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Street Photography in the Google Age

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## **Abstract**

The role and position of the documentary street photographer is examined in the context of other forms of contemporary visual survey, including Google Street View.

The Street View methodology is critically examined and related to the methodologies of other visual artists, including street photographers Peter Black and Robert Frank.

Comparisons are drawn between the methodological restrictions imposed by Street View and those imposed by the photographers in the course of their practice. The issue of authorship is discussed and the lack of specific authorship of Street View is related to its inability to augment the viewer's personal sense of place.

Wainuiomata, a suburb of Hutt City in Wellington, New Zealand, is introduced as a location for the author's research into how documentary photography might operate.

The author's own phenomenological history is considered, and it is proposed that Wainuiomata may act as a mirror which reflects a sense of place derived from personal history, triggered by the visual landscape.

The author's installation work *The 1 p.m. Project* is discussed and contextualised as a response to the author's research findings.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2005 I engaged in a photographic project documenting state housing in the Greater Wellington region. That year was celebrated publicly as the centenary of state-provided housing in New Zealand (Schrader, 2005), so the project was certainly timely. However the project was also driven by my strong personal relationship with state housing, a relationship which has existed since my early childhood.

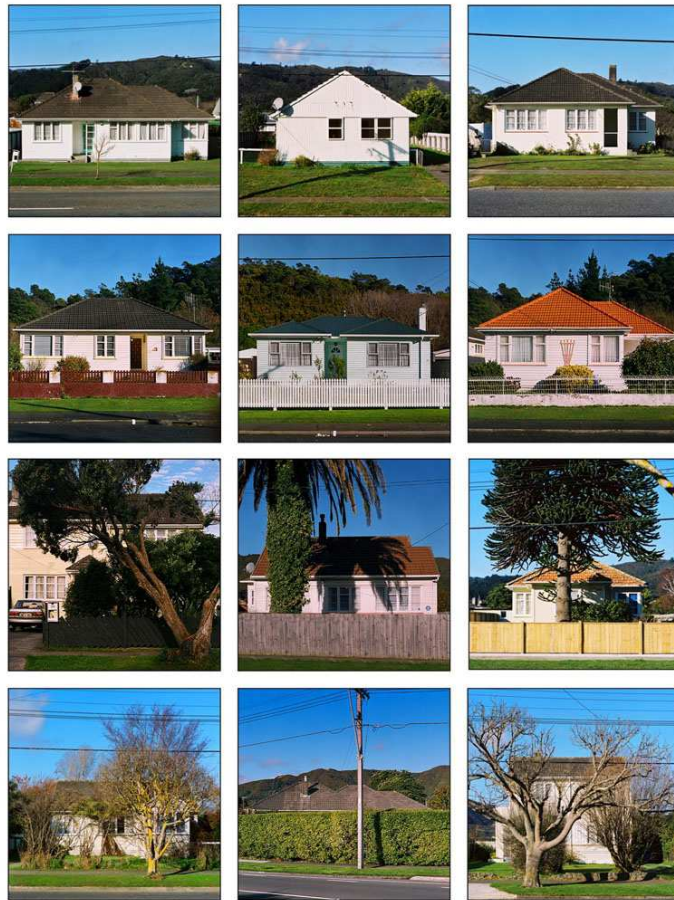


Figure 1

*State Capital* (2005) turned out as a typological study of the character of houses as they address the passer-by on the street, a documentary form which broadly suited my research objectives at the time. During the process of its making, however, I became aware of something significant in the way Wellington's suburbs engaged me emotionally as I travelled their streets, looking. I find a personal sense of place here, a perception of the *quality* of place which doesn't make itself apparent through *State Capital*. My desire to examine and test how photographic methods might operate to

mediate those perceptions of the quality of places has driven my research practice for *The 1 p.m. Project*, the work I present for the practical component of my masters thesis.

In the course of my research, it became apparent that I had some serious company in my practice of visual survey, photographing residential neighbourhoods from the street. In December 2008, Google Inc. introduced Street View to its online Google Maps service in New Zealand (“Google Allows”, 2008). This huge, constantly growing image database collected by rapid-fire cameras on Google’s roving vehicles allows anyone with internet access to view the suburbs of Wellington from about the same viewpoint as a pedestrian – or for that matter a street-based documentary photographer – from the comfort of their own computer.

