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# Last Skye Boat Song

## The Essay Film in A Maternal Landscape: Transitional Phenomena in Photographic Practice in Aotearoa

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An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy, Fine Arts.

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## Abstract

This practice-based research enlists a performative photographic process, where both participation and re-staging of phenomena become primary modes of making a moving image work which draws its form from the essay film, as described within the field of visual arts. The central focus involves my lived experience as related through a contemporary feminist art practice and an exploration of my own maternal landscape – termed here in reference to that which is the familiar space and home of my children while also indicative of my internal landscape and psychology of creative practice. This project proposes the central premise that autotheoretical and maternal experience in the domestic space can offer an opportunity to experience ‘transitional phenomena’ conducive to forming an artwork and the articulation of a unique artistic process.<sup>1</sup>

A key focus of my research is the further articulation of methodologies employed in the making of narratives that sit within the expanded documentary fields in essay film and related photographic practices. Moreover, to explore how research material is collected via observational and phenomenological methods and the gestation and transposition of such material into constructed moving image works. This approach involves creating a socially-informed and personally invested moving image art work and examining both the historical and contemporary significances of this approach. This focus encompasses questions about the visibility of process, authorship and gender in film and cinematic aesthetics. It is informed by and draws on scholarship which acknowledges and elevates the site-responsive, discursive and intuitive elements of women’s art making and seeks to contribute to an ethos where mothering can be described as a practice unto itself and which has agency.

The moving image work and research outcome *Last Skye Boat Song* takes as its departure point the singing of a lullaby for the last time and a conceptualising of the liminal space of mid to late-teenagehood. Apprehension, climate change, the housing crisis and ecological harm underpin the story of this work made over a set four year duration in the ‘closed down’ environment of the post Covid-19 outbreak in Aotearoa. At its heart are repetitious, cyclical and transitional observations made while navigating two parallel journeys. One into middle-age away from fertility and one during an initial and formative transgender transition.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, “Transitional objects and transitional phenomena”, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 1-30.

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*Your Skye boat speeds away into the tangled garden  
knees lifting, wrists deep in the earth, fingers pushing off  
out over the sea.  
One day I put you down and never picked you up again.  
In another version I took you up to my body and never put you down again.  
That weight is gone but sought often,  
measuring the gathered in limbs against my form,  
absorbing warmth and feeling the bone edges that replace softness.*

*We first crossed the Whites Line East at Waiwhetū before he was born.  
Now he runs the cut through Te Whiti Park to the firebreak, the eastern hill scar drawn along  
the edge of section 19.  
In the damp of the track he stops for a Pīwakawaka, crouches low and close.  
He takes me there where I rest often, breathless.  
Ahead and high above me, he's still again for a Toutouwai.  
I pull myself on through Mānuka.  
We're here now on Mt Towai ridge.  
We pause for the outline of the Laneway rising from the landscape,  
I can make out our trees, some yellow, a speck in the garden, a figure.  
Suddenly I want to be there, beside her,  
but we are off again - he would go forever.*

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

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The photomedia based practice I engage with involves the creation of still and moving image works in which narratives are often non-linear in character and explore the relationship between my own internal and external landscapes. They are simultaneously social and personal documentaries, incorporating representations of micro-histories and partial tellings. This project is motivated by the ways my experience of mothering my children and their participation in my processes of making can influence the creation of a moving image work that both inhabits and crosses genre categories. I am attempting in particular to work through ways that an artistic practice can respond to and acknowledge the emotional complexity of tending and caregiving in current liminal space I am describing. I am further motivated by an investigation of what my practice ‘does’ as well as how it might be an act of validating the invisible emotional labour of other artists who are mothers. This emerges from an ethos wherein mothering may be described as a practice unto itself which has agency.

My central research question is the following:

- 1) Can an autotheoretical elucidation of maternal experience in the domestic space offer an opportunity to experience ‘transitional phenomena’ conducive to forming an artwork and the articulation of a unique artistic process?

Further to this my proposed sub-questions include:

- a) How does this research inform scholarship which acknowledges and encompasses ethics of care and the ‘slow’ movement in art and which seeks to contribute to an ethos where mothering can be described as a practice unto itself with its own agency?
- b) In what ways does my research contribute to the understanding of moving image works which both inhabit and cross categorisations of the photographic and essay film, and are experimental and performative forms of self-produced documentary?

For previous projects, I forged relationships with other members of the community—including scientists, Kaumātua, and volunteer groups—for comparatively brief but highly intense periods of time. They were the beginnings of relationships I hoped to maintain as I sought to create connections in my community and to assist in fostering my own sense of belonging. This stemmed in part from the fact that neither my immediate family nor my ancestors are from Waiwhetū, where I have lived and worked for the past 18 years. I began this path toward connection with my first essay film in 2014

which I made as a way of caring for a local body of water and meeting the people for whom it had much history and significance. *Stepping into Social Waters: A Video Essay on the Waiwhetu Stream* (2014) involved volunteering my labour, collecting stories from residents, and then folding my creative writing inspired by this research into the process of image making and editing. Video and still images were made by constructing sets or 'mise en scène', with subsequent restaging of stories in and around the site. I have continued to use this methodology for a number of other projects including working with a group of Wellington public park guardians, a group of optometrists and eye specialists, and a work produced with performance artists and GNS scientists.

Here I turn directly to my blood relationships, personal histories, and maternal experiences—and how these connect me to the social aspects of my art practice. This is a distinct shift from the projects I have embarked on over the last ten years although there are methodological similarities which I have teased out in my research and that I have identified as connective threads drawn through my practice. My questions pertain to how I can characterise a photographically informed moving image practice which incorporates elements of directed performance, re-enacted and observed phenomena, and constructed imagery. Further, how does the situating of these structural elements support the translation of lived maternal experiences into a form which borrows heavily from the essay film, and why is this important? This project comes from a process of reflection that began four years ago when it became clear that my first child, assigned female at birth, would be transitioning to their true and intended self and beginning their journey to manhood proper.

In the initial turmoil of this discovery, I questioned much about birthing, mothering, raising gendered beings and my connections to his body, to my own and the turbulence of the transformations at this stage of teenage life and parenting. I had just sung my youngest child a lullaby for the last time, felt her weight slide to the floor as I put her down from my arms, knowing I would struggle to pick her up again. As my children moved into their teenage years and away from the levels of physical care they had needed into a new level of emotional nurturing I sought ways to negotiate the uncertainty and fear which presented itself. Primarily, I questioned how I could acknowledge the ways my children have informed the current phase of my creative life and shifting subjectivity.

My desire for this project was to be able to make a space to be present and make connections, draw pieces together, to deeply notice what is happening in an experience. I wanted to show my concern for my children and for the current environment and the importance of an awareness of the social and political worlds in which they are emerging and 'becoming'. Conducting this creative engagement with both sensitivity and mindfulness around consent is of crucial importance. Furthermore, there are many complexities around ways their stories and experiences cross with my own—this can be a lot to 'hold' across the spheres of care and artmaking. This work is not a memoir nor an inclusive summary of my experience as a mother – I am not reflecting on all of their childhood and my motherhood alongside it. But instead, I am specifically focusing upon this recent point in the continuum of

transition and growth, the auto theoretical immediacy of the four-year period—between 2019 and 2023—drives and frames my response. Their teenage years, the separating out and off are at the centre of this, coupled with my own sense of transitioning to a new phase of my life—along with the current socio-political climate which has driven many creative people home to work, as in my own case.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic hitting Aotearoa in March of 2020, I had envisaged a project that while containing similar propositions also invited the participation of other mothers of teenagers within my community of friends and artists residing in Lower Hutt. During the first lockdown period, the sudden isolation and uncertainty about the ability to have contact with and therefore access to others for filming, required me to rethink this element of my research and I made the decision to enlist this unexpected type of enforced ‘self-containment’ as one of the strategies or parameters for my project. This has been a defining device which has allowed me the space to gestate and ferment my own experience and observations in a manner inconceivable at the beginning of the project.

The Mother/Child dyad, the ‘art between us’,<sup>1</sup> and my own lived experience of the multiplicity and often cleft nature of primary caregiver and practicing artist, is often difficult to articulate especially given the distraction and busyness of the household during the early Covid-19 climate. My own maternal landscape has encompassed the disjointed realities of living, working, and creating artworks in the space where the nurturing and wellbeing of others is at the same time prioritised. I marvel, revel, and delight in my children. They seem otherworldly and magical in their own creativity, understanding of the world, and their empathy towards each other. The joy I experience with them is coupled with the frequent anxiety I feel about their future lives out in the world, combining in a manner that has me longing to tuck them back under my skin, to reabsorb their bodies with mine. But I have also longed for solitude and release of their weight against me, to be able to work and reflect. Some experience is recorded, and much is not – much of the internal dialogue that offers clarity to my process and intentions, seeps away. There seems never to be enough uninterrupted time to complete or sustain the train of thought and it becomes lost.

The process of embarking on the project has also been a process of trusting the ebbs and flows, letting my experience guide me and knowing that the material I am working with will sometimes vanish but resurface at another time in another form or iteration and in that respect is never lost. It has also been a process of trusting that there is value in the symbiotic relationship of caring and creating, with all its ambivalence and contradictions—it both feeds me and thwarts me. “Embracing motherselfhood” in terms of my creative practice means acknowledging that currently in my life, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen McMahon, “The Art Between Us” in *The M-Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, ed. Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2011), 309.

layer of selfhood which envelopes most tightly and is still immediate, is the nurturing of young teenagers, with their babyhood and childhood still fresh in my being.<sup>2</sup> I endeavour, waveringly at times, to write in my artist biography "...lives in the Hutt Valley with her partner and two children", although of the 188 artists listed on CIRCUIT: Artist Film and Video Aotearoa, New Zealand, I am the only one who acknowledges their familial situation in this manner.<sup>3</sup> This in part speaks to the 'why this is important' and why there is still a need for visibility.

The final film work is a 23:50 minute long HD moving image work consisting of a montage of visual imagery and text slides with a soundtrack constructed by mixing environmental sound with a music score. It has been designed to be viewed in an immersive black gallery space projected on screen grey. The text slides take a poetic form and have been derived from diary notes and written responses to happenings—this text appears in full in the prologue. They have been placed at the beginning and the end of the film as to function as 'bookends' allowing a longer middle section of the film to be led by the imagery and soundtrack alone. Initial and early points of departure of the film work included a focus on the current housing crisis and subsequent suburban construction boom and ecologically damaging aspects such as the use of artificial grass—this set against the privilege of home ownership. However *Last Skye Boat Song* has deepened into a consideration of portions of the external and emotional landscapes, objects and happenings, alongside the revisiting of objects symbolic of the transitions and losses taking place in my own maternal landscape and body. These emotional undercurrents have expanded to include climate change, in particular sea level rise, the cost of living crisis and trans rights. The sense of acceptance, of inevitable letting go and the corresponding 'loss' of my children as they transition to adulthood is a primary theme within this doctoral project—but it is coupled with what I hope is optimism and trust that they will make their way into the world safely despite the challenges and prejudice, as is the reality for my son. Layered and complex meanings can still be found in the artificial grass, the mistakes made on and to the land—the covering over or sealing of earth, the loss of connection to the ground beneath us. The film's visual imagery has often emphasised what can't be easily witnessed by the human eye, as certain aspects are 'hidden' beneath, above, and within. They represent the transitional, the in-between—the visioning of my inner and outer worlds.

## Methodological and Philosophical Underpinnings

My methodology involves making a filmic response to phenomena, emotional experience, ordinary objects, and contemporary social issues which present themselves to me while falling within a set of instructional parameters or constraints. These parameters dictate what I film, how I film and what is

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<sup>2</sup> Mielle Chandler, "Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices," in *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns*. ed. Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly, (Ontario: Second Story, 1998), 284.

<sup>3</sup> CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image, "188 Artists", September 18, 2022, <https://www.circuit.org.nz/artists>

revisited and re-filmed. The primary factor involves the locations where the film is made—that of my house and garden, Petone foreshore and Mt Towai peak. The second parameter consists of the period of time the film was made within, corresponding to the length of my research—the four-year period between March 2019 and March 2023. This means that no newly observed or additionally developed imagery was conceived and added after this time. This corresponds to my autotheoretical approach of being ‘here now’ which does not privilege the memory or remembering of autobiographical experience outside of the present timeframe but instead is diaristic and immediate in nature. These repetitions—happenings, objects, actions, and cycles, either as they present themselves to me or I engage with my camera by filming, are those which I have pushed to the fore—and am compelled to revisit, re-present or reinterpret. Thirdly I am constrained by what *I myself can do*. With the exception of some technical support, my film is conceived, recorded and edited by me. There is no intermediary party—which keeps me close to my work, creating an intimate and immediate relationship to my imagery, the experience I am witnessing or recreating and my children when they appear in front of the camera. This third constraint also requires me to trust that *I am enough* in the making of the project.

As the filming, editing and reflections on the film progress and develop, those phenomena which have repeated become a set of motifs which I begin to look for, examine and revisit to the exclusion of other things. This provides new opportunities to ‘open up’ further reading of these as signs and symbols and helps me understand why they presented themselves in the first place. An example is the imagery around the empty pool and subsequent burnt grass circle. For three years we filled a plastic pool with water and after the summer months were over, we drained it and left it to dry. Every year I revisited the pool and its meaning to me, examining it ‘from all sides’. A large non-recyclable piece of plastic, as unethical environmentally as the swaths of plastic grass covering the ground on new housing projects. I haven’t taught my children to swim, and I feel the pain of seeing my son not want to swim, too self-conscious in his own body. I lifted the folds of the pool for three years, observing the light and the dead grass underneath. It became a type of womb or cell-like structure filmed by a drone from above, full, watery and pregnant. On the third and final year, aware it will be packed down and sent off for good, I thought about the life of this object, imagining it receding into our past, belonging to this very particular phase of our lives, as the children no longer use it. I set up the camera and lifted the dry empty pool, this time in a straight line, a peeling back, the contact line on the ground becoming a horizon line receding. There was a moment in watching this scenario in which a brief illusion of a landscape emerged. The resulting image floats in the liminal space between representation, abstraction, and my embodied eye. The moment in which this image was created is one I didn’t see at the point of recording, as I was in front of the camera not behind it—rather than ‘looking’, instead I was animating the *mise en scène*. Shortly after making this last image of the pool I began Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and when editing the film, the act of packing up the empty ‘womb’ took on yet another layer of meaning, poignant but somehow also comical.

The filmic rendering of these objects, happenings and spaces represents the attempt to visualise the experience of transitional phenomena in my creative practice. They are a manifestation of the space and relationship between my inner subjective understanding of this period of my lived experience and the objective visual reproductions of ‘things that have happened’ and ‘objects that are there’. These experiences often involve my children, the remnants of their play or frequently used objects. My approach is discursive and relies on me noticing these phenomena and being ‘pricked’<sup>4</sup> by the unexpected in a way that feels significant for the project. I am aware of, and became attuned to particular forms, cycles of light, disintegration of objects, seasonal growing patterns, building of new constructions, and the growth, development, movement, and play of my children. I trust in an intuitive manner that these moments of discovery will become manifested when relevant into the project. Intuition is described as inspiration which comes from an unconscious place in a spontaneous manner and which produces an immediate knowledge not based in logical thinking or a rational process.<sup>5</sup> As a term intuition has often been devalued in the academic sphere but has been recently reclaimed by feminist theorists and creative practitioners as an integral part of women’s subjective and autotheoretical art production.<sup>6</sup>

An overview of the technical processes and associated methods I have used in undertaking this doctoral research project is important to include here as it highlights the appropriateness of the medium and its function as a central aspect of my methodology. I worked between two cameras—a standard DSLR (digital single lens reflex) and a larger mirrorless Canon C200 digital film camera that cannot be handheld. I own the DSLR camera that can produce HD (High Definition) quality moving image files. The C200 is one that I have limited access to and thus requires planning, a much longer set-up time, as well as additional assistance to manage the 4K Ultra HD files. The decision to use one camera over another was dictated by whether the filming was replicable—that is, existing in front of me for a short period of time and able to be recorded with little set-up, or possibly hand-held. Or if I can ‘make a note’ of the image, light, weather, and actions, I can ‘reconstruct’ it later using the higher quality camera. My desire to use the higher quality camera emerged from an interest in investigating the cinematic feel of making a film work at a higher resolution with cine-zoom lenses that elevate and heighten the immersive experience of viewing. I conceptualised and resolved the film to be experienced in a black, lightless gallery space, the nocturnal state of imprinting, akin to that of the dark space of movie cinema. A reminiscent nod to the photographic darkroom space of image making provided another subtext here. Relying on the way this aesthetic experience works to highlight key concepts in the film, with the goal of eliciting a parallel emotional response from the viewer. I collected these visual and written notes and arrangements as reminders on my iPhone or DSLR for more elaborate later filming with the C200. Some of these stills were also developed into generative iterations as new still photographs for external projects. Most are devised as moving images either as

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 27

<sup>5</sup> Henri Samier, *Intuition, Creativity, Innovation*. (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Amber Tamblyn, *Listening in the Dark: Women Reclaiming the Power of Intuition*. (Harlequin, 2022)

'still moving' images, stationary on a tripod, or with the addition of camera or light movement. All sound effects of the natural environment have been recorded on a Zoom H1 recorder, an on camera microphone or are from a subscription based stock library. Other natural or environmental sounds have been woven into a musical score which has been recorded on a keyboard by my partner while I played the flute on some audio tracks.

My conceptual framework consists of four primary areas of focus that cross categories—my doctoral research sits at the intersection of these underpinnings:

**Autotheory**, the critical thinking that comes from the 'self' as opposed to 'about the self', is an immediate form responding to the 'here and now' which acknowledges the advancements made by third wave feminists seeking to extend the development of key second wave premises and examine how theory and philosophy can be integrated into autobiographical and subjective art practice. Autotheory provides the framework which contextualises the aspects of contemporary feminist art practice I am engaging with such as lived experience, motherhood, and the ecological, social, and political factors that contribute to the emotional labour of caring for teenage children. In Chapter 3 I consider autotheory with specific reference to the scholarship of Laura Fourier, the writing of Maggie Nelson and practice of scholar and film maker Mieke Bal.

**Transitional Phenomena and Potential Space** are concepts drawing from the work of psychoanalyst D W Winnicott and extended upon here by other theorists to form a context in which psychoanalytic theory can be used to understand the imaginings of artistic processes and the drive of artists seeking to visualise the inner and outer landscapes of experience. This framing is used to consider modes of practice that require lengthy gestation and attunement to sites or happenings which 'open up' a revelation in the making of an artwork, and what conditions constitute this 'potential space'. A discussion of these concepts appears in Chapter 3, where I look to the work of artist and writer Patricia Townsend, psychoanalyst Kenneth Wright, and psychoanalyst and writer Thomas Ogden.

**The Essay Film**, examined here as it is connected to artists' moving image practice, is often non-linear and presented with in-film text rather than narrated voice over—it is also designed for the black box gallery space rather than the cinematic space of a movie theater. The essayistic mode having diverse roots in the literary essay, avant-garde practices, and disciplines such as anthropology and visual ethnography, is framed here by its adoption as a form by artists working in and around lens-based experimental documentary practice. The foregrounding of subjectivity—'the personal camera' and the essay film as a discursive 'form that thinks' allows for the curation of material which "focuses on the process of perceiving events and on the process of their

manifestation.”<sup>7</sup> In Chapter 5 I consider the scholarship of Laura Rascaroli, Timothy Corrigan, Nora M. Alter, Paul Arthur, Ursula Biemann and Jorg Huber and cite key international artists and their approaches to using the essay film as a form.

**Performativity in Lens-based Practice** is used as a framework to define performative elements across still and moving image and their interconnected theories. Here it is used to describe instructional and conceptual modes of photographic process and other performative elements involved in the making of lens-based works—either articulated as a performative act of making unto itself or acts of reenactment and restaging which are performed for the camera. In Chapter 5 I reference the critical writings of Jeff Wall, David Green, Joanna Lowry, Liz Kotz, Margaret Iversen, and David Campany.

**Mothering and Maternity in Art Practice** provides the primary lens through which I have conducted my doctoral research. Histories, perspectives, and both pioneering and contemporary practices are outlined in Chapter 3 and are focused largely on the scholarship of British and American authors including: Myrel Chernick, Jennie Klein, Andrea Liss, Lucy Reynolds, and Susan Bright.

**Aotearoa** is the context and geographical location for my research and therefore I have foregrounded the works artists have created in this country—a collection of practices to which I belong. Here influential artists include Joanna Margaret Paul, Kathy Dudding, the work of a number of other Aotearoa based photographers and moving image artists. I include an overview of several facilitating platforms such as CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image. This context, these practices, and their connections to my research are outlined in Chapter 4.

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<sup>7</sup> Jörg Huber, “Video-Essayism: On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional,” in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* ed. Ursula Biemann, (Vienna: Springer, 2003), 94.

## Chapter 2. Singing the Last Skye Boat Song: Foundations and the New Research

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Figure 2. Film Still #02, *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023).

This chapter outlines three projects conducted prior to my doctoral research and three which were undertaken during my study. The concluding section of the chapter elucidates the doctoral research with writing which is set apart stylistically. The three prior projects have been included to offer clearer contextualisation of my broader practice and to note particular connective and methodological threads, that have been investigated further within my recent doctoral research trajectory.

