Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth

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Dedicated to the memory
of

Kathleen Lillian Mitchell

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Introduction

In *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* photographic portraiture provides a basis for exploring the process of image making using analogue photography. The relationship between the photographer and sitter allows performative and educational aspects in the role of photographer to mediate image production. Time/space is allowed for the examination and discussion of photographic practice by explicitly revealing the process of image making. This space is created in two ways, by including the audience in the darkroom experience and through the resulting aesthetics embedded in the final photographic print.

The exegesis begins by providing a background to the project, describing the testing and exploration of home-made cameras resulting in the design and construction of the 10 x 10 inch camera employed in this specific body of work. The following section examines the relationships and engagement between photographer and sitter by referencing some influential precedents, and examining performative aspects in relation to the role of photographer. This extends to a consideration of academic discussion around art-based pedagogical practice and socially engaged art practice. The subsequent section examines portrait photography and the sociology of this particular project through an examination of the techniques of historical photographers.

Finally, it positions the medium and the influence of aesthetics, with particular reference to the hand made and material paper object. "Since photography usually involves a two-step process of creating a negative and then using it as a template to create a reversed (positive) version, innovation could take place all along the sequence," (Rexer, 2002, p. 12.). The particular impact of the wet negative when combined with the wet positive in this specific project defines a unique outcome compacted to fit the timeframe of the sitter so that their experience can include the processing of the negative and creation of a print that uniquely reflects their presence in the photographic studio and the aesthetic central to the process.

Background

This research project started its development in response to a growing personal skepticism around the use of modern technology in contemporary photographic practice. These questions stimulated by contemporary digital practices inform my ongoing practical investigation into historical and current analogue photographic methods. Over time the photographic apparatus improved to simplify and automate the photographic process and a specialized industry was created to manufacture materials and provide services to develop film and make photographic enlargements.

In the current environment, technologies have advanced to the point where cameras of all types are widely available, and camera capabilities are integrated into other consumer electronic devices such as cellphones, iPads and tablets. There may be no requirement for specialist training or prior experience and digital technology provides instant access to the photograph without any chemical processing. This type of contemporary camera mediates photography in entirely new ways as the specialized role of the photographer becomes optional to the point where some cameras are designed to be able to decide when it is appropriate to take a photograph without external input. Multiple images can be recorded every second and then reframed and edited in postproduction. The process of taking a photograph has become supercharged to the point where one might take photographs with little or no consideration of the traditional role of photographer.

Another notable shift is the transition to photography without a photographic device. As the convenience of computer screens and displays provides new viewing environments, the 'photographic object' would appear to be losing its currency. The Internet and social networking compound this by enabling instant mass dissemination to become the ultimate goal. New styles of photographic production have become evident; the 'Selfie' provides an example that while not new in itself, has new meaning in the mediated context of the contemporary photographic apparatus. Self-portraiture dates back to the invention of the camera as scientists and early photographers sought subjects to test their cameras. The difference today is that one can keep taking and inspecting these portraits until exactly the desired pose or effect is achieved, the 'Selfie' differs from the

self-portrait in that it provides endless opportunities for refinement and iteration. Subsequently, employing postproduction and digital effects, the image can be enhanced further to emulate a look or style of photography adding a sense of history or nostalgia to the resulting image.

Through the revival of an analogue process, there is an examination of portraiture in contrast to contemporary photography and self-portraiture. As the camera has evolved it has provided the individual with a powerful tool for self-representation without the need for technical expertise. It has also removed the professional photographer from the process and obscured the mechanism of production. My project explicitly reveals that process to the sitter and allows them to engage with it. This engagement with both the process and the photographer combine to create a distinct aesthetic that represents the sitter by categorically revealing the act of producing a photographic portrait.

The very first steps on this project were taken in the winter of 2013 while browsing the online marketing website Trade Me and discovering a 300mm large format lens advertised for sale. In previous tests for this project, 10 x 10 inch photographic paper had been used to make negatives for a rotary pinhole camera. As this lens was a standard lens size for an 8 x 10 inch camera, with a little care and possibly some vignetting it could provide full coverage on the same paper. In the experimental first-year phase of the MFA program, four distinct iterations of a single photographic visual system were tested. The rotary pinhole camera previously referenced creates a unique look due to its ability to capture and overlay multiple images. The use of an analogue medium and variables introduced by the hand made nature of its construction contributes to this. The initial series of images created prior to the MFA program featured literal portraits of subjects including a self-portrait, (fig. 1 & 2). Astronomer Jules Janssen became a personal hero as he turned the camera on himself and produced a similar series of portraits in the late nineteenth century during the testing phase of a camera he designed to record the transit of Venus

At the commencement of the MFA program, a provocation was provided to take a body of work from the last two years and revisit a previous work though the creation of a 'version two'. This inspired a second series of images using the same rotary pinhole camera, (fig. 3 & 4). In this series, a new narrative element was added; subjects were asked to come to the studio with an object, which was

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photographed, and an audio recording of their oral narrative about the object was made. These images were printed and an experimental video animation was constructed from the individual photographs to accompany the audio. Instantly the practice was expanded through the combination of these multiple elements. Feedback about this work suggested that despite the photos and video being interesting in their own right, they didn't 'sit well' together and the topics chosen by individual subjects were lacking in depth. However, a possible solution was identified which could overcome these issues by reworking the exchange between subject and artist. Overall, this second series reflected an exponential expansion of possibilities through the inclusion of an audio narrative and diversification of the output possibilities.

The third series of images using the rotary pinhole camera focused entirely on producing video animation accompanied by audio narrative (fig. 5, 6 & 7). During the search for a new topic and subject, the opportunity arose to interview an elderly relative about her recollection of the first and second World War. Access was also gained to a corresponding collection and memorabilia, the photographs were re-photographed and some objects relating to the narrative were also used. This coincided with the time frame of the theoretical research that was also being conducted into photography at the turn of the twentieth century and the onset of World War I. This was a major breakthrough as the resulting animation brought an already rich narrative alive and showed the true potential of the camera system being employed.