This paper considers documentary photographic practice in the context of alternative forms of visual survey available today. In section two I examine the Street View methodology and compare it with other forms of visual survey, including the practice of “traditional” street photographers. I consider the roles that control and authorship play in photographic method, and how they might affect the reading of outwardly similar collections of images.

In section three I reflect on the way we interact as an audience with different forms of visual survey, and propose that the degree to which they augment our sense of place may differ significantly, depending both on the level of authorship and on our own experiential histories.

In section four I introduce Wainuiomata, the geographic site of my research practice. I consider how the physical location is less important in engendering my sense of place than the imaginative constructions elicited for me there, and how these constructions might be formed through an interaction of the visual landscape (my perceptions) with the landscape of my memories (my conceptions).

In the final section I consider how the ideas generated in the earlier sections of authorship, perception, conception and control might inform and transform my own documentary practice, and discuss how they have influenced the development of my practical component, *The 1. p.m. Project*.



## 2. Driving Around in Cars

### *Don't Be Evil*

- Google Code of Conduct (Google, 2010)

Google Street View fascinates me. Google Inc., a company barely a decade old and yet whose name has already become the everyday verb for the (everyday) action of searching for electronic data, has provided us with a vast, banal yet mesmerising collection of images of the global built environment. But has Google really, as suggested by Finlay MacDonald, “unintentionally created a vast artwork...as big as the world itself, a mad photo-realist record of our everyday life and times?” (MacDonald, 2008)

Until Street View, Google Inc.'s forays into visual geographical survey were effectively an advanced form of data management – albeit with remarkably engaging results. Using Google Earth and its associate Google Maps, I can seemingly zoom in on a chosen suburban location until I am nearly touching the rooftops and can see the detail in back yards. With a flick of the mouse wheel I am back out in space. Magic. Yet, to my mind, Google Earth is nothing new, nor substantially revolutionary. It is simply an evolution, an advance in accessibility, a vast aerial meta-survey built on nearly two centuries of cartographic aerial photography, surveying the suburbs from above. These images already existed, from the mid 1850s when Nadar photographed Paris from a balloon, right through to the modern day when our lives are constantly surveyed from above by a multitude of surveillance satellites. Indeed, the images in Google Earth's database are simply a collection of those pre-existing images, infrequently updated, but cleverly sown together by software and made available to the general public.

With Street View, Google have taken a step in an altogether more interesting and proactive direction. Here, rather than stitching together existing images, Google have commissioned their own visual survey on a grand scale. Using fleets of vehicles equipped with an “all-seeing eye”, a spherical camera capturing 360 degree images at 30 frames per second, Google has created an entirely new visual survey of hundreds, soon to be thousands, of cities and towns around the world, seen from approximate human eye level (Spring, 2007). Stitched together with GPS and geospatial metadata,

and embedded into the Google Earth and Google Map software, this allows us the unprecedented ability to virtually step into any (previously mapped) street location from the comfort of our computer. Or rather, it allows us to step back in time into a frozen instant in a street's existence, because the images are fixed at the time the camera drove past.

By moving beyond a mere collator and organiser of others' images, Google have stepped into – and perhaps stepped *on* - the shoes of another realm of visual surveyors: Google have become the street photographer (and by extension - recording their images at a rate of thirty per second - the street videographer). This interaction with the urban and suburban domain through still and moving image has been practiced by humans since photography began. Some examples from across the contextual landscape are worth examining to consider where Street View might sit among other forms of street-based photographic practice.

From walking the inner city streets of Wellington, to driving the highways and back roads the length of New Zealand, Wellington photographer Peter Black has devoted much of the last three decades to surveying the urban and suburban visual landscape with his camera. Black's work shares a bloodline with a long history of street photographers: he traces his influences back to Atget, Walker Evans, Paul Strand, and William Eggleston, amongst many others (P. Black, personal communication, 2003). What these photographers share is an attention to the world around them: an inquiry, a personal response, and a desire to elicit some emotional response in an audience. In his series *Moving Pictures* (1995), Black seems to take the part of the Street View all-seeing eye, as a passenger in a car driving around New Zealand, shooting photographs on the move. In fact the final series of "moving pictures" Black shows us is quite different from the experience provided by Street View: Black's view is neither random, nor precisely pre-determined in methodology. Black was seeking to observe and capture the mood of New Zealand at a critical time in our recent history: the rapid deregulation of the mid 1980s. He photographed only those moments which caught his informed eye – those which evoked his emotional response and drew his considered attention (P. Black, personal communication, 2003). Following the journey and the thousands of photos which came from it, Black went through a long and carefully considered editing process, distilling his photographs down to a select, cohesive series of final images,

which communicate an engaging and provocative slice of New Zealand's history, as told by an attentive author. The final series may be seen as a kind of lyric essay, its poetic construction reinforced by its publication in a special edition of the literary journal *Sport*, interspersed with poems and essays responding to the *Moving Pictures* series (Black, 1995).