### Arriving on Section 19 – The Whites Line East

*This wind ... someone must be digging the land* - Peggy Luke-Ngaheke, Waiwhetū Marae, 2017

*We first crossed the Whites Line East at Waiwhetū before he was born.  
Now he runs the cut through Te Whiti park to the firebreak, the eastern hill scar drawn along  
the edge of section 19.*

A house north of the Whites Line East two blocks from the Waiwhetū Marae and nestled against the Te Whiti Riser trail on the eastern hills became our home three weeks before I gave birth to my first child. Not knowing the Lower Hutt area I had a sense of separation and a desire to make connections to combat isolation. This has underpinned much of my art practice since our move to the region eighteen years ago. I was first drawn to Petone foreshore, the landing site of my ancestors, fascinated

by historic rubbish dumps, the industrial areas at Seaview and the palimpsests of the Hutt River and Waiwhetū Stream banks jutting layers of industrial building waste, 100 year old combs, bottles, and crockery. I read Geoff Park's book *Ngā Uruora/The Groves of Life* and learnt about the precolonial ecology of the landscape. I met Teri Puketapu and heard about the history of the area which saw the last of his iwi Te Atiawa's houses torn down from Section 19 — which surrounds the present-day site of the Marae — after the Public Works Act of 1948. In 2014 I wrote:

The Frasers and McKenzies, in 1840, were aboard the 'Oriental' and 'Blenheim' respectively. Teri Puketapu's Te Atiawa ancestors welcomed, protected these new settlers, who had found themselves 'cast—as it were—upon a barren dreary and inhospitable shore.'<sup>8</sup>

Recited together with 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' and '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.<sup>9</sup>*

I was deeply troubled by the trauma and injustice of the Public Works Act and the evidence of disparity colonisation has caused for Māori here in Waiwhetū as of course has been the case with land stolen by the crown from iwi all over the motu. How then to find spiritual connection to the land and a sense of belonging when my ancestral roots are far away in Ireland and Scotland, and as Pākehā I have been privileged—which in itself has been called an 'indigenising claim' demonstrated in the texts of historian Michael King.<sup>10</sup>

In 2018 Waiwhetū began to shake with building development alongside many other Hutt suburbs. Heavy machinery demolished houses and cleared sections for a proposed 500 homes on 11 different sites. Pile drivers began early in the morning, churning the ground and sending dust skyward. These houses were desperately needed with hundreds of families on the waiting list for housing. I was keenly aware during this initial upheaval of my cultural and economic distance from many of my neighbours and the original kaitiaki of Waiwhetū in my comfortable situation as homeowner. Just

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<sup>8</sup> Geoff Park, *Ngā Uruora / The groves of life: Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995) 82

<sup>9</sup> Johanna Mechen, "Stepping into Social Waters: Photography Performed as Moving Image": an extended essay presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the postgraduate degree of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University. (Wellington: Massey University, 2014) 8

<sup>10</sup> Michael King, *Being Pakeha Now: Reflections and Recollections of a White Native*, (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2004)

down the street from us, mana whenua living in rental properties were being pushed out by building corporations—unable to buy the houses they lived in despite having the first right of refusal, they simply couldn't afford the huge asking prices. There was a feeling that another 'land grab' was underway, the ethical care for the history and community was swept aside in favour of spreadsheets, 'infill' (the subdividing of front or back sections) housing potential and above all, profits for investors.

By contrast, in the immediate environment of our home, we grew a vegetable garden and set up an inflatable pool. My children played in a large space soon to be overlooked by one of these new housing projects designed to hold neither green space nor room for gardens—instead only artificial grass. Thirteen of these houses have been bought by Te Atiawa Trust for emergency housing and will have almost entirely sealed land. The spiritual and physical implications of not having direct access to the earth's energy were also issues that were raised in my project *Waimanawa*, in which Teri Puketapu spoke of losing access to the Waiwhetū aquifer water and the 100 acres of land taken in 1948 under the Public Works Act. I acknowledge here that there is a complexity and paradox involved in addressing my own fear and anxiety around the spiritual and cultural connection to land and the future for my children here when the losses for the Māori community in Waiwhetū are much greater.

### Stepping into Social Waters



Figure 3. Installation Still, *Stepping Into Social Waters*, 2014, Massey University Wellington.

During my earlier projects I approached other members of the community asking for participation on a number of levels, including scientists, Kaumātua, and volunteer groups. They were the beginnings of relationships I hoped to maintain as I sought to create connections in my community and to assist in

fostering my own sense of belonging and understanding. Despite their landing site being less than five kilometers away, my Fraser and McKenzie clan relatives left the region soon after their arrival and there is no personal family history in Waiwhetū. I began this path toward connections with my first essay film, made as a way of caring for a local body of water and the people for whom it had much history and significance—and in an attempt to impart knowledge to my Pākehā neighbours.

*Stepping into Social Waters: A Video Essay on the Waiwhetū Stream* (2014) involved volunteering my labour, collecting stories from residents, and then folding my creative writing inspired by this research into the process of image making and editing. Video and still images were made by constructing sets or 'mise en scène', with subsequent restaging of stories in and around the site. I have continued to use this methodology for a number of other projects which focused on community relationships to inner city and urban waterway care. *Moturoa Stream\_Long Island in the City* (2015) wove four stories together collected over a month long period of volunteering in Central Park in Brooklyn, Wellington. As I bagged up rubbish, David, who visits the park every day, tells me about chewing up Kawakawa berries, and spitting them in to the water for the Koaro, he offers me a pine broom to sweep up discarded polystyrene balls. Another resident tells me about their mother recently immigrated from Taiwan who seeks the quiet of the park for Tai-Chi. Part of the project *Wairua, wai-rua, Waimanawa* (2017) was commissioned for the 'Common Ground Hutt Public Art Festival: Groundwater' and included a performance work by Angela Kilford and Aliyah Winter. The project looked at issues surrounding the water in Waiwhetū and was staged opposite the Waiwhetū Marae on the banks of the Waiwhetū stream. The video voiceover is delivered by Teri Puketapu, and was a return to my relationship with him established in 2013 when he first generously shared his knowledge of the stream. He talks of his fears around the safety of the Waiwhetū aquifer water. He speaks at a time when after a very long struggle, he is months away from opening a new bore to supply wai māori to the Marae, nearby health centre and greater community.



Figure 4. Teri Puketapu Works on Aquifer Bore Waiwhetū, (2017).

Figure 5. Aquifer Water from Waiwhetū Bore, (2017).

Figure 6. Teri Puketapu Views 'Waimanawa' Installation, Waiwhetū, (2017).

The video attempts to negotiate community relationships and connection to water by combining visual elements that represent different philosophies or approaches to the guardianship of water—both visible and invisible. Beliefs around spiritual clearance are juxtaposed with testing in a GNS science lab. The voiceover sits apart from the visual element and is installed overhead in an oak tree, a device I used to highlighting cultural differences or the uncomfortableness of loss—a trauma experienced by the Te Atiawa people at Waiwhetū but not by myself—the Pākehā artist. This video was made for a Pākehā audience, and framed the Hutt City Council’s part in the loss of access to the important water—as they were responsible for sealing the Marae’s water bores in 1948 to force the community to pay rates. (A link to view this work can be found in Appendix 1).



Figure 7. Install Still, *Moturoa Stream Long Island in the City*, (2015).



Figure 8. Install Still, *Moturoa Stream Long Island in the City*, (2015).

### Climbing to ground – A Sonorous Shadow

In 2018 I climbed to ground from the watery explorations of the streams and aquifer to make *Sonorous Shadow* during a three month residency at Toi Pōneke Art Centre. This was the first work which directly foregrounded my own subjectivity and lived experience to look at the sometimes joyful, sometimes dark push/pull between creativity and motherhood. Collaborating with my children I revisited years of quickly gathered photographs of their play and restaged a selection of these

reconstructed remnants on domestic surfaces to offer a glimpse into two inner worlds. Working in black and white digital still photography, alongside the video essay as a form, I sought to visualise our parallel worlds—their imaginative play space from which I drew inspiration, followed by an intimate projection of vulnerability, illness and injury resulting from play which speaks to the difficult elements of sheltering and nurturing.

In the moving image work my daughter lays in a fever on the couch, pulse racing, and later slowly cuts a cast off her arm and unwinds the bandage. My son plays with a tennis ball, a large bruise visible on his arm. Here I took my practice of manipulating digital still imagery into the performative gestures in the moving image work; the bruise for example was created with makeup, a representation summoning all the other childhood bruises. This was a three-component installation which referenced the ethics of the women Surrealists and took its name from the 1933 poem “Half Season” by Simone Yoyotte. This, along with elements of New Objectivity, dictated the form of the ‘elevated object’ and process of photographic making and referenced a shadow of fear, anxiety and loss that often sits as undercurrent to creative and maternal experience.



Figure 9. Video still #1, *A Sonorous Shadow* (2018).



Figure 10. Video still #2, *A Sonorous Shadow* (2018).

This work also first referenced tentatively and not acknowledged directly at the time, the early stages of my son’s gender transition. This was present in the form of a haircut, filmed as a reenactment of his first haircut after coming out. The voice over element of the installation made reference not only to elements of my experience and metaphors within the moving image work, but also what was included or excluded from the still images:

*There had been Lamb bones and kererū upside down  
We watched the death roll into snow  
at half speed  
slid and stopped.  
I discarded the lamb in the garden  
Those things fingers collected from the sand  
A chance scattering  
Like knuckle bones  
Fragile bones*

*All parts of the hands, chest,  
fine framed body*

*Not here, the flour dust eclipse  
Outlining a limb on the cork floor  
Or nails run though cabbage leaves  
Nasturtium and chard  
Leaking vivid colour.*

*So shortly done, the remnants  
dissolving archaeological ruins  
in mint green and gingerbread  
glued fast to the plate*

*a cracked Pringle, expired  
failed the assignment—they drew  
crosses for eyes and the tongue sticking out  
and laid it in its faulty transport*

*The day that saved me, that day that saved me—if it hadn't been so still, so blue...  
A small moment to live in as she sucked my blown kiss from the air  
We're here now, where the hair cut is all haircuts and the bruise every ball bruise,  
And although severed, never separated or separate or alone.  
But carried and worn always.*



Figure 11. Installation Still, *A Sonorous Shadow* (2018), Toi Pōneke Arts Centre, Wellington.

## Reaching – The Photographs / Planting the Whenua Trees

Throughout my doctoral research I have made still images alongside the process of filming as a way of making notes and sketching mock-ups. In some instances, these images became digital stills either because they were more evocative as photographs or hold a more effective meaning than their moving image counterpart. An example of this is a pair of two images which became part of the group exhibition *Quicken* (2020) at Massey University's Engine Room Gallery. The exhibition curated by Caroline McQuarrie and Jane Wilcox collected works by seven women photographers and explored notions of tactility in photographic process. The two works *Reaching #1* and *Reaching #2* came about as a result of a failure to record footage of my daughter's hands interacting with objects and earth on film. *Reaching #2* began as a moving image which I conceived after watching her move a dead Christmas tree as she stood behind it and lifted the trunk end of the small pine skyward, with only her hands visible. I was struck by its relationship to the freshly treated pink pine bones of the construction site behind her, the upended dead tree held at the base looked as if it could be the roots, the shaft of the truck removed. This first moving image shoot travelled towards the Christmas tree the camera on a gimbal, her body hidden. As the camera nears, her hands appear and grasp the stump of the tree.

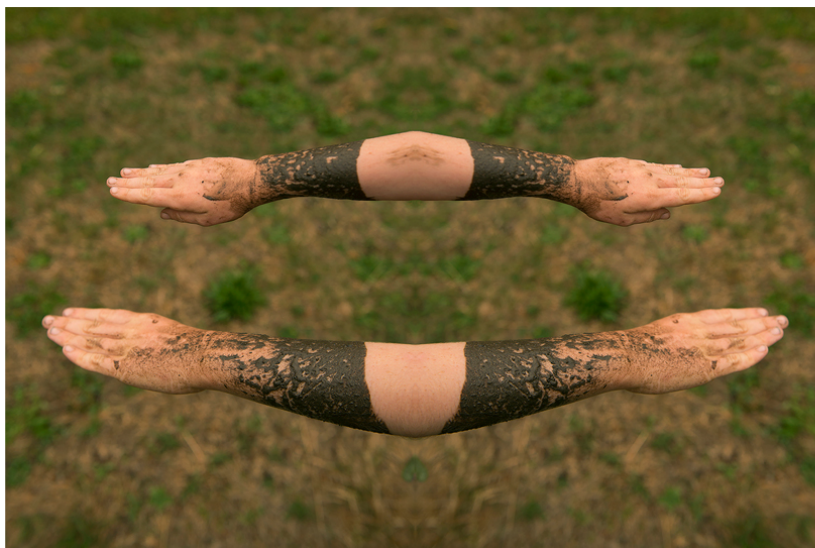


Figure 12. *Reaching #1* (2020).



Figure 13. *Reaching #2* (2020).

This recorded image was unusable, my technical skills lacking as the gimbal wavered and trembled. I re-filmed this for the final work with the tree right-way up later when the construction climbed above our back fence line—a cord holding the tree aloft so she could grasp it without taking its weight, while it floated surreally. The still image is warm with the colour of dead pine needles and a slight pink hue to the sky, my daughter's delicate hands, the last glimpse of the hills before they disappear behind the rising construction, and the tips of kowhai trees reaching down. *Reaching #1* was made at the time of

burying my daughter's placenta. As the freshly dug hole sat full of water from the sodden ground, she pressed her hands into the hole and pulled them out leaving a muddy ring around her arms. I didn't film this, as I wasn't quick enough, and she wouldn't repeat this for me. Instead, she let me photograph her arms, stretched out in front of her so as not to get her body completely in the frame. I flipped this image and mirrored it rendering an antler or bone-like image.

This image inspired the text included in the film which appears after seeing my daughter playing with a bone while hidden in a patch of Nasturtiums: *Your Skye boat speeds away into the tangled garden. knees lifting, wrists deep in the earth, fingers pushing off out over the sea.*

### Whispering — 'Susurrations' Women in Photography NZ & AU



Figure 14. *Lemon Play Stalks ii*, (2022).



Figure 15. *Bright Lights*, (2022).

*Susurrations* (2023) was a Women in Photography NZ & AU collaboration with Twentysix Gallery in Wellington and featured the works of six artists from across Aotearoa. Curator Virginia Woods-Jack stated of the exhibition that she wanted to bring together the murmurs at the core of each artist's practice: "the collective speaks to the continuous murmurs which inspire us all; they create a thirst for knowledge, a sense of belonging and wellbeing, they keep us awake at night and sometimes break

open our hearts and minds in ways we couldn't imagine.”<sup>11</sup> A series of five images developed during my doctoral study was included in this exhibition. These images were prompted by the themes I was developing in my research at the time and were made during the first Covid lockdown period in March 2020. Specifically, they referenced the ‘opening up’ of opportunities I have encountered, breakthroughs or inspirations relevant to making an art work—either by sitting with and inhabiting the space, creating room for contemplation, or in the gestational period following observation. Textures and rhythms, cycles of the garden—growth, wastage and death. This series explores remnants of play in the domestic garden space, continuing a theme commenced during my 2018 Toi Poneke residency undertaken during the preparation for the *Sonorous Shadow* exhibition. Here the treatments and my own play within the digital image making realm shifted to show a greater separation between the play of my children, who are now teenagers, and my own play. They have moved further away from me, and the scale of play is larger—outside of the house and away from the carpets, tables, and bench tops which were their play spaces as younger children.

## Washing — Dirty Laundry

*Dirty Laundry* (2023) was an exhibition and publication produced as a result of a yearlong collaboration with 13 artists and writers across Aotearoa that focused on themes around the invisibility of the physical and emotional labour of caregiving. I include this collective practice as it was undertaken during my doctoral study, I was included in the collective, and it was relevant to my study because of the manner in which it demonstrates the autotheoretical strand of proximity—those connections which form and exist in my sphere and run alongside my singularly authored work with collaboration and participation with family. I meet a number of the women artists involved at the earlier stage of my doctoral research at a time when I hoped to include their experiences as part of my research. Co-ordinated by Kate Stevens West and Cassie Ringland-Stewart, the project was born out of the success of an earlier collaboration between Stevens West and Ringland-Stewart which produced a book of paintings and poems by the pair. The 13 artists involved were: painter and designer Kate Stevens West; somatic practitioners Rachel Ruckstuhl-Mann and Clare Luiten; essayist Bronwyn Polaschek; poets Cassie Ringland-Stewart and Mary Walker; photographer Dianna Thomson; painter Hana Carpenter; installation artists Caitlin Rose Donnelly and Zoe Thompson-Moore; textile artist Philippa Doyle; personal non-fiction writer Holly Walker, and myself. Stevens West worked to build the project using the connections she had formed with other artists in her life whom she had met in her community, playcentre, study or art practice. Early in the project she offered the opportunity for both the visual artists and writers to respond to each other’s work. Zoom meetings, WhatsApp and a few face to face hui constituted the platforms to share work and stories—the conversations which undertaken forming a thread woven through the publication edited by Polaschek,

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<sup>11</sup> Twentysix Gallery, 29 April 2023, <https://twentysix.co.nz/susurrations>

alongside Stevens West and Ringland-Stewart. The collaborations here were not only with the other artists but with families and children, domestic spaces and gardens.



Figure 16. *Jelly Water*, (2023).



Figure 17. *Hose Board*, (2023).

Polaschek states in the introduction of *Dirty Laundry* that as the deadline for editing and publication drew closer, the organisers received several emails asking to regretfully withdraw—as the domestic load had subsumed creative making space.<sup>12</sup> However, Stevens West was determined to fashion a project and work in a way which she called truly feminist. Each participant was reassured that they should work only to their own capacity and be involved only when and how they could. This meant encouraging artists to work with what they had, reshape earlier work, and artists could opt out of the guiding prompt to respond to each other’s work. “We’re on your side”, she told me as I feared the workload would be too much for me also. Those in the collective who did respond to other artists work did so through drawing, stitching, or writing. Stevens West, for example, drew her responses to works, elaborating on and interpreting what the works’ themes meant to her in a way which she felt acknowledged and honoured the labour of making and said: ‘I see you’. Philippa Doyle took on the work of writer Mary Walker by stitching her poem *Tend* into a tablecloth. *Tend*, which talked about

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<sup>12</sup> Bronwyn Polaschek, Bronwyn, Cassie Ringland-Stewart and Kate Stevens West, eds. *Dirty Laundry: 13 artist and Writers on Invisible Labour*. (Rata Hamilton Press, 2023), 10.

tending to a dying tree in Walker's garden and tending also for the limbs, hands and faces of her children, shared a strand with my work for the collective. I produced four photographic print works and a video that spoke towards themes of garden care, cyclical growth, failure and death of plants, the garden play of my daughter, and the disintegration of garden objects. This was a continuation of the series which I produced for *Susurrations*.

The work of Zoe Thompson Moore holds connective threads with both my work for the *Dirty Laundry* project and my doctoral research as it employs long gestational periods in art work production and often revisiting iterations of previous work. Thompson Moore's work for *Dirty Laundry* includes *String Theory* (2003- ) an ongoing French knitting work which to date stretches over 100 meters long. Mary Walker writing in response to Thompson-Moore's work (in 2022) speaks to the activation of art practice through parenting when she comments that:

We no longer talk about setting life aside so we can create. Rather, we think about reaching for our making the same way we reach to turn the jug on, almost absent-mindedly. We wonder if the daily creative practice could be the same as the daily practice of hanging out the washing. For sure, we agree, the self-awareness needed to parent in respectful ways is the same self-awareness needed to create honest art.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 18. Video Still, *Bright Lights* (2023).

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Walker, Zoe Thompson Moore / Piecework, 26 June 2023, <https://zoethompsonmoore.com/portfolio/pissingwhile/>

## Singing the Last Skye Boat Song

As a mother, feminist, carer, and observer, I am an active participant in this narrative and therefore seek to position my voice within the work as way of highlighting the emotional landscape which has produced it. Working over an extended duration on one project which has been unfolding and developing has meant that some things are gathered in, and much is passed over. Autotheory and subjective experience in feminist practice has become the ethos and cornerstone of an enacted methodology, drawing together relational threads of the underpinning narrative on which the film rests. This section is set apart stylistically to enact an echo of the film's discursive structure, sitting alongside and becoming a parallel to the visual work. The stories, happenings and observations which comprise the inner and outer worlds of my maternal landscape appear as a selection here in a written form and represent those experiences which have been transposed into the film work. But also, those which proceeded and framed the final film work—as not all meanings can be tidily packaged or wrapped, some stories are glimpsed or stir in the undercurrent, others are described vividly. There are also vignettes which have been made as a response to visual research. These parallel forms, the performative responsive writing and the enacted performativity of the film offer a methodological process of illuminating the liminal or transitional spaces of the creative imaginary in making which appear in the gaps—the steps or gestations in the process toward realising a work: the moments when the kernel or thread of an idea resolves, connects, or 'breaks through' to form an image. My observations and actions have been embodied and reflected within the work—I have been both imprinted and have imparted a trace.



Figure 19. Film Still #4, *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023).

The soft glow of the night light disappears through the crack in the door, the neck of the dinosaur sock toy stops the drafts from clicking and rattling the latch, it bends on an unnatural angle and bounces back, late summer seagulls call and whoop in the dusk outside. A deep pink and orange light illuminates my hand as I pause in the doorway. Was last night the last Skye Boat Song? My daughter curled into her bed, a light blanket tucked around her chest, a breeze from the wind tapping the blind against the windowsill—I wad a lump of Blu-Tack to the corner and press it against the wall. This is the first night I don't sing to her. There's no fuss just "I'm alright, thanks", as I sweep her hair across her damp forehead. I stand for a moment in the crack of light, the glow on the wall, the reflection off plastic stickers on the light switch, the cobwebs on the doorframe. She is 11.

She is disappearing in a mist of the unknowable world of a pre-teen girl, more often seeking the solitude of her room, her own thoughts. I watch her walk in front of me slipping out of sight into this bright white haze. She is still with me, on land but moving towards a precipice, going ahead. I pull her towards me down onto to my knee as she covers her blushing face with her hands. She tolerates the first few lines of the knee bobbing song:

*This is the way the ladies ride-  
Saddle-a-side, saddle-a-side!  
This is the way the gentlemen ride-  
Sitting astride, sitting astride!  
This is the way the grandmothers ride-  
Bundled and tied, bundled and tied!  
This is the way the babykins ride-  
Snuggled inside, snuggled inside!*

I'd always skipped the 'bundled and tied' phrase just as I had skipped, "When the night came, silently lay, dead on Culloden's field" in the Skye Boat Song verse.