Next it seemed appropriate to test this technique on a contemporary topic if only to see if it would produce an engaging artwork. The fourth series of images using the rotary pinhole camera documented contemporary events; the audio narrative is replaced by Internet based content while the topic of war and conflict is retained (fig. 8 & 9). This final test of this visual machine is intended to complete this examination of how a combination of narrative and images can engage an audience on a variety of topics and that by changing one or more elements within the structure the whole system can be repurposed to fit any given subject matter.

Working with paper negatives in a rotary pinhole has proved a liberating process because unlike a more traditional workflow, there is no dependency on external facilities to process the negatives. Imagining that the negatives might just be

large enough to produce exhibition scale contact prints allowing the bypassing of enlarging cameras and the dark room. Images could be captured, processed and contact prints created in sunlight. No electricity is required, just water, chemistry and natural light!

During a discussion about this idea with a colleague, a book on making hand made cameras from 1902 was suggested. This book provided the final inspiration to build a camera based on camera designs from the nineteenth century. This project was divided into two phases - the first phase was to follow the handbook and build a camera suitable for the 10 x 10 inch paper negatives that were used in the rotary pinhole camera. This initial phase took place on the university campus where studio space and workshops are available. Initial investigations into sourcing materials produced useful networking opportunities that could support this project. Phase two was to explore a photographic practice using this camera.

The Relationship Between Photographer & Sitter

The relationship between photographer and sitter is central to this project. Such a relationship mediates an exchange that occurs during the sitting and also affects the process of image production by subtly influencing the aesthetic characteristics of the final print. This project offers a considerably different experience to most contemporary photographic encounters because the relationship between photographer and sitter is extended beyond the initial encounter in the photographers studio. By including the sitter as observer in the darkroom where the image is produced a process that is not normally seen is made transparent. This is important to the project as it allows dialogue established during the making of the image to be expanded, providing an educational aspect experienced as part of the project.

Historically the sitter has always been positioned in the studio nearby, but not included in, the processing of the photograph. Some of the key components of production have remained invisible to the sitter despite the requirement that they are physically in close proximity to image making. In his chapter in *A New History of Photography,* Jean Sagne (1998, p. 104.) describes the maze-like layout of photographic studios of the nineteenth century where sitters enter through a facade-like reception and are confronted by "...every conceivable contraption to conjure up illusions and weave deception." Meanwhile, the photographer's assistants retreat into nearby shadows to sensitize glass plates and process the images (Sagne, 1998). Clearly this was a hierarchical structure where the photographer is privileged with a fuller understanding of the creation of the image and the process of producing the final print.

In *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture,* Martin Lister describes a shift to a post-photographic era where networked and computerized photography dominate the social sphere (Lister, 2013, p. 1.). In this new era, contemporary examples of representation in the relationship between sitter and photographer focus almost exclusively on the moment of image capture resulting from the relationship or contract between photographer and sitter. As though a precursor to Lister's post-photographic era, Mike Leigh's movie *Secrets and Lies,* portrays Maurice Purley who is a studio photographer and whose methods in the photography studio are

featured (Leigh, 1996, "Photography Studio Scene"). Purley has a very intimate relationship with his subjects; engaging them with light banter and making them feel comfortable in the studio.

Leigh's exploration of the photographer character reveals complexity of relationships and suggests the way in which studio portraiture works to document contemporary society. In the photography studio scene, Purley asks one couple directly "Do you want to look happy or sad?" (Leigh, 1996). This immediately provokes the desired outcome and both sitters smile at the camera as Purley snaps the shutter. Despite this casual approach to posing sitters, the character is presented by Leigh as being in control at all times. During the climactic confrontation Purley states "I've spent my entire life trying to make people happy. And the three people that I love the most in the world hate each others guts." (Leigh, 1996, "Birthday Party Scene") suggesting that everyone outside his immediate family, including his professional relationships, fall into a group that he thinks he can manipulate. In this scene Leigh deconstructs a role often practiced by the photographer whereby they intend to engage and please their sitters in order to create a portrait which reflects an idealized likeness of the subject.

However, Leigh's character provides just one example of a contemporary studio practice through the presentation of a fictional character. Other examples employ quite different approaches to studio photography practice. There is a tradition of mobility in photographic portraiture, for example Sagne (1998) describes how historically, different types of photographers catered for different social groups. A photographer looking for work could create opportunities outside the aristocratic hub but this most likely meant adopting a mobile practice. "As soon as it made its first public appearance, photography became one of the attractions at fairs..." (p. 118). Sagne also describes the tradition of traveling photographers and how "the improvised photographers tent appears to have attracted 'a clientele mainly recruited from soldiers and nursemaids'" (p. 117).

An example of a modern traveling photographer can be seen in the portraiture of Irving Penn. In *Worlds in a Small Room,* (1974) Penn explored a cross-cultural demographic by traveling to the community he wanted to document then photographing sitters in front of his canvas backdrop. His use of a neutral background democratizes the sitter; the viewer is forced to focus on the sitters' physical presence rather than their normal environment. Sagne (1998) describes

a similar democratizing effect in his discussion of nineteenth century carte de visite photography. "Since anyone could have their portrait taken in the same format and against the same background as the head of state, king or emperor, a direct relationship was established between those in power and their subjects." (Sagne, 1998, p. 117). In Penn's example this was extended to the relationship between members of different communities and cultures with the photographer playing the role of facilitator.

