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Photographic Practice

An Exploration into the Working Methods of Five New Zealand Photographers

A thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Wayne Barrar



Esther Bunning



Rachael Hale



Ian Robertson



Jono Rotman



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Abstract

Each participant's photographic practice is explored in relation to their individual background, their working environments, their sourcing and development of concepts and final usage, production and display of images. Analysis and discussion of ethnographic information is underpinned by theories of creativity and communication.

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Appendices – Volume Two

Volume Two contains complete transcripts of interviews undertaken with research participants. (This volume is separate from the main thesis and is available on a CD, which can be found in the back cover of the thesis).

Appendix N	Transcript of Stage One Interview with Wayne Barrar
Appendix O	Transcript of Stage One Interview with Esther Bunning
Appendix P	Transcript of Stage One Interview with Rachael Hale
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Introduction

Background and significance

My undergraduate research (*Work in Progress: the Process of Creativity*) explored and documented different ways in which creative people work. The research explored the creative processes of two artists, focusing on where their initial ideas came from; how these ideas were developed; how a final result was reached; and what methods worked more effectively for which artist. I selected artists who used a variety of creative processes to create their final pieces of work. John Calvert, a sculptor who was working on a commissioned piece for the Lower Hutt City Council (to be placed on the Petone foreshore), and Robert McLeod, a well-known painter and art teacher working on a new series of paintings. It became clear that both artists had a similar overall process. Each developed concepts and ideas in the form of sketches or other similar works and displayed these sketches in their environment. However, each artist displayed a unique approach to the development of their ideas, the materials they used, the skills they possessed, the environment they worked in and who they worked with. This project illustrated the diversity of the processes that creative people use to achieve their final work. Examples of this work are available online (www.origindesign.co.nz/originart/frankie_rouse).

In this study I examine the photographic practice of five New Zealand photographers. *Photographic Practice: The Working Methods of Five New Zealand Photographers* explores the role that creativity and communication play in these photographers' photographic work. Theories relating to creativity and communication are used in order to analyse the ethnographic material. It is not the purpose of this research to define creativity and communication, rather the ideas underpinning these terms are used to discuss the ethnographic research and elucidate the photographers' practice.

Although there exists many definitions, to pinpoint creativity is problematic. As Edwards describes "...we still have no generally accepted definition of creativity – no general agreement on what it is, how to learn it, or if, indeed, it can be learned or taught." (Edwards, 1987, p. 2).

Creativity is often described as an insight that occurs in the mind of 'special' individuals. However, many theorists share a common view that creativity emerges from normal problem-solving efforts that depend on conscious thought processes and that it can be learned or enhanced to some degree (Weiten, 1995, 368).

Weiten states, "Creativity involves the generation of ideas that are original, novel, and useful. Creative thinking is fresh, innovative, and inventive." "Creative ideas come from a deep well of experience and training in a specific area" (Weiten 1995, p. 368). This is reinforced by Weisberg who states that, "...major creative achievements generally are logical extensions of existing

ideas, involving long, hard work and many small, faltering steps forward" (Weiten 1995, p. 368). Similarly Edwards adds, "A creative person is one who can process in new ways the information at hand...all need some knowledge of the techniques of their crafts." (Edwards, 1979, p. 26). Interestingly this is further emphasised by Albrecht who states, "Creativity should be an everyday skill. The fact is that everyone can think and behave creatively..." (Albrecht, 1987, p. 65). It is upon these broad views that the practice of the participants will be explored.

The following chapters examine the photographers, their working environments and working methods including their output and intended communication. These areas are explored separately in each chapter and then certain aspects are combined for discussion in the final chapter.

The first chapter begins by introducing the participating photographers and discusses how various aspects of their lives relate to their photographic successes.

Chapter Two looks at the participating photographers' working environments and examines these in relation to theoretical texts regarding creativity and the creative process, considering what makes these environments successful for them and how this aids in their processes.

Chapter Three focuses on analysis of the ethnographic research in relation to idea generation and development.

In Chapter Four, aspects of the photographers' processes, production and evaluation of their work are discussed and analysed using theories relating to the creative process.

Chapter Five introduces communication theory in an examination of photography's ability to communicate visually. This chapter looks at the variety of contexts used by the participating photographers and their choices for the most appropriate communications to particular audiences. The relationships between the ideas being communicated and their relationships to the media and methods used are also explored.