Her weight slips from my body.

A pontoon bobs in the sea out from Petone foreshore, thrashed by brown waves or rocking gently in glassy water, a bright red buoy marking the anchor beside it. It sits opposite Oriental Street, named after one of the ships my ancestors arrived on and near the landing site. I can't see the world my daughter disappears into—but I can imagine the one my son is on the cusp of. She lives in the containment of the pool—he looks out over the openness of the ocean. The sea is escape for Bonnie Prince Charlie, who rowed over the Minch to the Isle of Skye disguised as an Irish woman to hide

from the British soldiers.<sup>14</sup> My son will eventually shed his disguise and stride out into the sea—the pontoon is a goal, a safe haven. The journey is marked by the swelling of tides, the roughness of storms. Sometimes the goal is not visible and shrouded in fog and sometimes the water is still, ethereal, hopeful. Sometimes it vanishes altogether, the fluorescent buoy the only marker of where the small platform floated. It will return in calmer weather. The pontoon revealed itself, slowly pushing its way to the fore—glimpsed like the glimpse of my son’s skin, a belly button.



Figure 20. Film Still #1, *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023).

Earlier, Towai Peak was the challenge, the goal. He poured over maps of historic tracks, steep and unmarked. He would disappear off to explore, 5 hours at a time—winding his way along. I’d worried, often tracking his location shared on our phones. Did he have water, food, a coat? He showed me an old track he’d found and I puffed my way along after him. Thawing by the fire later I wrote the poem which forms the text work that appears within the film: *We first crossed the Whites Line East at Waiwhetu, before he was born...* I am torn between their needs, born nearly four years apart, the older is going ahead into his life, exploring confidently—I can’t keep up, I don’t need to keep up, I follow and watch curiously. The younger is the dot in the garden, far away from me as she retreats into the safety of her now 13-year-old world. The hill line disappears as the building rises. I feel a sense of oppression as the building site blocks the ascent of the full moon over the ridgeway. We venture as a family up to the hilltop where bizarrely we find the hill covered in artificial grass, high above the Hutt Valley and Wellington. I film this on a clear blue day from an angle at which only the land and sky are visible; a surreal image, diorama-like in its illusion of miniature scale. A cyclist sinks

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<sup>14</sup> In the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden in 1746 this episode of the Jacobite uprising led by Bonnie Prince Charlie was immortalised in The Skye Boat Song. Adapted from a Gaelic rowing song called an iorram, it is said to be based on the *Cuachan nan Craobh* or *The Cuckoo in the Grove*.

out of view, and the figure of my daughter rises, running into the scene. The fake grass at the top of the hill turns out to be a kicking off point—a launch pad for paragliders. It becomes a kicking off point for adulthood too as my son presses forward into the challenges of his life. He’s running, grabbing mānuka poles and sliding. It’s freedom and exhilaration but also risky and difficult. He would fly off from the top leaping outwards—he could go on forever.

There is a turning point, a lightbulb moment, the sea is the bush. Will he swim for the first time—head out towards Wellington? “Over there”, he points to where he wants to be.



Figure 21. Film Still #6, Figure 22. Film Still #11, Figure 23. Film Still #17, Figure 24. Film Still #15, All from *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023).

There’s a ruru in the kōwhai tree, the four teens sit silently in a blanket—their music turned down to a murmur, and a green glow from a string of LED lights. The ruru is so near and loud—did it come to talk to them, hearing their chatter and laughter and wanting to join? They are hushed but then rise slowly, creeping up to try and see. Phone lights darting and illuminating the low branches—a small shadowy form. It kept calling, unbothered. And then it was gone

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The bone turning over in her hands was definitely a dinosaur bone, it could be absolutely nothing else, just as a stick was ‘Not a stick’ and box was ‘Not a box’.<sup>15</sup> She had dragged it, followed by dogs from Butterfly Creek the summer before. We had driven home as she demanded that we head directly to Te Papa Tongarewa so she could present her find. This was her first performance, lying on a bed of mock caperberries in the Nasturtiums. I made them once, in a sharp brine. The flowers once

<sup>15</sup> Antoinette Portis, *Not a Stick*, (HarperCollins, 2007)

swapped for chocolates from the neighbours by my sister and I when children in our Tauranga home. Her hands are all I'm allowed to film, our conditions of consent—only the fine bones of the fingers and forearms, or her head down as I follow from behind.

v

Gristle and a thick tendon, en masse, it blooms and stains the white card, retrieved from the bag still cool. White blooms echoing, white sheets, clean and drying. The memory of its first birthing there in the photographs but somehow not in me all these years later. Only the fresh smell and strange weight. A polystyrene takeaway food container in a knotted plastic bag on the sideboard, my black sandals tucked together on the floor. I was staging another object in a make shift set. It felt wrong as the blood ran and pooled around the stones I used to anchor the backdrop. All stood at a distance, they wouldn't look closely—"What *is* that?". My daughter runs around the garden "Oooooowah!" Plunges her hands into the muddy hole leaving dirt rings. It's twelve years on. I waited until she could see it go in the ground—know this is where she is from, say this is where she is from.



Figure 25. Film Still #9, Figure 26. Film Still #5, Figure 27. Film Still #3, Figure 28. Film Still #8, All from *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023).

We got three fruit off the tree in the third year—I cut one in half, pull the stone out and hand it to her. "It tastes like me she said". "Then it should taste like me too", I add. She was trying to be revolting maybe, but that was golden, golden as the peach.

My blood was for this—used for this purpose, but soon to be gone.

Construction rolls around the house, for two years pile driving, nail guns and earthmovers shake the ground. Developers posted letters in our mail box, knocked on our door, and offered large sums of cash to buy the home we live in—with the intention of demolishing it. I feared for the trees under which I had planted my children's placentas. The ground is all ground, I tell myself.

I want to graft their trees.

After the second drug raid, the second volatile boyfriend of my next door neighbour to be jailed, the dozens of calls to police, dozens of dashes over the fence to check on her, the numerous calls to noise control, bashing on the front door at 3am in the morning, daily check-ins with my kids, "Did you hear anything last night? Did you sleep OK?"—I say to my partner, "We have to leave this place." One day I look out to large flames, the street is full of smoke. A fire has been set near our hedge. This is not in my work—not the tears from my neighbour as she waits on my couch for the police, mopping a black eye while her daughter plays around her feet. Not the commotion when a microwave was launched across the kitchen, a police officer taser in hand and perpetrator in a stand-off on the front lawn, me standing between them while the street looked on in their dressing gowns. "It's too hard", my neighbour tells me, "I don't know how to live here like you guys do with your normal lives and relationships." None of this is in my work, it's undercurrent. It speaks to witnessing trauma. I fear it won't get any better, I fear for her daughter, my daughter sleeping in noise cancelling headphones.

I graft the trees, the lime and the peach. "Fruit trees?" my colleague says, "you know that's not proper tikanga?"

I glimpse his skin, shirt raised to show me the top of the trousers he's just made. He lies on the artificial grass for me, I can't see it but I know it's there. He tries to breathe in a steady rhythm. Laughs when I pour cold water into his belly button—I wanted to make a small pool, like the blood pool or the swimming pool, it's silly. But I'm looking for connections, they come often, fluoresce in the days' dullness, they draw me towards them. My iPhone and notebook show the repetition, lines and arrows highlighted, circled, underlined, highlighted again in a different colour. I steal small wax pieces crafted by my daughters fingers, casts and traces. I film my son turning over poppy skins—old skins protected the bloom, curious, delicate, spikey but soft to touch—and translucent. I watch his new skin now as he breathes, the right skin, and mine thinning and fragile. My patch, small and plastic—to heal a hole, contain energy from a younger time—to replace something missing. He's replaced what's missing by removing what I have. We are both in menopause—on our separate but connected journeys. Our stomachs are breathing together, our belly's navel indents, our own permanent scars—

mine to his, my mother's to mine. This chain will end, clipped by the ivory cord clamps. I shift the angle of the camera to include his underwear label, ALPHA ♂.



Figure 29. Film Still #16, *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023).

viii

Three year old Axle is found after 22 hours in Tolaga Bay, the recently homeless family had found a place to live. It was unfamiliar. "I thought he'd be dead", his father said, "but he slept with the rabbits."

"I don't want to watch the news", my son tells me. I get it, it's full of what the world could do to him. Anti-trans activist Posie Parker (not to be mistaken for American indie film actress Parker Posey) is visiting to speak in Civic Square, asserting her right to 'free speech' under the guise of 'speaking up for women'. They're feminists they say. Not my feminists, they have a short memory. There would be a counter-protest group. We paused the news bulletin to talk about what might happen. I tell my daughter she can't go, it's too dangerous. I copy a list from my parent support group for my son, but he knows the drill:

1. Don't wear rainbow and trans colours that you can't take off and put in a back pack.
2. Be prepared to ditch your signs.
3. Blend in with the crowd, wear non-descript clothing.
4. Move in groups of 3 or 4.
5. DON'T leave the protest by yourself, you could get picked off and attacked.
6. But don't move in a large group, you could be targeted by anti-trans supporters looking for a fight.

The pounding of the earth.

I am the protector of a life force.

I sleep badly.

ix

The Kererū have come back after the pile driving. They return to a shifting landscape, sitting still in quiet conversation looking out over a grey sky and towering scaffolding. “What’s all this doing here?” the pair seem to be asking of the housing project—just as I had asked of the artificial grass on Towai Peak. I creep closer as these two have, leaving the shelter of the kōwhai to get a better look. Months before I had backed away, pressed against the house with my hands over my ears, while shattered tiles flew and floor boards creaked under the tread of the bulldozers. “You’re lucky”, he calls down to me, hunched forward on the digger, “All that yard”.

A twisted lemon, the last plant, sat covered in fruit, its house crumbling away. I pay a man to dig it up and throw it over our fence, we wait to see if it lives. It doesn’t. Everyone had been moved, and I wondered what had happened to the man who lived there and used to sing at night.

x

My focus shifts, sharpens and softens, extends and condenses. Small, bright and perfectly round pinholes of the valley, blue sky, yellow gorse, the faded green of the seemingly forgotten turf, high on the hill. I look under, through, and above. “What about the insects?”, my friend asks. My daughter lays on artificial grass on top of real grass as the earth next door is prepared for a plastic courtyard—she runs her hands through the short slick fibres. *Premium 40: A dense two tone mix of yarn with brown “thatch” creates a natural weave to best replicate a healthy NZ ryegrass home lawn. Infill with kiln dried sand*, reads the promotional website. You can cut slits for bulbs the developer tells me, which seems bizarre. “But don’t break a glass on it.” And, “Course, It’ll get a bit hot to play on in summer, but that’s why we have public pools, and you don’t need a lawn mower, that’s saved emissions!”

Grass is familiar, play where freshly cut mounds were fashioned into large nests to sit in, a giant bird, a solitary figure in my own imaginings on the school field. My daughter builds a nest out of pine needles pulled and shaken from a dried Christmas tree while sitting on plastic grass, her second performance. A nest for another life. The Christmas tree, my Germanic part, my Catholic upbringing, reaches up as if to meet a pile driver smashing downwards, echoing the fresh, pink pine skeletons of the building site—ubiquitous evidence of *Pinus radiata*. A builder’s shadowy figure works into the night with a torch backlighting the bare frame of a house—he is building another home for another mother perhaps, the structure womb like. Later the dead tree mimics the pile driver thumping down.

Lastly, it is placed onto the dead grass left behind by the pool—a burn like mark surrounding it as if it may have been set alight, it has entered the ritualised and revisited circle, our own damage to the ground.

xi

She pushes, back and forth, back and forth, the taut edge slops water at every rebound. Another rhythm echoing pile driving. I'm afraid of the deep sea, the tides, bodies being swept away. The pool is too small to swim properly, feels like a trap—but she's having fun. Then we swim together for the last time, in a cell like image looking from above, mirroring each other. It recalls our once shared bodily systems, as if she is in my womb, the water connecting us again. I imagine the pool bursting in a rush of water like the breaking of my own. We are reborn together. This dream-like image drifted in my waking mind in the state of hypnopompia, I tossed with the first night sweats of perimenopause. That last summer it came down and never went back up again—this phase is over. She had stopped swimming in it, my son never did—too self-conscious by this time. It has burnt the ground into a perfect circle, the last in its short life. Its next destination, the landfill.



Figure 30. Film Still #13, Figure 31. Film Still #14, Figure 32. Film Still #20, Figure 33. Film Still #21, All from *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023).

xii

We are moving backward and forward in time, repeating, rewriting, sweeping, cleaning, drying, covering and uncovering. Everything is the same, nothing is the same. The sheets, the bone. The sky in bright late Autumn light, the thunder rolling over us. The transformation of the seasons slow and almost unnoticeable, or suddenly upon us. New shafts of reflected light illuminate rooms, trace the lengthening hours on the wall. My calendar marks a date, the transition that threatens to never come.

When I cut the edge of the dead grass circle I wanted to look underneath, to dig further down. When she said no to filming and we swapped hands—hers for mine, I was taking over the healing—my own ritual with the ever present circle. I was using it walk through my own fear, heal something for myself, to create a safe space, do a protection. Somewhere amidst all of this I become aware that I am a long way away from my own ancestry. I watch Irish, Scottish, and English TV shows, I look closely at the landscape and the light, the faces and features of the characters. I find ancestral sites on Google Earth, ‘stand’ in Street View in Cork and the Isle of Man. Catherine Delahunty said in her 2007 speech at Waitangi on Pākehā and Te Tiriti, that there is a forgetfulness among many Pākehā so many of whom are descendants of families starved out of Ireland or burnt off the highlands of Scotland—“we the children [...] can barely acknowledge the loss of bones and sacred places left on the other side of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

I had taken the kitchen knife in spring, cut a deep curved line along the edge of the circle, where the new moss and growth met mown lawn. I lifted the flap of earth, peeled it back, grubs and centipedes dropping from the clod. When I watched my footage back, I was struck by the violence. I’d done something I didn’t mean to do. This was too close, too close to the date on the calendar of my son’s operation.



Figure 34. Film Still #19, *Last Skye Boat Song* (2023)

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Delahunty, “Flush and forget - Pākehā and Te Tiriti”, *State of the Pakeha Nation, Collected Waitangi Day Speeches and Essays* 2006-2015: 40

The climb that brought us here had been steep, mine and his together, a lot to hold. I take my flute to an echo chamber with two doors, open and close one to hear the draft's voice, a low roar, building. I am breathless, heart in mouth as I try to make the notes, find form to the last pieces, wish the bright still sky into pure joy and relief. Will it happen? Is it done? Will the disguise drop to the sand, redundant and be taken by the waves? A form appears, a mirror of his father I hadn't seen, why hadn't I seen this? Our parallel journeys so different, the observer protecting the observed. My attempt to find the calm and peace amidst rising tides. He is on the cusp, a precipice. He turns his head, a sharp nod to the gruelling climb. He's off—he will go forever.

*Your outline shatters  
and dissolves  
shards gone  
with the undercurrent,*

*replaced by silence.*

*Moving pictures  
at low volume.*

*I hold the towel to you*

*as you reformed and thawed.*

*Nothing to remind  
of the breath-taking shock  
but gentle prickling warmth,*

*so vastly and unbelievably  
different.*



Figure 35. Film Still #18, *Last Sky Boat Song* (2023).

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## Chapter 3. Autotheory, the Maternal, and Transitional Phenomena

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### Autotheory in Feminist Art practice

Researcher and writer Lauren Fournier provides the most contemporary, cohesive, and fluid thinking around the self-reflexive modes of engaging with lived experience and subjective embodiment in transdisciplinary art and writing practice within the academic sphere. In her 2021 book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*, she draws together commentary and reflection on the origins of the autotheoretical impulse, specifically as it has been developed by third wave feminists' as they revisit and extend the key premises of the second wave feminist movement, often succinctly summarised by the aphorism 'the personal is political'. How theory and philosophy are integrated into the autobiographical—especially for artists who sit on the periphery of the institution such as feminist, queer, and indigenous artists, among others—is described by Fournier as being very much a *Zeitgeist* of cultural production today.<sup>17</sup>

There are a number of relevant connections between Fournier's articulation and analysis of autotheory and my own research and practice. One of these connections comes from the lineage autotheory shares with the essayistic mode and to the essay film as a 'theoretical object'—a form that critically thinks, tests ideas and folds in cultural and sociopolitical context.<sup>18</sup> Here I will signal in addition the relevance of the works of Mieke Bal and Maggie Nelson. Secondly, autotheory has been described as not referring "to a 'theory of the self' so much as a theory that emerges from the self" therefore drawing in philosophy around the psychoanalysis of the creative thinking process.<sup>19</sup> A third and critical connection can be found in the unifying discourse autotheory provides specifically around the performativity of self, gender and lived experience as it relates to video art and the autotheoretical conduciveness of using the camera lens.

Autotheory, described most simply by Fournier "is the integration of the auto of 'self' with the philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware..."<sup>20</sup> Although this term circulated widely in 2015, earlier associated terms were 'fictocriticism', coined by Jeanne Randolph in the 1980s, 'critical memoir' and 'auto-fiction'. Maggie Nelson has been credited with first stating that the genre of her book *The Argonauts* sat within autotheory—however she admits in an interview that she ripped the term from Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*.<sup>21</sup> The repeated references to Nelson as

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<sup>17</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. (MIT Press, 2021), 18

<sup>18</sup> Mieke Bal, "Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics.", *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, eds. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 133.

<sup>19</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, (2021), 45.

<sup>20</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, (2021), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Carolyn Laubender, "Speak for Your Self: Psychoanalysis, Autotheory, and The Plural Self." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76.1 (2020), 39-64.

having forged the earliest contemporary example of a written form of autotheory is questioned by writer Daniel Peña. In a blog post he states that the first significant example is found in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* published in 1987, and goes on to point out that this lack of acknowledgment continues the tendency to credit white writers for inventive developments of genres and ignore the contributions of BIPOC writers and artists.<sup>22</sup>

Largely due to the intense interest in her work, Nelson has offered many insights into the writing of *The Argonauts*, a key theme being the reflection she offers on the role of memory and how she distinguishes what she identifies as performative writing from the critical memoir as a formative genre. For Nelson autobiographical writing is associated with writing which has immediate lived experience instead of memory as its main focus:

For a lot of people who write autobiographically, memory becomes the main subject, rather than actions. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. It's just that memory is not very interesting to me as a subject. I'm interested in performative writing, I guess—I like it to have heat, or to feel like you're moving with something.<sup>23</sup>

I identify this here/now aspect in my own writing and art works. I desire to capture the energy of what is happening right now—to isolate my experience as it unfolds before me and reflect directly. My experience of motherhood as it has affected my creative life has changed and evolved constantly. The current period being very different to ten or even five years ago. In this respect I don't wish to summarise or 'memoir' my entire time as a parent and working artist—but speak to how I feel its effects in the present moment. There is an awareness that this may look and feel very different when reflected on in the years to come, however the desire to 'preserve' this particular time and its feeling is a driver for my project and a key link to my photographic roots. There are moments of struggling to find clarity in the fog of thought around my process and I fear that it will never be clear without the distance that time provides—however, there is excitement and 'heat' in the negotiation of the immediacy that my observational methods supply. Furthermore, this immediate and what Fournier describes as a 'gut-centred' approach, folds in encounters with one's own context and environment and the people within it—the culture and artworks which most directly impact our practice and research at the present time.

Fournier points to the historical lineage of autobiographical thinking which can be traced to the sixteenth century essayist and philosopher Michel de Montaigne. In turn this literary essayistic mode can be identified as providing the roots of the film essay as a form in the writing of scholar and artist

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel Peña, "The Argonauts Is A Direct Descendant Of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* And No One Is Talking About It." *Ploughshares Blog*. March 15 202, <https://blog.pshares.org/the-argonauts-is-a-direct-descendant-of-anzalduas-borderlandsla-frontera-and-no-one-is-talking-about-it>

<sup>23</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, (2021), 28.

Mieke Bal, which I will elaborate on later in this section. Greater discussion around the essay film is provided in Chapter 5 while I signal here that I am identifying at this stage the connection that exists between autotheory and the essayistic mode in subjective writing and art practice. Fournier states of the connection, “Montaigne wrote in ways that directly considered the inner workings of his mind and that engaged the personal as a way of thinking through larger ideas.”<sup>24</sup> Nora Alter refers to Montaigne’s foundational essay theory as “the testing of ideas, himself and society” which suggests “an open ended and evaluative search.”<sup>25</sup> 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> Political philosopher and literary theorist Theodor Adorno points out the relationship and appropriateness of the essayistic form 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 interweave as in a carpet.”<sup>27</sup> Fournier states the compelling connection to autotheory: “Essaying and experimenting are both at the heart of autotheory as an aesthetic mode, where there are active and ongoing attempts being made to understand oneself and one’s life in relation to others.”<sup>28</sup>

However, while Montaigne has been described by his biographer Sarah Bakewell as “the first blogger” whose favourite subject “was himself”<sup>29</sup>—and there is a long tradition of earlier male philosophers writing in an autotheoretical vein—the personal in women’s scholarly and theoretical writing has often been categorised as a female trait and devalued for being too soft or not relevant and critical enough. Fournier notes that in fact this false association that women’s writing in particular has had with a lack of academic rigour, has meant that women’s critical writing has often been more readily accepted if it is clearly coded as private or belonging to the domestic sphere—which has been seen as in opposition to the public sphere or serious political discussion. And while the second wave feminists made large efforts to challenge this assumption, it remains an issue today.<sup>30</sup> Motherhood in particular, remains firmly in this realm where the experiences of the body can be likened to confessional or diarist practices and labeled as oversharing.<sup>31</sup>

The video essay, which is discussed in further depth in chapter 5, has ties to the early literary form of the film essay and both have compelling links to both poetry and performance as practices. Here I use elements the film essay as a form along with poetry in a response to my immediate site—my

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<sup>24</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, (2021), 49.

