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### Photographic inquiry and the reflective practitioner

**Michelle Catanzaro**

Western Sydney University, Australia

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#### Abstract

This paper presents images of Sydney's subversive irregular spaces, analysing the role that the photographer as researcher plays in defining and documenting space and alternative communities. The Sydney alternative arts and performance scenes have been operating as a system of unofficial venues. Many artists and musicians etch out an existence in dissident spaces, away from the norms of the profit driven venue experience. These irregular venues are not purpose built spaces and consist of a range of warehouses, lounge rooms and re-valourised buildings within Sydney. My research utilises photography to capture these temporal spaces as they shift, relocate and reform new networks in the face of imminent closure or exposure. I capture and map these networks as my photography responds to cultural 'actors' both human and non-human and records my internal and external interpretations of space. This paper explores a reflexive process of my embodied experience with irregular time and spaces that resist public visibility.

#### Introduction

This paper explores the nuances and issues around the notion of the reflective practitioner, specifically in the field of visual research. In this paper, I will draw on my own practice-centred research – photography – to present a model that can be adapted to address and contribute to the urban imaginary, while considering the role the practitioner plays with regards to process, temporality and subjectivity. The focus of this project is to disclose how time and space can change and liberate experiential outcomes. Soja (2010) explains that our geographies 'take on material forms as social relations become spatial but are also creatively represented in images, ideas and imaginings' (p. 18). The aim of my photographic imagery and subsequent methods of capture is to highlight the transformative nature of creative research of the urban imaginary, to define and understand the various ways that space can be represented through immersive experiences.

The photographic image has the ability to reveal and communicate a researcher's experiences in unique ways. However, to thoroughly analyse photography and its power to capture transience, it is important to understand the relationship that the photographic image has with documentation and the 'real':

“ ... the picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture (Sontag, 1977, p. 5). ”

This denotative function is inherent to photography's reality effect, but is also a point of deep criticism. Whilst the photograph is a powerful tool for documentation, it is suffused with subjectivity. 'The image is as much a reflection of the 'I' of the photographer as it is the 'eye' of the camera' (Clarke, 1997, p. 30) – the camera is fundamentally an ontological apparatus. The researcher projects themselves onto any scene being captured and is inescapably intertwined in the moment through emotive and physical connections mediated by the image.

In my practice, the photograph can represent the end of something (the subjective act of photographing and capturing 'what is') but also the beginning of something else (the analysis of the viewer or the performative nature of the final image). In a research practice, these ideas lose their independence and exist in correlation with each other, a constantly evolving, moving and exchanging network of ideas, reflections and interpretation. This paper explores my interest in the unique autonomy and intricate associations that exist within the hidden and marginal spaces in my study, and the ability of photography, as an extension of my own being in this world, to capture them.

### **The research context of irregular community space**

The spaces that house the alternative Sydney arts, music, performance and grassroots community scene are mostly self-sustaining. I refer to these spaces as irregular. They exist outside the regulatory environment as independent, self-regulated hubs for creativity and performance. Irregular spaces attempt to maintain independent, grassroots arts and cultural practices and performances without the aid of funded 'place making' initiatives in an increasingly expensive and therefore inaccessible-for-all global city. While irregular spaces often exist or operate in isolation, they are also part of a larger whole – a living, thriving network that breathes, hibernates, and stirs life into the city of Sydney. Irregular spaces are not easily identifiable. Addresses are not available online or on flyers and often external authorities regard these venues as somewhat illegal. These venues are not purpose-built spaces. They consist of a range of warehouses, lounge rooms and re-valourised buildings within Sydney city and its inner west suburbs. Some of these spaces have other legitimate roles during the day, and the remnants of these activities form part of their irregular character.