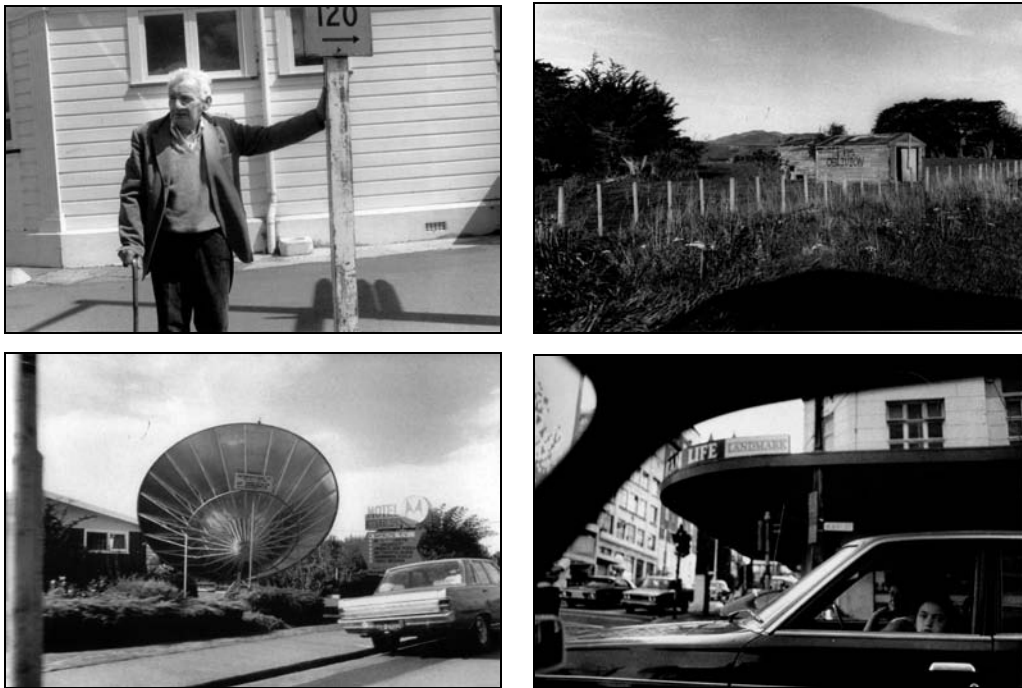


Figure 2

*Moving Pictures* does, however, share a strong methodological bloodline with *Street View*. Peter Black counts Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank high among his influences, and *Moving Pictures* has often been compared to Frank's *The Americans* (1959) with its similarly poignant reflection of a nation's social condition (Thompson, 1999). According to Black himself, however, the main influence for *Moving Pictures* was a lesser-known, incomplete series of Frank's entitled *From the Bus* (1958) (P. Black, personal communication, 2003). For *From the Bus*, Frank has superimposed a *Street View*-like methodological constraint over his photographic practice. Shooting only what he could see from the windows of buses as he travelled through New York, he describes the process as follows:

*The Bus carries me thru the City, I look out the window, I look at the people on the street, the Sun and the Traffic Lights. It has to do with desperation and endurance – I have always felt that about living in New York. Compassion and probably some understanding for New York's Concrete and its people, walking... waiting... standing up... holding hands... the summer of 1958. The gray around the picture to heighten the feeling of seeing from the inside to the outside. I like to see them one after another. It's a ride bye and not a flashy backy (Frank, 1994, p. 204).*