<sup>25</sup> Nora Alter, “Memory Essays,” in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann. (Vienna: Springer, 2003), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Georg Lukács, “On The Nature and Form of The Essay,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 18.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments.” *Framework* vol. 49, No. 2 (2008), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, (2021), 49.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, (2021), 26.

<sup>31</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, (2021), 27.

domestic space and place of home—and the transitions of teenagehood/late adolescent parenting I observe. The turmoil/bliss of navigating care provided to my young people with my own wellbeing and the profoundly connected way my creative life is bound to the experience of this phase of our lives, can provide a focused site for feminist engagement of an autotheoretical nature. Autotheory as described by Fournier is inherently intersectional—intersectional feminism as a conceptual framework, aligns most closely with my research as it acknowledges the complexities of feminist concerns across different societal modes of discrimination against women. Here I refer to those disparities and means of discrimination that affect mothers who are artists in particular, who are often perceived to or in fact do take large breaks from their practices to raise children or navigate significant interruption to their careers.

Scholar and film maker Mieke Bal has written extensively about her documentary practice and concepts of auto-theory (she hyphenates the term) in ways that resonate with aspects of my own research. Most compellingly the way she describes her films as theoretical objects which provide an “ongoing, spiraling form of analysis-theory dialectic”.<sup>32</sup> In her 2015 article “Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics”, she focuses on the use of ‘auto-theory’ to discuss the way in which the documentary film can be viewed as object for examination of interrelational dynamics of the ‘maker’ or ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Bal considers auto-theory to be a “reflexive modality” which allows her to “reconsider my own theoretical convictions in view of encounters with otherness to which I myself am party.”<sup>33</sup> The reflection on her experience filming is a continuation of the making that then feeds into further thinking about her art practice, hence the ‘spiral’ like movement in her work.

Her films centre around the life experience of migrants negotiating the loss and grief of relocating from home, presented as unmitigated and initially unwitnessed recordings by her subjects straight to camera. She sets up her video camera, leaves the room and allows a subject to determine which aspects of their stories are filmed, with very little intervention. She describes these works as a ‘movement toward the other’—in so far as they are not ‘first person’ documentaries of the maker herself but belong to experimental documentary practice as a whole, which attempt to negate an overbearing producer’s voice. As Bal states:

Documenting migratory culture requires a care to avoid all the traps of intercultural analysis, such as exoticization, reduction of individuals to numbers and statistics, or an unqualified empathic approach that comes close to or indeed enacts emotional appropriation.<sup>34</sup>

The ‘othering’ in documentary practice has occupied much discourse. Contemporary photographic practice in particular moved early on to push boundaries of documentary narrative structure. Such

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<sup>32</sup> Mieke Bal, “*Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics.*” (2015), 133.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>34</sup> Mieke Bal, “*Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics.*” (2015), 134.

efforts branched off to create the more self-reflexive conceptual practice of the 1960s and 1970s, with increasingly conceptual approaches to documentary photography developed further over the next decades. Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–75), is a significant and oft-cited example, signifying a growing awareness that the de-contextualisation associated with singular 'decisive moment' style images simultaneously objectified their subjects and cast the photographer heroically. The integral relationship I have with my children who impact my work and provide much observational material upon which I then reflect raises questions not just of consent but also of the complex and layered ways in which our lives overlap. When do the experiences that they are having and negotiating during this period of their lives, and the ways in which their own struggles affect me as a parent become legitimately my own experiences too? How can I be sensitive to my teenager's formative and vulnerable development while acknowledging the impact this tumultuous time has on me as a mother and artist?

## Motherhood and Mothering

In much research and theory surrounding feminist art practice, the discourse centres around the history of women's collectives or collections.<sup>35</sup> This is followed closely by the prevalence of work focused around domestic care, the space of the home, motherhood and embodied experience. The woman artist as sole practitioner and the study of this often reverts/becomes the study of them in relation to larger feminist discourse whether their work directly references constructs of female experience or not. I will acknowledge here that not all women artists wish to be gendered as such, or make works that they overtly identify as being feminist per se. Artworks that reference, either directly or indirectly subjective lived experience become gendered by context if that subjective experience is a product of social, cultural and political conditions—even as creativity itself is not specifically gendered. As Judith Butler has widely discussed, masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed. As Simone de Beauvoir herself said “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.”<sup>36</sup> To study lived experience as a woman artist and mother for me has been by default to become engaged in a larger conversation around feminism and women's art.

The ambivalence which has often been used to describe the experience of artists who are also mothers has been historically problematic and uncomfortable for women to discuss. This is in part owing to tensions between feminist and patriarchal paradigms in which representations have often remained largely stereotypical—despite motherhood's newfound prominence within the discourses of popular culture and politics.<sup>37</sup> Aotearoa's recent Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern for example, gained worldwide notoriety when she brought her then three-month-old baby with her to the 2018 UN General

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<sup>35</sup> Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), Myrel Chernick, and Jennie Klein. *The M-Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*. (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301.

<sup>37</sup> Clare Grafik, in Susan Bright, *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood*, (Art Books, 2013), 6.

Assembly and became the first world leader ever to do so. Feminist artists, mothers, and theorists have been critiquing the particular and shifting space motherhood and creativity embodies since the 1960s. Adrienne Rich has most notably articulated her acute pain as she pushed back on the patriarchal myth of the all-loving, all-forgiving, and all-sacrificing mother. In her book *Of Women Born* (1976), she challenges the assumption that:

a natural mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mother and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless; that children and their mothers are the “causes” of each other’s suffering.<sup>38</sup>

Feminist theory of this time turned the critique of this ‘naturalness’ towards increased scrutiny of the patriarchal image of the father figure—and the disparities within the division of labour which confined and restricted women who were mothers to an expected role or set of behaviours outside of her own desires and needs. Many feminists and feminist artists strategically or inadvertently distanced themselves from ‘coding’ that was associated with motherhood and mothering at this time—that which was considered submissive, weak, or irrational—in an attempt to gain the space and independence from the confines of conventions imposed upon mothers.<sup>39</sup> For it was also such maternal coding of femininity of the time, which placed women most strongly in contrast to men, as potentially lesser and more subservient. But while contemporary feminist theory often acknowledges mothering as a more complex layer of personhood, work is still to come addressing notions that place conceptions of motherhood exterior to a continuum of feminist progression and evolution. As Andrea Liss states in her 2009 book *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (2009), “Feminist motherhood complicates the dominant institutionalized idea of motherhood.”<sup>40</sup> And further to this, our media cultures repeatedly use problematic and simplifying language and phrases such as a woman’s ability to ‘juggle’, the various elements or tasks in her life, or ‘balancing motherhood and work’, which implies that “we are really living in a ‘postfeminist’ world.”<sup>41</sup> The implication is also that this is attainable—juggling is a skill that can be mastered, balance can be achieved.

Adrienne Rich first refined the definition of the more contemporary and now widely used term, ‘mothering’ in 1976 when she distinguishes “between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall

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<sup>38</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 22.

<sup>39</sup> Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.

<sup>40</sup> Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, (2009), xvi.

<sup>41</sup> Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, (2009), xvii

remain under male control.”<sup>42</sup> While the institution remains largely the convention, mothering is the lived experience, which feminists understand as acknowledging and providing agency to women. That mothering can be multifaceted, fluid and “could be experienced as a site of empowerment and social change”, speaks to the heart of the relationship between mother artists and ethics of care in social practice, with which I seek to engage. Mothering has subsequently been articulated as a practice, which is not passive, static, or fixed, but rather active and activating.<sup>43</sup>

Emily Jeremiah in her article “Motherhood to mothering and beyond: Maternity in recent feminist thought” (2006), elaborates on these different and problematically oppositional concepts (motherhood and mothering) and incorporates newer thinking since the early ‘third wave’ feminists, regarding Judith Butler’s performativity of gender and constructivism, outlined in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.<sup>44</sup> Primarily, Jeremiah notes how the ethics of care are incompatible with this theory as it is extended to maternal performativity. I will signal here my different but connected use of the word performativity as it is related to the practice of restaging and re-enacting phenomena for the camera, which I will elaborate on further. Butler describes gender as a series of performative acts: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”<sup>45</sup> Jeremiah interpreting Butler states: “Firstly, the idea that experience is separable from its construction is a fallacy; there is no such thing as a pure, unmediated (‘real’) experience. But that does not mean that maternal subjectivity is only ‘constructed’.” Or, “to claim that maternal experience is constructed is not the same as claiming that construction causes maternal experience.”<sup>46</sup> Mielle Chandler in her article “Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices” (1998), had already drawn attention to the question of ethical and moral decision making in response to Butler, when she pointed out that mothering practice involves responding to the needs of another being, a being that requires food, warmth, bathing, comforting, teaching and play.

According to Butler, varying the repetition of practices that make up gender provides agency, and thus for Chandler this means “To be a mother is to enact mothering”<sup>47</sup> and therefore “Mothering behaviours, viewed in this light, contain the potential for a disruption of dominant discourses on maternity, which depend upon their enactment for validity and which, therefore, are vulnerable, open to change.”<sup>48</sup> Butler suggests this change could come by the possibility of a “failure to repeat.”<sup>49</sup> But

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<sup>42</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, (1995), 13.

<sup>43</sup> Emily Jeremiah, “Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond: Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* vol. 8, no. 1, (2006), 21.

<sup>44</sup> While Rich was a breakthrough theorist in terms of shifting maternity into the academic realm and aligning it with the ‘The personal is political’ the core assertion is that ‘experience’ and ‘institution’ are binaries, the latter being the realm of “Patriarchy as monolithic entity” which “tends to obscure the relationship between subject and ideology.” Emily Jeremiah, (2006), 23.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 25.

<sup>46</sup> Emily Jeremiah, “Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond” (2006), 25.

<sup>47</sup> Mielle Chandler, “Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices,” in *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns*. ed. Sharon Abbey and Andrea O’Reilly, (Ontario: Second Story, 1998), 273.

<sup>48</sup> Emily Jeremiah, “Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond” (2006), 25.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 141.

the nature of care *is* repetition and to ‘refuse’ the enactment of this part of gender performance once one has become a mother, even as it is recognised as so aligned with the burden of unpaid work, problematically compounds notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers and does not address issues around whether a woman has chosen to become a mother or not. Instead Chandler suggests mothers “embrace motherhood and ... demand social, economic and political respect for mothering practices.”<sup>50</sup> †

## Maternity and Art Practice

Early and significant international visual artists and theorists who contributed to the critique around motherhood and art practice were mothers who addressed the ‘condition of motherhood’. While I acknowledge all mothers who make art in my initial research, my focus will be specifically on mothers who make art which in some way is about a mothering experience. Myrel Chernick, Jennie Klein, and Andrea Liss have made significant contributions to scholarship in their books *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (2011) (Chernick and Klein) and *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (2009) (Liss). Lucy Reynolds has written extensively on woman’s moving image. Here I cite the chapter by Catherine Elwes which appears in Reynolds 2019 book, *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices*, which concerns strategies of exposure and concealment of the artist’s body in moving image works. Specifically addressing the connections between motherhood and photography, Susan Bright’s book *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood* (2017), is an important reference for my research and includes the photographic and performative work of Ana Casas Broda, Hanna Putz, and Elinor Carucci. In *Home Truths* Bright points to a continuing lack of diversity and nuance in the representation of motherhood in photography and popular culture, where binary stereotypes have deep roots. Such characterisations include: the good/bad mother, working/staying at home, the all sacrificing/absent mother, or the Virgin Mary mother of Christ; rather than reflecting the lived subjectivity of mothers themselves.

Andrea Liss outlines significant early developments in the recognition of artists who were mothers when she talks about the formation of the American ‘Mother Art’ collective of artist–mothers who met through their involvement in the Woman’s Building in downtown Los Angeles in 1974. The original Mother Art group formed after experiencing discrimination against them but perpetrated other women —specifically that the Woman’s Building had a rule which stated children were not allowed in the studios, however dogs were. One of Mother Art’s first projects was to build a playground for children as response and protest.<sup>51</sup> The group carried out site-specific projects such as *Laundry Works* (1977),

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<sup>50</sup> Mielle Chandler, “Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices,”(1998), 284.

† Discussions around negation of pre cultural maternal determination are not my focus here, partly because the concept that pregnancy, birthing and nursing can be a deeply transforming physical, spiritual and sexual experience for many mothers, is not up for grabs in terms of how my research relates to my own experience. This is not however to ignore, or deny the fullness of queer motherhood, however this is outside the scope of my research.

<sup>51</sup> Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, (2009), 2.

a series of performances in Laundromats around Los Angeles where art and poetry was hung on washing lines and the members engaged with women doing their laundry. These performances were timed to wash-and-dry cycles.

Relevant artists who appear in *Feminist Art and the Maternal* and work in lens-based media, are American artist Sherry Millner's video *Womb with a View* (1983). This collaboration with Ernest Larsen consists of a video work with its voiceover humorously musing on the physical state of pregnancy. American-born and British based artist Susan Hiller's work, *Ten Months* (1977–79) involved a ten month documentation of Hiller's pregnant belly, closely cropped in from a set of full length photographs to negate voyeurism of her body and emphasise the rising moon of her child's head. Then-London based duo Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's 95-minute video *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), as conceptualised by feminist theorist Mulvey, subverted dominant thinking of the time around the domestic space and the male gaze and considered the maternal as a thinking and creative space.<sup>52</sup> Notably, artist and theorist Mary Kelly appears in a section of the film reading from her journal—she was at the time working on her *Post-Partum Project* (1973-79). *Post-Partum Project*, comprised of text and objects, is extremely significant in terms of discourse around intersubjectivity and the boundaries of the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the child's 'Imaginary'. Kelly stated of the work, published as a 1983 book, that it "is a saga of intersubjectivity that powerfully established that the mother is anything but passive within the mother and infant/young child's relationship."<sup>53</sup>

Lucy Reynolds' book *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices* (2019), collects together the scholarship of artists and writers examining a broad range of formative and contemporary works by women using moving image. Catherine Elwes contributes a chapter "Strategies of exposure and concealment in moving image art by women; a cross-generational account", which is relevant here as she discusses the inclusion or exclusion of representation of the artist's body in front of the camera. Elwes who comments that while visibility of professional women artists has grown over the six decades the anxiety around self-presentation of the female form has endured, albeit shifted by the responses of successive generations to "[...] a culture of display that narrowly focuses on the status of individual women's erotic capital."<sup>54</sup> And further that, "Women face the Sisyphean task of forging self-images that represent the whole of their beings, psychic, political, economic and social [...]."<sup>55</sup> Elwes's account is one which tracks the oscillating nature of representation by artists between the extremes of total nudity to complete absence and the various degrees of veiling on the spectrum—as artists from second, third and the current fourth wave of feminism seek to negotiate the prevalence of the female form as object, site of abuse and oppression in film and television. Early commentary during the 1960s and 1970s notably by art historian Griselda

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Catherine Elwes, "Strategies of Exposure and Concealment in Moving Image Art by Women; A Cross-generational Account" in Lucy Reynolds ed. *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices*, (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019), 197.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 197.

Pollock warned that the female body could be easily co-opted by male culture, a critique which prompted the disappearance of the female form from some branches of the early feminist art movement.<sup>56</sup> This was notable in the artworks of Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, and Lis Rhodes. While these artists among others sought to remove the regime of the male gaze, other methods of addressing authorship and the subjectivity of the “invisible producer” were being developed such as voice and text as surrogates.<sup>57</sup> Peggy Phelan’s term for this strategy is “active vanishing” and certainly was not a method used by all visual artists of second-wave feminism, Elwes noting that many film and video artists argued that this erasure left space open for traditional and conventional representations of women in popular film and media to dominate.<sup>58</sup> Indeed by the 1990s many women artists were presenting themselves confidently in front of the camera, a reaction to perceived prohibitions of 1970s and 1980s feminist expression.<sup>59</sup>

My intention for my doctoral film is to be bodily present in front of the camera in minimal and specific ways. Firstly, I had no desire for my physical likeness to be used to represent my emotional journey at this time, rather that my embodiment would be largely via the movement, stillness, and direction of the camera ‘eye’. Secondly, although I am present in an image of my stomach, this is a reference to the umbilical connection I once had to my children and still feel keenly in my being—the images of their hands and bodies in addition offer a surrogate experience as when they are present they also represent my body. A visceral representation of this bodily connection between us is found in the images of placenta blood, our once shared bodily fluid, thus the primary and very intimate delineation of an aspect of my internal experience and emotional life is foregrounded by way of this metaphor. This is quite different to the representations of mothers’ bodies in the artworks exhibited in *Home Truths* which I elaborate on in the following section.

## Motherhood and Photography: Home Truths

Susan Bright has most notably collected together 12 artists and written about the representation of motherhood in photographic practice in her 2013 exhibition and book *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood*. There are several points of her research which differ but also parallel my own contribution to this field of inquiry. Firstly, the relevance of what Bright calls a full awareness of the medium’s limitations and the choice nevertheless of the artists she has gathered who work *within* the medium. This is a limitation I also feel and is at the heart of my decision to work adjacent to the photographic medium—in film. Although I have made this decision I consider my central ethos, my core motivations to have stemmed from my photographic background—therefore I recognise and align myself with a certain number of the complex, self-referential, and at times ambiguous

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 203.

approaches of the artists outlined in her research. In this section I will outline such points of alignment and difference within the work of a selection of the artists in *Home Truths* as a means of further positioning my research in the broader field of subjective representations of motherhood in art practice. Of the artists represented in *Home Truths*, a number use self-portraiture, and representations of their bodies and the bodies of their children as one way of imparting the physical and emotional connection to their children—the skin-to-skin contact that is familiar to most who have had this with their own children up to a certain age, often ceasing around the early school years. With the exception of one image in my film (my belly with a small HRT patch visible), my body is not present in front of the camera. Instead, it is my embodied eye—the movement of the camera or animation of objects in frame, which indicates my physical presence. The physical representations of mothers and children’s bodies together denotes a particular period of connection and development belonging to the younger years, just as the corresponding absence of my body in my film belongs to a specific phase of separating off from physical connection—the movement away from the interior of the home and out into the world. Importantly this representation also speaks to consent around photographing one’s own children. The consent which I was granted and that was understood by my children when they were younger differs greatly from that which feels comfortable for them as teenagers. My emotional relationship to my children and my own feelings regarding connectivity, joy and fear are therefore represented differently.

Ana Casa Broda stages scenes of play and intimacy with her child as a way of acknowledging elements of her difficult relationship with her own mother. Upsetting memories become games restaged, transformed and cinematically lit. In *Kinderwunsch (video game)* (2010), Casas Broda lies on a bed naked, her son with his back to her playing video games. *Kinderwunsch (Mummy 1)* (2008) depicts the artist lying in the middle of a living room floor, one of her children rubbing her body with soap suds while her other child looks on. Casas Broda describes her images as a way of dealing with the memories and fear which crowd her body, stating that these scenarios are for her “Our own rituals, acts of bonding and of dwelling in the present.”<sup>60</sup> And in a way that is highly resonant for my project: “Thus the photographs are born out of a crossroads between images living in my head and the everyday moments that denote them.”<sup>61</sup>

Hanna Putz, born in 1987, approaches a feeling of being overwhelmed by a constant stream of images from the position of someone belonging to a generation who lives largely online. Putz also stages and lights her images but interestingly obscures herself in many of her photographs of her and her baby. She is either photographed from behind or with her child placed between her and the camera lens. Addressing her formal images and the obscuring device, Bright states that “Putz’s pictures also prompt thoughts about the connections between the process of becoming a mother and

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<sup>60</sup> Susan Bright, *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood*, (2017), 32.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

the erasure of a woman's sense of self."<sup>62</sup> This resonates with my doctoral project as I find myself in a different but connected phase of selfhood erasure —that of the mother whose identity has been entwined with her children's but is now moving towards a new definition of motherhood and caring.

Artist Elinor Carucci's practice is also relevant for a number of reasons, most specifically as she blends quintessential bonding experiences with the unveiled realities and emotional labour of caring and speaks to issues of consent. Carucci, who is a mother of twins, has photographed herself since becoming pregnant in 2003 and subsequently documented her children for the book entitled *Mother* (2013). Her works capture moments during pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, often with the help of her partner who is also a photographer. Bright describes Carucci's images which appear in *Mother* in the following manner: "The series has a remarkable rhythm, and the intensity and fluidity of the pictures marks the very significant emotional changes that mothers undergo as their children age and develop."<sup>63</sup> And further that "the early pictures of the pregnancy, birth and newborn months are intense cinematic, almost literary scenarios—sometimes full of fear, sometimes tender."<sup>64</sup>

Carucci's approach included planning and often staging various daily events—bath time, breastfeeding, and the gaze of her own parents on her naked pregnant body. In a 2014 conversation with Susan Bright, Carucci stated that although she would set up her lights and camera for an image or 'set the scene' for bath time, for example, what was then captured was still left largely to chance.<sup>65</sup> The staged photographs are often lit with undiffused light producing harsh shadows and the feeling of sunlight through a window—private inside-of-the-house moments suddenly illuminated. Despite including highly relatable moments of care and nurturing—of joy, fear, frustration, and guilt, none of the images are meant to be romanticised. Carucci intentionally edits out any images that she considers 'too pretty'. She also removes clothing that has recognisable logos or characters on them, preferring to show herself naked to highlight the early mother/child bond created by skin-on-skin contact. This staging and curation of photographs, as with the other artist examples cited here, is at the heart of the durational differences and parallels between still and moving images—what David Campany has called the meditation on the 'frame' or fractional second of lens-based exposure and the durational moving or 'still moving' film image with its sustained 'leading' of the viewer through curated edits.<sup>66</sup>

Carucci's images also directly represent many characteristic aspects of motherhood, building further however upon more traditional representations to expanding notions of the maternal into those that have often been considered 'inappropriate', such as dissatisfaction and guilt as a mother and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>63</sup> Susan Bright, *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood*, (2017), 62.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Bright and Elinor Carucci in conversation, School of Visual Arts, October 28 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liUD6FMew4Y>

<sup>66</sup> David Campany, "Posing, Acting, Photography." in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, David Green, and Joanna Lowry eds. (Photoforum and Photoworks, 2006), 97.

attendant frustrations. In her image of her daughter *Emmanuelle Crying* (2006), her child's distressed face fills the frame, from a higher, presumably adult perspective, the rest of her body remaining out of focus. She appears to be pleading for comfort or something else that her mother/photographer is not providing. The image embodies the frustration and pain of both the child and mother and elicits a strong emotional response from this viewer. I have taken one such image of my own daughter, crying in the bath with the pain of chicken pox sores, however I cannot imagine a time when I would feel comfortable with including this in any public way as part of my art practice.

