Home and Homelessness: Ann Shelton's Aesthetics of Displacement

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> I was in the room, or rather I was not yet in the room since she was not aware of my presence … Of myself … there was present only the witness, the observer with a hat and travelling coat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that mechanically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph.
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> — Marcel Proust, 1925[1]

On 30 September 1957 at 12.20 pm in the city of Wellington, a 'spinster' named Nancy Martin signed a house mortgage with Australian Mutual Provident Society for the princely sum of three thousand one hundred pounds. Purportedly the first single woman in Wellington to obtain a mortgage to build her own home, Martin was unusual in many ways. In 1948, as a young teacher, she travelled to England to study music, courtesy of a British Council scholarship, and on her return she introduced the recorder to New Zealand primary schools, an action many parents would undoubtedly not have appreciated. By 1952 Martin was responsible for music education at Victoria University and started collecting art by local artists. In the meantime, the Czecho-slovakian-Jewish architect Frederick Ost and his wife Greta escaped from wartime Europe and migrated to Wellington at the other end of the world in 1940.[2] What brought these two individuals together – Martin and Ost – was a house: a home for Nancy and a chance for Frederick to exercise his European modernist aesthetic principles. These narratives from two ends of the earth have at their centre concepts of displacement and loss, experiences of belonging and not belonging, of home and of homelessness.

What drew Ann Shelton to these intertwined narratives was the house, perched on the side of a hill, overlooking bush on one side and facing towards the city centre on the other. Shelton now lives in this house with her partner, along with traces of Martin whose presence continues to echo in the rooms, and in the narratives that Shelton has overlaid through her photographic

1 Marcel Proust, 'The Guermantes Way', in **Remembrance of Things Past**, vol 1, trans CK Scott Moncrieff, Wordsworth Editions, London, 2006, p 971. See also Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Photographic Approach' (1951), in **The Past's Threshold: Essays on Photography**, eds Philippe Despoix and Maria Zinfert, Diaphanes, Zurich/Berlin, 2014, p 66.

2 Leonard Bell, 'A Series of Displacements: An Introduction to the Art of Frederick Ost (1905–1985)', **Art New Zealand** 86, Autumn 1998, p 64.

Spreads from **a spoonful of sugar,** Rim Books, 2015.

Installation view, Ann Shelton, **house work**, a project for **Enjoy Feminisms**, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington, 2015. Photo: Shaun Waugh.

series in the artist book *a spoonful of sugar* and the site-specific project *house work*, both from 2015. Shelton's photographic process has consistently engaged with uneasy places, sites of fractured and anxious histories, and with events that have been displaced in the landscape. Drawing on her earlier career as a newspaper photographer, Shelton approaches her subjects much like a private investigator or a domestic archaeologist, gathering material that forms a skin and a framework for the resulting work. The artist book *a spoonful of sugar* features photographs of both the inside and the outside of the house and includes a selection of house plans, the mortgage document and rubbings of various surfaces from the house, as if Shelton is determined to build familiarity with every textual *and* textural component of her new home.

The site-specific project *house work* was also a performance that began with the audience walking through the bush and up the hill to the house. Here, they were met with almost-empty rooms bar some of Shelton's artworks and stools and, in time, the sound of an intriguing, evocative spoken narrative emanating from the built-in speakers.[3] The actions of the participants echo those at an open home viewing, when prospective purchasers can inspect a property, just as Shelton did; it is a mostly anonymous process and a chance to objectively view a house or peek at your neighbour's possessions. In this instance, the participants were instead implicated in the fictional aural narrative wafting through the rooms, intertwined with elements of the real narrative about the real place, which they were now visiting. This dialectical action of real and not real sets up an uneasy feeling of *not* being at home: although the house may seem familiar because of its likeness to home, it is anything but.

For Frederick Ost, home is but a distant memory, an apartment in Ostrava, an industrial city, in eastern Moravia, near the Polish border, from which he and Greta were driven by the burgeoning threat of war and the rise of National Socialism throughout Europe.[4] The visual conditions of migration and exile, or what can be referred to as an aesthetics of displacement, offer an opportunity to consider the ways in which photography conveys loss or reveals a lack of feeling.[5] This sense of loss and displacement was explored in the writings of German film and cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer, who also found himself in exile in the early 1940s. Throughout much of his writing, Kracauer considered the concept of the homeless image, in which photographic meaning is transformed by the loss of the referent, suggesting the state of exile and echoing his own condition of being extraterritorial.[6] Kracauer used the concepts of extraterritoriality and of the homeless image to explore the uncanny sense of displacement and alienation when the familiar and the unfamiliar butt up against each other to form a schism or an inversion of homeliness.

