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Stepping into Social Waters

Photography Performed as Moving Image

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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

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## **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.

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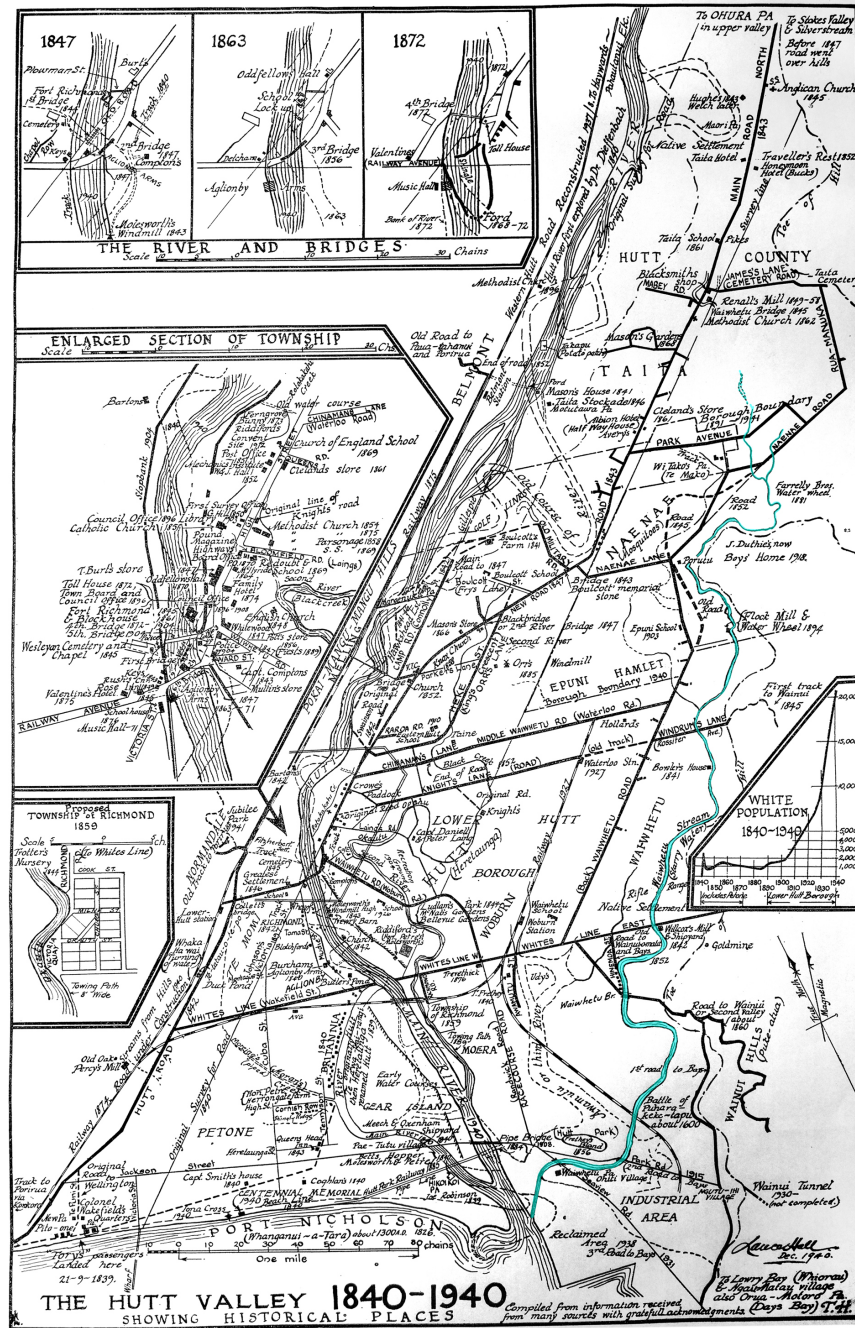


Fig 1, The Hutt Valley 1840-1940, Showing historic places, Compiled by Lance Hall

## 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.

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<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.

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<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,

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<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 verity 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

## Introduction

Photographs and films are objects that constantly address the conditions of their own making - although their creation is rarely witnessed by the viewer. But for the resulting evidence on screen or in print, the apparatus and many processes by which photographs may come about are mysterious and largely invisible. As a medium photography comprises multiple modes of image making – that when combined with contemporary concerns provides the potential for endlessly complex and subtle layering across the breadth of its numerous material output options, digital, analogue or both. It is the selection and combining of different modalities of working - the interrelationship of how something is both experienced and expressed - which constitutes my methodology for my subject, as expanded on here.

There are three main constitutive elements which informs my methodological inquiry as a social dialogue with a site then represented in video essay. The first of these modalities concerns my agency to identify a visual research framework to carry out work within that according to a set of self imposed parameters. Second, the use of performative procedures during the primary research phase of my project and when implementing the work. Third, it is the use of reconstruction and restaging as a primary device in the final represented video form that assuages its narrative structure.

In the first of three sections in this exegesis, I contextualise my research and creative work against the background of conceptual and documentary photographic practices; at the core of the work is the desire to employ image making to frame and convey a wide range of personal and social concerns; in being human, to respond to the land and people who I come into contact with. Further, to share and participate in dialogue with a range of audiences, in a range of settings and contexts. As a lens based artist I wish to continue to engage discursively with, and acknowledge here, the problematic nature of documentary photography, film and video with its assertions of the 'real' and authentic representation of the 'what has been'. However, I am describing new methods of finding and making visual meaning around social concerns, and presenting this in an immersive way. Situated in the context of contemporary art practice I am using photographic documentary practice as leverage to extend the boundaries of this form to include moving image in the form of the video essay, weaving narrative elements that are personal, historical and cultural, in order to contribute to contemporary storytelling in the digital age.