Carucci's desire is to represent motherhood in a way which does not either idealise motherhood, as the popular media and social media often have, or reiterate traditional notions of the non-sexual pious mother in the form of the virgin—the mother who exists solely to nurture her child and whose sexuality is invisible or hidden, as with the Virgin Mary. She does reference the Madonna and child in many of her images—breastfeeding her twins or bottle feeding a child later on. While she depicts nudity and tenderness between her and her children, she states clearly that she does not wish to violate trust with her children and therefore has edited out any images for her book that show their genitalia, which is something Casa Broda for example does not do. However, Carucci does have images of extreme discomfort, as with *Emmanuelle Crying*. This brings into focus the conversation around consent as it can and can't be given by children, which has informed my practice and the development of my understanding of an ethics of care employed while making my work. I have been very aware of early commentary and examples of perceived and actual exploitation of children and their bodies in lens based work. Sally Mann is one notable example who has repeatedly talked of her exasperation at being known as “the one who photographed her children naked”, despite these images consisting of a relatively small number within her larger body of work.<sup>67</sup>

## Transitional Phenomena and Potential Space

This section focuses on psychoanalytic theory of subjective experience as it relates to art practice. It specifically explores the concept that an artist's interconnection with a ‘transitional or potential space’ can ‘open up’ opportunities to encounter phenomena relevant to an art work—either by frequent visiting or inhabiting the space, creating a space for contemplation, or in the gestational period following data and visual research collection. Here I primarily reference the research of artist and psychotherapist Patricia Townsend and psychoanalyst Kenneth Wright who interpret different aspects of the influential psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott's pivotal theory of Transitional Phenomena in terms of extending an understanding of the creative process. Winnicott has been credited with a major contribution to psychoanalysis when he described transitional phenomena as an area of

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<sup>67</sup> Blake Morrison, “Sally Mann: *The Naked and the Dead*”, *The Guardian*, May 29 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/may/29/sally-mann-naked-dead>

experience between inner and outer worlds.<sup>68</sup> He saw this space as a place of creative illusion, play and imagination and called it transitional or 'potential' space.<sup>69</sup>

The motivation for discussion and relevance of these lines of enquiry is based around questions I pose in my own research. I am specifically interested in the analysis of this phenomenon and the interpretation of the theory surrounding it as it informs the visual material collection and gestation periods of my own processes. As my practice involves making personally invested moving image works whose narratives explore the relationship between my own internal and external landscapes, there are several questions central to articulating my methodological underpinnings here.

How does the visual material I collect come about—the happenings which are observed, and where and how is the 'space' for reflection of these events made? What process is used in the transposition of such material into my film work and what are the connective threads between the two modes? For example, the repetitious appearance of particular objects in my doctoral film come into play as metaphorical and symbolic signifiers—they offer layered meaning, concepts not always directly referenced in my project, such as maternal loss. How I have chosen them and the ways by which I direct these signifiers and place them into the work happens largely on a psychological level, through my own 'playing' with my medium and when I am allowed extensive periods to gestate on my work—something that liminal and self-contained space of covid lockdowns over the course of my project has provided.

Townsend critically examines the relationship transitional phenomena has to creative art practice by highlighting common experiential threads in the making of site-based works, both those of her own and of other artists. She approaches the examination of a practice from a basis in creative psychoanalysis and in particular extending on Winnicott's notion of 'potential space'. She argues that Winnicott, even as he initially formulates the experience of creative illusion and 'space of play' in relation to early childhood development, did not develop his theories to explicitly include the experience of the adult artist and so seeks out relevant connections and applications of his theories to forms of artistic process.<sup>70</sup> Thomas Ogden clarifies potential space when he states, potential space is the general term Winnicott used to refer to an intermediate area of experience that lies between fantasy and reality. And that, "Specific forms of potential space include the play space, the area of the transitional object and phenomena, the analytic space, the area of cultural experience, and the area of creativity."<sup>71</sup> The area of creativity is the focus here—and while potential space originates in the space between mother and infant, an adult can develop their own capacity to create potential space.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, "Transitional objects and transitional phenomena", *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 1-30.

<sup>69</sup> Patricia Townsend, "Making Space: Transitional Phenomena in the Making of a Series of Artworks," in *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*, Annette Kuhn, ed. (London: I.B. Tauris: 2013), 173.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas H Ogden, "On Potential Space." in *The Winnicott Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2018), 121-33

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

In her 2019 book *Creative States of Mind*, Townsend is concerned with a self-reflexive examination of her creative art process in the naming of a connection between the inner world of the artist and the outer phenomena which she draws on. She folds in elements of the outside world such as an immediate landscape or frequently visited site or the studio. The landscape for example can be considered a 'transitional space'—that is a landscape or site that has been invested with aspects of inner experience—a reflection on something internal.<sup>73</sup> Her own transitional space is described as the personally significant site Morecambe Bay in England. Townsend talks about what is revealed to be her own artworks in her chapter 'Making Space', where she describes Morecambe Bay as being 'troubling' in terms of its history. On her trips to the area she would gravitate to the mountains and stay away from the vast expanse of the flats, notorious for its quicksand and fast flowing tides. This danger, illustrated by the stories of fatalities represented a draw for her somehow—a resonance she shares with the depth of the quicksand—a kind of 'tip of the iceberg' of emotional and creative being. She is compelled to make a series of artworks related to the bay.

In interviews and data collected by Townsend for *Creative States of Mind*, she points out that many artists have described potential space in creative process as being like a focused version of hypnopompia, the space between sleep and full wakefulness, this space creates a box or container for creative energy—a rich and exhilarating space where much seems possible and an openness to connections unfolds. Townsend describes a homogenised version of the process: once the decision to make the artwork was made this was followed by considerations for different ways of approaching the subject—this was the time of experimentation and research. Here many things were tried. This space can be alive and hyper alert, buzzing with excitement and ideas.

This was the 'data' collection period before individual works or components of the series were developed and made, followed by what seemed to be a less productive or 'stuck' phase for the artist—which can seem dormant and fruitless. However, later developments determined that this was a period of gestation and bubbling fermentation—not stagnant at all, but essential to the work. The imagination was hard at work, moving on the process in the artist's subconscious. Townsend describes the process as being put into action by the experimentation, but then the unconscious takes over and little control can be intentionally exacted. Under the surface, the fragments, threads, and pieces of material and thoughts around the project are broken down and rearranged. Psychoanalyst Kenneth Wright points to the significance of the 'found object' which can hold latent form and can be passed to a work—capturing and holding the 'feel' of a lived experience. Drawing heavily upon the work of philosopher Susanne Langer, Wright examines the way in which art can replicate the textures and rhythms of feeling gathered from perceptual forms. Drawing out

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<sup>73</sup> Townsend, "Making Space: Transitional Phenomena in the Making of a Series of Artworks." 17.

perspectives on creative process he considers what 'inner need' guides an artist in the translation of experience into material forms, and what conditions afford this voice to push through and materialise in an artwork. He argues that the "possibility of aesthetic experience depends on the condition of the uncoupling of life and experience from the demands of action."<sup>74</sup> This is stated in his 2013 chapter *Found Object and Mirroring Forms* when he speaks to contemplation and reflection:

The first condition establishes a *domain of contemplation or reflection (transitional space)*, in which the qualities of objects—their shapes, textures and patterns—can be more fully experienced because they are now divorced from practical concerns. Such a domain excludes the world of ordinary action and practical concerns and establishes a place in which 'presences' can be conjured up and felt (though this might include forms of symbolic action such as play or creative modification of a medium as in the making of an art work).<sup>75</sup>

The space carved out during this uncoupling from the 'everyday' is augured as being necessary to allow the openings for a work to emerge. There is an evident connection to the video essay process here, as stated by Jörg Huber: "The essayistic mode enables openings in which something happens or breaks through that cannot be seamlessly categorized or fully explained."<sup>76</sup> The act of curating, arranging, and restaging of material and objects for filming takes precedence here in my own practice, over the linear storyboarding characteristic of much narrative film practice. Discursive webs radiate out, pulling in relevant threads—in the throes of creative imaginings, all things seem connected and are 'grist for the mill' while making a work. This happens in the home space where there is no 'off' switch in the contemplation and gestation or making which continues, in and around the caring for home and family—and not uncoupled from 'ordinary action' at all. This can be likened to Peter Todd's description of Joanna Margaret Paul's films as being made in the time she had remaining after caring for the children and running a household. Or in the case of Ree Morton whose art journals show the consideration of her projects seamlessly existing alongside shopping lists.<sup>77</sup> Morton has become the subject of much discussion around the push/pull relationship between motherhood and 'committed' artist, as she made the difficult decision to move to New York to focus on her work, while her children moved to Virginia to live with their father.

Several key issues relating to the nature of artistic experience in the transitional or contemplative space can be found when Wright asks "...what is it *like* to create a poem, painting or other artistic artifact, before considering the more theoretical issues involved."<sup>78</sup> He points to the example of poet

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<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Wright, "Found Objects and Mirroring Forms," in Annette Kuhn, ed. *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 211.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

<sup>76</sup> Huber, "Video-Essayism: On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional," 94.

<sup>77</sup> Alice Gregory, "What Does It Mean to Be an Artist and a Mother?" *The New York Times*, August 29 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/t-magazine/ree-morton-artist-mother.html>

<sup>78</sup> Wright, "Maternal Form in Artistic Creation.," 306.

Seamus Heaney. Heaney, when posed the question “What is it like to make or write a poem?”, after being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, replied, “It is like an echo coming back to you...”<sup>79</sup> Wright asserts that this echo might not be an exact or completely recognisable reflection of the artist’s feelings, thoughts or words but rather something that resembles them. They have been reflected off something external and the returning image or sound is a more detached or more objective view. This quasi-objective form “allows him to grasp it more clearly.”<sup>80</sup> Wright suggests that the artist is tuned in to this echo—the words, images and happenings that sharply resonate, quicken the heart and ‘speak to’ something that is felt. An echo that ‘rings true’ somehow. Philosopher of art Susanne Langer, whose work has influenced Wright’s, first stated in 1953 that the structure of the art object reflected or echoed the structure of human feeling, thus refuting suggestions made by Freud that art is just an outlet for ‘instinctual tensions’. Langer writes instead that “Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling.”<sup>81</sup> Wright elaborates on her statement saying art replicates the structure of human experience on a symbolic level and that according to Langer, art is not concerned with *direct* emotional expression, which would place it closer to the sphere of impulsive action, but portrays for further contemplation the shapes and qualities of lived experience.<sup>82</sup>

The theory of transitional phenomena has come to have a bearing as I recognise a spirituality or meditative space that is in play while I make my film work—and attempt to name this in the context of this project. It resembles the experience of ‘thin places’ of Irish Christian history in my ancestral culture. Thin places is a term which originates in Celtic Christian traditions practiced in Ireland and Scotland since the 5<sup>th</sup> century and refers to the space between heaven and earth, a place where one can feel closer to God, where the ‘walls’ between earth and the divine are especially thin. The Buddhist concept of Bardo is another example of an intermediate realm, in this case between death and rebirth. I am striving for an understanding of those moments when a feeling arises of being close to another realm, another state of being—being stirred, lifted into a heightened level of awareness. During a mass, listening to karakia or waiata tangi, or simply being in the garden quietly for long enough to move thoughts about an artwork from one place to another. A still moment in my home, the bush or the foreshore, where meaning is suddenly generated spontaneously, from the environment—revealing something inspired which sits outside of myself but is also *of me*. For me this also includes the time while singing lullabies to my children. Here in the transition from waking to sleep, a space for reflection exists, a fostering of peace and rest for your child. A ritual picked out from the everyday routines to dissolve the fretting over the day and to remind you of the bond between child and parent.

Our lives play out in constant transition, as we age, move jobs, houses, start families, farewell loved ones. At this time, we also occupy a very particular transitional space—the liminal space of the Covid-

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>81</sup> Susanne K Langer, *Feeling and Form : A Theory of Art*. (London: Routledge, 1953), 40.

<sup>82</sup> Wright, “Maternal Form in Artistic Creation.”, 308.

19 pandemic. The gravitas of this liminal space has created a type of turmoil that affects artists (among others) and art making—as the ability to project forward to a time of ‘not pandemic’ and the disconnection from the time ‘before the pandemic’, a suspension of a kind of knowledge of one’s self as an artist, or at least the knowledge of a continuity of a practice. In this current climate, having begun my doctoral study six months before the first of the Covid lockdowns, I have managed to negotiate Covid-era restrictions while teaching and the demands of anxious kids and their disrupted learning and to settle in ‘at home’ to an extended period of isolation. This has correspondingly intensified the observational elements of my practice, the attention to detail, and the deeper noticing and awareness of heightened moments of clarity in the days where work and meeting the practical needs of the family are felted together. What then becomes my own ‘stuff of art’ amongst the day to day of living, is a symbolic relationship where work is conjured via my participation with family and neighbourhood happenings—as skylines and views shift, and play objects are abandoned and eventually discarded.

## Chapter 4. Aotearoa

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This section specifically addresses artists working within the geographical context of my doctoral study, Aotearoa, New Zealand. It foregrounds the work of Joanna Margaret Paul (1945-2003) and Kathy Dudding (1961-2010) as key practitioners and influences on my work, and folds in the work of other New Zealand artists who work primarily in and around themes of motherhood, the domestic space, lived experience and observational or gestational practices and primarily use film and photography. Here I include a survey of relevant artists and artworks across a number of New Zealand collections that either include or foreground works made by women. Among the online collections and books cited are Circuit: Artist Moving Image; RM Women's Moving Image Archive; Women in Photography NZ & AU and *Through Shaded Glass*.

### Joanna Margaret Paul (1945-2003)

*Your images will release their phosphorus only in the aggregate.* - Robert Bresson <sup>83</sup>

To consider the work of Joanna Margaret Paul is essential here both given the Aotearoa context and that her practice was primarily imagined and carried out in her domestic space and incorporating her surrounding family life and friends. Her film work is deeply personal, dreamlike, fragmentary, and richly woven around sets of recurrent motifs. Paul sought out the everyday, that which was in front of her, the loved objects she shared her home with, the cups, flower vases, her children's cast-off coats. She worked primarily from home and with interior spaces while her children were young. She drew and filmed her children both at play and going about their daily activities. She tended to her life and cared for objects and people in her realm through the recording of her observations and experiences of them—to 'make meaning'.

Collected in Archives New Zealand, her films are most often categorised as 'personal records' rather than 'short films'—and in fact many of Paul's films were conceived as 'letters' to her sister Mary.<sup>84</sup> Paul was a pioneer of interdisciplinary and postmodern practice in Aotearoa. She produced over 30 experimental films and hundreds of paintings and drawings, along with prose and poetry writing. Paul was known for her resolve and the effort she expended reconciling mothering and art making, weaving much of her experience within both spheres together. She states of her work: "All my films, poems, paintings play more or less between inner and outer events."<sup>85</sup> Peter Todd describes Paul's

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<sup>83</sup> Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, translated by Jonathan Griffin. (New York: Urizen, 1977), 44.

<sup>84</sup> Dick Whyte, *A Place for Shadows: A Prolegomena to the Authorship Practices and Films of Joanna Margaret Paul*. MA Thesis. (Wellington: Victoria University, 2008), 26-27.

<sup>85</sup> CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image, "Joanna Margaret Paul", September 10 2022, <https://www.circuit.org.nz/artist/joanna-margaret-paul>

artworks as being made in the time she had remaining after caring for the children and running a house—“Moments grabbed for poetry, drawing and painting, films. So everything that got done was important. Time was precious.”<sup>86</sup> Paul believed firmly that her roles as mother and artist were not mutually exclusive. Her son Pascal Harris reflected that: “I think for my mother art and living were intertwined inseparable from each other.”<sup>87</sup> Despite this there have been those that point to the struggle and conflict she felt around balancing motherhood, notably Peter Ireland who has commented that she was a complex and unforgettable human being dearly loved by many, however “her extraordinary dedication to her work caused suffering in others”, and that “she was personally, sometimes a casualty too.”<sup>88</sup> These are nervy assertions familiar to artists who are also mothers who are constantly faced with making sacrifices in both spheres and weathering societal implications that neither job is managed sufficiently. Paul’s strategy for managing both her family and her art practice was by keeping them close, contained and aligned with her personal ethos which included a lack of desire for self-promotion, as she did not see her work as a ‘career’ as such.<sup>89</sup> In part because her experimental, self-produced films were made in opposition to mainstream cinema—as she made a deliberate decision to not to engage with film in its commodifiable form. And partly because she worked at a time where the conventions and constraints placed on women artists in Aotearoa meant artists who worked with personal and domestic themes were often overlooked. Paul pushed back on what was deemed valuable and appropriate with works which have been described as “quietly radical”.<sup>90</sup>

Paul was involved with establishing the exhibitions and projects of The Women’s Gallery in Wellington with Allie Eagle and others in 1979 and was passionate about the conversation and exchange this space provided. She was aware however of the benefits of isolation to her art practice, remarking in *Letters from room to room (1988)*, in conversation with Eagle, that she felt her achievements in the Women’s Gallery space and time with those involved was important, a chance to use art as a lever into real areas of discourse.<sup>91</sup> But later in her association with the gallery she reflected on a need to refocus her energy on her own work as she was insulated by marriage and distance.<sup>92</sup> This is a resonant reflection and indication of the importance Paul placed on protecting and balancing her inner reserves of caring and making. It is interesting to note that despite many of the initiatives developed by second wave feminist groups of the 1960s and 70s to support women artists—such as organisations which wrapped in child-care, collective funding, and sharing of resources—this mode of

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<sup>86</sup> Peter Todd, “Through a Different Lens/Film: Work by Joanna Margaret Paul,” November 18 2015, *CICUIT: Artist Moving Image*. <https://www.circuit.org.nz/writing-and-podcast/through-a-different-lensfilm-work-by-joanna-margaret-paul>

<sup>87</sup> Pascal Harris, “My Mother: Art and Being,” in *Joanna Margaret Paul: Imagined in the Context of a Room*. (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2021), 12.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Ireland, “A Shape to Part the Space: Johanna Margaret Paul 1945-2003,” *Art New Zealand* 108 (2003), 97. <https://art-newzealand.com/108-paulobit/>

<sup>89</sup> Jill Trevelyan, “Paul, Joanna Margaret,” *Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, April 11 2023, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/6p1/paul-joanna-margaret>

<sup>90</sup> Emma Bugden, “Tempered Pleasure: Joanna Margaret Paul as Wordsmith,” in *Joanna Margaret Paul: Imagined in the Context of a Room*. (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2021), 177.

<sup>91</sup> Marian Evans, et al. *A Women’s Picture Book: 25 Women Artists of Aotearoa* (Wellington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 84.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 82.

working requires a high output in terms of managing relationships, and a related ethos of care for those outside of one's own family. The energy and benefit of containment needs to be weighed and measured with the advantages of connection, support, discourse, and exposure. A self-contained and isolated mode of working, brought on in my case by the Covid-19 climate, has at times been difficult, but has also provided surprising opportunities and a 'protected' space for creating work.

Paul's short films in particular have enjoyed a recent renewal of interest and have found new audiences. In 2021 The Dunedin Public Art Gallery launched a retrospective exhibition of her work accompanied by a significant publication. *Imagined in the Context of a Room* (2021) includes nine film works produced between 1972 and 1982. In 2015 Peter Todd toured an exhibition of Paul's film work titled *Through a Different Lens/Film: Work by Joanna Margaret Paul*. And in the same year CIRCUIT: Artist Film and Video Aotearoa commissioned the making of a suite of new moving image works in response to Paul's poetry by six contemporary New Zealand artists. Andrea Bell writes of Paul's films and folds in references to Robert Bresson and his book *Notes on Cinematography* (1975), mentioned along with Sergei Eisenstein's *The Film Sense* (1947) as resonant and inspirational to Paul.<sup>93</sup> Bell notes of the films which include family and friends that Paul did not stage her children or direct them instead, "she intuitively filmed and photographed her subjects often engaging in a seemingly natural state."<sup>94</sup> This acts in contrast to my process of filming my own children, which is staged and directed, albeit via 'naturalistic performance' without sophisticated acting or multiple re-takes. Exceptions to this mode of direct presentation of subjects in Paul's oeuvre are *Task* (1982) and *Bag* (1976). In *Task* we see Paul staging the repetitious act of ironing children's clothes, the camera trained on the hands of the woman who irons, along with the packing away of clothes and the ironing cloth once finished. *Bag* again simply presents a woman's hands unpacking a bag as if making an inventory of its contents—the identity is not apparent. These two films along with *Napkins* (1975) are amongst those which engage most directly with the invisible, subjective, and gendered spheres of labour. In Paul's film *Children—Imogen* (1975), imagery floats between a small hand making crayon drawings, flowers arranged in small cups, a child eating at the window. Her filmic observations are rendered poignant and dreamlike. Despite her eldest child appearing in this film, this is one of several works that references the death of Paul's second child Imogen—here by way of the title.

In his thesis *A Place for Shadows: the films of Joanna Margaret Paul* (2008), artist and writer Dick Whyte writes extensively about Paul's films presenting a thorough and insightful examination of theory which frames her authorship and relationship to viewers in a manner which is resonant with my own

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<sup>93</sup> Evans, *A Women's Picture Book: 25 Women Artists of Aotearoa*, 97.