**Figure 3**

Frank describes his intrinsically passive methodology - “The Bus carries me thru the City, I look out the window...” - while at the same time expressing his desire to communicate some of his phenomenological experience of the city through the images he captures: “It has to do with desperation and endurance – I have always felt that about living in New York”. It is personal. Frank – and in his turn Black – have imposed a Street View-like restriction on their shooting method: they are bound to the motor vehicle that carries them, and the images they produce reflect this singular point of viewing. The moving vehicle offers little or no time to plan, to compose, and the photographs have been grabbed, snatched in the way we all snatch glimpses of the world as it passes by our car or bus windows. Or, indeed, grabbed in the way the Street View van grabs 30 images a second as it passes, without pausing for thought or composition. But while Frank may be drawing from the Street View palette, the

selection of images and arrangement into a final series transforms the work into something deeply personal and renders the artist's hand implicitly visible.<sup>1</sup>

Returning and responding to Black's Moving Pictures, I find traces of myself, of my own experience of that time in my personal history. Born in 1965, I was taking my first steps in the new corporate world in the late 1980s. But I also identify strong fibres of Peter Black. When I engage and reflect on what has captured him, I can read into his perceptions on the state of the country, the "something about the way society was at that time" to use Black's words, which are flavoured by the personal and political experience of the photographer himself (P. Black, personal communication, 2003). This work, like Frank's, is unquestionably authored.

Other photographic observers have been more explicitly autobiographical in their approach. For *In Vespa*, the first episode of the 1993 film *Caro Diario*, filmmaker Nanni Moretti is trailed by the camera as he rides around the neighbourhoods of Rome on a motor scooter. Described by Millicent Marcus (1996) as a kind of "*Flannuerie in Vespa*" (p. 239) - invoking Beaudelaire's *flâneur*, the gentleman who walks the streets of a city in order to experience it - much of the episode comprises footage which could have come directly from a Street View camera. We see not only Moretti on his scooter, but also the specifics of the visual streetscape which capture his eye. Residential buildings drift by as the camera passes, and through their visual scape Moretti illuminates and reflects his wry commentary on his city and his life view. It's a kind of poetry in motion, with a lyric quality similar to that engendered by Frank and Black's work.



Figure 4

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Frank never completed *From the Bus* nor published it as a series, so we may never know for sure how he would have treated it. But it is worth remembering that, for *The Americans*, Frank shot (and in some cases returned and reshot) some twenty thousand images before the meticulous selection and construction of the final series of eighty-three photographs (Frank, 1994, p.112).

My personal history offers me little response to *In Vespa* beyond the intellectual. But it calls to my mind the opening sequence of the New Zealand soap opera *Close to Home* (Isaac, 1975-1983). Here again we were treated to a series of drive-by suburban streetscapes, in this case overlaid with the distinctive theme tune of New Zealand television's first major attempt at a prime time soap opera. The sequence opens with the obligatory shots of key city features: the Auckland Harbour Bridge, Christchurch's Cathedral Square, the Wellington cable car and so on. But then we segué into a series of drive-by clips of houses in suburban streets. There is an implication that these are suburbs from the various cities already featured, but in fact they are equally likely to have all been shot around Wellington, where the programme itself was filmed (NZ On Screen, 2010a). Shown at a time when television, rather than the internet, was the predominant screen-based visual medium within our homes, I saw *Close to Home* as part of our collective national identity: we were both embarrassed by it and proud of it at the same time. The opening sequence cleverly evokes this collective ownership: while the shots of city features could be from any tourist film, the intimate sequences of suburban streets – with our 1920s villas, our 1950s state houses, our 1970s townhouses - feel more like they were lifted from our family photo albums. This isn't just a New Zealand soap opera: it's by us, for us, about us. It's ours, for better or for worse. The poetic resonance I find here is as much personal (to me) as it is intended or deliberately authored. While I can admire Moretti's witty and insightful visual self-portraiture, I am not transfixed by it in the way that I am by this soap opera's simple televisual opening sequence. It digs deep into my personal history, and in here I find clues about my own practice and response to the Wellington suburbs.