3 Commissioned by Shelton, Pip Adam's narrative for **house work** was based on Shelton's research.

4 Leonard Bell in an email conversation with Ann Shelton, July 2016.

5 On migratory aesthetics, see Mieke Bal, 'In Your Face: Migratory Aesthetics' in **The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories**, eds Sten Pultz Moslund, Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm, IB Tauris, London, 2015, pp 147–70.

6 Siegfried Kracauer, **The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays**, trans Thomas Y Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1995, p 340.

Phoenix block, room #53, 2008, c-type photograph, 1190 × 840 mm.

Shelton delves into the psychological state of alienation in those of her works that engage with concepts of home and homelessness, such as *room room,* 2008. On visiting the abandoned site of the Salvation Army's former drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility on Rotoroa Island in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, Shelton photographed the women's wing of the Phoenix building before the site was demolished. Places such as this, in their empty and abandoned state, become unlived spaces and have a melancholic atmosphere much like a crime scene. In looking at photographs of abandoned places, we imagine that something has happened there and the photographs somehow open the spaces up to our forensic enquiry. These bland, cheaply decorated yet functional rooms reek of despair and anxiety, with their fading or peeling wallpaper and nasty floor coverings evoking a sense of punishment rather than a sense of home. For these spaces are temporal locations for their inhabitants, and despite the poor attempts at personalisation, such as a mirror or pasted images of mountain views on the walls, the stained single mattresses and deteriorating conditions speak of unfortunate, desperate stories. This feeling is enhanced by the circular and ocular nature of the images, which convey a sickening sensation of surveillance and voyeurism. The photographs not only employ the illusion of convex form but also the images themselves are reversed, recalling the proto-photographic tool of the Claude glass. The Claude glass was a tinted, blackened convex mirror used to produce a stable reflected image reminiscent of the paintings of Claude Lorrain and which, with its rather weak reflection, dulled the pictorial details. The glass was held up so the viewers could see a reversed image of the landscape behind them. The pictorial properties of the Claude glass reduce everything in its view to a visual equivalence, becoming strikingly like those of a photograph, as photographic historian Geoffrey Batchen puts it.[7]

room room is an elegy in part to Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, based on lectures she delivered at women's colleges in Britain. In the essay Woolf ruminates on the desire of a hypothetical female author to have a room of her own and a modest income in order to write. Rather than evoking a sense of literary or creative freedom, these rooms instead recall Proust's horrid sense of estrangement at the unexpected sight of his grandmother when the 'instant photograph' conjured in his mind becomes a screen that hinders involuntary memory.[8] *room room* is the anathema of both Woolf's desires and of Kracauer's idea of photography being a medium without artifice – for what in these photographs can be seen as true when their inhabitants used hallucinogenic substances to escape reality and photographic meaning itself elides solidity?

In *once more from the street*, 2004, Shelton turned her lens on another institutional site, that of the former Lake Alice Psychiatric Hospital in Whanganui. Opened in 1950 and closed in 1999, the complex comprised 10 two-storey villas with eleven beds in each, four villas with fifty beds, its own fire station, swimming pools, library, chapel, morgue, garage, garden, rugby grounds and cricket pitches.[9] Apart from the reference to 'psychiatric', one could be forgiven for thinking this description is straight out of *Brideshead Revisited*, the novel by Evelyn Waugh written as a memoir of a young student at Oxford University, and published just five years before the opening of Lake Alice.[10] Instead, this abandoned site, much like that of the drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, references stories of extreme trauma: the abuse of patients here led to calls for a royal commission into their mistreatment and resulted in compensation payments.[11]

These photographs and those of *room room* also recall the photographic and psychiatric practices of Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, where the camera flash

7 Geoffrey Batchen, **Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography**, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p 73.