<sup>94</sup> Andrea Bell, "I'm Looking for Something that's Almost Nothing/Through a Lens of Filtered Light," in *Joanna Margaret Paul: Imagined in the Context of a Room*. (Dunedin: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2021), 198.

research. The selection of theorists Whyte brings together is diverse. Relevant to my wider research and referenced previously here are: Laura Marks, Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, and Annette Kuhn. Whyte weaves together in a rich and thoughtful way an authorship study approached through the lens of 'Intercultural cinema'. This framing borrowed from Marks refers to "a specific genre or movement" of experimental films created by authors caught "between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge."<sup>95</sup> Specifically in Paul's case, these realms are those of a feminist artist who is also a mother and a film maker—and working against mainstream ideologies of commodifiable art.<sup>96</sup>

Paul made films completely on her own, after having sought technical instruction on 16mm film-making at art school. She later invested in Super 8mm which was cheaper and intentionally designed for 'home use'. She cut and edited her films herself or edited entirely 'in camera', varying her approach according to her given topic. *Napkins* is edited in camera while *Thorndon* (1975) was edited by splicing. Her films are largely hand held, fragmentary, and silent—elements that Whyte suggests combine to remind the viewer that they are watching an authored construction. The silence distances the viewer, while the embodied use of the camera, which shakes and jolts is in opposition to its use to create a cinematic illusion.<sup>97</sup> This non-linear and fragmentary imagery which moves from close-up abstract forms to wide representational shots has been self-described as 'visual poetry' by Paul. Her body is present also in the works—her 'camera eye' or embodied eye which pivots between subject and peers though curtained window frames makes no attempt to hide herself as author, allowing her audience to reflect on the means of production. Whyte notes that without the reassuring guidance and resolution of traditional narrative film structure the audience becomes active in the production of meaning, citing that Kuhn saw that there are several ways of making an audience aware of their role in producing meaning—one of which is "The 'feminine', 'open' or 'poetic' model of discourse."<sup>98</sup> According to Whyte, the more abstract a film becomes, "the more a spectator has to construct meaning for themselves from the fragments of things *seen*."<sup>99</sup>

### Kathy Dudding (1961-2010)

Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Wellington based artist and filmmaker Kathy Dudding made 12 significant moving image works on both film and video between 1983 and her death in 2010. Her work intersects with central themes in my research as she primarily used the long form essay film and indicated family and identity as being primary concerns in both her personal and professional lives. She often featured or referred to members of her family in her films, such as in *Hey Daisy*, the semi-autobiographical *Smash Dupe* (1985), *The Return* (2008), and *Asylum Pieces* (2010). Dudding's films

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<sup>95</sup> Laura U. Marks, and Dana Polan eds. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. (Duke: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>96</sup> Whyte, *A Place for Shadows*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 35-36.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

are experimental documentaries and film essays, all filtered through the lens of personal experience. Dudding was interested in the dialogue between text and image, and how these elements functioned in her films. The medium of film best suited her desire to implement and weave unique, layered, and complex stories—which was also attested to by many film critics and supporters.<sup>100</sup> These were often micro histories of a site, interwoven with autobiographical stories, and larger social commentary. Dudding completed her undergraduate degree in film and a Master of Fine Arts in Aotearoa before spending time abroad in Paris, where she became interested in Surrealism and developed a social and political consciousness that would later emerge within her films.<sup>101</sup>

In her film *Asylum Pieces* Dudding creates a 75-minute work focused around the death of her partner by suicide. The opening images feature the abandoned architecture of a Porirua psychiatric institution referencing a photographic project undertaken by her partner before his death after a long period of depression. The film proceeds to fold in a disquieting history of the current and former political landscape of mental health in New Zealand, and the lived experience of former residents. The film uses archival footage, Dudding's own footage comprising long, stationary camera shots, and voice over—the voices being those of actors. It also included an animated sequence made by Euan Frizzell. Stark lingering images of landscape and the architecture of the asylums is interwoven and contrasted with the transcendental Japanese concept of Wabi Sabi and the eighteenth-century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etchings of imaginary prisons. Martin Rumsby states of this juxtaposition in the film that "The etchings appear as the prisons within the labyrinths of self. Of a self that cannot reconcile itself with the demands of society, or a society which cannot quite meet the needs of its citizens."<sup>102</sup> Writer Brannavan Gnanalingam in a 2010 article published in *The Lumiere Reader* describes Dudding's methods:

Dudding's films feature striking juxtapositions between their visual and aural elements; unlike many contemporary documentary makers, she creates space between image and sound for an audience to interpret the film [...] Through contemplative imagery and the nuanced merging of personal and official narratives, Dudding powerfully chronicles the effects of official policies towards mental health on individuals.<sup>103</sup>

Dudding stated that her own environment was pervasive in her work, and that having spent a number of years working at The New Zealand Film Archive, Ngā Taonga, she had watched thousands of experimental New Zealand films, which influenced her practice—and that she also recognised elements of the *Cinema of Unease* in her work.<sup>104</sup> *Cinema of Unease: a Personal Journey* (1995), is a

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<sup>100</sup> Bernard Carpinter, "Poetic Director Nourished Culture," *The Dominion Post*, August 29 2010, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/obituaries/4071357/Poetic-director-nourished-culture>

<sup>101</sup> Martin Rumsby, "Before," *Illusions: a New Zealand magazine of film, television and theatre criticism* 35 (2003), 22.

<sup>102</sup> Martin Rumsby, "Genres," *Illusions: a New Zealand magazine of film, television and theatre criticism* 43/44 (2012), 7.

<sup>103</sup> Brannavan Gnanalingam. "Kathy Dudding on *Asylum Pieces*" *The Lumiere Reader*, July 12 2010, <https://lumiere.net.nz/index.php/kathy-dudding-asylum-pieces/>

<sup>104</sup> "TBI Q&A: Kathy Dudding" *The Big Idea*, June 23 2008, <https://thebigidea.nz/stories/tbi-q-a-kathy-dudding>

documentary written by Sam Neill and directed by Neill and Judy Rymer that takes the form of a personal documentary. Essayistic in nature, Neill narrates an exploration of the history of New Zealand cinema while foregrounding his own journey to New Zealand in the 1950's. Neill states of the social commentary in the documentary that it summarises his sense throughout our cinematic history "of a dark and brooding landscape, where bad things seem in imminent danger of being about to happen".<sup>105</sup> The films to which Neill refers include underlying themes of political power struggle, mental illness, or reflect Aotearoa's search for its own cinematic and cultural identity in 1970-80s cinema. The documentary discusses the films *Sleeping Dogs* (1977), *Bad Blood* (1981), *Carry Me Back* (1982), *Patu!* (1983), and *Vigil* (1984). These films were also highly formative and influential viewing experiences for me as a teenager and young adult. Vincent Ward's *Vigil* in particular, made a lasting impression and was watched many times, along with my favorite film at the age of 16—American filmmaker Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978).

In her earlier film *The Return* (2008), Dudding creates stories within stories as she weaves her grandmother Dorothy Dudding's reminiscences of arriving in Wellington with her own more contemporary experience of the city, mixing archival footage of Wellington filmed between 1908-33 with her own observations. On the making of this film Dudding stated that she began with a written text—the primary component being the story of her great-grandmother's journey to Wellington at the age of three from England, and she subsequently shot and edited her footage around it. The title of the film refers to her grandmother's story of witnessing Halley's comet in 1910, and then later when it returned in 1986. Her grandmother muses on her disappointment in the comet's appearance and lack of spectacle compared to her experience as a child.

As Dudding grandmother speaks, colour views of the Wellington waterfront depict skateboarders bobbing in and out of the frame at night, the illuminated boatsheds on Oriental Parade, or the surreal image of a statue within a park lit by a streetlight. Of her imagery used in the film Dudding stated that "The postcard shot was eschewed—instead I focused on the offbeat moment, the quirky, the strange, the surreal side of the city."<sup>106</sup> *The Return* includes a quote by the French Jesuit Michel de Certeau from his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980). De Certeau's writing combined psychoanalysis, philosophy and social science research and his chapter *Walking in the City*, with its descriptions of contrasting views of the street, inspired Dudding to think about the way she portrayed the city, concerning herself with "the idea of walking or wandering as an act which goes against the regulated nature of the city. It refers also to the city and memory, as in micro-memories—the small moments that get lost in the bigger histories . . . my grandmother's memories, and my own filmic ones."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> "Perfect Strangers 2003", June 13, 2023, *Moria*, <https://www.moriareviews.com/horror/perfect-strangers-2003.htm>

<sup>106</sup> "TBI Q&A: Kathy Dudding" *The Big Idea*, June 23 2008, <https://thebigidea.nz/stories/tbi-q-a-kathy-dudding>

<sup>107</sup> "Walks in the Wind with Grandmother", *Stuff*, January 3, 2009, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/short-film-season/521209/Walks-in-the-wind-with-grandmother>

My interest in Dudding and the resonance her work holds for my own project comes from her nuanced consideration of the essay film form, the Aotearoa-based context in which she worked, and the richly varied themes and concepts she explored through her methodology of 16mm montaged vignettes. She was also a mother, but said she preferred not to take on any particular label, instead, a “string of things”, filmmaker, video artist, writer, poet, archivist, teacher, mother, and granddaughter determined her make up.

In 2001 Dudding made the film *Lily in the House of Lipsticks*, which marked her return to filmmaking after ten years of raising her daughter, working part-time jobs, and studying at university. During her career she was a Fulbright Scholarship recipient, and her works were exhibited, published, and collected. She was also engaged in a research cluster called *Wandering Women and the Screen*. Her two feature length films are long-form essay films that incorporate found archival footage, largely drawing upon material she had researched and sourced while working at Ngā Taonga—and voice over either in the form of recorded conversation or scripted dialogue or spoken poems. In these ways Dudding’s films are very different to my own, however her use of non-linear juxtapositions of image and text involves similar methods. The text becomes a prompt for foreshowing and allusion rather than a literal script. In *The Return*, while Dudding’s grandmother talks about conscription for World War Two, the weight of what she is referencing—the reality of families separated, is paired with archival footage of schoolgirls practicing gymnastics, a reference to life going on for those not called into service. She was also interested in the alternative views of her subjects, moving from abstraction, the micro, to wider macro views, preferring static framed scenes, which relied on the quality of light, reflection from surfaces, or the movement of subjects in and out of the frame.

## CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image

*CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image* (founded in 2012) is Aotearoa’s largest online forum and hosting site and is directed by writer and curator Mark Williams. CIRCUIT regularly facilitates podcasts, symposia, and articles by artists, writers, and curators covering a diverse range of themes around contemporary artists’ moving image and filmmaking projects. CIRCUIT features and supports a large number of women artists, is committed to the principles of biculturalism and partnership between tangata whenua and tauwiwi that Te Tiriti articulates, and works in partnership with galleries and festivals to distribute films and commission new works. Encouraging distribution and festival inclusion outside of Aotearoa has been a core contribution made by the platform. In 2015 Williams was included in the Writing Women’s Experimental film Histories programme as part of the London Film Festival and presented a paper on the screening featured in the festival, *Joanna Margaret Paul: I am an open window*. The panel was chaired by artist, writer, and teacher Lucy Reynolds and included presentations by Charlotte Proctor and Maud Jaquain. CIRCUIT hosts the work of 188 artists based in Aotearoa, and includes many artists with points of connection to my research, however I have endeavoured to include the moving image examples which resonate most strongly with my own work

and acknowledge that there are limitations to the breath and fullness of my survey imposed by the specific scope of my project.

Horowhenua based artist Leala Falseuge is a member of 7558 Collective, a group of four women who work collaboratively to explore exploring indigenous histories and the strength of whakapapa or genealogical structures. Her 2023 work *Vessel: Dissolution: It's in the milk* is a 5:55 minute long film which is the third iteration of a project which began in 2016 when she was pregnant with twin girls in 2016. Falseuge, who states that her first and primary medium is photography, began the project on Polaroid film as a way of documenting her pregnancy. For the first iteration of the work, which was exhibited at RM Gallery, she reflected on her memories and emotions of the pregnancy and finding herself unexpectedly single, by responding in writing to her images. These responses were written in pencil under the 100 Polaroid images and erased when the work came down. In a second iteration for the exhibition *M/other*, curated by Sarah Hudson and shown at Whakatāne Museum and Arts, the Polaroids were displayed with a revised version of the text reflecting a shifted meaning. *Vessel: Dissolution: It's in the milk*, commissioned for the Masons Screen (on Mason's Lane, Wellington), presents another revisiting of the photographic images, this time reworked in a moving image iteration and accompanied with a voiceover text. Here Falseuge reflects on the time spent in hospital for the month her twins, who were born prematurely, were cared for in the neonatal unit, a time she describes as visceral.

Birth, grief, love, the care provided to her daughters—descriptions of the sounds of the hospital, beeps, breast pumps, the flicking of fluorescent lights, feature in her voiceover and revisit her reflections in spoken word as accompaniment to the imagery and replacement for the written text. The images of the artist's pregnant body in the film float either projected on trays of milk or obscured by dripping and poured milk. The milk takes on the colour and illumination of the soft muted Polaroid images, her body's image, her vessel, joined and bathed in the milk it would later produce. This iteration expands upon the concepts in the previous versions, providing a rich, dense, and moving experience. Falseuge stated of this work that "If people only see a small snippet of the film it will be true to the whole feeling of the film."<sup>108</sup> Falseuge describes her greater practice as being concerned with the everyday, domesticity, motherhood, and caregiving which are autobiographical noting that "We don't see this as much."<sup>109</sup> Along with the very emotional and poetic description of caregiving, Falseuge's film could be described as having a diaristic quality, as the reworking and extending of her pregnancy's documentation became visual prompts to reflect on her insights gained over the six year span of the project.

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<sup>108</sup> Mark Williams and Leala Falseuga, "Visceral Motherhood" March 22, 2023 in *CIRCUIT Cast 11*, produced by CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image, MP3 audio, <https://www.circuit.org.nz/writing-and-podcast/leala-falseuga>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

In 2017, CIRCUIT invited Mercedes Vicente to curate their annual Artist Cinema Commission. Vicente proceeded to work with five New Zealand artists given the provocation of *Thick Cinema*. Each artist was asked to make a short work “[...] examining cinema’s sensorial capabilities and notions of embodiment and experience.”<sup>110</sup> Fiona Amundsen is a photographer and filmmaker who works primarily with the long form film essay and was one of the selected artists. Her approach explores the relationships that an ethical documentary and filmic art practice can foster in the representation of painful historical events. She is interested in “the social responsibility of witnessing...” and describes “... the potential for imagery to perform a kind of visual listening and documentary witnessing of acts of colonial imperial violence, be it historical or not.”<sup>111</sup> Her work for the *Thick Cinema* commission entitled *A Body that Lives* (2017), presents testimony from one of the 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war who escaped from a camp in Cowra, Australia in 1944. Structurally it is arranged in multiple sections, mixing archival footage with interview material from her central survivor Teruo Murakami, along with imagery relating to a memorial garden dedicated to the Japanese soldiers who died during the breakout.

Tāmaki Makaurau-based artist Judy Darragh’s work *POP Ghost* (2004) muses on the nightly ritual of cooking dinner while her young son watches cartoons on television. Darragh states that “This was shot from the kitchen window—the TV screen is reflected in the glass and the image appears outside on the lawn. This was a nightly occurrence as I made dinner for my young son as he watched cartoons. The one second moment repeats endlessly trapped in a time bubble.”<sup>112</sup> Darragh is also co-editor with Imogen Taylor of the online periodical *Femisphere*, which supports and advocates for the visibility of female artists, both contemporary and historical. Among other notable national practitioners are artists Maria O’Connor, who uses the video essay to express literary and philosophical underpinning approaches through critical-poetic writing and filmmaking, and Janine Randerson, whose art practice includes collaborative, site-specific installations based around meteorology, eco-systems and Kaitiaki.

## RM Women’s Moving Image Archive

RM Women’s Moving Image Archive is an initiative associated with RM Gallery and Project Space in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa’s longest running artist led Gallery. Established in 2020, the stated aim of the archive is to address the continued marginalisation of women’s moving image in this country, as “Moving image—in its ephemerality and (apparent) lack of commodity value—often partially falls into oblivion, remaining under-seen, under-researched and largely inaccessible.”<sup>113</sup> The platform

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<sup>110</sup> “The Thickness of Cinema: Collected Interviews and Presentations from the August 2017 CIRCUIT Symposium and Artist Week”, *CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image*, December 11 2017, <https://www.circuit.org.nz/writing-and-podcast/e-book-the-thickness-of-cinema>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> “Judy Darragh POP Ghost (2004)”, *CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image*, April 14 2021, <https://www.circuit.org.nz/film/pop-ghost>

<sup>113</sup> RM Gallery & Project Space, “RM Women’s Moving Image Archive”, April 22, 2021, <http://www.rm.org.nz/movingimagearchive/#about>

offers opportunities for emerging and established artists to deposit and profile their work and it includes several moving image works relevant to my research topic.

Sonja van Kerkhoff uses a diverse range of materials in her art practice including video, film and photographs and works between Aotearoa and the Netherlands. Van Kerkhoff's film *Wrapping for a Marginal Citizen* (1994) a 13:26 long SVHS work is described by the artist as "A quasi-self-portrait of an artist and mother of young children where I use my own art objects as backdrops or elements to complement the narrative."<sup>114</sup> Van Kerkhoff narrates the work using two voices, one described as optimistic and one pessimistic, as her children play with eggs and egg cups and interact with images of her artworks. Images of a cloth appearing repetitively though the video printed with images of a baby and text reading 'it's not place for a baby'. Beaten and broken egg merge with her children's hands over her art objects. Van Kerkhoff lists as her 'actors' 6 children.

Lara Lindsay-Parker works with themes of landscape, performance, body, feminism, and technology. In her work *Sad @ the Beach* (2017), Lindsay-Parker presents a 3-channel video work which "comes from a desire to be reconnected with a previous version of self; an obsolete self."<sup>115</sup> This work was seeded by the discovery of a VHS tape of home movies found abandoned in the rain on the side of the road. The sorrow and nostalgia of this discovery prompted a meditation on the objectifying of both the female body and the obsolete technology. The artist's figure is seated on a beach front, the tide encroaching. Lindsay-Parker describes her work as operating at various levels of seriousness. Here she works on the premise that technology can 'feel' and offers herself up in an empathic manner to the discarded and sodden VHS tape. Lindsay-Parker's 2018 work *Glitch* locates the artist's body in a perpetual 'glitch' motion frozen waist deep in the sea and she self-describes it as an attempt to locate fragmentary trains of thought. Later she is seen floating in the sea 'earthing' in order to stabilise her electrons. Lindsay-Parker states of the work that the train of thought is not always clear to the spectator: "It serves to negotiate and navigate the fruits of my research, my body, my emotions, my subjectivity, and my objectivity."<sup>116</sup> Both of these works by Lindsay-Parker employ long contemplative images, the sea as a metaphor for freedom and disconnection from constraints, of the body and technology—her stated aim "to examine the ways in which female identity is constructed and represented through shifting technological interfaces."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> RM Women's Moving Image Archive, "Sonja van Kerkhoff", April 23, 2021  
<https://www.rm.org.nz/movingimagearchive/sonja-van-kerkhoff/>

<sup>115</sup> RM Women's Moving Image Archive, "Lara Lindsay-Parker", April 29, 2021  
<https://www.rm.org.nz/movingimagearchive/lara-lindsay-parker/>

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

## Women in Photography Aotearoa

Among the many relevant New Zealand based photographic practitioners whose projects have focused on or touched on motherhood and family include Anne Noble, Janet Bayly, Margret Dawson, Fiona Pardington, Deborah Smith, Edith Amituanai, and Ans Westra among others. Many others work between photography and film media including, Marie Shannon, Edith Amituanai, Sarah Hudson, Joyce Campbell, Bridget Reweti, Fiona Amundsen, Natalie Robertson, and Suzanne Tamaki. Anne Noble's project *Ruby's Room* was an early influence on my practice and contains 40 photographs of her daughter's mouth taken between 1998 and 2007. These works explore the unrecorded joys of childhood and mothering at the site of the mouth. As Noble notes: "The mouth that speaks, tastes, smiles, reacts, learns, loves, etc. They celebrate and magnify moments of growing up that are not normally celebrated, and they're deliberately not erotic, not romantic, not ideal, not perfect."<sup>118</sup> Margaret Dawson has often worked with the creation of tableaux and the concept of masquerade, in the referencing or recreating of historical images. In her work *Que Sera Sera* (2013) she employed friends and family as actors and collaborators. Critic Andrew Paul Wood writes: "Thematically Dawson's oeuvre often resembles a record of an amateur performance of an unknown play, or a group of children imitating some mysterious aspect of the adult world they don't quite understand with a combination of naïve awe and workaday practicality."<sup>119</sup> This notion resonated with me as I have included my own children in artworks which they themselves may not be able to fully comprehend as yet.

Women in Photography in NZ & AU, is an Instagram platform based collection curated by photographer Virginia Woods-Jack, who established the site in order to highlight the work of women and non-binary creators. The organisation runs Instagram 'takeovers' where artists can share their work and engage in discussion with others. In February 2023 Woods-Jack curated the group's first in-person exhibition *Susurrations* (which I was included in and is elaborated on in Chapter 2).

## Māori Moving Image

A wide range of practices have been collected together by Melanie Oliver and Bridget Reweti in a curated exhibition and book *Māori Moving Image* (2022), published by Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, the exhibition of which originally opened in 2019 at the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt. Oliver and Reweti described the purpose and process of framing the collection as a desire to celebrate and share appreciation for the more than forty year span of Māori artists using

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<sup>118</sup> Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, "Anne Noble: 'Ruby's room' photographs", May 10 2020, <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/topic/3507>

<sup>119</sup> Andrew Paul Wood, EyeContact, "Margaret Dawson in Christchurch", April 29, 2013, <https://eyecontactmagazine.com/2013/04/margaret-dawson-in-christchurch>

moving image to foreground complex ideas, lived experience, and radical hope.<sup>120</sup> Among the artists featured in the publication are: Lisa Reihana, Rachael Rakena, Ana Iti, Maureen Lander, Maree Mills, 7558 Collective, Donna Campbell, Suzanne Tamaki, Natalie Robertson, Kahurangiariki Smith, Louise Pōtiki Bryant and Nova Paul. The exhibition was designed as a physical archive space, displaying books and articles and hosting dialogical events led by artists that were recorded as a way of acknowledging a prior lack of research and accessible information about the works, ideas, and influences of Māori moving image practitioners. Oliver and Reweti focus their joint thematic writing around the conduciveness of moving images, the ability to record motion and time as particularly applicable to Māori aspherical notions of time as, “[...] starting from the centre and moving in any direction.”<sup>121</sup> As such many of the artists featured in the book’s interviews have worked with an emphasis on Te Ao Māori, while exploring questions of time, language, and identity.