Central to my research, as communicated in the second section of this writing, is photography's relationship to the video essay form, how it may be utilised for my subject matter, and how this shift of materiality in relation to the subject allows the medium to be communicated or experienced by an audience, both through and beyond its processes. The decision to use moving image and questions around the perceived 'transparency' or 'invisibility' of documentary film technology will also be addressed. How might the role of video essayism – together with its connection to the social and political aspirations of early video art and author's voice, expand my practice of photography? And as a project, what can my research inform us about the effectiveness of video essaying in relation to building a story of specific cultural site? A key aspect here concerns the theory of 'transitoriness'. As articulated by Jorg Haber, it is the ability of the video essay to make the very process of perception visible that becomes central to my concerns.<sup>5</sup> Particularly, I am interested in investigating through visibility of investigative photographic process in practice alongside critical theory. This involves a literal putting of myself into the frame as a performer, re-enacting my investigation (the subject of the third section of this exegesis); and, finally, in relation to this, how performativity and elements of cinematic construction and device can be engaged and used productively to meet the challenges in the telling of a valuable social/relational document. This is to critically question and reflect on the processes undertaken by the photographer as investigator.

In pursuing these questions it has proved important to enlist perspectives from beyond photography and art practice to both inform my research and as influence on my practice. This includes the fields of social sciences and visual anthropology from which I select and weave methodologies found within these disciplines that help to articulate, although not totally crystallise a definition of my work.

They also help me to understand a responsibility I undertake to the living stream, to others - and the successfulness and genuine nature of the represented form. In the main I have adopted a western theoretical framework, but I recognise that the stream is a living force. I have spent time with it - not nearly as much as others - and in ways it has imparted to me as a particular lesson of knowledge not based in text or theory, nor about the application of ideas, rather as a sensate and spiritual matter (in a non-religious sense). I am aware that it is less genuine only to use the stream for my analytical ends. Instead, in thinking under a non-western research paradigm, I have made a connection and started a relationship with a named body of moving water that will endure. This ethos is present as part of the work.

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<sup>5</sup> J.Haber in U Biemann 2003 pg 9)

## Representation, Agency and the Photographic Document

In the following section I provide a boarder overview of where I sit in relation to photographic theory in order to articulate how conceptual documentary practices are a corner-stone of my research. This helps to explain the expanded field of photographic practice and where I situate my work in video essayism. It also leads to discussion on visual literacy, the author and critical authorship: the photographer's agency to work in hybrid forms and outputs. The key concepts of representation and the photographic document relate to my practice; as I am making a trace, providing the evidence of an object and place in time, making permanent and consigning to the 'ever receding past'.

This last quotation is in reference to Ann Banfield's attempts to describe and reformulate what Roland Barthes considered to be photography's most confounding enigma – the 'here now' and 'there then'. The concept that there are two elements or forces at work in a photograph – one, the experience of the moment of its creation, 'bound into the ever receding past, the other occupying the horizon of a continual present.'<sup>6</sup> Culpability for the representation of sites and people that lives on after the moment of capture is therefore foremost in my practice, as the history of the photographic medium dictates fascinating but obsessive theory in relation to this. This is often based on its apparatus, its ability to capture the decisive moment, the gaze, the 'what has been' and concepts that place many photographs into a discourse about memory, loss or death. Its practitioners are traditionally engaged in 'lone wolf' or isolated endeavours, such as the working in the darkroom, complete with its ritualistic order and repetitious enactment of tasks. The photographer as hunter, collector of images for his own ends, his camera trained on the other. This has led some writers like John Sakowski to comment, in 1962, in an extreme fashion, that '...photography becomes one of the arts, like literature, painting and music, only when it stops obsessing over its own history and theory – when its mirrors become windows'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, when photographers stop looking at themselves.

Sakowski, in his role at New York's Museum of Modern Art, notably championed the career of Garry Winogrand, an American street photographer who vehemently rejected any responsibility for his images and denied any relationship between his images and any

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<sup>6</sup> Banfield. A (1990) pg 65, 87

<sup>7</sup> Sakowski. J (1962)

shared public or human meaning.<sup>8</sup> His assertion being he was an impartial observer, providing the window on the world that Sakowski speaks of.

Similarly, Jeff Wall has commented that 'Photography cannot find alternatives to depiction as could the other fine arts. It is in the physical nature of the medium to depict things.'<sup>9</sup>

However, this implies that photographic validity can only come from complete 'transparency', no subjectivity or trace of the author, only of the machine - the camera. This has caused much anxiety around the validity and acceptance of documentary photography within a fine art context. In his article 'Notes on photography and loss', Walead Beshty offers observations regarding the theoretical problems that arise when the meaning in a photograph is hung on depiction alone, when it is presented as transparent - as is often the criticism of traditional documentary photography. Notably, the well understood difficulties with photographic likeness being mistaken for 'truth' or the 'real' or 'authentic' assertions, often associated with documentary photography, however - lead some 'photographic criticism to argue that what is noticeably absent in the photograph is the most compelling evidence of what the photograph is about.', and furthermore that, 'This is a very peculiar way to begin to understand aesthetic objects, that somehow they are exclusively what they are not, that aesthetic meaning can only be about the separation of signifier from signified.'<sup>10</sup>