**Figure 5**

In 2010, the internet has become arguably more important than the television as a visual screen-based medium in many of our homes. Online video hosting websites now provide an interactive tool for the personal visual surveyor. In the YouTube video *Driving over Wainui Hill* (2007), the poster “acevaze” invites us to sit in the car with her while she makes the emblematic drive over the single road into the Wellington suburb of Wainuiomata from the Hutt Valley. Again the footage is close to that taken by the Street View camera driving over the same road and in fact we can take that same journey with Street View and a few clicks of the mouse. But the sparse personal commentary, and the knowledge that the footage has been deliberately shot and uploaded for an audience to share in the poster’s personal experience, serve to reframe the footage as an exercise in personal expression. Here the authorship, the creative poetic is explicit: acevaze is proudly proclaiming *hey, this is me, driving over Wainui Hill, come along for the ride!* Once again I find the video transfixing, mesmerising: there’s more here than just a simple amusement at the commentary and the recognition of a symbolically-important connection between the (geographic) outside and inside of Wainuiomata. I also find a joy, a refreshing freedom of practice and availability which offers a reminder of the democracy of documentary photography.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, when I take a journey with Street View, I become the author, the editor, constructing and reading into the images the kind of documentary, societal reflections which give it meaning for me. The way in which visual survey is presented, and the way in which we interact as audience and post-photographic participant, forms a critical pathway affecting the degree and nature of our response as an audience.

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<sup>2</sup> *Driving over Wainui Hill* may be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqE0azhrAgk>

### 3. You Can See My House from Here

*[Google Street View] has brought a new way of looking at the object. [It] has shown it without memories, without poetry. This is a matte description, non-realistic. The object appears without the halo of meanings, and that is what gives birth to anxiety, which is a profound and metaphysical meaning.*

- James McNaughton, after Roland Barthes

(McNaughton, 2009, p.117)

I have observed and interrogated a number of Street View users and it is clear where their immediate fascination lay. Without a single exception (myself included) the very first place they had visited using Street View was their own house. We already know what our house looks like from the street, and in fact the quality of the images in Street View generally disappoints us. This disappointment is revealing in itself. James McNaughton (2009), in a recent essay in *Landfall*, describes his experience of visiting his Wellington home and neighbourhood through Street View. For McNaughton, the experience was an uneasy, anxious one. He speaks of trying to reconcile the bland, washed out images on his screen with his own, experience-based knowledge of those places. He saw an implication – an accusation, even - written in the universal availability of the images that his place is no place special – Street View had robbed his neighbourhood of what McNaughton describes as its “halo of meaning”. He’s acutely aware that Google’s all-seeing eye is lacking the mediation of subjective human experience necessary to engender a sense of place – or at least to reinforce his own sense of place.

But in any case we do seem to expect to get some vicarious pleasure through seeing our house as the anonymous van driver’s camera has seen it: knowing that someone else is noticing us – or has cared enough to photograph our home. Perhaps we’re motivated by the same narcissistic impulse which leads us to search our own name on Google. But with Street View we quickly realise, as McNaughton has, that the attention has not been paid to us as individuals, but rather by default as members of a vastly larger data set. Are we just guilty of noticing ourselves? Who else cares? And so we move on to travel with Street View to the places we have lived before, where we grew up, where our family live, and then perhaps to visit some of the famous places we’ve seen or always wanted to see. My young sons’ favourite is the Eiffel Tower – a structure they’ve seen



dozens of times (and in much higher technical resolution) in books, postcards, photographs and websites. Given this vast database, this unprecedented ability to visit and observe places unknown, places unseen, what is it that drives us to zoom in on exactly the opposite? What attracts us to spend our time viewing streets, houses, monuments and the like that are already well populated in our visual consciousness? Perhaps it is as simple as the fact that nothing has been pre-selected for us, no editing performed (although at the larger scale it has, of course – we can't go *anywhere* in the world with Street View, only those places Google's vans have been before us), and without this authorship, this lack of poetic guidance, we don't know where the story is supposed to begin. And so we seek comfort first in the familiar: a reinforcement of our expectations, a reassurance that our visual construction of the world still resides there in the universal database to which billions of others have access.

In describing his experience of Street View, McNaughton recalls Roland Barthes' description of the *Nouveau Romain* in 1962. Barthes credited the "new novel", and in particular writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, with seeing and projecting objects separate from their usual significance (Barthes, 1985, p.10). I'm not sure that Barthes and McNaughton have it exactly right here. Have Barthes' new novel objects, and McNaughton's street views, really been stripped of their "halo of meanings"? To do so would imply that the meanings reside with and belong to the objects themselves, rather than in the reader or viewer. I would suggest that it is not the Street View images themselves which instil this sense of disquiet and unease, but rather the context of viewing which offers us freedom but fails to offer us direction. Street View does not so much strip the streets of their meaning, but rather it fails to offer any *extension* of whatever meaning we already attach to those places. It seems to teach us nothing new – we are left only with our own meanings, our existing imaginative constructions – a new experience is promised but none is in fact delivered.