Maree Mills is one of four writers in the publication and contributes an essay entitled “Contemporary Māori Women’s New Media Art Practice” which originally appeared in *The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader* in 2008. Here Mills states that a recent recognition of ‘new old’ way of thinking was driving the use of digital media to communicate Māori paradigms and that “Sharing and the re-articulation of knowledge are required for the culture to remain alive. The old stories as well as new need to be told, and a dialogue regarding their meaning and application in a contemporary world should be fostered.”<sup>122</sup> Mills asserts that Māori women digital artists in particular are at the forefront of reinventing and reclaiming lost narratives, using concepts of manawa whenua (connection to land and underground water), the wharenuī, and whakapapa.<sup>123</sup>

The work *This is Not Dying* (2010) by Nova Paul is particularly relevant to my research as it presents what Oliver and Reweti describe as: “The desire to connect and gift time to her viewers.”<sup>124</sup> Constructed using a 16mm Technicolour separation process, notably used by artist Len Lye, Paul states that the process is very physical and that, “Everything slows down in this space of gathering shots; you step out of ‘measured’ time and into a relational space, responding to the shifts in the environment and in the beings within it.”<sup>125</sup> The 19:25 film locates the everyday settings of Paul’s whānau and whenua, their homes and activities, the familiar spaces of shared memories. Paul’s consideration for her viewers is also reflected in the soundtrack of her film ‘Whakarongo Mai’, an instruction to listen is played by Ben Tawhiti and is one of Paul’s Ngāpuhi anthems—whaka meaning “to bring yourself into a state of rongo or peace, to settle yourself, so you can listen.”<sup>126</sup> Paul is very aware of and deliberately fosters the filmic space and time with its scope for meditation. The making

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<sup>120</sup> Melanie Oliver and Bridget Reweti eds. *Māori Moving Image*, (Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 2022), 7.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>122</sup> Maree Mills, “Contemporary Māori Women’s New Media Art Practice”, in Melanie Oliver and Bridget Reweti eds. *Māori Moving Image*, (Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 2022), 35.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>124</sup> Oliver and Reweti, *Māori Moving Image*, 59.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>126</sup> Oliver and Reweti, *Māori Moving Image*, 61.

visible of this contemplative space by layering and repeating moments of footage is her gift to her whanau and viewers: “For me this process mirrors the wānanga of transforming time into space, the notion of time being circular.”<sup>127</sup>

My desire to make visible not only the inner landscapes of my emotional experience but also the consideration for the lengthy gestation of my film work are concepts that sit adjacent to Paul’s. However the space of the everyday, of noticing, rest, and contemplative experience of time for viewers are elements that I directly desire and hope I can offer in my own film.

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<sup>127</sup> Oliver and Reweti, *Māori Moving Image*, 61

## Chapter 5. The Essay film and Performative Modes Between Still and Moving Image

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### The Essay film, Video Essay and Film Essay: Origins and Definitions

As my moving image work responds in part in its formal and conceptual framing to the category of essay film, it becomes important to differentiate between various genre subcategories, in particular regarding the video essay and film essay which both have comparatively subtle differences and have been the subject of much debate over the last twenty years. As Laura Rascaroli has stated in her significant book *How the Essay Film Thinks*, “The argument of the essay film, I claim, is always also an argument on genre”, and that she seeks in her book “to illustrate the kind of flexibility that will allow us to broaden our concept of this practice and, in turn, to trace the essayistic not within a fixed generic form but within a method of filmic thinking that exists and thrives in gaps.”<sup>128</sup> The current section outlines some of the most commonly agreed upon differences among the three forms, my decision to identify with and use elements of the essay film in my research, and how this aligns with the other branches of the conceptual framework I have employed. Here I look to the scholarship of Laura Rascaroli, Timothy Corrigan, Nora M. Alter and Paul Arthur as significant sources and also reference key practitioners as examples of each of the varying forms of visual essay. Formative women artists working with this form include Agnès Varda and Chantal Akerman.

Somewhat confusingly, in much contemporary theoretical writing the terms video essay, film essay and essay film are used in a broadly interchangeable fashion and there remains much crossover, fluidity, and slipperiness in the definitions of each, with Arthur describing “a self-consciously liminal category.”<sup>129</sup> However, since the early 2000s there has been more effort to tease out the differences among them, largely as the contextual markers of technical advancements and greater dissemination options fuel shifts in wider accessibility of the film medium and its outputs, inclusive of the audience’s access to material, how films are made, and by whom.

Briefly stated, a video essay typically refers to a short form video, no more than 10 mins long that combines found, archival and newly shot footage with music and/or other soundtrack audio and narration. Because of its length it is often favoured as a form within education for analysis of a subject or text. The film essay is a longer form, up to 30 mins long which conforms to more traditional short film storytelling but includes elements of critical analysis. The essay film is a long form work between 30 mins and feature length or even longer and is used most often to explore layered and complex

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<sup>128</sup> Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Arthur, “Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore,” *Film Comment* vol. 39, no. 1 (2003), 59.

ideas and themes from a personal and subjective 'one author voice' point of view. It is described as being an 'in-between' hybrid form which blends montage, non-linear narrative, documentary and avant-garde aesthetics.<sup>130</sup> All of these approaches have been described as art forms in their own right.

All of these forms have also been described as being experimental in one way or another, however it is worth noting here that experimental film which has been an extensively studied and theorised genre was developing alongside essayistic film practices but it is not the focus of my research, although there are some crossovers present. Experimental film emerged from early cross-pollination with music, theatre, and dance—the result of a desire to offer interpretive alternatives to traditional documentary or recordings of these temporal performing arts—a 'visualising' of avant-garde music, for example. But it is also as a means to its own end, a trans-disciplinary form. Developing in the early 1970s, video art—although crossing over somewhat with experimental film—has roots in the social and political activism in Europe and America during the late fifties to mid-sixties and as a genre drew on a diverse range of art movements and theoretical ideas including Fluxus, Pop Art, Minimalism, body art and performance, and other such forms that embraced non-commodifiable art practice.<sup>131</sup> It was often considered as a temporal and ephemeral statement, a reaction against the commercialisation of the art market. Experimental documentary film, a relatively new category emerging over the last twenty years with shifting definitions does have a relationship to the essay film form. I will elaborate on this further in a later section as I draw connections between conceptual photographic documentary and experimental documentary film.

Firstly to the essay film, as it is widely agreed that the film essay and later video essay take their lineage from the essay film which has existed as a form, if not explicitly called 'essayistic', since 1930.<sup>132</sup> Rascaroli states that it was the work of the French New Wave artists and film makers of the 1950s and 1960s which saw the development and categorisation of this new reflexive and experimental form of non-fiction film making called the essay film. She cites the influential 1969 manifesto of *Third Cinema*, in which Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino established the use of the term and described the essay film "as one of the privileged forms for the realization of a revolutionary, anticolonialist, anticapitalist filmmaking practice"<sup>133</sup>. Among practitioners associated with the film essays of French New Wave are Alain Resnais (1922-2014), Jean-Luc Godard (1930-2022), Jacques Demy (1931-90), Agnès Varda (1928-2019), and Chris Marker (1921-2012). Marker is most well-known for defining and using the film essay form with renowned films such as *La jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1983). However it is Godard who is credited as key in the development of theory and

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<sup>130</sup> Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera : Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, (New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), 21

<sup>131</sup> Johanna Mechen, "Stepping into Social Waters: Photography Performed as Moving Image", 23.

<sup>132</sup> Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, 1.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

criticism of the essay film with both his film works and writings on cinema. He challenged traditional conventions of storytelling and critique with his unique and self-referential style.

As 'essay' is of course a literary term, the 'essay film' takes its lineage from literature and this origin is best articulated by Alter as she writes in reference to French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne's formulations on the essay which can be traced to his 1580 volume *Essais*: "'To essay' means 'to weigh,' as well as 'to attempt,' suggesting an open-ended, evaluative search. But this objective search is haunted and constrained by the presence of individual subjectivity."<sup>134</sup> And further to this, "By 'essay,' Montaigne meant.[...] It was a wide-ranging form of cognitive perambulation that reflected upon fundamental questions of life and human frailty, tensions and overlaps between 'fact' and 'fiction'"<sup>135</sup>. Arthur has proposed that the literary essay emerged as a leading non-fiction form for both intellectual and art innovation which meshed personal, subjective and social history and therefore "one way to think about the essay film is as a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde and art film impulses."<sup>136</sup> And the essay "offers a range of politically charged visions uniquely able to blend abstract ideas with concrete realities, the general case with specific notations of human lived experience."<sup>137</sup>

Rascaroli examines problems and definitions raised by the proliferation of new forms of personal documentary in the essay film.<sup>138</sup> From a basis in scholarship of film and literature, Rascaroli negotiates difficulties and tensions that arise from this artistically innovative form which is neither fiction or non-fiction, but combines strands of both. She attempts to trace and evaluate existing definitions of the film essay from its roots in literary philosophy, encountering both vague and sweeping ideas of what the essay 'is'. She cites Theodor Adorno and Georg Lukács, two significant Marxist literary theorists who both describe the essay as "indeterminate, open, and ultimately, indefinable"—according to Adorno "the essay's innermost formal law is heresy."<sup>139</sup> The historic characterisation of the essay notes its tendency to be fragmentary, digressionary, and complex in composition: "As José Moure argued, the fact that we resort to a literary term such as "essay" points to the difficulty that we experience when attempting to categorize certain unclassifiable films."<sup>140</sup> Essays however do have a governing form as pointed out by Arthur in reference to the writings of Samuel Johnson and "are process-orientated with rhetorical journeys in which neither an exact route or final destination are completely spelled out."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Nora Alter, "Memory Essays," in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, Ursula Biemann, ed. (Vienna: Springer, 2003), 12.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>136</sup> Arthur, "Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore," 62.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>138</sup> Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments." *Framework* vol. 49, No. 2 (2008), 24.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>141</sup> Arthur "Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore," 60.

The video essay has primarily been described as short form (3-10 minutes), frequently incorporating poetry, such as in the video works of short story author and poet John Bresland, who has also written about the origins of the video essay. Stucky-French quotes Breland on the rise of the form's use: "Today, to make a small-scale personal film, you can shoot the thing on an inexpensive digital camera and upload it to any number of free video sharing sites. You can shoot and edit video, compelling video, on a cell phone."<sup>142</sup> As a lecturer at Florida State University, Stuckey-French notes that video essays have begun to appear in both literature and essay-writing courses: "students are creating video essays in new, interdisciplinary programs that bring together editing, writing, rhetoric, and digital and media studies."<sup>143</sup> The video essay is a term also applicable to a form adopted by visual anthropology. A branch of social anthropology, visual anthropology has employed the video essay to describe what is essentially a visual documentation of a written form of research. It allows the ability to cross language boundaries and offer accessibility of findings to the groups and cultures portrayed—and an acknowledgement of the subject as viewer. Advancements in technology and new media have expanded the video essay's popularity as a form to include research presentations by educators, scientists, historians, ecologists, and political activists. Sarah Pink defines interdisciplinary agendas around the photographic in ethnographic writing, and describes the video essay as a contemporary approach which is more reflexive than traditional ethnographic practice, one which acknowledges subjectivity and experience.<sup>144</sup>

A key practitioner and video essay theorist is the Swiss artist Ursula Biemann. In the book *Stuff it: The video essay in the digital age*, (2003), to which Biemann contributed and served as editor, she describes the video essay as difficult to crystallise, 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>145</sup> Jörg Huber, another *Stuff It* contributor, writes: "Essayist video works are interesting exactly because of the way in which they take their point of departure from the perception of things and phenomena—from a perception which marks the specific ways and opportunities of everyday experience, of being-in-the-world, of opening the world."<sup>146</sup>

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>147</sup>, but it is theorist Huber who demonstrates most clearly the relevance that the video essay has to art practice, and its resonance with the roots I claim in my research that branch from photography. Huber states, while also differentiating the video essay from traditional formalist ideas

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<sup>142</sup> Ned Stuckey-French, "The Video Essay." *American Book Review*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2012), 14-15.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>144</sup> Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), 165.

<sup>145</sup> Ursula Biemann, ed. *Stuff it: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*. (Vienna: Springer, 2003), 8.

<sup>146</sup> Jörg Huber, "Video-Essayism: On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional," 94.

<sup>147</sup> Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 20.

around the concrete pre-visualisation of early associations with the medium, that:

the author's significance is not in being an agent 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>148</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 which engages the theory of transitionality. Transitionality can be defined as a deliberate shift or development, which embodies purposefulness in a manner beyond that of merely asserting a change or difference.<sup>149</sup> With specific relation to my own work this addresses in-camera manipulation and construction along with the restaging of my research and personal experience in a self-referential manner. In his chapter *On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional* (2003), Huber applies this theory to the complexity of the video essay and its seemingly radical openness. He states a crucial point here, that the seemingly freeform quality implied within the video essay should not be taken 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>150</sup> Huber further emphasises 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>151</sup>

## Subjectivity and The Personal Camera

Rascaroli has also extensively examined subjectivity as a defining element of the essay film in her book *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (2009). Here she discusses history, theory, and practice with a focus on three subcategories of the personal camera: the diary film, the notebook film and the self-portrait film. The examples that she cites in her research have crossovers and share lineage with other filmic traditions, namely the personal cinema of the avant-gardes, that of auteur and art cinema and first person documentary. The inclusion here of a short discussion of the diary film is by way of identifying its specifically autobiographical nature and pointing to yet another identifying feature of my doctoral film. As Rascaroli points out, whereas essay films are

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<sup>148</sup> Huber, "Video-Essayism: On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional," 94.

<sup>149</sup> Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 13.

<sup>150</sup> Huber, "Video-Essayism: On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional," 94.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

necessarily subjective and personal, they may not in fact be autobiographical, diaristic or self-portraits.<sup>152</sup> The diary, much like the essay film, has resisted categorisation and often associated with ordinariness and the banality of everyday existence—an in-between genre which may include verbal and non-verbal materials such as poems and photographs.<sup>153</sup> Cited by Rascaroli and worth quoting at length here is a description of the diary by Rachael Langford and Russell West, from *Introduction: Diaries and Margins* (1999):

The diary, as an uncertain genre uneasily balanced between literature and historical writing, between the spontaneity of the reportage and the reflectiveness of the crafted text, between selfhood and events, between subjectivity and objectivity, between the private and the public, constantly disturbs attempts to summarise its characteristics within formalised boundaries.<sup>154</sup>

In the same way as autotheoretical life-writing differs from temporal distance or autobiographical memoirs, the diary is formed simultaneously in real time with life events and does not anticipate its own conclusion.<sup>155</sup> In this way the diary stays ‘in the moment’, drawing in anything and everything for consideration—as has been the case in the diaries and journals I have kept throughout my doctoral projects and from which I have drawn material and devised ‘scores’ and parameters. Rascaroli suggests that the diary film differs from its unedited literary counterpart as it is twice in the present—at the time of recording and then at the ‘now’ of contemplation and reflection. Linear and non-linear narrative presentation can further allude to the temporal gaps between filming and editing undertaken in post-production. For even as a diary may be conceived for personal use and reflection, there is still the potential for a ‘reader’— just as a number of Joanna Margaret Paul’s films were intended as ‘letters’ to her sister or edited in camera linear entries (as was the case with *Thorndon* (1975), the making of any autobiographical work involves a ‘performance of the self’: “The act of switching on a camera immediately produces a (future) audience, even if an ‘intimate’ one.”<sup>156</sup>

## Performative Modes Between Still and Moving Image

My primary interest in considering modes of performance and performativity in my film work emerges from their connection to earlier conceptual photography and the relationship I claim that my moving image research has to such a lineage. Important also is the way the varying modes of performativity I will describe as relevant collect to form a performance of the self as noted by Rascaroli when talking about autobiographical film and diary practices. I will outline here aspects of connectivity to forms of conceptual photographic documentary-style practices and certain examples of performativity in visual

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<sup>152</sup> Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera : Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, 106.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

art as these intersect with my practice-based doctoral research. I will then expand this to a discussion of current scholarship around the relationships between still and moving image practices which fall within the scope of my research in the visual arts.

Notable scholarship around performance and performativity has been provided by a number of theorists including J.L. Austin (providing a formative theory of the “performative utterance”) and Liz Kotz (around conceptual art practices) and has been rearticulated by others such as Margaret Iversen to more specifically explain its relationship to photography—where it is primarily used to describe instructional in photographic practice as it emerged with the photoconceptualist turn of the 1960s. Others who have expanded upon these ideas include Jeff Wall, David Green, and Joanna Lowry. Kotz, in her 2005 essay *Language between performance and photography*, argues that efforts to theorise conceptual art “have struggled to determine the movement’s relationship to the linguistic, poetic, and performative practices associated with the prior movements of Happenings and Fluxus.”<sup>157</sup>

Kotz addresses the use of language in conceptual art as it emerges from but also parts with object based processes and places it in a larger historic contextual turn which unfolded from a profusion of text-based scores, instructions and performance notations that surrounded the Happening and Fluxus movement.<sup>158</sup> And further, that this turn “occurs alongside a pervasive logic structuring 1960s artistic production, in which a ‘general’ template or idea generates multiple ‘specific’ realisations, which can take the form of performative acts, sculptural objects, photographic documents, or linguistic statements.”<sup>159</sup> Iversen takes up what she interprets as an understanding which can be taken from Kotz here, “that the score or instruction governs the individual utterance or performance.”<sup>160</sup>

On the difference between performance and performativity, Iversen points to performance theorist Peggy Phelan’s definition of performance “as a unique and spontaneous event in the present tense that cannot be repeated or adequately captured on film or video.”<sup>161</sup> Performativity on the other hand is used to describe a repeated gesture without the site-specificity of a temporal performance. Iversen in her 2009 chapter *Auto-Maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography*, uses ‘performativity’ to characterise the instructional way some conceptual photographers work, stating: “Performative photography begins with an instruction or rule which is followed through with a performance.”<sup>162</sup> She uses as an example the production of a series of books by Ed Ruscha, who was heavily influenced by Marcel Duchamp’s 1913-14 works *3 Standard Stoppages*, with particular reference to Ruscha’s 1963 series *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. Here Ruscha defined the parameters of his project with the

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<sup>157</sup> Liz. Kotz, “Language between Performance and Photography.” *October* 111 (2005), 3.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>160</sup> Margaret. Iversen, “Auto-Maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography,” *Art History*, vol. 32, no. 5 (2009), 838.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 839.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 839.

instruction: to drive from the city to his parents' house in Los Angeles, along Route 66, photographing every gas station.

Iversen implies in her chapter that the performative effect makes something happen rather than describes a given state of affairs and thus displaces self-expression, that “performativity involves the partial abdication of the authorial control.”<sup>163</sup> Duchamp’s “experiment” in *3 Standard Stoppages*, began with an instruction to drop a length of thread from a prescribed height to render a shape which is an approximation of the length, invoking what he called “canned chance”—an instructional gesture laid out with a set of text based rules that rendered a variety of different outcomes. A similar project to *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* also undertaken by Ruscha saw him employing an aerial pilot to fly over Los Angeles on a Sunday photographing empty car parking lots. From these, Ruscha considered the information not seen from the ground, such as the herringbone patterns left in the absence of cars and the darker oil stains in some areas, mapping the most popular parking spaces.

The past twenty years has seen a further proliferation of photographers and video artists working in this manner, among them the American artist Taryn Simon whose work concerns the public/private divide and includes intensive research and text panels to foreground the concept of the documentary premise of each series. Her 2009 work *Contraband*, for example, required her to work in a set timeframe for five days at JFK airport photographing every forbidden and confiscated item removed from passengers by border control. It was then presented in both an exhibition and book which was laid out in a manner to highlight the rhythms and flows of the five 24-hour cycles. British artist Tacita Dean’s film *Green Ray* (2001) aligns the timing of the setting sun to the length of a roll of 16mm film in order to catch the green ray—the last and slowest on the colour spectrum to refract and bend below the horizon. After training as a painter, Dean has worked with photography, installation, and (primarily) analogue film. Her 1997 works *Seabirds (Magnetic)* and *Mosquito (Magnetic)* concertedly employ units and measures of observation, recurring themes throughout her practice. Here lengths of magnetic tape were cut and installed in lengths based on the duration of the sound recordings—the calls of seabirds and the much longer in length buzzing of a mosquito.

In their 2003 chapter “From presence to the performative: rethinking photographic indexicality”, co-authors David Green and Joanna Lowry, drawing upon earlier writings of C. S. Peirce on semiotics, both challenge and extend on the concept that a photograph can only be a trace and consigned to the ‘what has been’ of memory, death, and mourning. In fact, they state that the trace or inscription made is not because light happened to capture an image at that instant, but because it was taken. “The very act of photographing, as a kind of performative gesture which points to an event in the world, as a form of designation that draws reality into the image field, is thus itself a form of indexicality.”<sup>164</sup> Green

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 840.