Finally, Chapter Six explores theories relating to the creative personality and the participating photographers' practice and discusses the inter-relationships that exist between the ideas discussed in this final chapter and the proceeding chapters.

Research aims

Drawing upon theories of communication and creativity, this research examines the significance of working environments, individual interests and social backgrounds of five New Zealand photographers in relation to their photographic practice.

The research method

Photo-ethnography

This study has adopted a photo-ethnographic approach. Photography is a powerful medium for research and ethnography is based around participant observation. Both are significant to this study. Anthropologists often work to establish friendships, relationships and trust and try to understand their subjects' points of view.

Researchers working within an ethnographic practice base their methods around participatory observation to understand the cultural context. This requires involvement with the subject and the situation and is a process of collaboration. This can be considered participatory in the sense that "you are a participant in another culture's typical events, you can use your own experience as a part of the study" (Harper, 1987, p. 7).

Ethnographers acknowledge subjective interpretation, and ethnography treats photography as a viable form of research in itself (Emmison 2000, 26). This visual text is a form of exploration and allows the researcher to record aspects of a situation before being fully aware of their significance to the research. Photographers can capture an image and then find out what ideas the image is communicating about the subject (Emmison 2000, 26), which can then also lead to additional verbal exploration.

In order to understand and record aspects of the participants' photographic practice, visual research and interviews were undertaken. The process involved in gaining research approval, as well as the methods used to undertake the research, are outlined below. The ethnographic research methodology is appropriate to this research and photography plays a significant role in the information gathering and communication process.

The participants – Selecting, approaching and gaining approval

To obtain a diverse sample, a list of photographers was made and grouped into areas of photographic practice such as commercial, fine arts, wedding and portraiture. This was completed to ensure an even distribution over the separate areas of practice. The names on the list were obtained through discussions with others in the photographic industry. Initially ten photographers were approached but only five decided to participate in the research project. The final number of participants limited the research to a manageable size while ensuring the generation of meaningful data to meet research aims.

Potential participants were emailed an introductory letter (Appendix A). If no response was received from the initial email, then the introductory letter was posted. Potential participants who had not responded at this point received a telephone call from the researcher who introduced herself and the research topic (as outlined in the initial letter). A copy of the information sheet for Stage one interviews (Appendix B) was then posted to the participants unless they stated they did not want to participate.

Five of the ten photographers approached agreed to participate. Of the five who did not agree, two did not respond, so to avoid annoying them, the researcher decided not to pursue further contact. One agreed, then cancelled due to time constraints and work pressures, a recurring theme found in the research, and one did not respond after agreeing to do so.

The five photographers who agreed to participate were Wayne Barrar, Esther Bunning, Rachael Hale, Ian Robertson and Jono Rotman.

Before conducting the research it was necessary for the researcher to gain approval from the Massey University Ethics Committee and from the participants themselves. It was also necessary to gain approval from other people photographed while undertaking the visual research component of the project (Appendix C).

Due to the sensitive nature of the information requested from the participants, the researcher moved through each stage of the process with caution. While this process was time consuming, it enabled the researcher to develop friendships with the participants, which was essential in establishing credibility and therefore building trust.

The participants received documentation insuring confidentiality of any material specified by them and explaining their rights as a participant (Appendix B). The researcher ensured consent forms were signed which gave permission to interview and videotape participants, and to take photographs of them and their environment (Appendix C). If requested by a participant, all interview tapes were destroyed after the research was completed.

The interviews – Conducting and transcribing

The interviews were done to gather information relating to the participant's photographic practice. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. A semi-structured interview method was the preferred approach for Stage One. This was followed by a more unstructured conversation like interview with individual questions in stage two. The interviews took place over a month with a three-month period between Stage One and Stage Two.

To ensure the participants were fully informed about the research topic, each interview commenced with a general overview outlining the research topic and the purpose of the interview. The interview questions were established following a review of literature on the subject. The literature review highlighted key ideas that the researcher wanted to develop further and established the gaps in the research that needed exploration. Additional questions were developed through discussions with the research supervisor, peers and other artists and photographers, including the research participants. The questions were further developed by referring to additional sources including Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Mace (1998).

The process for Stage One included an interview question sheet (Appendix D) which was broken down into eleven sections, containing nine areas of specific concern and two general areas. These sections have been numbered accordingly to allow for cross-referencing. The sections include:

1.1.0 General Overview: Introduces the research topic to the participant and develops an overview of the type of work that they do.