Due to the ever changing and indefinable nature of irregular spaces, they are both challenging and important to photograph as evidence of dynamic, mutable urban space. The majority of spaces must walk a paradoxical line between defining themselves (having character), while remaining unidentified in the public eye. During my research, I have come across a range of related terms that have a strong affinity with how I see irregular space. For example, Low and Lawrence-Zuniga's (2003) definition of 'contested space' considers specific sites as political. For them, these geographic spaces are concerned with conflict, be that subversive, oppositional or resistant. While this study does not position irregular space as an active political movement, the documentation of Sydney's irregular spaces will inevitably reflect the social, economic and cultural context of the city that incubates them. Ideologically, Soja's (1996) ideas surrounding 'third space' have also been influential; third space is where 'everything comes together' (p. 56–57), an ontological, epistemological space concerned with movement, creativity and 'imaginative configurations of space for human practices' (Maier, 2013, p. 77). Chatterton and Holland's (2003) notion of 'marginal spaces' 'encapsulating both play and resistance' (p. 202) have also played a part in refining the way I see and interpret irregular spaces.

It is however particularly Bey's (2007) definition of the temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) that most closely aligns with my understanding of these spaces and their manner of being. A defining characteristic of irregular spaces is that they do not stay fixed in one place or in one form for very long: these spaces embody temporality. This bears a relation to Bey's (2007) description of transformative spaces as Temporary Autonomous Zones. For Bey, these are spaces of liberation (of time, land or imagination), which dissolve and reform elsewhere before the 'State' can crush them. Irregular spaces are continually disappearing, reinventing themselves or reforming to evade and bypass legalities, and in some cases, spaces simply don't wish to be visible. The ability to remain hidden reinforces the relationship irregular spaces have with darkness; the night's medium, which has the ability to conceal and reveal. Irregular spaces are cloaked in darkness and emerge selectively from darkness. For some people, exploring darkness holds comfort and familiarity; for others, it represents the unknown, terror and uncertainty. Schlor (1998) discusses the dualities that appear as we experience the nighttime city through newspaper articles and media. These stories range from nighttime assaults to reports on the highs and lows of the nighttime entertainment economy. In the media, the night is often represented as a time of violence and disorder. These reports, and our understandings of them, resonate with a variety of dualities: 'light and shadow, dream and nightmare, wealth and poverty – antonyms which construct a wide field from real news and fabulous stories, a world of its own' (Schlor, 1998, p. 10).

My photography (writing with light) explores nighttime in the city in a different way. My images respond to these dualities as they appear, and consider light, dark and the shades that exist in between as symbolic of the transformative, ephemeral and hidden nature of irregular spaces. The source of light is neither uniform, nor is it used to maximise exposure. Sometimes it is present within the image, and sometimes it is tangential, but darkness always plays a defining role. In studying these spaces, I am motivated to capture the ephemeral, and events likely to disappear. However, my research also captures the community-minded attitudes these spaces thrive on and foster, in real time. Individual and collective experiences are recorded, as they represent private and personal encounters with the performers and the punters who attend these events.

Within this paper, I aim to present the way my imagery captures the notion of disappearance. The purpose of this research is not to provide a traditional, historical account of irregular spaces within Sydney and the inner western suburbs. Instead, it is an attempt to capture – through my own experiences – the being of these

irregular spaces, their unique and momentary qualities, as well as to comment on how spaces of irregularity interact more generally within the city space. Moreover, my individual relationship with these spaces has enriched and informed my own understanding of the city. Through my photographic practice, I have come to know the irregular spaces in my study, inside out. This is not the objective knowledge that comes from an exhaustive documentation of events in particular spaces and the musical acts performed in them, including the when and why. My images stand as a situated form of knowledge, an ontological extension of the phenomenal experience of being involved in a place as a learning practitioner-researcher.

Throughout this study, there has been a range of methodological challenges related to researching the hidden and the subversive. This paper explores the idea that, while I am absorbed in these spaces, I am not interfering, intervening or attempting to sustain the spaces as cultural entities. Ethically, I agree with Banks' notion that:

“ Swooping god like into other peoples' lives and gathering data (including visual data) according to a predetermined theoretical agenda strikes me as not simply morally dubious but intellectually flawed (Banks, 2001 p. 179). ”

Instead, I acknowledge the sensitive issues surrounding researching 'subversive' spaces and question methodological issues related to representing data and the disclosure of information in sensitive research studies.