<sup>164</sup> David Green and Joanna Lowry, “From Presence to the Performative: Rethinking Photographic Indexicality,” in *Where is the Photograph*, David Green ed. (Brighton: Photoworks/ Photoforum, 2003), 48.

and Lowry point to the artists of the 1970s-80s such as Jeff Wall, who helped articulate key concepts around photography's status within conceptual art practices. It was Wall who first signaled Ruscha as a precedent in his 1995 article "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art". Systematic visual documentation devised in advance of shooting and made seemingly without consideration to artistic details such as lens lengths, quality of the light, time of day, as with Ruscha's *Twentysix Gas Stations* or *Every Building on Sunset Strip, Los Angeles* (1966), were in fact a reaction to and mockery of the very principles of pre-photoconceptual views about the medium: "less to do with presenting photographic documentation as art and more to do with a self-conscious 'parody' of the photograph's use as record."<sup>165</sup>

The experience of making an image is at the heart of the notion of photographing as a performative gesture unto itself. Beyond its processes of recording what was to be documented—Green and Lowry again, state—it provided an actual arena in which it was to be acted out.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore there is a complex interdependency between event and record: "the photographs themselves were not merely the residue of that process but constituted its actual realization."<sup>167</sup> Wall in an adjacent articulation of this idea says, "A photograph therefore shows its subject by means of showing what experience is like; in that sense it provides 'an experience of experience'."<sup>168</sup> As a reference point for my research, performativity described in this manner is significant for the contextualisation of my work in the history of conceptually-driven lens based practices. However, I will signal here that for me the subjectivity central to my project and the displacement of self-expression that instructional modes are often characterised as displaying are not mutually exclusive.

In my doctoral research performativity is relevant in three ways: firstly, by means of the instructional parameters my work is encompassed within: its locations, the four-year timeframe, and my role as a self-producer of the work. Secondly, by the act of choosing material to record an act or gesture which is pointing to something—drawing something from one world into another.<sup>169</sup> This material comes about from observing and noting experiences, actions, and phenomena which form my own kind of 'score'—which is self-curated from diaristic and autobiographic material. I am then recreating these immediately or at a later stage for the camera. In this sense I am also performing a version of my experience of mothering than can be likened to Butler's interpretation of gender performance, but which subverts stereo-typical notions of what this repetitious labour might 'look' like. Thirdly, these reconstructions involve the direction by me of the re-enactment of activities by my children. There is something that sits between performativity and a performance here because the re-enactments are based on something that has already been done and seen by me and the performers are 'social actors' albeit that they are 'posing' as themselves. Here employing in-camera manipulations and

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<sup>165</sup> Green and Lowry, "From Presence to the Performative: Rethinking Photographic Indexicality," 49.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>168</sup> Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in Ann Goldstein and Ann Rorimer, eds. *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965-1975*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 44.

<sup>169</sup> Green and Lowry, "From Presence to the Performative: Rethinking Photographic Indexicality," 48.

constructions to create imagery that is included in the form of making sets or mise en scène in which to stage objects—and offers connections to the use of processes that reference both theater and the cinematic in photographic practices, such as the staged performances for the camera by artists including Gregory Crewdson, Jeff Wall, and Cindy Sherman.

David Company in his writing on the relationship between still and moving images, has critiqued what he calls Christian Metz's "brilliant" 1985 essay "Photography and Fetish", pointing out however that the argument Metz constructs as he compares the two media focuses on film largely in its popular narrative form and photography with reference to the very socially specific domestic snapshot.<sup>170</sup> Company goes on to say that "simple binary contrasts can overlook the fact that crossover between media can be much more radically hybrid."<sup>171</sup> One of his particular interests mapped out in his 2006 book *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image* is that of a different binary, that of acting and posing. This becomes particularly relevant to the acts of performance involved with restaging, and reenacting. Restaging in the context of my film means taking an object or a scene which has been noted or part of my "score" and filming it once again. One example is the bone pictured within the empty pool. I have placed this in the shallow water to film it with the reflections of sheets on the washing line. In an earlier shoot, the white sheets were already on the line, and I filmed them blowing in the wind. For the bone in pool shoot, I restaged this. Re-enacting involved the staging of a person and an action. My daughter re-enacts playing with the bone in the nasturtium leaves. I have asked her to do this for the camera, and I am directing her but not so specifically that the awkwardness and 'pretending' is wholly removed from the feel of the image. She is not an actor as such, but instead she is repeating and reenacting something she has previously done.

Performance and performance art modes as diverse and crossing categorisations as they are understood to do within the fields of fine art do not explicitly constitute a branch of my conceptual framework. Instead, I look to the elements of performativity previously outlined, that of an instruction carried out based on a set of parameters and the performative aspects of re-staging and re-enactment. These elements can be framed as 'something that has come before' as opposed to something which is conceived, improvised or scripted as a site-specific temporal artwork which may or may not have an audience present and may or may not be recorded or documented in some way. I will note also that my research doesn't in any significant way enter into scholarship around photography and moving images as documentation of performance art and indeed the recognition of this as an art practice unto itself.

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<sup>170</sup> David Company, "Posing, Acting, Photography." in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, David Green, and Joanna Lowry eds. (Photoforum and Photoworks, 2006), 96.

<sup>171</sup> David Company, "Posing, Acting, Photography." 96.

I do however reference performance which takes the form of experiments involving recording myself performing various tasks or actions. An example being a film shoot that I planned to extend the ways of considering the meanings of objects and scenes which seemed to visualise the invisible—those views which could not easily be obtained: looking from above via a drone, underneath objects, or in water, as with my image of blood in a tank of water, visualising its return to the earth via a muddy hole dug for placenta burial. The placenta burying incidentally, *had* come before in a manner of speaking as this was the second burial—the first being the whenua tree planting for my son 17 years before and well outside of the immediate parameters for my project. My placenta from the birth of my daughter, that last physical conjoined piece of the both of us, sat in the freezer for over a decade and was buried at the beginning of my doctoral project.

As I sought to look at my recurrent motifs from all sides, the pool from above, the bottom of the dry pool, the pool circle with its suffocated grass, I imagined myself digging down through the earth's layers, under the pool circle around the neat border between live and dead grass. I took a kitchen knife, set up my camera, asked my daughter to stand in for me while I framed the scene. I cut a deep, semi-circular slit in the ground and peeled back a flap of the ground. The violence of this act surprised me in watching the footage. I had done something to the land that I didn't intend. It was significant to me at the time also because just prior to this shoot, my daughter had told me she didn't want to be in any further shoots for the film. This to me became a kind of "handing over" then—her hands disappeared so mine took their place. I discounted the shoot from inclusion due to such violence. Later, towards the end of my filming my son had gender affirming chest reconstruction surgery and there was a great sense of relief and pride that this was happening. However, in the lead up to the operation and the considerable amount of anxiety I had about how well this would go, I could not bring myself to watch this piece of footage and I removed it from the timeline.

## Chapter 6. Reflections, Insights and Conclusion

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The purpose of this concluding section is to address the contribution my doctoral research has made within my field and to reflect on several of the insights I have gained via the process of creating the essay film. Here I 'hold' an autotheoretical voice stylistically while I further considering my methods and their effectiveness for my project, in addition to foregrounding the pre-project context and the ways my research questions and aims have been addressed at this point.

As my project has shifted and developed, strategies and parameters emerged which firmed the edges of my enquiry and helped in focusing my attention towards a very personal expression of the invisible emotional landscape of this period of my artistic life. Contextualised and framed in part by a performative and autotheoretical approach, my emphasis was on the personal, subjective, critically engaged, reflective and fluid. The four years within which the project sits formed the duration of time I drew on to make the work, to the intentional limiting of a wider 'remembering' of all my emotional and physical maternal labour, and as such the responses and renderings of 'scenes' and enactments in my film work have been made in a very specific time and place within a particular, comparatively brief timeline of socio-political activity in Aotearoa. The socio-political, economic and environmental concerns which hold representation in my essay film are those which appear to me as the most acute, and are fascinating, perplexing or contradictory in some way. I was informed by the events and issues that sparked conversation in our household; those that my teenage children became aware of and noted as I talked about my own observations and reasoning behind staging and filming recurring motifs.

We had long conversations about the nearby housing development and its use of artificial grass. We talked about the history of cultivated lawns, the norms, and traditions of urban garden spaces as tidy cultivated plots of mowed grass, the life span of plastics, and the ways in which housing developers claimed to be offsetting carbon emissions. Alongside this my children became interested and involved with climate rallies in support of Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, who began her school climate strikes in 2018. The undercurrents of other threats to their personal and wider environmental safety were also beginning to register on their radar.

Aotearoa has reeled in the current post-pandemic environment, as has much of our world, the resulting societal and political uncertainty has seen extreme reactions in the form of a rise in conspiracy theories around the management of the New Zealand government's virus response and the gender-based backlash and death threats directed towards then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the first woman to give birth while in office. Add to this such matters as the rising costs of living and

house prices, and the increasing devaluation of the human resources in our universities, rising crime and assaults and an increase in reported domestic abuses. Only a few years earlier, in 2016, The United States of America elected Donald Trump as President, even after his history of boasting about groping women was revealed. In 2017 the Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexual assault thus re-igniting the phrase #MeToo, which was originally coined by social activist Tarana Burke in 2006 as a way of empowering and removing shame from the victims of sexual harassment. On January the 21st 2017, all of the main centres in Aotearoa hosted women's rights marches to coincide with the Trump inauguration, his party having already signalled the dialling back of reproductive rights.

In June 2022 the landmark Roe v. Wade US Supreme Court case of 1973 which ruled that the constitutional right to access abortion be protected, was overturned. Both my children and partner attended the Wellington march—I carried a placard which read 'We shall Overcomb', a reference to Trump's hair, and somewhat comically also to my own at the time. The week that Trump was elected in November 2016, a large earthquake hit Kaikōura in the South Island. Widely felt, our house suffered a small amount of damage and a tsunami warning saw us hauling the kids out of bed and walking up the riser with most of our suburbs other residents. The following day Lower Hutt was hit by the worst flooding in over a decade and the schools were closed. My daughter has nicknamed this week 'disaster week'. It marked a very significant point for her—and me as witness to her concerns, of feeling unsafe for a myriad of reasons. The flooding throughout the country, a direct result of global climate change has only intensified over the past eight years.

This foregrounding of the immediate historical events prior to the doctoral project is important, just as the long gestational development of the essay film produced during the research. In addition to the contexts which led me to frame my own lived experience, the larger fears and challenges to gender rights, gender identity, and environmental safety for my children have been brewing and pushing their way to the forefront of my consciousness. It is important too that this context be acknowledged in order to address questions about what is and isn't explicitly in the film work. Within a contemporary feminist framework where I am foregrounding subjectivity and maternal experience there are many points that resonate historically with first and second wave feminist movements—third wave feminists, the Generation X'ers to whom I belong have generally been recognised as those holding greater economic power, albeit in a Eurocentric and American-centric context. The landscape I move through and raise my children in is present day Aotearoa albeit with the American political landscape prominent in our media. Access to health, maternity and childcare, greater employment opportunities, addressing pay disparities, and LGBTQI rights are issues that were advanced by second wave feminists on the heels of first wave equality struggles to secure voting rights, but are still embattled. Gender identity and the associated human rights, reproductive rights, along with sexual safety, consent and the constant media reports of rape in our culture feel alarmingly ever present.

How then have I made a work underpinned by the fears about the world my children are growing into? The central premise of the project—can an autotheoretical and maternal experience in the domestic space offer an opportunity to experience ‘transitional phenomena’ conducive to forming an artwork and the articulation of a unique artistic process?—has been posed in this way to indicate the deliberate creation of, and interaction with an environment of deep noticing and reflection in which to make my work. The transitional phenomena and potential spaces described by Townsend, Wright and Ogden happen in the play with objects and interaction with spaces formed after revisiting and contemplation, which produce moments of breakthrough and understanding in my work, and can only be afforded by the *time* taken to consider my process and discoveries. This space is my domestic landscape and is not divorced from the actions of the everyday, but closely interwoven and interconnected with them.

This practice-based doctoral research is less ‘about’ contextual issues and themes, but more the result of an attempt to visually investigate the spaces between the tumultuous peaks of emotional care—the calm, cyclical, repetitious, still, and reflective gaps the psyche presents as a means to combat disquiet and the fear of annihilation. It is to offer an antidote to the intensity of the experiences and transitions I am living through at this time—while simultaneously alluding to these experiences in an intentionally non-literal and non-linear fashion. The insistency I have maintained to work in a largely self-imposed and comparatively isolated way has not meant that I am unaware of the world around me or the struggles of women at a similar stage of life with similar demands of the unique young people in their care.

What I have done is to insist that the period of time I have been given to make a doctoral project is precious. I have made the space to work in a way that has caused financial strain, careful not to over commit to teaching, and other employment that would squeeze the time I need to both create work and reflect upon it. The projects undertaken outside of my PhD study have been carefully chosen and managed. In line with my guiding ethos, I have continued to prioritise the care and needs of my family and staunchly rebuff the frequent comments made to my partner, “I bet you’ll be glad when she’s finished her study”, as if there has been a significant failing in the expected attention and duties afforded my family—which has not been the case.

What is mostly absent from my essay film is the characteristic imagery of ‘typical’ domestic labour. Piles of dishes, grocery shopping, cleaning of bathrooms, endless meal preparation, folding of laundry, organising of transport, navigation of homework, and negotiation of the social calendars of my children. These are seemingly invisible, despite still comprising a large amount of my physical and mental labour and their absence may appear to negate this aspect of parenting in a contradictory and devaluing manner. However, I do this as a way of pointing to the different stage of life I am in—the physical needs diminishing but the emotional needs of my children increasing. The intensity of my experience of facilitating and supporting the medical transition of my son, with its research, emails,

doctors, and specialists appointments at a time when legislation around accessing these health services were only beginning to be developed in this country, has been a pervasive strand of my emotional labour, in a way that I could not have imagined while my son was a baby. At that time the piles of washing, nappies and toys felt like my whole existence. In this way my project works somewhat differently in its representations of maternal experience—i.e.: there are no images of my breast feeding or the soothing of a crying child.

One significant moment of discovery during my project came when I acknowledged my own state of menopause and realised my son and I were on our separate but parallel hormonal journeys. I sought to acknowledge this with imagery of my placenta blood and HRT patch. My son appears pre-transition turning over poppy skins in his fingers, then his belly is shown breathing two years after beginning testosterone HRT. But it is not until the final image where he wades out towards the pontoon in the harbour at Petone, six weeks after reconstructive surgery that we see his full form. Instead I employed text within the film to speak to my witnessing his struggle to move into his life and body authentically. His bush walks were a sole journey, but on one occasion he allowed me to accompany him, and this became a significant shared experience referenced in the film.

The insights I have gained around consent and the process of including my children—when they have allowed this—have been profound, joyful and humbling. When I explained my project to my children, I was careful to say that this film was *not about them, but my experience of this time with them*. My son was a young teenager when I began considering this project and is now 18 in his first year of university. As the doctoral project progressed, I intermittently checked in with him about my developments, read sections of the text for my thesis to him and showed him draft edits of the film. I watched his understanding of my work grow. His insights and responses further informed the development of the film. The final frames in the film which reveal his face, the only time this happens in the work, alludes to this increased understanding and was a hugely significant and generous gesture on his part to acknowledge and trust the use of his image—he has witnessed my process by his involvement and validated it.

This speaks to my second question: How does this research inform scholarship which acknowledges and encompasses ethics of care and the ‘slow’ movement in art, and which seeks to contribute to an ethos where mothering can be described as a practice unto itself with its own agency? In the same way that the long gestational process and deliberate generation of time to ferment ideas and responses to phenomena has opened up opportunities to experience connections and breakthroughs in my project—it has also created the opportunities to observe the symbiotic relationship between caring and creating. This happens slowly. This process can’t be rushed or treated in a wholly pragmatic manner. It acknowledges the demands of emotional caregiving and offers what I hope is a validation of art practice by other artists who are mothers managing this particular stage of their children’s development and folding in their own lived experience. The agency I claim my doctoral

research highlights is the active recognition that my practice of mothering has facilitated the ability to be present in the care of my children in a way that has been beneficial to the making of an art work as opposed to working against productivity and stifling my creative process. There have of course been constraints and frustrations around managing the demands of holding both spheres of my professional and personal lives and the entanglements that intensify the experience of their coupling. But I have made a deliberate decision to engage outside my doctoral project and family life only in a way which is minimal and relevant to my research, and in line with my ethos of incorporating slow art practice—as can be seen in the three external projects made during my time in the PhD programme in the foundation work section, which appear in Chapter 2.

My primary use of the essay film to make my moving image work has provided both a flexible context and adaptable medium which effectively fits and responds to the fluid and reflective nature of my enquiry. It has allowed the layering of meaning, movement of cyclical and non-linear timelines, and attempted to convey evidence of my process of thinking about and reflecting on my project. This project was experimental in nature as the outcome was not predetermined and the methods I have employed I had not undertaken previously over such a lengthy period. The form of the essay film and my photographic methods of collecting, curation and reflecting via editing, allowed me to produce a work which sits in a cross category of lens based practice.

As a lens-based practitioner and trained photographer, the making of still and moving photographic images has been a lifelong endeavour, the camera both my passport for participation and an essential tool. I filmed and edited the entirety of *Last Skye Boat Song*, with technical support and sound design by my partner. This was deliberate decision and in line with my previous works. Aside from his technical support, his presence on some sessions kept the work within the safe and familiar bonds of our family. The nature of this work as a single-authored, self-produced film is in keeping with the essay film. It is the single-authored approach that connects also with the autotheoretical approach applied within my doctoral project. For although I have also worked in dialogue with my children, I have ultimately been the director. It is my own lived experience and my artistic perspective from which the work is derived. This is different from some of my other recent work that was developed in collaboration with others. There the ultimate outcome of a project was very much determined by collecting historical and anecdotal material via a process of dialogue with others, and then folded into my site-based experience. Whereas traditional film and documentary production relies on camera operators, a full crew, along with post-production specialists, my own film production mitigates any of the 'in-between' aspects of the creative making process. I am often alone within the stillness of the garden but accompanied by my camera and an object I am manipulating or with one of my children whom I am directing.

The performative manner in which I engage with the camera to make work is evident in the way I have framed my research, the chosen motifs and the way I have worked to a 'score' or set of

guidelines to examine them. Performance provided by my children has been staged by me and enacted by them and is coupled with the construction of sets and staging of objects. These amalgamate in the film to represent a 'performance of the self', which is diaristic, autobiographical and immediate in its response to events and happenings which have pricked me emotionally. An emotional immersive film work took shape as I revisited the filmic devices and motifs—shifting the pacing as I moved back and forth between filming and editing. These strategies worked to guide me in a manner which was not quite effortless but organic and flowing. The engagement I had with my son in the filming of final sequences of the film and his growing understand of my process has confirmed for me that my methods have activated and given agency to a wholistic mothering/caregiving and art making existence for the duration of my doctoral project—highlighting the 'active' rather than 'passive' nature of my artistic experience with my children.

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*Last Skye Boat Song* (2023), can be viewed by request. Please email [johanna.mechen@gmail.com](mailto:johanna.mechen@gmail.com) to receive a Vimeo link and password.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1.

To view the moving image works featured in Chapter 2:

*Stepping into Social Waters*, 2014.

<https://www.circuit.org.nz/work/stepping-into-social-waters-a-video-essay-on-the-waiwhetu-stream>

*Moturoa Stream\_Long Island in the City*, 2015.

<https://www.circuit.org.nz/work/moturoa-streamlong-island-in-the-city>

*Waimanawa*, 2017.

<https://www.circuit.org.nz/work/waimanawa>

*Sonorous Shadow*, 2018.

<https://vimeo.com/302653818> Password: PhDGuest

### Appendix 2.

To view further moving image works by Johanna Mechen:

*Rupture/Capture*, 2016.

<https://vimeo.com/162244063/> Password: PhDGuest

*Rupture/Capture* was undertaken during the Enjoy 2016 Summer Artist in Residence.

*Beginning with a quest to video her vitreous eye floaters, Mechen explores the relationship between Optometry and Photography, weaving historical and contemporary elements of both practices with factual and fictitious discoveries.*

*These two lens-based practices, components seeded with the invention of Galileo's telescope, look in opposite directions. Photography, Weston's "one searching eye", looks out and captures, while optometry looks inward to a different set of constellations, one with its own science and subjectivity.*

*Mechen enlisted the help of optometrists, ophthalmologists, and collectors of objects, and presents a figurative, poetic and intuitive interpretation of this research. This hybrid imagery attempts to whimsically "see inside the eye, with that same eye", while being weighed and measured against the accuracy of health professionals. Artist Statement, JM.*

*Pens*, 2018.

<https://vimeo.com/302650619> Password: PhDGuest

*Pens* was part of the work produced for *Sonorous Shadow* during the 2018 Toi Pōneke Art Centre Artist in Residence.

### Appendix 3.

#### Reviews, Articles, Podcasts and Radio Media:

Johanna Mechen. "Waimanawa: The Water From Under the Land", *Memory Connection Volume 3, Number 1, Memory Works* (2019). <http://memoryconnection.org/article/waimanawa-the-water-from-under-the-land/>

Mark Amery. "Finding Common Ground", March 11 2015, *The Big Idea - Te aria nui*, <https://thebigidea.nz/stories/finding-common-ground>

Bruce E Phillips. "Transformative Practice and Open Gestures", (2017). <https://bruceephillips.com/writing/common-ground>

Dr Marcus Moore. "The End to that Eye" <http://enjoy.org.nz/publishing/exhibition-essays/rupturecapture/the-end-to-that-eye>

Lucy Ovenden. "Photography and Suspicion" May 31 2017, *EyeContact*. <http://eyecontactsite.com/2017/05/photography-and-suspicion>

Reuben Friend, Martin Patrick, Thomasin Sleigh, and Emma Bugden, Hosted by Mark Amery. "2015 in Review" December 17 2015, *Circuit Cast #37*. <http://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/circuit-cast-episode-37-best-of-2015>

Thomasin Sleigh. "Te hīkoi toi: 'Dirty Laundry' Uncovers Domestic Demands and Artistic Space", August 12 2023, *The Post, Te Upoko O Te Ika*. <https://www.thepost.co.nz/a/culture/350051582/te-hikoi-toi-dirty-laundry-uncovers-domestic-demands-and-artistic-space>

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