Both Sakowski and Wall's statements could be disputed, in particular with reference to artists like Alison Rossiter, Marco Breuer and Andrew Beck who work entirely with the mediums physical processes and chemistry and whose work is devoid of any 'subject', in a traditional sense, beyond its own materiality. But also in relation to the theory of 'Equivalents', named by Alfred Stieglitz in the 1920s and practiced by Stieglitz and Minor White among others. Equivalence relies on the use of photography as a tool for metaphor - where non literal depictions and abstractions are used as emotional expression, existing on several levels of varying complexity, the notion of equivalents also relies on the engagement and investment of the viewer and their ability to see a 'sense of correspondence to something that he knows about himself.'<sup>11</sup> Thus providing a mirror for the photographer, but also for the viewer.<sup>12</sup> It is this metaphorical and poetic employment of the medium which I employ in my practice.

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<sup>8</sup> Rosler. M (1989) pg 320

<sup>9</sup> Wall.J (1995) pg 32

<sup>10</sup> Beshty. W (2012)

<sup>11</sup> White. M (1963) pg 17

<sup>12</sup> Wall.J in Lauson.C (2008)

Photography has widely been recognised as a valuable and significant conceptual art form, founded in proto-conceptual practice during the 1960s and 1970s - conceptual approaches to documentary developing over the following twenty years. It is the possibility of new hybrid modes of image construction and presentation and their definition that directs my research. Particularly in relation to the expansion of my previously primarily still photographic practice, into moving image. This, as with most creative practice, is a result of embracing evolving technology and equipment but also ideas.

It is not my intention however, to provide a retrospective examination of digital evolution. Democratisation and accessibility to the medium do play a role in my investigation, but the digital revolution, dissemination through the internet and social media, and theory that puts photography in 'crisis', is not directly relevant to my work.

Conceptual documentary is characterised and differentiated from traditional documentary practice primarily as a result of a new, self reflexivity around photography; the awareness that the de-contextualisation associated with singular images, the 'decisive moment', the 'hero' shot were adding to a what was termed 'compassion fatigue' and indifference to photographs. This in reference to desensitisation to suffering, a result of constant bombardment our society experiences, of generic and repetitious imagery.<sup>13</sup> New critiques raised in response to a growing skepticism around 'who is speaking thus'<sup>14</sup> - the photographer as producer of knowledge, capturing images with a capacity to be highly constructed in unapparent ways, and a reliance on context to determine meaning - were offered, most notably by Martha Rosler with her print series and book 'The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems' (1974-75). Rosler challenges the exploitive representation of Skid Row inhabitants as victims in earlier traditional documentary photographs of the Bowery as, 'traditionally carrying (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful'.<sup>15</sup> Even as she titles her series, '...in two inadequate descriptive systems', her images, empty shop fronts - trace evidence only of the people she references, juxtaposed with text pages of poetic lists of drinking terms - this strategy provided a very new way of looking at photographs that require us to consider different ways of representing a subject. 'There are no stolen images in this book', 'Impoverishment is the subject here.'<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the photo book as a form, was also largely responsible for representing photography in a manner that challenged singularity

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<sup>13</sup> Miles.M (2010)

<sup>14</sup> Soloman- Godenu. A (1991) pg 169

<sup>15</sup> Rosler. M, (1989) pg 306

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

and defined the conceptual photographic document; this due to its ability to hold narrative, it's rejection of museumification and documentary as commodified high art and the greater circulation the format affords.

There are many practitioners that have emerged since Rosler, particularly during the 1990s, who exemplified this movement with books and photography exhibitions that presented a new multiplicity. Exhibitions such as 'The World as One: Photography from Germany after 1989', collected together the German photographers Eva Leitolt, Enno Kapitza, Jitka Hanzlova, who along with many others working at this time, such as British artist Martin Parr - these photographers largely train a lens on existence in their own communities and domestic lives; they evoke the everyday, the banality of life in a 'dead-pan' fashion. Devices such as repetition, particularly in reference to excess or the indexing of objects, specimens collectively signifying a particular archive; or the vacant landscape with trace only of occupation or use - these begin to constitute the new vernacular of documentary practice. Organising categorising and often self-publishing in small editions and with total autonomy, they personify 'the drive to archive' <sup>17</sup>.

As the critique of photography continues into the 2000s, these very same traits are pointed to as contributing to a photographic demise; the charge, that anyone is capable of producing this type of imagery. This is countered by the recognition that many photographers have moved philosophically in practice, from a detached and observational only point of representing a subject, to a concern for more exploration in order to know the world for themselves. This is pivotal, not only in how it relates to the theory of equivalence, but in how it is intrinsically linked to the concepts of self reflexivity and an open ended investigation which are key in video essayism. It is these concerns which I take with me into my own practice, the desire to know the world for myself, and the agency I claim by way of organising and presenting my findings.