1.2.0 Experience and Intuition: Discusses the validity of these aspects in relation to the participant's photographic practice and process.

1.3.0 Motivation: Explores motivation in relation to the participant, their work and their success as a photographer.

1.4.0 Stages of the Process – Initial Concept: Establishes where initial ideas come from and how they are developed.

1.5.0 Stages of the Process – Information Gathering: Examines methods and processes involved with gathering information and how it is used.

1.6.0 Stages of the Process – Developing the Idea: Techniques and methods used to develop ideas.

1.7.0 Stages of the Process - Timeframe: Discusses timeframes and how they influence the development of work.

1.8.o Creativity and the Creative Process: Establishes the participant's views and opinions regarding their creativity and creative processes.

1.9.o Working Environment: Looks in depth into working environments and how they relate to creative processes.

1.10.o Communication: Discusses the communication of ideas to viewers and audiences and communication devices employed.

1.11.o Summary: Allows the participant to mention additional thoughts that may not have been included in the questionnaire and permits the researcher to add further questions which may have arisen during the interview process.

Additional questions were asked throughout the interview to gain further information when necessary. Participants were able to develop ideas and concepts, taking tangents that often led to additional information.

The procedure of the interviews tended to follow the interview question structure. This was essential as it ensured all significant areas were discussed and the researcher found that breaking down the process into manageable sections allowed the participants to answer the questions more easily.

The interviews were undertaken in the participants working environments. This allowed them to be at ease during the interview. The interviews were recorded onto digital video (DV) tape for accurate transcription. Participants were made aware that they could stop the tape at anytime and that the visual footage would not be used.

Some of the questions were difficult for the participants to answer and required them to think about aspects of their practice in a way that they had not done before. To give the participants time to reflect on their processes a copy of the interview questions was sent prior to the interview. This also allowed the participants to establish if there were any questions that they were not comfortable discussing and also to withdraw from the research if they did not want to be interviewed on these topics.

The process for the second interviews had a similar structure to that of the first. Before the interviews, an information sheet for Stage Two (Appendix H) and a letter introducing Stage Two (Appendix G) were sent to the participants. However, unlike the initial interview which looked in-depth into the "photographic practice" of the photographer, the second interview looked into the life of the photographer to establish links between their creative approaches, working methods and experiences and to see how these affect photographic practice.

This led to an in-depth interview question sheet (Appendix E), which was broken down into five sections. The sections are:

2.1.0 Childhood: Examines childhood experiences and accomplishments and their relationship to the participant's creativity today. Also explores the role of parents and/or mentors and discusses what led them to pursue photography as a career.

2.2.0 Education: Investigates what formal education the participating photographer has undertaken and why, and how this may relate to their creativity today.

2.3.0 Photographic Practice: Discusses different elements of photographic practice.

2.4.0 Life: Explores the life of the photographer including goals and challenges and how these affect life decisions.

2.5.0 Individual Questions: Develops further ideas discussed in the initial interview and additional questions that have arisen from the visual research, and are specific to that participant.

The interviews were transcribed by an outside source and proofed against the original recording by the researcher. The transcripts, along with a letter explaining the process (Appendix F) were returned to the participants to proofread, make any alterations if necessary and return to the researcher. Once all alterations from the research participants had been completed, a final copy was sent to the participants for their record. This process ensured that the research participants were satisfied with their responses and was essential in building a trusting relationship with the participants.

The photographs

Photographs have been included in the thesis to encourage visual comparisons relating to the main ideas discussed in the text. Participants were informed that the photographs would be included in this thesis and that further uses such as publication and exhibition were a possibility. The researcher stated in the information sheet for Stage One interviews (Appendix B) that the researcher would seek further consent should any of these situations arise. Colour laser copies of photographs chosen for inclusion in the thesis were provided for approval and consent forms were signed (Appendix J and Appendix K).

The thesis contains examples of photographic works completed by the research participants. The participants were made aware of these works and their consents obtained (Appendix L and Appendix M).

Incorporating the literature reviewed

A review of literature was conducted before the research in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the topic and establish foundations upon which to base ideas. The findings from the literature have been integrated into the main body of text. This allows for in-depth discussion that integrates theory, ethnographic research and interview data, creating a so-called "thick description" (a concept created by Wilhelm Dilthey).