Compare this with the other visual surveys discussed above. At first glance, the images and footage in Robert Frank's *From the Bus*, Peter Black's *Moving Pictures*, acevaze's *Driving Over Wainui Hill*, Moretti's *In Vespa* or the opening sequence from *Close to Home* might have been taken from Street View. But this is a little like saying that the words in this essay have been taken from the Oxford English Dictionary. What happens *after* the taking is the crucial element in extending the viewer's experience of place

through viewing the work: the selection, the composition, and the exercise of (a degree of) control over the way of viewing the images which the artist imposes on the audience. It's authorship, again. My sense of New York, New Zealand, Wainuiomata, Rome - their *meaning* deriving from my overlaid experiences - is enhanced, altered, augmented as my imaginative construction extends to encompass my encounter with these authors' works: *Frank's* New York, *Black's* New Zealand, and so on.

A desire to interrogate my own photographic practice in this context, and to consider how it might serve to mediate my experience of place, leads me to the location of my research enquiry: over that hill of acevaze's and into Wainuiomata, in Wellington's Hutt City.

#### 4. Nappy Valley

*Quite frankly, not the sort of place you'd take  
your family on a picnic...*

- Gary McCormick (from Grieve, 1994)

Wainuiomata is a geographically isolated suburb of Hutt City, connected by the single steep road over the hill from the Hutt Valley. Lying in a swampy valley surrounded by hills, Wainuiomata is a very particular place, yet in many ways it is no place in particular. Not much is known to European historians of what is now Wainuiomata before the arrival of European settlers. Though not a permanent Maori settlement, the valley was certainly important to Maori as a camp site en route to and from the Wairarapa (Alexander, 2000). In the 1840s The New Zealand Company “acquired” the land, and with the clearing of the hill road in the 1850’s, a few farming families moved into the valley and drained areas of the swampy flat land for agriculture (Alexander, 2000). The potential for Wainuiomata as a residential suburb was recognised by property developers in the 1920s, and in 1927 Wainui-o-Mata Development Limited was formed by Andrew Fletcher, with the intention of raising finance from prospective residents to purchase farmland and build a Garden Suburb, in the tradition of the New Towns being developed in England. Investors in the company would receive land and building rights once the new subdivision was completed (Alexander, 2000).

This was truly property development on a grand scale, including plans for a tunnel through the hill from Seaview allowing both road and tramway access (Alexander, 2004). Unfortunately the 1930s depression took hold and the tunnel project was cancelled in 1934, by which stage works had reached approximately one third of the way through the hill. The tunnel was finally completed on a much smaller scale and is now a conduit for water and sewerage pipes (Alexander, 2000). By 1939 the Development Company was facing liquidation, and investors took ownership from the shareholders, forming collaborative committees to make progress on housing. Progress continued slowly through until 1950 when the government purchased 1000 sections, with the intention of building low-cost housing for workers in the rapidly-growing Hutt region (Alexander, 2000). The majority of Wainuiomata’s houses were built and

inhabited rapidly over the following decade, primarily by young couples and families of modest means (Alexander, 2000).

Where does Wainuiomata sit in *my* consciousness? Where does my imaginative construction of Wainuiomata begin? I've always known Wainuiomata as a "nappy valley" – its plenitude of affordable, state-assisted housing was perfectly placed, in time at least, for the post-war baby boom and the "new demographic" of young families with modest means. "Nappy valley" has never been a particularly benevolent description, and recent entries by Wainuiomata into my public consciousness have also been mixed. It seems often to be in the news for the wrong reasons. In recent years the area has been notably associated with a "Makatu" incident where a woman was accidentally drowned through excess water consumption during a Maori exorcism ("Deadly curse verdict", 2009). It was also the subject of some public amusement when media revealed that a grumpy Palmerston North motel owner had banned any and all residents of Wainuiomata from staying at his motel, following a string of boisterous incidents involving sports teams from the suburb ("Wainuiomata residents hit back", 2009). Wainuiomata was the subject of an episode of Gary McCormick's "Heartland" television series in 1994, which had a large popular impact at the time (NZ On Screen, 2010b). McCormick focused on a small number of idiosyncratic characters from the suburb, and controversy ensued about the portrayal of Wainuiomata and its residents (popularly known as "Wainuiomartians") as "a bunch of weirdos" (Longhurst and Wilson, 2002).