It is the agency and my experience of deliberate privileging of the visual that leads to my assertion as a photographer, that I am able to claim a greater awareness of visual literacy here. The ubiquitous nature of photography brings with it the corresponding universal perception of greater visual literacy. There is a misconception that because visual material thoroughly permeates Western culture and the globe, the ability to read and decipher photographic imagery is embedded. The 'reading' of an image in our contemporary society

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<sup>17</sup> Miles. M, (2010)



still needs to be acknowledged as relying on many factors. Theorist and writer Leslie Devereaux articulates this:

'Film, photography, cinema are all cultural products available as artefacts to be scrutinised for their form, their use, their origins and their meaning. The contested critical space of the discovery of meaning contains many possible investigative manoeuvres: inquiry into the nature of producers as Author, technician, artist, biographical subject; assessment of the conditions of production, those enabling structures and devices and constraints; interrogation of the receiving audience, as viewer, reader, critic, dupe.'<sup>18</sup>

The contention surrounding context and critical authorship once associated primarily with photographic documents of reportage and photojournalism, are still germane even as photographers and artists forge new highly contextualised forms of hybrid documentary practice, such as mixing still and moving images, presenting the readymade and ephemera alongside lenses based work, incorporating sculptural elements; and insist on greater control over the presentation and dissemination of imagery. Photographer as author with the agency to construct and present art work, is again, central here. What further can photographic artists do to assert validity - employing their craft and skills? Artist and writer Walead Beshty frames what could be one further way to consider representation and agency regarding conceptual photography that is relevant to my practice, '...I think it would serve us best if one left aside questions pertaining to what a work might be "about" or "represent," as these seem all but exhausted avenues, and instead start by trying to address what an artwork does—or more precisely, what we make it *do*, and what we *do* around it.'<sup>19</sup>

Beshty's consideration of a relational field of practice has prompted the question how can we experience photography anew in this way? How can we address 'what an art work does'? For myself as a contemporary artist using a lens, this has meant embarking on an investigation which employs the modalities associated with recent conceptual documentary practice and combining these with the durational aspects of moving image. Once engaged with this modality, the incorporation of performative elements in practice - the 'what we do' around artwork become a natural extension and further mode in which to practice. This is the subject of the following sections.

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<sup>18</sup> Devereaux. L (1995) pg 3

<sup>19</sup> Beshty. W (2012)

## The Expanding Field, The Video Essay and Transitionality

Of the move by so many primarily still image artists to using moving image, a number of theorists believe this to be a straightforward consequence of technological developments within the medium. For instance, writer and curator Martin Jaeggi summarises by saying, digital media has fundamentally changed the relation between still and moving photographic images (ie photography and film/video), by moving them closer together - the ability to have a high quality digital film function on a DSLR camera. It is no longer a matter of needing, 'two distinct cameras or mastering two quite distinct sets of technological procedure, it has become a mere matter of decision'.<sup>20</sup>

I am aware of the history and critical theory around film making as being distinct. As such, I will outline here the greater relevance of the use of term video - despite there now being large comparative crossovers in both mediums due to digital advancements. I will use the term video as it refers to the lineage my work takes from the advent of the handheld video camera, firstly for its immediacy of play back and secondly for its relationship to the present day sophistication of its digital counterpart. I want to be clear also that when I refer to the medium of video, I am referring to the genre historically (and domestically), but not to the aesthetic of its early technically or rudimentary form. Optically film has always been of superior cinematic quality, but new digital cameras have closed the gap between the two. However film will always be a product of optical/chemical process, involving many more 'steps' of removal from the original subject and involving a greater number of hands to deliver a finished work.

My deliberate decision to work with moving image has been, as mooted by Jaeggi, a natural extension of my practice in part aided by access to, High Definition digital hardware or DSLR cameras - but much more nuanced as well, as there is curiosity pertaining to how the 'photograph' survives in the transition from stasis to non-stasis in my creative work. If film has generally been critiqued in terms of artifice and fiction, whereas photography signifies reality,<sup>21</sup> but cinematic restaging or 'performance of the self' have been and will continue to be widely practiced by artists such as Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman, it seems further contradictory and epistemologically elusive factors will always be in play. Tracing the photographic thread becomes much like wading the murky waters of the literal and figurative stream I have stepped into. Theorist and writer George Baker attempts to clarify:

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<sup>20</sup> Jaeggi, M (2013)

<sup>21</sup> Jaeggi M (2013)

'For it seems that while the medium of photography has been thoroughly transformed today, and while the object forms of traditional photography are no longer in evidence in much advanced artistic practice, something like a photograph remains - *survives*, perhaps in a new, altered form [...] and one that will answer to neither technological exegesis nor traditional formalist criteria.'<sup>22</sup>

Many examples of work that constitute or are a result of photography's expanded field have been pointed to by a number of writers and theorists. While I am aware of a relational area or field as described by Baker, with particular reference his experiences inside camera obscura installations, as being shared and relational - I am interested in investigating the transition of myself as photographer into a video essayist. Furthermore, to a relational field only in so far as it is connected with performance and participatory practice; and while participation with others is an element of my work, it has taken a secondary role to my relationship with the stream itself. Expansion into moving image in the field of my creative practice is primarily about the ability to employ new media and moving narrative to further aid photographic story telling.

A divergent lineage has brought me to the video essay as a form this year - and as I strive to 'un-muddy' the waters of definition or un-felt a historical thread, the trajectory can be traced in the following manner. The photo essay is a form of narrative documentary practice, which is comprised of a short descriptive sequence on a social documentary topic or event, and devised for print in editorial magazines. It can be characterised further by the author's insistence that no image be printed out of sequence, cropped, rescaled or otherwise interfered with in a way that alters or undermines the 'reading' afforded by the deliberate editing and juxtaposition of each image. This is one strand, and is rooted firmly in photographic practice.

