth France's poem:

*There is no need to remember swamp-grass,  
Or how the first women (let the rain pass,  
They have prayed) wept when the hills reared up  
Through the mist; and they were trapped  
Between sea and cliffed forest. No ship could be  
More prisoning than the grey beach at Petone.*

So it is, that I lean over in anticipation, a handful of paper towels,  
And there is a role reversal of sorts, as first described by E.J Wakefield,  
following the first arriving colonisers: 'They supplied their guests with potatoes and firewood,  
and with the occasional pig; shared in the toils and meals of the family,  
delighted at the novelty of every article unpacked'<sup>3</sup>  
Many of those novelties unpacked, rest in a settlers' landfill,  
behind what was the Hikoikoi Pa site at the mouth of the Hutt river,  
piled to the bank edge and slowly pushed over.  
Combs, broken hand mirrors, cups, face cream jars and bottles.  
The jutting and eroding remains of the dump,  
sat perhaps on Margaret Fraser's dressing table,  
or Thomas McKenzie's dining table,  
just as the teacup many have sat on the banks  
beside the immigrant market gardener.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hughes. R,(1987) in Park .G, (1995). Pg 82

<sup>3</sup> Wakefield. E.J (1908) pg 148

And so it was my new mother self, searched for comfort near the water.  
I walked its banks, pushing a buggy, looked for company and conversation,  
called after my eldest daughter, always afraid she might fall in.  
It was however often my own barren and dreary shore.  
The rubbish and fowl smell.  
Those few walking conversations were about the state of the stream,  
what it once had been, what had happened to it.  
I imagined a time when I could return, to and with my camera, my notepad.  
Six years and another small lifetime later, I did.  
I filled an absent person's waders on a Cape pondweed dig.  
Without my own waders and without weekend care for my children,  
I wouldn't become a regular help. I would wait for the school years.  
But I had met these 'Friend of the Waiwhetu Stream',  
they were a small passionate group,  
determined to clear and clean, to restore health.

*I hold these things - the here now, there then.  
All is filed and dated to await it's rediscovery.  
Over time they bury themselves further into the mud.  
Sifting and re-ordering is lengthy.  
Cape pond weed has taken control in places,  
it has to be dug out by the root.  
Recovery may be slow, but every day or so  
a clear wet form is loosen from the silt,  
and thrown to the grassy banks of the Waiwhetu stream.*

The Cape pond weed arrives here, 1902, on boots and clothing  
returning with the soldiers, home from the Boer war in South Africa.  
It invades, restricts water flow, builds silt.  
Since its arrival, volume of rubbish and toxicity of the stream grows.  
The pond weed sends roots down, finds firm hold among the river stones,  
through the silt, through the rubbish,  
pinning layers of plastic bags, clothing scraps to the stream bed.  
Once rich and dense land and soil at the banks of the stream,  
observed by Charles Heaphy in 1839, as

'the luxuriant growth of potatoes, taros and kumera indicate'<sup>4</sup>  
was replaced by market gardens which, in turn, are replaced by industry.

In 1848 a shipyard, at the top of Whites Line East,  
when the water was still deep, before the Wairarapa earthquake in 1855.  
At the southern end of the stream,  
a shallow, path altered, body of water  
was branded a 'sandy swamp' a 'no mans land'.  
Justification enough, for the draining of the land  
the building of the wharf at Point Howard in 1929.  
A promise of things to come. And they came.  
Caltex Oil that same year,  
The Ford Motor Company swallowed 18 acres in 1936,  
Griffin & Sons further up stream in 1938.  
Dulux Paints followed, 1939, The Industrial Chemical Industries, 1950.  
Feltex Carpets early in the 1940s, a surge in industry here.  
Workers' traversing the stream discern the factory dye day-by-day,  
by the colour of the water.  
So it was, that up until 1970, industrial waste flowed unchecked  
into streams and harbours.

Not only factories, households too, contribute to the toxicity,  
to the storm water drain run-off into the stream.  
Car and house cleaning detergents grew sophisticated.  
Hedge lawn and grass clippings are put into the stream.  
Dog shit, engine oil, waste paint.

And then the living food is gone.  
Watercress, eels, black freshwater mussels,  
all were staples of a Māori diet here.  
Teri Puketapu, tells me he hasn't seen the small black mussels for fifty years.  
Growing just above the tidal line, he would gather them,  
feeling around in the silty shallows, not far from the tidal zone.  
Another traditional food source has taken over,

---

<sup>4</sup> Heaphy, C, 1880 in Park, G, 1995 pg 86

as it appears the pond weed is a dish in its native home.  
'Waterblommetjie bredie',  
the new flower shoots and stems cooked with watercress,  
potatoes and lamb or mutton.  
And so an invasion and colonisation that is repeated throughout New Zealand.  
The women of the Waiwhetu Maere, adapted, begin collecting the pond weed flowers,  
selling them at the Wellington markets.  
The small waxy flowers are white with speckled black stamens, have a delicate sweet smell.  
*Aponogeton distachyos*,  
from the northern hemisphere, a variety prized also for its blooms.  
I imagine these orchid like flowers in shallow arrangement dishes,  
centerpieces on upper-class dining tables in town.