I am aware of this modern popular history, but when I visit Wainuiomata I find something which runs much deeper in me: a response to the residential streets and the houses which populate them. Lucy Lippard (1997) has described her notion of "place" as *"a portion of the external world mediated through human subjective experience: a portion of land or townscape seen from the inside"* (p. 7). I feel a personal sense of place here in these streets, engendered through my ability to imaginatively construct what it might look like from the inside. Wainuiomata holds a strong resonance with my own history of growing up in low-income state housing. Although not strictly a State House area – the government built housing here for sale, rather than for charitable rental – the houses in Wainuiomata are still cut from the same Fletcher Construction portfolio of around five basic designs, and they bear many of the visual markers of state-provided

housing (Alexander, 2000; Schrader, 2005). I can't look at the streets of Wainuiomata without seeing the places I grew up. Although the physical locations were different – over the hill in Avalon, and in a succession of houses in Wanganui – I feel a strong empathy with the Nappy Valley of Wainuiomata.

The development of housing in Wainuiomata through the twentieth century reflected the development of State Housing in nearby Hutt Valley and around New Zealand. In the late 1930s the Labour Government, led by Michael Joseph Savage, determined to step in and sponsor the provision of rental housing for families too poor to afford their own homes (Schrader, 2005). Over the following two decades, entire suburbs of state housing were built throughout the Hutt Valley and elsewhere, principally by the Fletcher Construction Company from this handful of basic house plans (Schrader). From before my earliest memories, my family depended on state housing for a roof over our heads. We lived in a succession of state houses – seventeen houses before I turned fourteen years of age – across the Hutt Valley and north in Wanganui. So although I have no memory of ever having visited there before the age of thirty, there is a real, phenomenological sense in which Wainuiomata is *my place*. There's a significant part of my cultural identity here. In this sense it's really not about the geographical position at all – Wainuiomata is simply the mirror which elicits what Michel Foucault has termed a "heterotopia", an amalgamation of the conceived (what my brain sees) and the perceived (what my eyes see) (Foucault, 1986). Like an image in a mirror, this heterotopia is neither entirely real - I've never lived here, Wainuiomata is not *my place* - nor entirely illusory - it's not solely a product of my imaginings. My "sense of place" as it relates to Wainuiomata is informed by how I perceive and identify its visual landscape, but equally by my desires and imaginings around my experiential history of all the places I have known – in particular, for Wainuiomata at least, the places of my childhood. There is a societal resonance between this place and the places I grew up, forming what Walter Benjamin has described as a "cultural territoriality", a concurrence of shared social norms and values which tie people together in a *culturally valued space* (Spiridon, 2004).

It's not all wine and roses though. I am aware of my empathy with the streets and houses of Wainuiomata, yet what I see when I visit there elicits in me an uneasiness, a disquiet. It feels an uncomfortable, indeed a distinctly unpleasant environment. I

remember no such strong feelings from my own childhood memories of growing up in places which seem, to my recollection, to be outwardly similar. Is there something malignant under the surface of my memory, something intuitive which bubbles to the surface when confronted with the visual reminders of my earlier life? Or am I perhaps subliminally aware of a disjuncture, noticing instead the edges, the borders, elements which don't match my imaginative construction? Most importantly, how might my photographic practice operate to explore and relate these heterotopias, and move beyond the realm of simple visual perception?

## 5. Do you see what I see?

*The greatest challenges for artists lured by the local are to balance between making the information accessible and making it visually provocative as well; to fulfil themselves as well as their collaborators; to innovate not just for innovation's sake, not just for style's sake, nor to enhance their reputation or ego, but to bring a new degree of coherence to the lure of the local.*

- Lucy Lippard (1997, p 292).

My research practice in Wainuiomata began from my position as a “traditional” documentary photographer: attending visually to the suburban landscape, collecting images only where I found a conscious resonance or discord. Some of that work is shown in figure 6. People respond readily to these images. The language is familiar and easy to read: *see the suburban decay; regard the juxtaposition of the built and the natural; sense the ambiguity; reflect on the pathos.* It's a well-trodden path, notably from the American “new topographers” such as Lewis Baltz (1991; 1998; 2001) and Robert Adams (1977; 1996), and even Peter Black has visited here with his series *Sites* (1990).