The film essay as a form, made famous by the French artist Chris Marker, takes its lineage from experimental film and video art - characterised also by inclusion of visual text forms. Experimental film having seeded in early cross pollination with music, theatre and dance - a result of a desire to offer interpretive alternatives to straight documentary or recordings of these temporal performing arts - a 'visualising' of avant-garde music, for example. But also as a means to its own end - a trans-disciplinary form. Video art although crossing over with experimental film, has roots in the social and political activism in Europe and America in the late fifties, early sixties - and as a genre drew on a diverse range of art movements and

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<sup>22</sup> Baker.G (2005)

theoretical ideas including Fluxism, Pop art, Minimalist sculpture and Body art and other forms that embraced non-comodifiable art practice.<sup>23</sup>

The video essay by original definition has its roots in literature; as 'video' is from the Latin verb *videre*, meaning 'to see', 'to essay', meaning 'to assay', is traced to the sixteenth century social critic and philosopher Montaigne who in 1550 wrote *Essais*. Connected to the Latin origin of 'agens', denoting human agency, 'to assay', means also 'to weigh', as well as 'to attempt'.<sup>24</sup> Montaigne defines the practice of essay writing as 'a testing of ideas, himself and society'.<sup>25</sup> This as cited by leading video essayist and writer Ursula Biemann, suggests Montaigne alludes to 'an open ended and evaluative search'. Furthermore, essay theorist Georg Lukacs argues the validity of the essay as an art form by pointing to what he considers to be the essential value determining characteristic, that writing an essay is 'not about the verdict...but the process of judging'.<sup>26</sup> The French revolution and enlightenment critic Theodor Adorno points out the relationship and appropriateness of the video essay has to art practice - referring to its form 'being neither fact or fiction, but a personal investigation involving both the passion and intellect of the author', as 'concepts do not build in a continuum of operation, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument are interweave as in a carpet'.<sup>27</sup>

The video essay has a relationship to the film essay and video art, but significantly also draws from the lineage from visual anthropology and to a lesser extent, visual ethnography, not to be confused with the very different use of video in traditional visual ethnography practice, where any cinematic device used for emotive and subjective ends is avoided as to ensure scientific value.<sup>28</sup>

Biemann describes the video essay as difficult to crystallize and sitting somewhere between documentary film and art video. It is an in-between genre: 'For a documentary, they are seen as too experimental, self-reflexive and subjective, and for an art video they stand out for being socially involved or explicitly political'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Meigh-Andrews. C (2006) pg 2

<sup>24</sup> Biemann. U (2003) pg 12

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Rascaroli. L (2008) pg 24

<sup>28</sup> Pink. S (2013) pg 184

<sup>29</sup> Biemann. U (2003) pg 8

The video essay as a form has been claimed by several disciplines and recognised as a visual art form in itself. It has been a term adopted by visual anthropology, a branch of social anthropology. Visual anthropology, recently and newly defined by technological advancement and new media as having expanded out to include the work of scientist, historians, ecologists and political activist; all seeking to describe what is essentially a visual documentation of a written form of research; the ability to cross language boundaries and offer accessibility of findings to the groups and cultures they portray - an acknowledgement of the subject as viewer. It has also been a form attached poetry, such as the video works of short story author and poet Johan Bresland. And also to radically subjective videos on highly contiguous subjects, such as the 1994 video essay work of Brit Hein, 'Baby I Will Make You Sweat'. Here, Hein delves into a personal and sexually change exploration of the power displacement which arise from sort out encounters between affluent white women and impoverished black men.

The application this form has to art practice is reiterated in much theory which recognises the seeking of a self reflexive mode of operation and the desire 'to preserve something of the *process* of thinking',<sup>30</sup> but it is theorist Jorg Huber who demonstrates most clearly the relevance of the video essay has to art practice and in particular to my practice with the roots I claims in photography. Huber states, while also differentiating the video essay from traditional and formalist ideas around concrete pre-visualisation of early associations with the medium:

'...the author's significance is not in being an agency in control over the material, but rather as someone who arranges things, competently ordering, staging, commenting, but also losing him-/herself in the subject matter, letting things happen to him/ her. The essayistic mode enables openings in which something happens or breaks through that cannot be seamlessly categorized or fully explained.'<sup>31</sup>

It is the self reflective and self reflexive desire to articulate concepts, to have visible in the artwork the evidence of the thought process - the aforementioned desire 'to preserve something of the *process* of thinking'<sup>32</sup>, which engages the theory of transitionality.

Transitionality can be defined by a deliberate shift or development, which embodies

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<sup>30</sup> Good. G (1988) pg 20

<sup>31</sup> Huber. J in Biemann. U (2003) pg 94

<sup>32</sup> Good. G (1988) pg 20

purposefulness in a manner beyond that of merely asserting a change or differentness.<sup>33</sup> In relation to my work this is about depiction, on screen, of my research and experience in a very self-referencing form. In his 2003 chapter 'On the Theory-practice of the Transitional', Huber applies this theory to the complexity of the video essay and it's seemingly radical openness. He states that the inherent free forming quality of which is implied in the video essay should not be mistaken to mean an ungrounded-ness: 'The point of the video-essay is to test experimentally how "world" is being produced and made relevant in and through being perceived. It is about the construction of visibility and invisibility.'<sup>34</sup> Huber emphasizes focus on the phenomenology of perception by stating:

'By experimenting with perceptions, the object of perception is observed as a perceived object; it is represented and produced by perception. The phenomenon is what happens and what is manifested. The video-essay focuses on the process of perceiving events and on the process of their manifestation, their emergence'.<sup>35</sup>

Transitionality in terms of the video essay is about the ability to differentiate between the processes of the many disciplines that employ it as a form, by making those processes visible. Whether it be a visual anthropologist articulating a body of research, an scientific investigation undertaken by a visual artist or a photographer presenting the evidence as a result of a mining of a social site.