8 Philippe Despoix, 'Kracauer as Thinker of the Photographic Medium' in **The Past's Threshold**, p 19.

9 Lake Alice Hospital website: www.lakealicehospital.com.

10 Evelyn Waugh, **Brideshead Revisited**, Chapman & Hall, London, 1945.

11 Simon Collins, 'Terrible Legacy of Lake Alice', **New Zealand Herald**, 26 October 2001.

and photographic apparatus were used, supposedly objectively, to capture and reveal the hidden, deceptive traits of the hysteric. Photography's ability to capture moments that have the potential to be experienced but fail to register in the subject's own consciousness is described by Ulrich Baer as being akin to the structure of traumatic memory.[12] Baer takes up this concept from Sigmund Freud's reflections on memory and photography: Freud describes the unconscious as the site where memories are stored until they are developed, alluding to a delay in the recognition of memories *and* images.[13] Likewise, Walter Benjamin contends that the camera catches that which the photographer does not see, an optical unconscious that Benjamin likens to the discovery of the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.[14] Unlike the series *room room,* the photographs in *once more from the street* do not show us interior spaces but rather that the villas are situated in the landscape, perched uneasily it seems on the unkempt grounds. Shelton's inversion of these photographs, as in many of her works, seems not just an optical illusion but also a doubling effect that creates a schism in vision and in mind, reflecting her interest in the association between trauma and time, and between the photographic image, the past and the present.[15]

The use of doubling or inversions in Shelton's works critiques the monocular nature of photography and recalls early photographic techniques such as the stereoscope, developed in order to see photographically as if by the duality of human vision. For Jonathan Crary, the stereoscope became a crucial indication of the subsumption of the tactile within the optical, with the doubling of the image forming a phenomenological effect on the viewer.[16] The invention of this optical tool was closely aligned with theories of optical illusion, after-images and other visual phenomena but the central question, according to Crary – given that the observer perceives a different image with each eye – was how is the subject then experienced as a single or unitary image?[17] For Shelton, two or more identical or almost-identical images present a particularly strange experience, which constitutes a slippage or a schism that departs from monocular vision and 'foregrounds the role of the camera in the construction of fields of representation'.[18] It is this slippage in vision, or a stammering that disrupts the reception of images, that Shelton suggests references a kind of trauma, violence or pathology. Hence, the reversed images in *room room*, or the doubled images in *once more from the street*, suggest darker narratives and evoke an observational unease.

The concept of doubling in the Lake Alice project is present in many of Shelton's works, including *a kind of sleep*, 2004, and *Twenty six photographs of a house* from 2005–7, in which the original photographs of a house taken by its architect James Walter Chapman-Taylor in 1930 are juxtaposed with Shelton's images. In a classic rephotography project, the images form a schism in time, with the space between the images representing the lives lived in this rather peculiar Arts and Crafts house. Besides very minor changes to the kitchen and garden, the house remains largely in its original condition as if, in being charged with the time of its making, it lies outside of time at its site in rural north Taranaki. Rephotography has a long tradition in

12 Ulrich Baer, **Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma**, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p 8. See also Batchen, **Burning with Desire**, p 187, and Jennifer Good, **Photography and September 11th: Spectacle, Memory, Trauma**, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2015. Good expands on Freud's concept of belatedness in relation to photography, memory and trauma.

13 For Freud on the conditions of memory, trauma and photography, see, for example, Sigmund Freud, **Moses and Monotheism**, trans Katherine Jones, Vintage, London, 1952, p 152, and Sigmund Freud, **The Interpretation of Dreams,** trans James Strachey, Avon Books, New York, 1965, p 574.

14 Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in **One-Way Street and Other Writings**, trans Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, Verso, London/ New York, 1997, p 243.

15 Donna West Brett and Ann Shelton, 'The Event Horizon: Returning "After the Fact"', **Memory Connection**, vol 1, no 1, December 2011, p 336.

16 Jonathan Crary, **Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century**, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1992, p 62.

17 **Ibid**, pp 118–19.

18 Ann Shelton, **Doubling**, www.annshelton.com/texts-and-media/artist-texts/doubling.

Ann Shelton, **The guest room (The Guests Room. The stone lintel over the fireplace was hewn by very early settlers in Taranaki and was in the house where Mr. Wilkinson was born)**, 2005/2005–7, c-type photograph and black and white fibre print, 364 × 508 mm each. The black and white image is the work of photographer, architect and astrologer James Walter Chapman-Taylor. It was printed, with permission, from his original glass plate.