The automated photo booth also provides an interesting example of highly accessible portrait photography that has a similar effect of democratizing the sitter. While lacking the presence of a photographer to select the photographic moment, modern automated photo booths often rely on an audio cue advising the sitter of the forthcoming exposure. In *Photobooth: A Biography,* Meags Fitzgerald (2014) provides a historical overview of the automated photo booth which was first presented at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889 and had, by the late 1920s taken the modern form that we see today. While generally regarded as either a form of entertainment or a utility for generating travel documents, portraits produced by photo booths have increasingly become the focus of arts based practices. As Fitzgerald puts it, "they [photo booths] occupy a space of their own which is somehow both incredibly mainstream and amazingly niche." (2014, p. 20). Accessibility is a key factor in automated photo booths, in *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* this aspect is maintained by taking the project to a community while the concept of a photo booth is extended in the relationship between photographer and sitter.

The concept of a contemporary photo booth has become highly diversified. While automated chemical 'dip and dunk' type photo booths can still occasionally be found in operation, they have mostly been superseded by digital successors. There is a small but dedicated community engaging the production of artworks with images made in analogue photo booths (Garrett & Meacham, 2015). Meanwhile, the proliferation of digital photo booths seems ubiquitous. Countless websites offer DIY instructions for making these yourself out of domestically available components.

There are also examples of automated digital photo booths, which have been fabricated locally and are available to hire for private and corporate functions. *Classic Photo Booths*, have locations in the Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch (Bamber, 2015) and *The Amazing Traveling Photobooth*, operates out of nine locations in New Zealand (Vollebregt 2015). The scope of contemporary photo booths has expanded well beyond the traditional automated paradigm.

Other examples of contemporary projects operated by photographers extend the notion of a photo booth. DIY instructions are available on the Internet to construct a theatrical set which engages sitters with a fantasy setting not dissimilar to historical carte de visite portraits (Bavila, 2015). Wellington based photographer Mark Tantrum employs the conceit of a photo booth to stage portraits at functions and corporate events (Tantrum, 2013). Commercial photo booth projects can be an amusement, the primary function is to beguile or captivate, but they lack the potential of other approaches because the primary function is to entertain and make money rather than to reflect on a social group or capture a snapshot in time. In *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth*, the notion of a photo booth is expanded in a unique way; the sitter is able to have an encounter with the process, which has the predetermined outcome of creating a portrait, whilst also providing an educational perspective on analogue photographic practice.

In her article *Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics,* Susan Murray (2008) describes how life seems to have become increasingly fast paced. In response to this photographic studio practice, balance is sought between holding the attention of the sitter without compromising the quality of the experience. The use of analogue methodologies forces the experience to be more considered as it has similar issues to its historical counterpart. The light sensitivity of film (or photographic paper in this case) is a lot slower than what can be achieved digitally so the sitter is required to keep still during the exposure. In the antiquarian studio, devices would have been used to achieve this. While no physical device is employed in *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* to achieve this, the discussion around the historical technology helps the sitter understand the process, which in turn influences how they pose, present themselves to the camera and the consequent look of the final image. As the project has developed, especially in the last year, a script for interacting with sitters has been established, which addresses these issues by sharing the process.

Sharing of information about the image making process with the sitter and then inviting them into the darkroom to observe the process of developing and printing the image is an important part of the project. This method allows dialogue established during the making of the image to be expanded. In doing so, it imparts an educational aspect to the project, which would not ordinarily be discussed with the sitter by revealing a component to processing images in contemporary photography that is ordinarily hidden by digital technology. The transparency of the process in *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* sets up this comparison in order to provoke questions about how contemporary image making processes work and what might be hidden.

Putting the photographer and subject on a more even level furthers the idea of democratizing the sitter previously illustrated by cited examples of Irving Penn and in Jean Sagne's chapter from *A New History of Photography*. It is not just a case of posing the sitter to achieve the desired effect but rather to actively include them in the process so it takes on new meaning for them, which is reflected aesthetically in the final portrait. Enthusiasm for this project and the dual roles of photographer and educator relates to a growing understanding of the relationship outlined, the materiality effected by the technical process of making the analogue photograph and a desire to reflect on this by collaborating with sitters to create the image. For the sitter, especially those born in the new millennium who are unlikely to have entered a photographic studio, let alone a darkroom, it is often a revelatory experience.

Performative and Pedagogical

This project takes a pedagogical approach to photographic portraiture and draws on the wider community for its audience. It also provides comparative reflection on performative aspects in roles associated with the educator and the photographer. An exchange takes place in the relationship between the photographer and the sitter; a performative aspect in the role taken by the photographer can facilitate this. For the purposes of this project, the term, 'performative' can be defined as the strategies employed by the photographer to engage the sitter. Research for this project has revealed that a performative engagement with the sitter is expedient in that it works to facilitate the sitters engagement with the process and creates an atmosphere more conducive to making portraits likely to be pleasing to the subject and suitable for whatever purpose the subject might require them. This type of engagement is also evident in the example of Mike Leigh's movie *Secrets and Lies,* (1996) outlined in the previous section where we see Maurice, the photographer character, engaging with his sitters. In *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* the sitter is similarly engaged through a constructed encounter targeted towards providing an educational backgrounding to the process of analogue photography. This methodology aims to create a connection with the sitter through shared experience and transparency.

Revealing this process can often be a revelatory experience for the sitter. One point of difference between *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* and other contemporary photo booth projects is that the image is processed by hand and follows the tradition of the traveling photographer. In automated photo booths, the sitter takes control, where as in this project the sitter first engages in a studio session then observes the process of image production. The project provides an introduction to analogue processing, the chemical 'magic' of photography and the materiality of the photographic object. There is a deliberate attempt to be a welcoming and convivial host. This sets the tone of the encounter and helps create an atmosphere where the photographer and sitter can take on the appropriate roles. This relationship begins prior to the sitting, as there is some negotiation around booking the session. Sitters respond to promotional material, normally this would consist of a photograph, and a brief description of the project and encounter, which is emailed via a group list (although sometimes sitters

make contact in response to word-of-mouth recommendations). This first contact provides the initial opportunity to welcome the sitter and begin to put them at ease about the interaction. While this process is repeated again when the sitter arrives for their portrait, the initial contact goes a long way towards establishing the relationship in the initial instance; this relationship forms an understanding or contract. Once this has been established, the session can proceed with the sitter assured of the mutually understood outcome.