### **Researching the Irregular – Methodological Issues**

To experience and be a part of these spaces, you need to talk to the right people, be connected to online networks or track the movements of a band or act. Yet even then, you need to stumble blindly down darkened alleys, take wrong turns and sometimes be confronted with disappointment. Your breath still gets caught in your throat as you push open a random door, slightly terrified of what you might find on the other side. Intriguingly, to step into a world of darkness, minimal lighting, loud noises and nameless faces are the comforts you are searching for. A place where you are no one or someone, and to be honest, it doesn't really matter which, 'a type of twilight zone has been created that offers musicians and punters not only flexibility, but also anonymity' (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003, p. 211). The moment you cross the threshold from darkness into light, is a moment charged with exhilaration and uncertainty. 'These zones [inside and outside] are defined by our intentions' (Relph, 1976, p. 50).

With irregular space, the walls represent the boundaries discussed by Relph. The space within becomes 'inside' and everything removed from that interior becomes 'outside'. This crossing of the threshold indicates a precise moment, one where you move from the outside to inside; the public to the private and in a moment, the unknown becomes the known.

As these spaces are not publicised, one is unable to search for them in a conventional sense. It is not the commercial pub on the corner with its billposter advertisements; these spaces function under a blanket of discretion. On some internet and digital flyers containing details of events, the tagline 'make sure you throw this in the bin when you are done' is included, indicating the secretive nature of these events. Email invites and invite-only Facebook events often involve contacting the host for the address and event details. A number of invites carry a 'friendly' warning:

“ Remember to keep your BYO rations out of plane (sic) site, tell only your closest of comrades about our attack mission and it is of exceptional importance that you arrive and disperse in stealth mode at all times to avoid detection by the enemy ... over but never out (9 Feb. 2013). ”

The informal language emphasises the discretion required to hold this event. It goes without saying that the event is forbidden in some capacity, and that people are to enter and participate at their own risk. This exclusivity can add to the excitement surrounding an event.

Due to the changing nature of these spaces, the research process is unpredictable and sometimes the connection with a space, or the people within it, is fleeting. While there is some evidence of Sydney city's historic irregular spaces and alternative scenes, one of the key struggles of this research project is finding recent or current historic materials and/or documenting history as it is unfolding, not after the fact. Pink (2014) discussed this predicament at the 'Initiating Change by Design' symposium, contemplating the fact that the ethnographer's work is often concerned with the past, as this is recorded and can hence be identified. The present event then becomes an example of what has gone before. This is problematic within my own research context due to the peculiar vitality and malleability of irregular spaces and their sporadic, event-based presence that temporarily flirts with the present before disappearing.

## Temporality and Liminality

Irregular spaces are brimming with unique actors and experiences. These socio-material and human elements transform a venue, which begins as space, into a place, as attendees become familiar with the site and begin to endow it with value (Tuan, 1977). Cresswell (2004) agrees with Tuan's definition of place, claiming place is a location that is bestowed with meaning. Tuan (1977) notes that interaction is necessary for space to become place, insisting that place is a combination of experiences over varied moments in time. In my research, all these irregular sites began as 'spaces'. Those spaces are often hard won, eked out of already existing environments, claimed in the interstices of place/space dynamics. It is important to note, space and place are inherently phenomenological concepts (Vanclay, Higgins & Blackshaw, 2008). The transition from space to place in this specific context is based upon the immediacy of my own experiences. Integral to this is my being in the world as a practice of 'being in the space' – hence, I record the experiences of each space through the lens of my camera.

In phenomenological terms, the uniqueness of the experience adds value and meaning to the image. While these images are my depictions of the realities happening, they capture fleeting moments and include the temporal value of history. Barthes (1981) states that images 'express temporal truth' (cited in Crowther, 2009, p. 145) and that these actors do actually exist within a specific period of time. This acknowledgement of extant time is very important, as the TAZ can disappear and never be found again in the same form. The act of photography, and the agency of the image, creates a network between the living and the lived, the past and present, and potentially, the future. The image represents a very particular moment where I accompany a specific space or place, within time.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) discusses the notion of 'being in time' in relation to embodiment, highlighting the matter of the body, stating 'the body is our general medium for having a world' (p. 146). This connection between the body and the world is essential in understanding the phenomenological approach of my practice, where the camera is an extension of my body and works to share with the viewer what I see. This can be understood in terms expressed by Marshall McLuhan's (2003) theory of technology as an extension of the human body or more fittingly, as an understanding through design ontology (Willis, 2006) and interpretation in which the 'designed being' of the user acts back upon the tool (in this case the camera) with the intention of modifying the process (p. 80). This idea resonates with Latour's (2005) notion that the agency of the object is always interdependent. Yet, Willis (2006) furthers this stating:

“ ...here we can think of equipment, appliances and other functional objects as having “horizons of use”, similar to Gadamer's notion of interpretation as 'an interaction between the horizon provided by the text and the horizon that the interpreter brings to it' (Winograd & Flores, 1986). Interpretation is inseparable from the ontological designing process (Willis, 2006 p. 83). ”

When the image is taken, it is of the natural, exterior or existing world:

“ ... the photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint. Wherefore, photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation instead of providing a substitute for it (Bazin, trans Gray, 1960, p. 9). ”

It then becomes clear that the ontology of photography is inherently linked to the basic notions of our embodiment in the world:

“ ... our intuitive fascination with this [embodiment] is the basis of photography's phenomenological depth (Crowther, 2009, p.152). ”

Whilst I am aware that I play a role in framing the image for the viewer, I believe the documentary intent of the image must not be to spoon-feed the viewer with denotative information that aligns with expectations, but more to allude to what else is happening inside and often on the edges or outside of the frame. The aim is to reveal something about the current moment in time and help contextualise the performer. I do this by including a range of actors, such as the crowd, the musical equipment, the performer's stance and/or the lighting. These references can be subtle, they can simply include the tattered corner of a rug or the hand scrawled marks scribbled on a beam supporting the stage. Yet, each referent should be enough to infer values about the space and or time the image was taken.

The inclusion of these referents not only indicates specificity of place but it also evokes a deeper reading of the image. Jay (1992) discusses this in relation to the photograph suggesting that images are 'slippery'. Jay infers

that it is almost impossible for somebody to view an image and simply stay there, the image provokes:

“ ... mental and emotional meanderings into geography, psychology, politics, biography, sociology, popular culture, art history, science, morality and a myriad of other connected fields until each picture seemed to resonate with the whole of human history (Jay, 1992, p.10). ”

When I frame my images, there is often a purposeful engagement with the edge of the frame, whether this be through placement of actors to the sides of the image or a purposeful compositional element that leads the viewers eye off the edge of the image (Catanzaro, 2014). In doing this:

“ ... it alludes to the importance of space and aids to represent the spatio-temporal nature of the photograph and the viewer's ability to move around the image and to 'slip off' (Jay, 1992) and wonder what else is happening within the space. Effectively, although the photograph is a snippet of time, it leads the mind to other places and times, connecting the past with the present and the future (Catanzaro, 2014, p. 9). ”

Every photograph is caught up in a web of varying temporalities including the time of exposure, historical time, the time of development, cropping, the time of reception and circulation. In that sense, a photograph, like any artifact or cultural document, is never fixed, but made in each viewing circumstance (Drucker, 2010, p.23).

To demonstrate this notion of movement, temporality and slippage, it serves well to take one irregular space and analyse it visually for its representation of ephemerality and the photograph's ability to straddle the past and present. The images are captured months apart, visualising the temporal relationship I have with one space as I weave in and out of its interiors over a period of just under two years.

The physical space captured in figures one to six embodies temporality in the way it is repurposed and evolving. The interior and objects in the space differ dramatically from event to event, ensuring that with each visit to the space, the walls speak in another way to those within them. This ephemerality is demonstrated when looking at imagery of the 'foyer' area, which I have defined as a liminal space. The foyer is used as a chill-out zone, or a talking space for people to mingle. As these rooms are the first point of interaction from the outside world, they often undergo significant changes in styling and decoration depending on the event, an index of what is to come. Stevens (2007) discusses these types of in-between, liminal spaces; while designed for practical purposes, these spaces can also allow for a variety of playful social behaviours, reflecting their material significance. Figure 1 shows the very first room of this irregular space that you are ushered into. This is where the host stands, asking for donations and observing the security footage of the space outside. The host ensures that the front door to the venue is firmly shut before allowing you to cross the threshold and open the second door, where you enter into liminal space. The small first room (the threshold) has a draped curtain hanging against the wall, covering something unknown, the counter and dim lighting increases anticipation as you wait to see what the interior will reveal.