Ann Shelton, **Meeting Room, Rotoroa Island**, 2008.

survey or scientific expeditions and, in re-recording sites with a comparative image, it offers a unique means to explore and analyse even the most insignificant changes in the landscape. The comparative topographic photograph is also anticipatory and incomplete, as it hangs in an air of expectation with both the 'before' and 'after' images situated in a state of constant referral to the other. In this sense, the repeat or return image is doubly displaced from time and history; the space of time between the comparative images forms a gap, an empty space or fissure, that reveals the traces of history.[19]

One of Shelton's earliest photographic series, *Abigail's Party* from 1999, has personal and aesthetic resonances with her most recent series in that it features her home at the time, a share-house in Auckland. Like *house work*, this series has both biographical and historical resonances and yet is reminiscent of a house magazine article from the 1970s. With its atonal colourings of yellow, cream and burnt reds, and featuring empty rooms with vintage furnishings, the series has an eerie quality of a deceased property, as if the owner, who we imagine in a bouffant wig and a flared pantsuit, has gone on a long cruise and never returned. The series was inspired by the 1977 Mike Leigh stage and television play *Abigail's Party*, which evokes the same garish colour scheme and kitsch aesthetics. The one-room play tells the story of Beverly and Laurence who invite their new neighbours Angela and Tony over for drinks, accompanied by the divorced Susan. Susan's daughter Abigail, who is never seen, is having a party next door. As the night wears on and the alcohol takes effect, an argument breaks out over an artwork and the much-maligned Laurence has a fatal heart attack. This dry and cruelly observant play focuses on the British class system and the bitter efforts of the growing middle class to forge a new life in 1970s suburbia.

19 For rephotography projects, see Mark Klett, Ellen Manchester and JoAnn Verburg, **Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project**, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1984, and Donna West Brett, 'Afterimage: Rephotography and Place', in **Photography and Place: Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945**, Routledge, New York/London, 2016, pp 99–123.

The photographs in Shelton's *Abigail's Party* are all titled with references to women, such as *Calendar Girl*, *Modern Girl* or *Show Girl*, as if attempting to place the absent Abigail back in the picture. We see her bathroom, living room, dining and sitting rooms, and her kitchen with Barsony-style dancing figures on the wall, the latest in wall ovens and forlorn and empty countertops bereft of any evidence of a party. Instead, the curtains are drawn, everyone has gone home and a feeling of loss ensues. Women often feature in Shelton's work, present in portraits in her earliest works and later designated through their physical absence but poignantly present histories. There is the absent Abigail with her kitsch and groovy apartment and Nancy with her modernist Wellington dream house and in between are references to classical women, working women, incarcerated women, tragic women, lost girls and murderous girls. Their lost stories become the focus of Shelton's lens and, like in a Claude glass, we glimpse into their world as if from the edge of a precipice, from the corner of our eye or in the reflection of a mirror. They remain ungraspable and, as if in a dream, we anxiously search for them but all that remains are traces displaced in obscure narratives, in urban myths, lost to history and to memory.

This sense of loss and the concomitant desire to reclaim the past through photographs as a form of unconscious remembrance is what makes Shelton's work so poignantly and painfully present. These empty spaces of domestic and institutional homes, bereft of occupants, are reminiscent of Kracauer's homeless image where the image is torn from its referent, reflecting a sense of loss and an anxious desire for the past, which is displaced and irreconcilable. This sense of loss, evident throughout Shelton's photographic oeuvre, like the homeless image, conjures stories of displacement, of belonging and not belonging, and reveals hidden views, lost histories and invisible, numinous presences.[20]

In thinking about Nancy Martin, I imagine her as privy to Proust's ruminations on photography and memory, so appropriately described by Kracauer in 'The Photographic Approach'. Kracauer writes of Proust's passage in *The Guermantes Way* as identifying the photographer as a witness, an observer and a stranger – all types, he considers, who are characterised by their 'common unfamiliarity with the places at which they happen to be'.[21] In the passage, Proust sees his grandmother in contemplation, and for the first time sees her as if through the indiscriminating eye of a camera, and he recoils at the dejected old woman sitting before him whom he does not know or recognise. In describing Proust as being so overwhelmed by involuntary memories that he could no longer register his present surroundings to the full, Kracauer quite rightly identifies Proust's recognition of the photographic approach as being akin to the psychological state of alienation.[22] It is this state of alienation, an aesthetics of displacement, that Shelton evokes through her doubled and inverted images, in photographs of lost places, sites of violence, trauma and anxiety, or in forgotten histories. Shelton is the observant visitor who stands at the elbow of Proust and, rather than recoiling at the horror of it all, photographs it. ■

20 Thanks to Tom Loveday for discussing the relevancy of numinosity to Ann Shelton's works, Sydney, March 2016.

21 Kracauer, **The Past's Threshold**, p 67.

22 **Ibid**, p 68.

once more from the street,
installation view, Starkwhite, 2004.

house work, 2015, an off-site project for **Enjoy Feminisms**, installation view, Wellington. Photo: Shaun Waugh.


THE PRIEST