When the sitter arrives for their portrait, they are aware of the camera, lights and a photographic backdrop. The camera is fairly dominant and central. It plays an important role in beginning discussion about the process. It is styled on a nineteenth century large format bellows camera but slightly larger due to its square format. It is not unusual to see this style of camera featured in museums and camera shop displays (images and logos depicting it are not uncommon). Photographers occasionally use these types of cameras in contemporary photographic projects although more often they are the smaller 4 x 5 inch version or perhaps the larger 10 x 8 inch. The camera constructed for this project is an uncommon size at 10 x 10 inches and signs of its home made construction are evident in the use of domestic hardware like nuts and bolts from the hardware store, cardboard, black tape and office binder clamps. The camera immediately engages the sitter and conversation often begins with questions about its construction and a comparison with historical cameras.

The camera has a substantial presence in the studio; it is the first thing that people notice and works as a starting point for discussion. In this way, the camera provides an entry point to discussion of historical and contemporary issues in photography. A stool is provided for sitters, who usually require prompting or permission to take a seat on it. This is suggestive of a formality in the relationship between photographer and sitter who often also ask how they should pose. While full ownership of this rests with the sitter, they are offered guidance in regard to positioning themselves, engaging with the camera and relaxing. Traditionally, devices were used to immobilize the sitter for long exposures (Sagne, 1998). Historically, the response of sensitized plates to light was fairly slow; as a result the exposure times were relatively long when compared to film. This project employs paper negatives, a decision that will be unpacked in a later section on aesthetics. The response of photographic paper to light is also considerably slower compared to film so there are similar issues to sensitized plates where

any slight movement of the camera or subject will result in a blurred image. This is mitigated to some degree by the use of a faster modern lens that can achieve fast shutter speeds using the same amount of light but the depth of field (the amount of depth that is sharp) is decreased. Shooting inside under electric strobe lights means that adding more light to increase the depth of field is not practical. This does mean that positioning the sitter is crucial as any forward or backward movement will result in an out of focus image. The sitter is asked to imagine that they have an invisible thread from the base of their spine, through the top of their head that is slowly being pulled up. This technique works well as a virtual alternative to employing a similar mechanical system for keeping the sitter still and in a good posture.

Techniques are also used to help sitters relax, as the anticipation of being photographed can be quite stressful for many people. This is achieved by suggesting that the subject perform some face stretching exercises; to close their eyes first, then grimace, then smile and open their eyes. This method also creates a fairly reliable prompt for timing the photographic moment to coincide with the sitters' eyes being open and a receptiveness in their expression that can be desirable. Of course this isn't always what the sitter wants and so it is necessary to meet any requests that they might have around how they are represented. Sometimes sitters will choose to discuss this; perhaps a portrait where they are not smiling suits their intentions better. Sometimes sitters will ask if they can be posed a particular way or dress in a certain costume. Often this is in an attempt to re-stage a historical photograph of a relative or family member.

As previously outlined, the decision to photograph on paper negatives for this project creates some limitations as more light is required to correctly expose the paper and the dynamic range is limited which can result in images which have a lot of contrast. These technical issues are not dissimilar to the problems and constraints of historical plate camera systems. The real motivation for this becomes evident when the process moves from the photographic studio into the darkroom. Unlike film, which requires complete darkness during processing, photographic paper can be processed using a photographic safe light meaning that the sitter can safely be present in the darkroom and watch the image emerge on the paper during processing. The effect of seeing this, especially for the first time, is not to be underestimated. It is an entirely magical moment watching someone seeing their own image slowly appear on the paper as the developer activates the

exposed areas of the paper. The presence of the sitter throughout the processing and printing stage in the darkroom also provides further opportunity to discuss and reflect on issues in photography and the materiality of the analogue photographic process. A comparison to digital processing is often made at this point, as it is so different to how people usually produce contemporary photographs. There are many possible topics that relate to this conversation including dissemination, ownership and copyright. The simple fact that in this project the image isn't stored digitally and is not displayed on an electric screen can be a revelation for some people.

Undeniably there is an educational aspect to this project and a determination to make this method of production more present for its audience. In her article The *Artist as Educator: Examining Relationships Between Art Practice and Pedagogy in the Gallery Context*, Emily Pringle conducts a study into artists' perceptions of their own pedagogical practices (2009). Pringle describes that a key intention of the educator is to investigate art practice through the dissemination of 'practical know how' and the development of critical analysis (Pringle, 2009). She notes that "...it proved possible to identify connections between the emerging construction of art practice as a process of conceptual enquiry and making meaning with dialogic forms of teaching and learning these practitioners aspired to." (Pringle, 2009, p. 4). Pringle also identified complexities in the relationship between gallery based pedagogical practice and other teaching institutions (p. 5).

This discussion is extended in *A Bad Education*, in which Helen Reed interviews Pablo Helguera, the Director of Adult and Academic programs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Reed, 2013). This centres on Helguera's book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, and describes how he discovered a relationship between teaching and performing while studying at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, an art school which is adjoined to a museum. This allowed him to further examine relationships between art and education. Speaking about aesthetics and socially engaged art Helguera states:

"My point is that when you are making certain claims, or even generating certain impressions about what you are doing, you need to do them in an effective way in order to really affect the world, otherwise your artistic intervention in the social realm is no different from making a painting in the studio. And there is a difference between symbolic and actual intervention." (Reed, 2013).

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It is not the intention of this exegesis or the companion practical component, *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* to add to discourse around art-based pedagogy or socially engaged art. Rather, it is intended that this project proceed with awareness of the discourse in relation to these fields and how the project is informed by this discourse.