This connects directly with the concept of transparency in photographic practice and brings into focus the agency of the photographer to manipulate or 'play' with the appearance or visibility/invisibility of the medium. In my work this visibility forms a dual meaning; I tread a fine line of 'near' documentary film, by way of the cinematic appearance the video work has. But I also make visible selected elements of my visual research by restaging them for the camera in a way which does not quite suspend disbelief - the viewer is aware of the construction - the unlikelihood of the white recorder on screen discovery, for example. This however is complicated and left 'open' by the fact that some of my video is *not* staged.

I have allowed an open ended-ness, which has provided opportunistic, intuitive and poignant inclusions to the video. Which elements of my research I chose to privilege, to what level I restage these elements, to what level I manipulate elements to 'read' as 'natural', constitutes my agency as an artist here.

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<sup>33</sup> Koopman. C (2009) pg 13

<sup>34</sup> Huber. J in Biemann. U (2003) pg 94

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

## **Performativity, Instructionality and Reconstruction**

Firstly, to briefly return to my mihimihi: My camera has always been a passport for me to enter the lives of others. I have photographed lovers, events and valued possessions. I had done this a lot as a younger person as it gave me permission to be with and around people - to play a role as a photographer.

After my day on the dig with the 'friends', I returned with my camera and walked along the bank as they dug and shouted stories up to me from the water - along with the objects, raked into piles on the grass. When the dig was over and the last pond weed plant flung to the bank, I returned by myself, sometimes with my camera and sometimes without. I collected rubbish from along the banks, travelled and tracked the length of the stream. Pulled by the allure of excavating shadowy forms on the stream bed and the memory of the weight of the water against me - I bought waders and stepped in. I became part of the stream, but an unnatural one. I was a curiosity; I had staged myself in the stream. I worked twice a week on average in the stream for three months. I collected objects and rubbish and I talked to anyone that approached me. I began to know where the rubbish would collect after storms or high wind - I went particularly to bridges after the weekend to climb in and collect beer bottles. I had a circuit - I travelled it somewhat ritualistically. My waders, my gloves, my cap, the sharps container (for needles), the fork, the object bags, my notebook, the rubbish bags. I began to learn of the history of the stream in the memories of long time residents - these became the leads that dictated my research. After several months, I began to hear the same stories - the stream catching fire, running blue with paint or red with carpet dye. There is a collective memory of the stream - it prompts me to research the ecology of the stream further, and I learn about the pondweed, the eels.

As I step out of the water, I have already come to realise that it is my experience of being in the stream I wish to impart - not just the objects as they are literally and symbolically connected to it. When I return it is with my camera and some of my finds - these have become my props. I am wearing my waders but they have become costume and the stream has become my mise-en-scene.

The use of performance as a mode begins with my stepping into the stream, working while I engage in conversation with passers-by. This is site specific and durational. It is witnessed and engaged with informally by those who speak to me. Mostly it is un-witnessed. This mode

bears a relationship to my public artwork, 'This\_was\_now\_here' I completed in 2013, a pop up studio, where the public was invited to bring object and watch them being photographed. But I have transitioned from my earlier practice of 'showing' process, and by this I mean making visible the process by the photographic works actual creation being observed - to performativity creating the work and re-enacting it on camera as a performance. To explain my instructional framework and define the difference between performance and performativity I am looking to several writers, and theorists and artists.

Glenn Barkley provides one connection to 'experiential' theories of the performative and instructional field of photography, when he suggests of artist Ben Cauchi's work, that it is one of the unseen elements of Cauchi's wet collodion image production, which reveals in a temporal fashion, the absorption in craft and making:

'Watching a photographer using the process, which demands that the plate be kept wet, you are struck by the speed of movement required. It is as if the photographer must hurriedly negotiate the space, yet is trying to remain nonchalant. It is photography as performance enacted by, for and in the camera, and it is little wonder that even viewing the works become a type of performance.'<sup>36</sup>

This type of performance could also be characterised by site specificity, and duration. The photographer negotiates the studio and darkroom but in a prescribed manner that is determined by the length of time allowed by the wet plate process and the set tasks that must be carried out. Witnessed only by chance, haphazardly, by the presence of the arts writer, for a performance that would otherwise be private and unseen.

The work of Ed Ruscha and its link, offered by writer Liz Kotz, to a refinement of the definition of 'performative' provides a further connection to the field of my practice. In her essay 'Language between performance and photography' Kotz defines 'performative' as a gesture repeated but without the site-specificity of a 'performance'.<sup>37</sup> Margaret Iversen in her essay 'Auto-maticity: Ruscha and performative photography', uses 'performativity' to characterize the work of Ruscha - with particular reference to his series 'Twenty-six gasoline stations 1963'. 'Performative photography begins with an instruction or rule which is followed through with a performance.'<sup>38</sup> Here, Ruscha defines the parameters of his project with the

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<sup>36</sup> Barkley. G (2013) pg 35

<sup>37</sup> Kotz. L (2005)

<sup>38</sup> Iversen. M (2010) pg 15



instruction - to drive from the city to his parents house in Los Angeles, along Route 66, photographing every gas station. This type of work could be linked to the DuCampian concept of 'canned chance', Ruscha having described himself, as heavenly influenced by Marcel Duchamp and he engaged this kind of quasi experiment - the rules or parameters of which are laid out but the outcome is still variable.