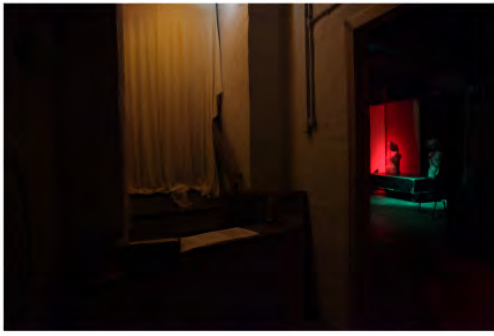


Figure 1. Open door, 20-5-11. (Photograph taken by Author, 2011). To aid the sense of stoppage, please view left to right.

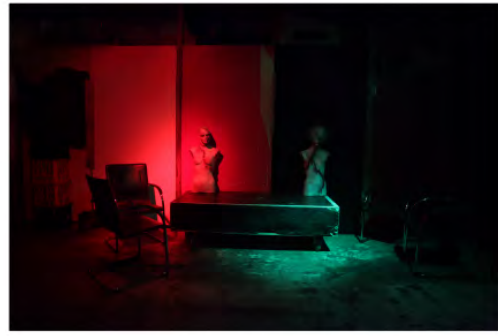


Figure 2. Dummies 20-5-11. (Photograph taken by Author, 2011).



Figure 3. Green light, 7-10-11. (Photograph taken by Author, 2011).



Figure 4. Armoury, 4-5-12. (Photograph taken by Author, 2012).

In Figure 2, I capture what I first glimpsed from the threshold. That is, two dismembered and disfigured dummies bathed in two pools of contrasting light, one red, and one green. The curling stitches swirl across the bare chest of the female torso and the lighting creates two very different reactions to these strange actors.

Figure 3 is captured approximately six weeks after Figure 2. Here, we see the same room transformed as I now stand inside the space looking back at the area where the dummies formerly sat. Couches and chairs litter the space and in the time that has passed since the previous event I attended, we see that the dummies have disappeared and the walls have been repainted and redecorated. Remnants of paint dribbled on the floor are evidence of the transformational project that may have recently just occurred. The green light still pointed at this humble liminal area, yet the combination of new actors creates a completely different feel to the space.

In Figure 4, another period of months has passed and we see the space completely transformed again. On the left hand side of the image, familiar black paint marks can be seen on the wall, visible in the previous image, but now accompanied by an addition. Above these paint marks we see hand painted lettering referring to the 'armoury'. The front room itself is now structurally different and has long benches and tables installed. All of which, during this specific event, is covered in foil.



Figure 5. Foil head, 4-5-12, (Photograph taken by Author, 2012).



Figure 6. Foil piping, 19-10-12, (Photograph taken by Author, 2012).

In Figure 5 we see a front-on shot of the foil covered tables and a plaster head perched upon the bench. Exposed pipes or tubing frame the image, which have also been encased in foil. The space successfully creates an ambience of fun and play, the DIY approach loosely applied, apparent in the details as seen on the edges of the seats and the small rips in the foil. In an FBI radio interview entitled 'Early Underground', Michel Freeman interviews Luke and Seb (members of Sub Bass Snarl), who discuss attending an event in the 1980s where an entire basement on George Street, Sydney was covered in foil. This act, an homage on the part of the hosts to the earlier event, connects the space aesthetically to the former rave culture and to its allied ethos.

In Figure 6 we see a series of screens displaying 1980s computer games. The screens are installed inside solid, wooden boxes, which were not at all apparent in the previous images, an event occurring six months after the 'foil' event. Framed on the left hand corner of the image, we see the remnants of the last event, the foil encasing the now exposed rope in this front room. While there has been an inclusion of computer screens and the foil has mostly disappeared, this piece of remaining foil creates a historic trace to the space's former uses and throughout this series of images, a remnant of the old seems to always remain, supporting the notion that 'space is nothing but the inscription of time in the world' (Kofman & Lebas, 1995, p.16 cited in Crang, 2001).

This type of liminality is explored visually through the spaces and the photographs, and also through the interweaving notion of the liminal researcher, absorbed in the space but absent from the aesthetic changes. The slipping in and out represents my own experiences and interactions with these spaces at a variety of times. It is only upon reflecting on these images that I am able to make the visual links and trace the residues of foil between the past and present events as analysed through my hermeneutic practice.