Photography in the Social Sphere

As soon as the camera lens became fast enough to record the human likeness, it was turned towards people as subjects, beginning the practice of photographic portraiture. After its initial popularity in aristocratic society, the rise of the carte de visite and increasing availability of studio photography throughout the 1800s, concerns were raised about the quality of photographic portraiture (Vaisse, 1998). Pierre Vaisse describes in *A New History of Photography,* how around 1870 to 1890, a decline in the quality of photographic art was identified and this in turn led to the rise of the Pictorial movement mostly by amateur photographers in the early 1900s. Drawing its origins from painterly traditions of portraiture, Pictorialism sought to perfect photographic representation of the subject. The publication of a series of portraits of artists titled *Men of Mark*, by Alvin Langdon Coburn in 1913 ushered in collections of photographic portraits of both famous and ordinary people that would become increasingly popular throughout the twentieth century. While initially employing props to contextualize the subject, as the practice progressed these elements were replaced by an expanding visual vocabulary. The photographers' choice of composition, framing and the uses of different cameras and lenses provided an adequate context to uniquely represent the sitter in the desired way. Vaisse on the topic of Coburn's portraiture explains:

"Thus he did not characterize his subject by using the conventional props of a palette and brush for an artist or a pen for a writer, but, rather, by making an analogy between the subject's art and the appearance of the image." (Vaisse, 1998, p. 505.)

Vaisse also describes the work of German photographer Helmar Lerski who was photographing professionally around the same time as Coburn. According to Vaisse (1998), Lerski had a particular interest in using light to sculpt his subjects and also worked with close-up portraiture. In 1931 Lerski published a series of portraits of ordinary working-class people titled *Köpfe Alltags*, [Everyday Faces] (Vaisse, 1998, P. 509).

Vaisse explains how this publication was indicative of a growing trend, especially in Germany, towards portraying "...anonymous images of ethnic or social types [they] came to be more popular than collections of portraits of famous people..." (1998, P. 510). This growing interest in the ordinary and everyday people suggests how we as a society might engage with the familiar in order to find equality with our own status.

In *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth*, the historical precedents outlined above provide a basis for situating the project in the wider community. Extensive testing on the university campus was expanded to encompass a range of subjects from outside the academic institution where the project was originally based. Accordingly an approach was made to Wellington City Council funded Toi Poneke Arts Centre, who offer an art gallery, space, artist's studios and a darkroom. Their existing darkroom was available as part of the proposal and they were able to host *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth*, as a one week artists residency. The manager of Toi Poneke responded with an invitation to test the work at their 10th anniversary open day on August 8th 2015. A variety of people engaged with the project and were photographed; there were members of the Toi Poneke community, families from the region who had come in for the open day and some international tourists who happened to be passing. This test provided an opportunity to engage a new audience and produced a snapshot of the community on that day and in that location, it also provided a precursor for the one week residency taking place in the last week of October in the same year.

A comparative example of a contemporary photographic project using portraiture in the social sphere is *Freeview,* by artists David Cook & Tim Veling (2014). This project engaged with a community around Freeview School in post-earthquake New Brighton. The school had been designated to merge with other schools in the area so Cook & Veling used portraiture and interviews from individual children in the community who were asked what would be an appropriate use for the land that they were vacating. In this way the personal narratives of the children were highlighted to the community who were effectively being asked by the artists to reflect on the implications of this merge (Cook & Veling, 2014). The project Freeview provides an example of a pseudo collaborative portraiture project of a very particular timeframe of the New Brighton post quake rebuild.

In another example from historical photography, we see how this idea of representing social culture through a snapshot in time can be be contentious and go through a process of re-evaluation in a contemporary context. In the catalogue *Te Awa: Partington's Photographs of Whanganui Māori*, the interesting case of photographer William Partington (2003) and his collection from the turn of the twentieth century is discussed. The introduction to this catalogue describes how the collection, which was lost for many years, features a substantial survey of local Iwi from the Whanganui region. When it was recently rediscovered by Partington's decedents, believing that they had effectively inherited ownership of the collection, they put it up for sale at Webb's Auckland based auction house in 2001. Descendants of some of the subjects from Whanganui intervened in the auction process claiming that they had special rights to the images as their ancestors were depicted and the photographs provided important historical information about their tribe. The auction was canceled and a private settlement was negotiated where the entire collection was purchased and placed in the care of the Whanganui Regional Museum.

This is a particularly important case because it illustrates how this collection represents a snapshot in time but also how the value and meaning of these images has changed and that new meanings are inferred in contemporary society. It also brings into the discussion ideas around consent and permission that are frequently under negotiation in photographic practice. Ownership is also challenged in the case of the Partington images; this issue is frequently being re-examined in contemporary society as a result of the dissemination of images through social networking and the Internet. While this is not a main focus, this project does operate with an awareness of these issues and the discourse around them. In *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth*, sitters are given a print to take away with them at the completion of the session. They are also required to complete a model consent form where they agree that the negative can be reprinted and the subsequent prints and any interview material or audio recordings produced at the sitting may be exhibited or published as part of this project. The consent form also explains that the sitter can opt out of this arrangement at any time and this is discussed further during the sitting in the context of who owns the photographic negative that would be used to make reprints.

In this way the project addresses ownership by bringing the subject to the forefront and discussing the issues around this with sitters. The collection of images from *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* may serve to function as a future archive of contemporary culture, just as the Partington collection provides an archive of Whanganui Māori at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Materiality and Aesthetics

Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth, takes inspiration from the early pictorialists who used close-up cropping, lighting, few props and interventions post-exposure to enhance the final print (Vaisse, 1998). These pared down elements separate the sitter from their environment and in doing so force a deeper consideration for the subject. This practice was perfected by Coburn when he used lighting to situate his subjects by referencing their own art. A sculptor would be photographed so that a shadow of their sculpture fell across the image for example. In Irving Penn's *Worlds in a Small Room,* (1974), the sitter is photographed against a neutral backdrop which has the effect of democratizing the sitter and creating a sense of equality across the series of photographic images. In *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* the sitter is cropped to their head and shoulders against a neutral backdrop. No props or costume are included except what they bring with them to the studio on the day. The paper negative generated during the shoot is processed then contact printed while wet, compacting the process into a timeframe where the sitter can take away the resulting print. This process leaves a residue of chemicals and water on the surface of the print, a mark of the making that reflects the process and through the obviously handmade aesthetic, resonates with the Toi Poneke environment where the work is situated (fig. 10).