Once proudly acclaimed, Seaview leads the way,  
No area in New Zealand contributed more,  
a triumph of growth and diversification.  
But at great cost to the health of the stream.  
West German laboratory workers reveal lead levels in the stream,  
as highest in the Southern hemisphere,  
The government pressured, introduces new fresh water policy,  
acknowledge Te Ati Awa, guardians of the stream.  
And so a road part way back is forged.  
The Waiwhetu Stream Restoration Project begins  
In 2009, 21 million dollars the price to pay, buys dredging out 56.000 tons of stream bed.  
This sludge housed now, in lined concrete bunkers at the Silverstream landfill.  
The stream, its bed and banks, now concreted in and over,  
pollution is seeping to the surface.  
Dignitaries pretend to sip the water.  
The Minister for the Environment is presented with a jar of this 'black ooze'.  
This sits in a display case in parliament buildings for several years,  
before it disappears.

Merilyn Merrett, chairs the Friends of the Waiwhetu Stream (FWS).  
She is devoted to the stream.

She doesn't understand my early interest in the 'things'.  
Her house doubles as a lab - tanks of pond weed, experiments in control.  
She asks the City council, to stop spraying the Cape pond Weed, it's not working.  
Other species suffer, in outweighs the benefits of die back.  
Merilyn, with evidence, stops the council 'stem cutting' too  
as it, does little for killing a weed  
as much a good pruning does for a grape vine or fruit tree.  
She would dig them out instead - every individual pond weed, at its root, all 350,000 plants.  
She did. Five kilometers – where it stretches from Nae Nae to Seaview,  
but for the section sealed over, concealing past harm.

During the dig, much was unearthed.  
Bags and beer bottles - rags and shoes.  
Others things more were curious - musical instruments, antique bottles,  
china and ceramic rollers from the 'Griffin's bend' adjacent to the biscuit factory.  
The sheer volume is exhausting.  
Frustrating slimy plastic strings, matted clumps, rope, cable, wire.  
Dionne, FWS digger, feared she would find a body.  
They have their crime drama moment one day,  
when two bodily shaped bags of cooked chickens where pulled from the water.  
There is curiosity and speculation about the items uncovered,  
it relieves the tedium of the dig and the volunteers make up stories about their finds.  
Chrissie, retrieves a large metal hook and tells a story of a meat worker,  
labouring at the Petone freezing works during the fifties.  
He comes upon hard times, in desperation  
fleeces a carcass off the delivery truck to feed his family.  
To cover his crime, he slides the empty meat hook off it's track  
and flings it into the stream, still driving.

floating rubbish originates Nae Nae and Taita, many believe.  
The Taita link is given away by swarms of artificial flowers found,  
having floated downstream from the Taita cemetery.  
Here the head of the stream is curveted under the cemetery,  
a poignantly reminder of the 100 year slow death of the stream,  
born at its very source, it's genealogical roots.

No emotional connection to the stream here, one local man, boldly claims.  
The affluent downstream suburbs have a stream they want to heal.  
they have taken pride in it again.  
But here in Nae Nae it is a drain.  
They over filling recycling bins in windy weather, he says  
eat too much fast food, ready mixed drinks,  
“You can tell by all the ‘woodys’ in the stream” he says,  
”and I don’t mean the woodhens, they have been gone a hundred years”.  
And here another barrier to recovery,  
as everywhere the stream moves through in this suburb,  
it is curveted under roads, concreted over in long trenches.  
Little wonder it is treated like runoff, dead water, a drain.  
Up in the principle contributories to the stream,  
there are fish that struggle to spawn,  
but their breeding cycle is thwart by these trenches  
sight given here, to an absence of fish ladders.

I am back on the dig with the ‘Friends’.  
My own work has begun with my camera, notebook and I.  
Amusement is provided by a small plastic Mickey Mouse toy,  
which bobs to the surface, quickly tied to an eeling line,  
poked into the bank by the laughing friends.  
Eeling, is not illegal, the eels are not protected,  
but isn’t advised, mercury is present in them,  
and the species should be conserved.  
This is highlighted later in the dig,  
Merilyn finds a homemade eeling spear embedded in the stream.  
A fork, crudely taped to a broom handle – ditched,  
no doubt, in a hurry by its young creator, upon being caught.  
Historically Maori would have used hīnaki not lines or spears here,  
local Kamatuata Teri tells me are discourage this traditional practice in the stream,  
until it is repaired and restored as a food source,  
until it’s ‘Mauri’, it’s life force, is returned