These images demonstrate the importance of the researcher's positioning within space across time:

“ Our body and the bodies of others are central to the practical accomplishment of fieldwork. We locate our physical being alongside those of others as we negotiate the spatial context of the field. We concern ourselves with the positioning, visibility and performance of our own embodied self as we undertake participant observation (Coffey, 1999, p. 59). ”

Coffey is a sociologist and while her comments about the positioning of self and visibility resonate with my work, it is important to note the preponderance to 'bodies' and the human within sociology. While this still applies in my work, this is extended to non-human actors, as previously outlined. This is exemplified in Figures 1 to 6, as it is the objects, as human traces that signify change and time, rather than the human bodies within the spaces, which are the focus. By capturing the utility of ordinary objects like dummies, paint drips and worn chairs, the photograph inscribes the potential of their matter (Hunt, 2014), creating associations and inferring past memories. This relationship between present and past is further highlighted in the relationships that exist between 'when' the image is taken and 'what' the present version of the space has become.

### **Design change and hermeneutics**

When beginning my research, acutely aware of the space closures that the grassroots scene had endured, I wanted desperately to save the spaces I was studying, to perhaps invent/design a failsafe approach or plan that would help sustain the life of the culture. In this way, I was embarking upon my research in the traditional role of 'designer as problem solver'. Upon further inquiry, it became clear to me how intrinsically tied the 'death' and 'redefinition' of these spaces was to the vitality of the scene within which they thrive. It also became clear that any given solution to extending the life of these spaces had to come from within these spaces, not from the outside (or an outsider).

This revelation was only made available to me through a hermeneutic approach to my research. This can be understood as a circular pattern that allows us to move from our prejudices to encounter the 'other'. This aligns with Jahnke's (2012) arguments about Ricoeur's attitude that 'to accept the involvement of the self in interpretation means also to acknowledge that the self evolves in these processes' (Jahnke, 2012, p. 37) and therefore ideas and projections are redefined as an outcome of the practice. These complexities invite a response like Coyne's (2005) – that design situations must remain open-ended to ensure the diversity of the social dimension of design is considered. Not only do I now know more about these spaces in an objective sense, but my understanding and aims changed through my insider knowledge of these spaces. I was transformed by my ontological investigation. It became clear that more could be learned by simply engaging, and 'being in this world', than by assuming I had a solution based on a short time-based inquiry. The notion of 'being in the world' comes from Heidegger's phenomenology of being that he called 'dasein' (Malpas, 2010) and is explored further below.

It is important to note that my approach responds to the evolving and ephemeral nature of space that is fundamental to phenomenological method. 'One of the phenomenological constructs used to understand and develop the notion of place is insideness' (Cecil & Cecil n.d. p. 241) and 'to be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it' (Relph, 1976, p. 49). Physical transition to an inside space may be instant, but belonging in place is more accurately described as a slow reveal. The notion of insideness is reflected in disclosing either seconds (temporally) or parts (physically) of an environment slowly being unconcealed as I move through it. My aim is that the viewer feels embedded within the environment (via the image), existentially experiencing the movement and radiant energy of the space. The application of this technique of insideness also allows the viewer to interact with the image, and deepens the viewer's involvement in a temporal process of interpreting this space and the actors within it, as they come to presence. Heidegger (1927) would call this 'presencing', to acknowledge the to and fro as one responds to and interprets phenomena.

Heidegger believed that all lived experiences feed into your understanding of any given subject. Annells (1996) expands on this Heideggerian philosophy, arguing that hermeneutics is a process of interpretation that aims to bring an understanding of phenomena through language, and in my case through the image (Catanzaro, 2014). Relph discusses this in relation to not only insideness, but also experience:

“ To be inside a place empathetically is to understand that place as rich in meaning and hence to identify with it, for those meanings are not only linked to the experiences and symbols of those whose place it is, but also stem from one's own experiences (1976, p. 55). ”

This slow reveal of insideness situates the experiential nature of photography within space (Catanzaro, 2014).