It would seem that cellphone photography has become ubiquitous in western culture. The proliferation of digital cameras within consumer electronics has resulted in contemporary photography becoming increasingly environmental. *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* employs the photographic studio and darkroom as anchors slowing down the photographic process, allowing a dialogue to take place and a considered decisive moment where a single image is taken. With the 2014 reprinting of Henri Cartier-Bresson's first photographic publication *The Decisive Moment*, initially published in 1952, the concept of taking a single image to document an event or capture a likeness is worthy of further scrutiny.

In a world where digital capture and cellphone technology enable us to create numerous photographs and delete those less flattering, this project engages with the notion of the single decisive portrait moment; one image as a result of this photographic moment compared with endless images taken without pause for thought.

Photographic history includes numerous examples of portrait photographers who worked with close compositions and portraiture. The most inspiring of these move beyond merely democratizing the sitter in a neutral space instead reflecting a unique individual in a photographic image that can endure our changing perceptions over time. Julia Margaret Cameron's portraits do just that. A comprehensive survey of her photographic career, *Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs*, contains over 1200 of her photographs, the majority of which are at least 150 yeas old. The presence of her subjects is absolutely striking and one can't help considering the individual depicted in the portrait, and what their lives might have been like. More than anything else, Cameron's photographs narrow the gap in time and make us feel connected with the era she was documenting. Technique was important for Cameron and she was clearly resourceful, making the most of photographic limitations to create dramatic effect. Julian Cox describes how "..working with a lens disproportionately small relative to the size of the plate. There is a compression and simplification of form, with the face and head barely in focus and the hand...reduced almost to a blur." (2003, p. 50.). This effect suggests a fleeting moment, perhaps timeless, except on further scrutiny these aspects of the portraits are betrayed by costume and styles of the period placing them in history rather than in the present. Likewise, *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* captures a fleeting moment synonymous with traces of movement and selective focus. This fleetingness suggests that there is a timelessness to the portraits, an intensity of engagement that is also evident in Cameron's work.

In contrast to Cameron, the photography of Christian Boltanski is concerned with the passage of time and mortality. In his introduction, Ralf Bell describes how we are determined by time "The space in which we interact is often more consciously acknowledged than the time that we pass through, although time is equally as important for us while we live our lives to death." (Bell, 2006, p. 9.). Boltanski creates an indexical archive of his subjects, often augmenting the photographs with everyday objects that suggest links and influence how they are read. These collections of society are dignified through their inclusion as important subjects in

the archiving process. However, Boltanski doesn't generate the images himself, rather he works with existing photographic material. In *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* the portraits are created through an exchange with the sitter. Whilst the indexicality of the process works in a similar way in both projects, archives that are generated by photographers possess a more personal resonance where the connection between photographer and sitter is more directly evident.

A reflection of how the relationship between photographer and sitter impacts on the project is also made evident in the final portraits where the sitter has introduced their own aesthetic to the image. For example, at one sitting a request was made by the sitter to include his friend in the image so they were photographed together. In this photograph, their relationship becomes a prominent feature in the reading of the image (fig. 11). In another portrait the sitter chose to wear a headscarf with the intent of re-staging a specific family portrait of her Grandmother (fig. 12). These examples illustrate how the sitter can contribute aesthetically to the portrait with the photographer to influence how they are represented.

While *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth,* reflects aspects of both historical and contemporary photographic aesthetics, it could be directly positioned in 1978 because of how it employs a specific black and white Ilford photographic paper introduced at that time (Fisher, 2014). The use of this paper lends a particular aesthetic to the project, the negative is typically high contrast and the slow response of the paper requiring more light means that images tend to have a shallow focus. Black and white photography does talk to the history and legacy of photography by taking us back to an earlier starting point. But unlike black and white film, the paper negative can be processed under a photographic safe light making it possible for the sitter to observe the process and their image being revealed in the developing tray. The method of contact printing to produce the final print is made viable by the negative's comparatively large size at 10 x 10 inches.

Compacting the duration of the process and contact printing the wet negative onto unexposed photographic paper introduces unique aesthetic elements on to the surface of the paper. This addition also speaks to the 1970's era of hand made black and white photographic printing and the new wave of interest in analogue photographic processes.

Conclusion

To conclude, this exegesis makes a claim for the continued relevance and presence of analogue photographic processes within a contemporary art context. The inquiry into materiality through the production of positive and negative paper prints is uniquely implemented in *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth*, to engage the sitter though inclusion in the darkroom process. The necessity of compacting the timeframe of this engagement has led to the development of wet contact printing and generated an aesthetic that is unique to the project and evident in the final photographs.

Social engagement examined by expanding the project out from the university environment and into a community arts centre provides an opportunity for subjects with diverse range of photographic experience to be introduced to the 'magic' of photographic alchemy or to rediscover it in this project. Through a considered process that generates a single image, the role of photographer and the relationship between photographer and sitter is scrutinized. This method of image making, the aesthetic impact of a neutral background, consistent framing and selective depth of field work together to establish some democracy in the way the sitter is represented by the final portrait.

Finally, the contrast between contemporary photographic methods and the experience of *Mr Webster's Marvellous Photo Booth*, offers insight into the process of image making and provokes more reflection on how we make photographs today. While not a primary objective, an aspirational outcome of this project is to empower the sitter to experience photography in new ways and consider alternative methods of production.