Figure 6



**Figure 7**

With these projects, however, the photographers seem motivated to persuade, to encourage the audience to share their agenda, or at least to ponder the artists' evident distaste with the realm of modern suburbia. It seems clear, reading these artists' series of photographs, that the places they show are largely at odds with the photographers' personal places: unsettling their cultural territorialities. They are predominantly seeing from the *outside*. They're not in the game: they're looking on, commentating.

Furthermore, the buttons of suburban pathos are easy to push here. For many New Zealanders Wainuiomata's reputation precedes its substance: in the 1994 Heartland Wainuiomata episode, Gary McCormick opens by describing his long-held perception, shared by many of his fellow Wellingtonians, of Wainuiomata as

*...a poor area, referred to as Nappy Valley, with a high crime rate and quite frankly, not somewhere you'd take your family on a picnic* (from Grieve, 1994).



**Figure 8**

It's a prejudgement which is easy to fuel (McCormick himself does so with his footage of straggling cheaply-dressed school kids and abandoned industrial land with burnt out car bodies protected by baying Rottweilers) and as McCormick shows, the signifiers are



readily identified and isolated. The work I assembled in this way feels on reflection like prime-time television: easily accessible, but ultimately capable of little beyond gently force-feeding the audience the images they have been conditioned to want. Nor do these images encapsulate my sense of place – Wainuiomata as seen from the *inside*. The layers of my personal history that I find located in these suburbs are not in the extraordinary – they are not *here* or *here*, they are *everywhere*. I’m watching the light catching the trees and I’m missing the forest.

The works of the visual surveyors discussed in the preceding sections offer clues to other ways in. By imposing a degree of restriction upon the photographic method, artists like Black and Frank have allowed their instincts to direct their practice. Black has spoken of *Moving Pictures* that, while he had a sense of *something* in the way the country was, he really didn’t know what the project would be about until he saw his images developed. He describes the experience of shooting from the moving car as follows:

*It’s like the camera didn’t exist any more. All you did is just be there – see it – respond to it. But you didn’t place it there – you didn’t try to compose it there. And because of that you’re given things you can’t possibly understand* (private communication, 2003).

Relinquishing a degree of control in the capture of his images and allowing his instinctive responses free reign, Black has managed to scratch beneath the surface and explore his sense of New Zealand in a way which wasn’t offered by conscious planning. The direct authorship happens more at the stage of selecting and sequencing the series, composing a lyric essay responding to the *something* he has located. The experience for the viewer is one of a virtual road trip – we ride along, catching glimpses of the world as it flashes by, laying our own experiences over those of the author and gaining an enhanced sense of both the author’s place and our own.

Moretti and acevaze have also photographed from moving vehicles, but their works are sequenced using moving image rather than still. Here the road trips are more literal, as we are led through the streets in real time, the poetics layered through the sparse commentaries.

Watching these pieces while thinking about my own practice, it becomes apparent that the time-based sequence is an important feature of my narrative too – I’m moving through, passing by, a transient observer. In this respect it’s notable that Robert Frank never completed his series *From the Bus* - which he described in 1972 as his “last project in photography” - turning instead to film for much of the 1960s (Frank, 1994). Frank had spoken of his compulsion to find a “more sustained form of expression” with his photography, and the appeal of film with its natural sequencing and flow is understandable. Moving image also resonates with the Street View experience. Google’s vans effectively shoot video: still images at a rate of thirty per second. Yet it requires a lot of patience and mouse-clicking to generate anything like a time-based experience for the Street View user. While it has certainly collected a vast visual database, Google Street View has done nothing to usurp the role of photographers’ authored documentary practice.

I feel like I’m getting closer to an understanding of how my own practice might operate to mediate my sense of place for an audience. By strapping a video camera to my car I meet Street View on its own terms, relinquishing a degree of control of the image-making in order that I might seek, as Black did, the *something under the surface* which engenders my response. Allowing the audience the time-based experience, rather than so they might be taken along for the ride rather than constructing it from individually weighted pieces.

So here is *The 1 p.m. Project*: a lyric essay on the personal heterotopia I find reflected in the suburban streets of Wainuiomata. The content is so endemic to my personal history that I really can’t focus on it – focus improves the perception but disguises the conception, the latter so crucial to the engendering of my sense of place. It is repeated, street after street, year after year, layer after layer.

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