

Your text for *components of a special collection: a collaboration with the university of Auckland fine arts library*, Publication.

*A project by Taarati Taiaroa and Tracey Williams*

Max White

1. Can you tell us a bit about your book-based work(s) and how they are intended to operate? (for example: documentation, in an exhibition, a means of process, collaboration, distribution as a publication, as an artwork, etc.).

My book-based work was originally produced and exhibited as part of an MFA I did at Elam in the early 2000's.

For several years prior to that I was making paintings based around The Whau Portage, at Avondale and its environs. Photography was part of my practice as documentation for this work.

Whilst doing the Masters I found myself reflecting on my time as a student at Elam in the late 1960's. Among other artists from that era in whose work I had always been interested, a particular influence was Ed Ruscha. As a 'homage' to him I referenced some of his titles in the books I made.

Although my photography was mainly film based, I was using a post capture digital workflow, scanning negatives and positives and printing to inkjet. This coincided with the emergence of digital capture technology. My first digital camera was a 20D. Digital capture gave me the opportunity to produce many smaller image files.

Books seemed the most viable means to publish the recordings I was making. I envisaged them as a homogenous collection and because most concertinaed, I liked the idea that they could display opened as a continuous sequence, even on a wall.

2. Have you made many books? How do you see the making of books fitting into your wider practice?

I made nine titles in editions of three books each.

*The Whau: River Portage*

*Avondale Shopping: Every Building on Avondale Main Street*

*The Unmentionable: Canal Road Avondale* (Both titles reference Ed Ruscha's 'Every Building on the Sunset Strip')

*Walking the Course*

*Standard issue: Nineteenth Century Sublime* (Title reference to Ed Ruscha's series of 'Standard Station')

*Greywacke*

*Avondale Palaces: Real and Lost Realestate Opportunities* (References Ed Ruscha's photo book 'Real Estate Opportunities')

*All the Numbers 1 to 96*

*Short People* (Title references Ed Ruscha's 'Colored People' and Randy Newman's 'Short People')

Some of these titles are also in the collections of the Auckland Public Library, the Architecture Library of the Auckland University, and the AUT Library.

Hand made photo-books are a format for which I feel considerable affinity and I hope in the future to develop more work in this medium.

### 3. What legacies, histories, traditions and/or disciplines have informed your book making practice, if any?

Ruscha outsourced the production of his books because paperbacks at that time could be produced quite cheaply. Of course book production is still relatively cheap, but I liked the idea of contradicting Ruscha's methods in the decision to show my work in the hand bound craft tradition of the book.

I had been involved in workshops with students executing briefs that required them to use bookbinding facilities so I had some degree of expertise with the techniques.

At the same time I was also gaining experience in software applications, 'In Design' in particular, so the area of book design was of interest to me in its own right.

One of my MFA supervisors, Megan Jenkinson, also encouraged me to use the photo book medium as an effective way to show the wide range of photo material I had gathered.

### 4. Do ideas about the way books function inform the books you make and if so what are those ideas?

Handmade artists' books have a very long tradition. Many artists have used them as a vehicle to get their work to specialist communities and/or out to a wider audience. The display of work in handmade book formats is initially unmediated by curatorial selection and may be more accessible to people who don't have access to *institutional art*, or to those who see art circles as a sphere in which they would not be welcome. So an egalitarian, unauthorised, accessible aura may attach to work presented in this way.

If the work is formally acquired for preservation in book collections, Librarians to some extent, take on the critical aspects of the curatorial role. However, their selection of texts may be made for archival purposes as well as on the basis of aesthetic criteria. This suggests an inclusive dimension to the institutional acquisition of hand-made books.

Viewing visual texts in handmade books can be a private experience in a way that seeing work in a public gallery, or even in a domestic residential setting, can for the most part never be: For this reason hand-made books are ideal for presenting subject matter which is in some way culturally contentious: It is a format which may more readily avoid censorship. Amongst other texts on a shelf, hand-made books can even be hidden in plain view and as they are very portable they may also be easily circulated to interested

parties. These transgressive, or *samizdat* properties of artists' hand-made books also interest me.

The thematic content of my photographs relates to the 'debased' and perhaps 'banal', 'marginal' or 'utilitarian' sub/urban environments to be found at The Whau Portage near Avondale and in its environs between the Manukau and the Waitemata harbours.

It is an area representative of urban 'backwaters' everywhere.

Therefore, the notion of 'fragility' and 'preciousness' suggested by my books; their pristine white covers, so easily soiled, their fragile paper jackets, their capacity to flow or even burst their covers; invites an experience of dissonance between the tactile page turning experience of reading them and the viewer's appraisal of the 'mundane' and 'utilitarian' content displayed within.

What feelings does a reader have when, through the materiality of the book its-self, they are maneuvered into handling "respectfully" visual texts depicting aspects of the 'built' or the 'natural' environment which are conventionally considered to be unworthy of either aesthetic recognition or cultural/ecological preservation?

#### 5. Do you have any thoughts on where and how you see the making of books by artists in this country fitting alongside the practice of book making by artists in other countries?

Initially I didn't see myself as fitting into the book making tradition as such. Using this medium was simply a way to effectively deliver work within certain economic and aesthetic constraints.

I have always been intrigued by 60's conceptual art made to arbitrarily self imposed rules: As for instance when Ed Ruscha, on the way to visit his parents back east, decided to take a photo of every service station he passed on Route 66. This chance element seems to offer a refreshing spontaneity.

And for Ruscha, showing his material in book form and sub-contracting out the making to recently mechanised book manufacturers, was, paradoxically, both a self imposed discipline and a means of access to the random. My sequence, taking a shot of every property on, for example, Canal Road Avondale, was alert to this pragmatic/impulsive tension. Though I contradicted Ruscha by hand-making my books, I think of their artisanal qualities as provocatively highlighting the arbitrary nature of their thematic content, in a manner in keeping with the spirit of spontaneity apparent in Ruscha's aesthetic.