Fig. 1, Tam Webster. (2012). *Cindy,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.
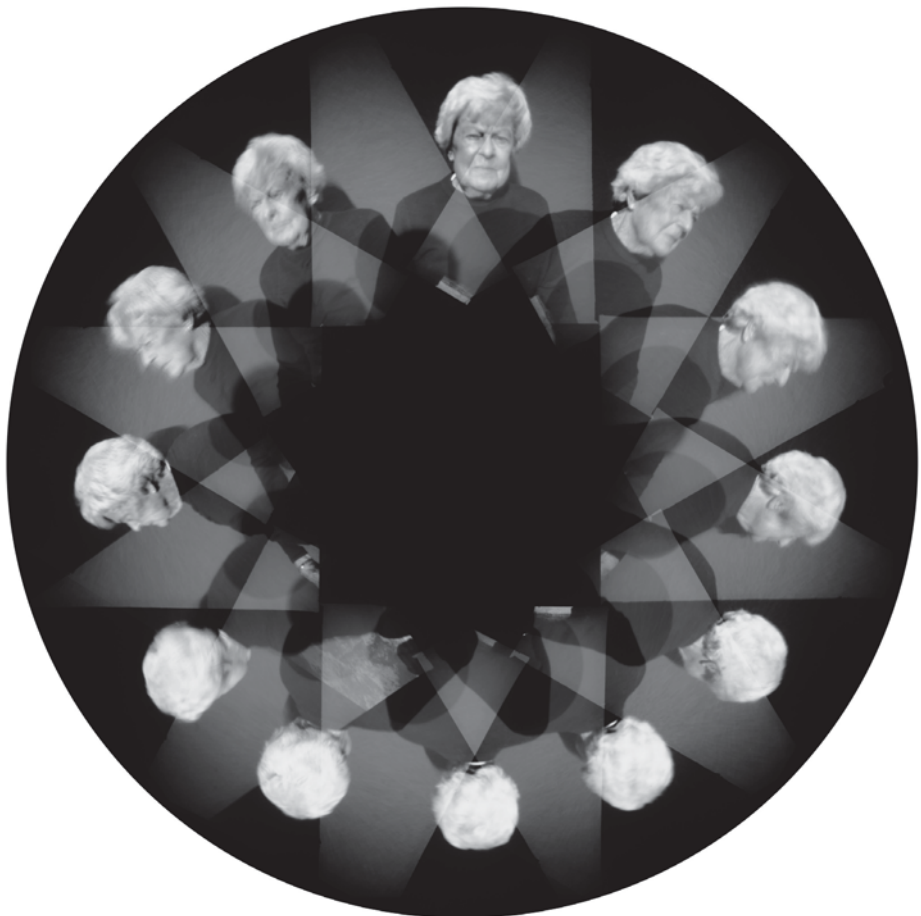

Fig. 2, Tam Webster. (2012). *Kath,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.
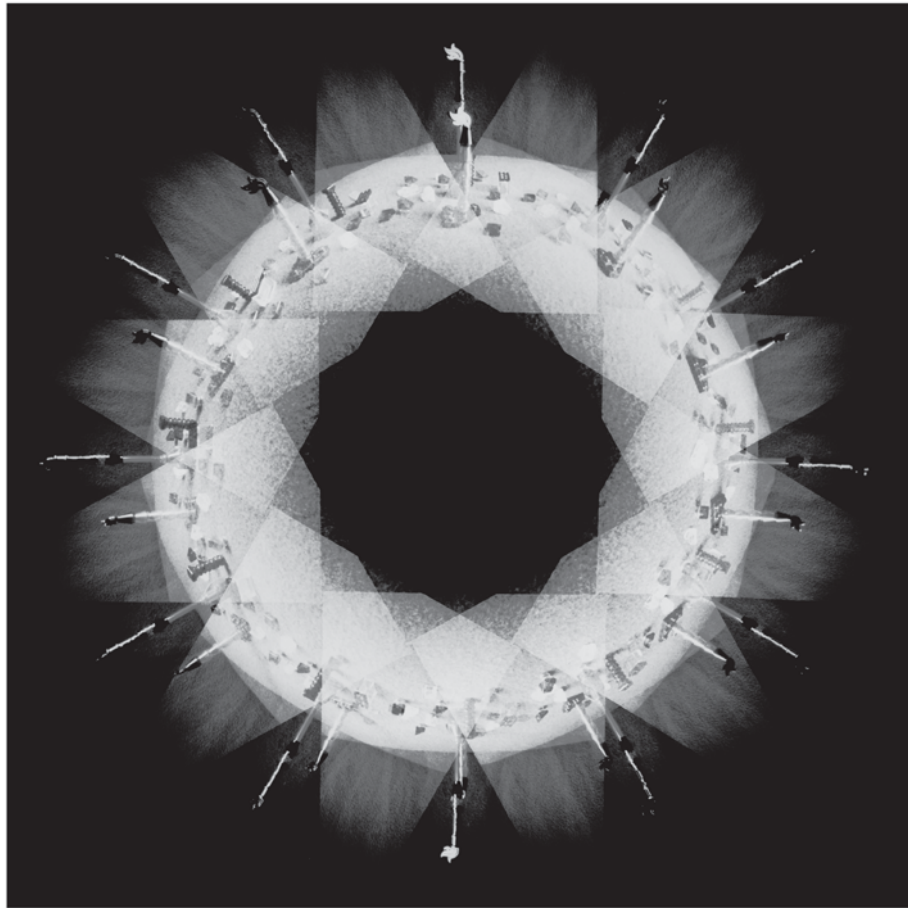
Fig. 3, Tam Webster. (2014). *Lego,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.

Fig. 4, Tam Webster. (2014). *Teddy Bear,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.

Fig. 5, Tam Webster. (2014). *Tea Cup,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.

Fig. 6, Tam Webster. (2014). *Elephant,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.