My work is also instructional in this way, as I am working to a set of self imposed rules while collecting primary data and experiencing being in the stream. This framework is my improvised script: travel to the stream, collect rubbish, dig out rough pond weed, talk to those who approach me, use their stories as a starting point for the generation of research. This research takes the form of archival stories and photographs, ecological data from the stream, archived Radio NZ recordings and newspaper clippings. A local woman who works with the FWS, tells me about digging up a white recorder - she brings me the recorder and I re stage its discovery for the camera. I hear about the pondweed flowers being eaten in South Africa, and find a stream on the Kapiti coast where pondweed is still found. I collect the flowers, research a recipe and re stage them in a baking dish - and so on. This modality of working constitutes a branch of my methodology and further grounds me in ways of how I may come to 'know' the stream, make meaning and visually articulate this.

Another artist who practices in this mode is American photographer Taryn Simon. Simon practices in the area of conceptual documentary and works with an instructional premise. Her 2008 project 'The Innocence', consists of portraits of innocent men and women who were convicted and served prison sentences for a violent crime which they did not commit. The instructional framework for the series was to place her subjects at one of three locations, the scene of the crime, the alibi location or the location where the subject was arrested.

Simon's work illustrates the value of the photographic medium as a vehicle for complex story telling – photographs, combined with text, as evidence of the enacting of a set of rules or instructions for engagement with others. This is most clearly demonstrated in her largest project to date 'A living man declared dead and other chapters' 2010. Here she has laboriously researched and followed 18 family bloodlines from around the globe, in a four year period. She then photographed in a formulaic manner every living relative in that bloodline. The formula required her and her two assistants to travel with a folded plastic sheet, marked precisely with camera and light positions, so that every portrait was exactly the same. The performative element is now provided by the portrait sitter, but strictly

controlled by Simon - sit facing the camera directly, hands in lap, not smiling. The work is a seemingly straightforward indexical 'snap shot' of these family bloodlines at a particular point in time. In this sense, they could be compared to the cataloguing work of August Sander. But Simon's are woven through with complex and almost unbelievable stories, in the form of text and supplementary images, of family feuds, intergenerational incarnation and genocide. Geoffrey Batchen, in a recent article states this of Simon's 'A living man declared dead and other chapters', '...the challenge taken up by Taryn Simon – to give the apparent transparency of the photograph a social thickness and make the natural read as historical.'<sup>39</sup>

It is this apparent transparency of the medium that follows me as I make the shift to a video work and consider the viewer of the work - who I rely on, in the spirit of 'equivelance', to find something of themselves in it. I consider the medium, aesthetics, audio, voiceover and dialogue. In the following, I look to the work of other photographers who have made the same transition to moving image when exploring a history or site and who use both differing and similar modalities and methods to myself. There are many notable photographic artists who have made this shift, including New Zealand Photographer Gavin Hipkins and New Zealandlander Dacry Lange (1946 - 2005), Lange having pioneered socially and politically engaging video work during the 1970s, that was unique by way of his combining of genres, documentary, avant- garde and stuctualist video making.

Two artist in particular that inform my work are Norwegian artist Hiedi Morstang and British artist Simon Starling. The look to the work Morstang for it's adherence to, but simultaneous departure from documentary devices and for it's technical clarity; while the work of Starling provides insight into the use of re staging and reconstruction as a method of storytelling. Morstang situates her works in the short documentary film category. They are visually minimal, High Definition digital films, which thematically engage tensions within the landscape, either in the form of continuous archaeological history or environmental conflict. The form could further be described as 'slow- doco'. The duration of shots and pace of editing point to her photographic roots, and the works cinematic feel is further framed by the presents of a linear narrative structure. She also dictates the manner in which the film is viewed by controlling them in screenings as apposed to exhibiting them in a video installation. This not only controls the darkened environment the film is viewed in but also the point in which viewing begins and ends.

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<sup>39</sup> Batchen. G (2011) pg 740

Her two most recent works 'In Transit' (2011) and 'Prosperous Mountain' (2013), are relevant particularly for the lack of contextualising information and voice-over. During 'In Transit' the cinematography draws the viewer along - precise editing paces out a linear narrative experience which is added to by a few small pieces of dialogue. An extended opening shot - a passenger point of view of driving along a dirt road - takes the viewer to a location that is eventually revealed as the site where the remains of Norwegian soldiers who fought for the SS during the battles on the eastern front in World War Two lie. Considered traitors in their home country, their bodies were left where they fell until renewed interest and a bid by relatives saw an excavation of the battle field undertaken. A short summary of the story is provided at the end of the film in the form of text frames, which reveals the identities and origin of the bones unearthed. Until that point, the viewer is provided the visual narrative of the journey, the translated dialogue and the occasional signifying object presented as evidence - a button or piece of uniform, a weapon. These things are not staged - but there was a large amount of collaboration and the participation with others to achieve the film outcome. There are not 're-takes' or calls for 'action'. The lack of voiced over audio as a method, allows the work to 'breathe'. The attention is not divided between audio and visual, however it does not leave the viewer searching uncomfortably for context. There is a photographic sensibility - a weaving of long locked off shots with extreme close-ups of bones - in a way that evoke the characteristics of the isolated location, the forgotten bodies and lives, and the difficulty of the work to retrieve these remains and the tension between the groups involved.