To understand the slow reveal of experience, it is important to understand the evolution of my photographic process developed throughout my interactions with these spaces over the period of study. In the early days of photographing, it became a ritual, to enter the space and stand at the back, behind a group of people, in a dark corner. This is materialised through my photographs. Darkness at this point was my friend. Slowly, as time progressed, I relaxed. I came out from the dark and started to become more embedded in the space. That said, the times when I was covered in the sweat of the crowd beside me and left with the smell of others on my skin was an important time within my research. It was the slow immersion of being within these spaces that has effected the documentation process ever since.





*Figure 7. Beard face, (Photograph taken by Author, 2011).*

This complete immersion is demonstrated in Figure 7. This particular gig was in a very small room, the temperature was hot, and it was almost hard to breathe, like stepping into a car that has been left in the sun all day. As I am quite short, the view of the performers was almost entirely blocked out. With no intention or way to push to the front, I experienced the performance in glimpses and sounds and through the faces of those who could see, those taller than me, those with a better vantage point. Enjoyment and concentration etched on their faces, beers poised at their lips, appreciation shared between people discussing a song or experiencing a moment.



*Figure 8. Camera high, (Photograph taken by Author, 2011).*

As you can see in Figure 8, at this particular gig another photographer is experiencing a similar height-constraint and is raising their camera in the air as an attempt to capture a more holistic view of the band and audience. Not only does this cause increased visibility and attention to the photographer, but it is also not a practice I would generally engage in, based on years of experience photographing bands. However, in the spirit of trying new things, I raised the camera and took a picture, the image was blurry, but more than that, it reinforced an immeasurable disconnect between the image and myself. It was as though I was looking at an image someone else had taken, due to the fact that my eye had not been pressed to the viewfinder and I had not consciously framed and deliberated over the actors captured.



*Figure 9. Your view, (Photograph taken by Author, 2012).*

While this was an option for capturing the space, it was at this point that I really understood how vital my experience of the space was to the documentation. If I felt cramped to the point of claustrophobia inside a space, as I did in Figure 7 then that needs to be translated to the viewer. This project, as previously expressed, is not about the performer on stage and capturing the best angle of the lead singer, it is about contextualising a phenomenological understanding of space and place as explored experientially through the lens of my camera. While the heat in this space was unbearable, the vibe was electric and it was from here that I took comfort in the confines of other bodies around me. When a space was not necessarily full or the audience were sitting (this is often due to the kind of performance that requires attentive listening) I too would sit, (as seen in Figure 9) and shoot through the people watching, or shoot from the perspective of others in the room, wanting to capture what it was that they were experiencing, as opposed to a superficial view. Engaging in these practices began to solidify my place as an empathetic insider.

### **Reflections and Revelations**

Throughout my research process I have learned a great deal about the role of 'self' within my work and my inherent ability to 'connect the personal to the cultural and thereby place the self in a social context' (Preston and Thomassen, 2010, p. 49). This connection means we must be aware of the role that the self has in encoding and decoding the image. Barthes reinstates this notion when he states that:

“ I am the reference of every photograph, and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it I am alive here and now (1981, p. 91). ”

This quote highlights the embodied act of photography, the researcher's significance and presence within the image at that current moment of time and also their onus as a researcher to visually interrogate their moment in time as a reflexive practitioner.

My research has reinforced the power of the visual as a methodology, but also its inherent fragility as its success is heavily reliant on the researcher's ability to fully open themselves up to the world:

“ ... [the photograph] functions as a social lens and can be both a 'mirror' and a 'window' (Bogre, 2012). ”

A self-awareness of this notion is imperative when conducting visual, phenomenological research, as reflection

and post analysis is as important to the process as the original act of photographing. Through engaging with phenomena and placing myself inside these spaces, I was able to reflect on my imagery as a dynamic record of my own fluctuating experiences. This research project aims to reflect a journey from outside to inside irregular spaces, a journey of discovery over time, full of unexpectedness and change.

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### **About the author**

Dr. Michelle Catanzaro lectures in design, visual communication at Western Sydney University. Michelle's practice-based research involves photographing urban space, mapping urban geographies and archiving and collating visual imagery. She has published, presented and exhibited on her research nationally and internationally. Michelle's research is interdisciplinary and intersects with a range of research areas within culture and society, urban studies, human geography and media and innovation.

Email: [m.catanzaro@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:m.catanzaro@westernsydney.edu.au)