Fig. 7, Tam Webster. (2014). *Medal,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.
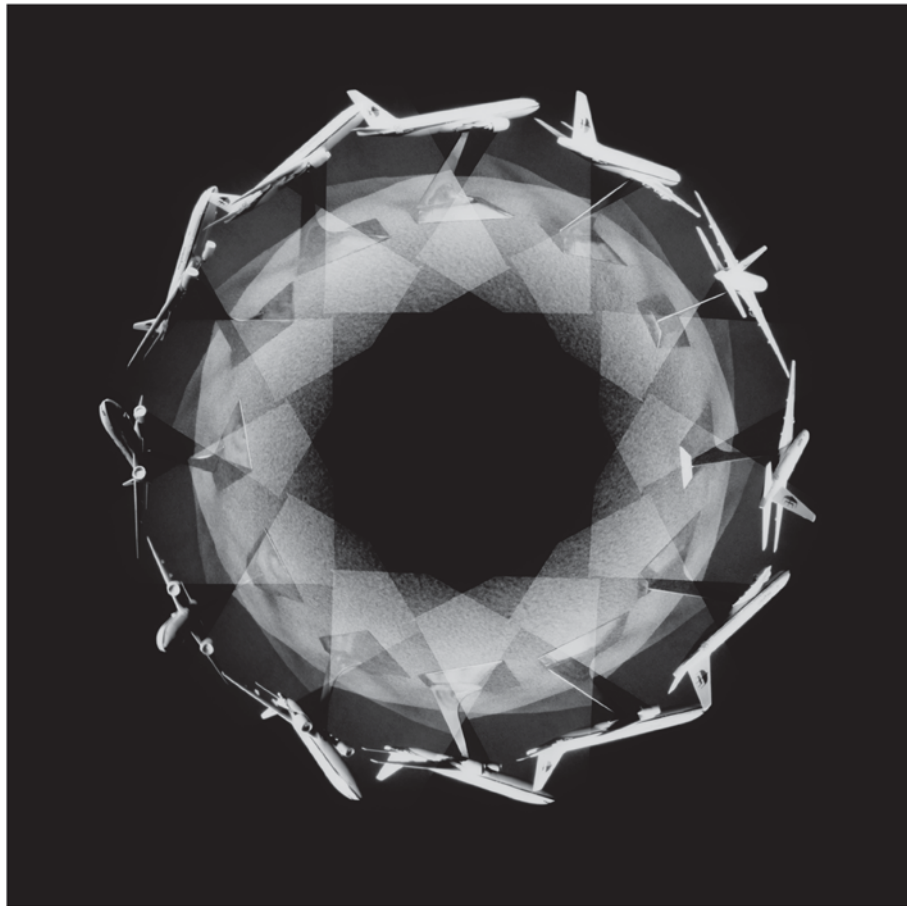
Fig. 8, Tam Webster. (2014). *MH17-1,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.
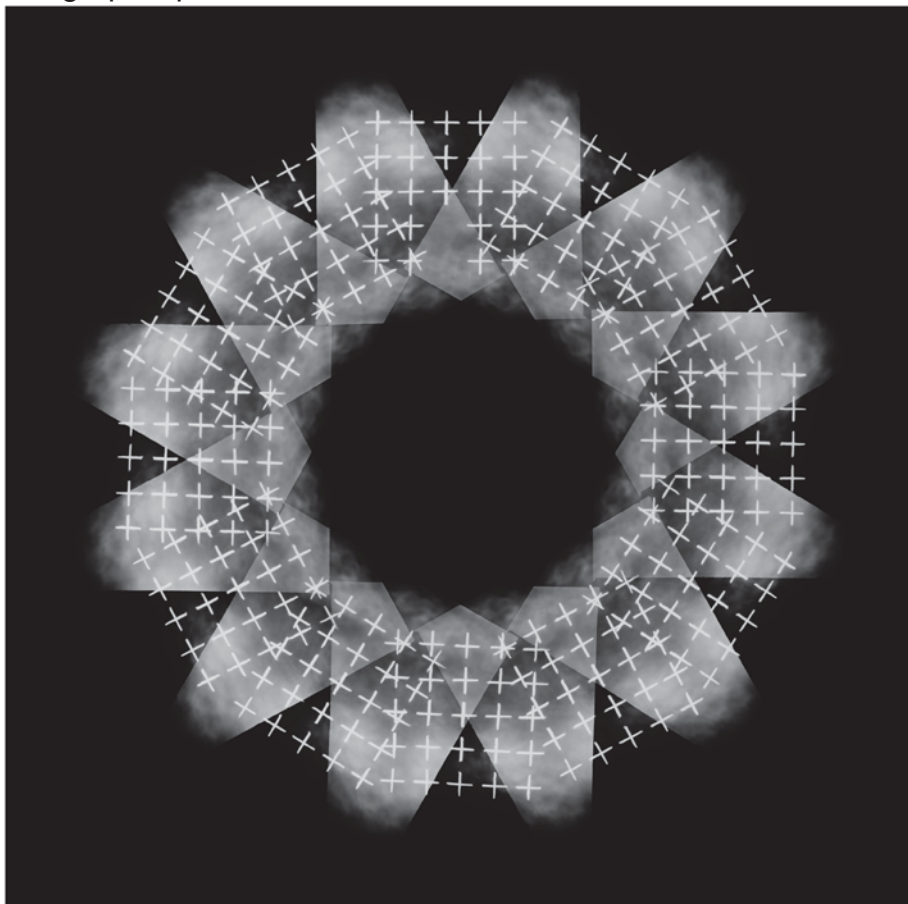

Fig. 9, Tam Webster. (2014). *MH17-2,* Rotary pinhole. Silver gelatin photographic print. Artist's documentation.

Fig. 10, Tam Webster. (2015). *Tess,* Silver gelatin photographic print, 10 x 10 inch. Artist's documentation.

Fig. 11, Tam Webster. (2015). *Herbert & Kawika,* Silver gelatin photographic print, 10 x 10 inch. Artist's documentation.

Fig. 11, Tam Webster. (2015). *Bojana,* Silver gelatin photographic print, 10 x 10 inch. Artist's documentation.

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