In contrast to this the film work of British artist Simon Starling is highly constructed in the way that still and text based imagery is mixed with moving image to illustrate a story provided primarily by an at times, frenetic voice-over. Starling draws from a range of historical material, his 2012 work film work 'Black drop', for example, documents the relationship between the Transit of Venus and the history of cinema - but the narrative weaves fictitious information seamlessly to present a new 'history', collapsing the two together. The viewer must 'keep up', make connections - there is almost too much information. The use of restaging and the representation of research documents within the work inform my own practice. The camera pans across a pin board of historical documents and illustrations, research organised and arranged on a set for the camera. The movement and layering of narrative storytelling afforded by film, although here it is entirely black and white, is nuanced and intriguing. If photographers are essentially storytellers, Morstags and Starling's work are examples of the

potential of moving image and offer explanation as to the desire of photographers to extend their practice by expanding the narrative form.

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During my creative research I have literally and figuratively stepped into social waters, understanding there are many contributing factors in the stability of a given site; and that a body of water runs its course to those who use it and care for it (in its past, in the present for its future). What began as consideration of artefacts became the much wider concern of mining a site in its fuller extent, the greater significance of ecological damage inflicted on the stream and the subsequent attempts to restore it. What is accomplished is my studio submission, *Stepping into Social Waters: a Video Essay on the Waiwhetu Stream* - a 21 minute moving image work. This was proposed to the Lower Hutt City community Dowse Art Museum, so as to further engage the community. Occupying this space also acknowledges my communities' support and interest in this project.

The research material I gathered, was directed by selecting from the stories and interactions I had while working in the Waiwhetu stream, is also merged with my personal experience of being in and with it. This then entered a phase in which the findings of this primary investigation was deliberately reordered, reconstructed and restaged and presented in a visual essayistic form. This consciously generated fragmentation at times - and weaving of internal and external elements of the stream. The viewer follows three narrative stands through the video work: the path of the stream from its head to the connection with the harbour at the river mouth. Secondly, the physical body of the photographer stepping in and out of the stream, an active agency, acting out the ritualistic and performative mode of the investigation, taking the viewer into and beneath the waters. Then thirdly, a narrative trail of found research - documents, illustrations and objects which foreshadow and background key themes in the work. I elected not to use any narrated voice-over or text frames to add additional context - the viewer can opt to 'read' those text snippets included, but the work is also designed to be cyclical. Information -knowledge derived from my practice into the site - is configured to be absorbed by the viewer through visual narrative alone. The video essay is looped, thus the metaphor becomes such that the viewer can step into the stream at any point.

There is an audio which accompanies the video work. This is also largely reconstructed so as to mimic and simulate the construction of visual elements. As found in video imagery, there are elements of the soundscape that have not been disconnected from their source imagery. Unseen elements in the form of walking, carrying, and equipment set-up, have been incorporated as sound, along with archival sound recordings and new sound recordings that reference historic elements of the site - the stream trains at the railway yards, for example. This is intended to prompt the viewer, beyond the images on screen, toward crucial decisions in terms of a narrative, what is both selected and excluded in the work.

Finally, returning to the beginning: In the process of looking to work in a more valuable social/relational field of conceptual photographic practice, I have made a connection and started a relationship with a named body of moving water that will continue on. And while this work has a public audience at the Dowse Art Museum, its further effectiveness or success as a work will be determined in the ongoing dialogue, visibility and any contribution it can make, to a momentum around restoring some health to the Waiwhetu Stream. I have attempted to give a social thickness to the work, by way of making visible the elements of my investigative process; my attention to and duration with the stream, not only as an visiting observer. I did not skim the waters' surface, I went into them at depth and I have made a document with a sensitivity to greater investment in, and capability for, my subject. The initial timeframe spent early in this project making, without my camera – time spent socially with the stream and those connected to it, is also part of my photographic process; ritualistic, instructional and performative. My actions and investigation were embodied in me and translated into the work. Imparting also to the stream itself, as I have both made and left a trace.

*The line begins back at a distant point  
Secluded, as if in a far country, in a remote past  
Back here across a sea, it meets the Avon  
and finds Rewaka - a new beginning place  
It loops, traverses the bypass at Murapara Gatatea.  
and finally crosses The Whites Line East  
at Waiwhetu.*

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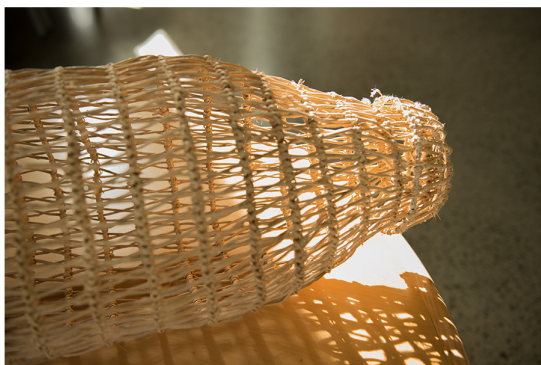


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