

The New Photography
New Zealand's first-generation
contemporary photographers

—Athol McCredie

Gary Baigent
Richard Collins
John Daley
John Fields
Max Oettli
John B Turner
Len Wesney
Ans Westra



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Introduction

This book is about the beginnings of contemporary photography – also known as art photography – in New Zealand. It centres on personal social documentary photography for, in very general terms, this is how things started out. This kind of work was personal not because it was significant only to the photographer and perhaps their acquaintances, as those who liked to condemn it claimed, but because it wasn't taken for someone else's purposes – to illustrate an article by a writer or as part of one's employment, for example. Consequently it was free to speak in ways particular to the photographer, with a consistent and coherent perspective or vision that was not limited to the familiar vocabulary and syntax of everyday forms of photography.

It was social because it was about the human world, even when it didn't actually depict people; and in only a handful of exceptions was the natural environment purely the subject. Lastly, the work was documentary because it showed the world 'out there', as chanced on by the photographer, rather than deliberately posed subjects or set-up scenes. Its method was observation and its aim truth to experience; a way for the photographers to explore, interact with and make sense of their world.

Collectively, the photographers in this book established a new field of photography in New Zealand, one that was not simply illustrative. Outside of the snapshot, portraiture, camera club photography and a few types of scientific work, photography was (and mostly still is) considered as a sort of intermediary step in the production of meaning, or as an accompaniment, an *illustration* of the word. But this new photography spoke for itself and with its own language. We can ask of conventional photographs, 'What is it of?' or 'What is it about?', but with this work the answer will only take us so far (or, in some cases, nowhere at all).

The photographers selected for this book – Gary Baigent, Richard Collins, John Daley, John Fields, Max Oettli, John B Turner, Len Wesney and Ans Westra – are all part of the first generation of contemporary photographers. Each created a significant body of work in the 1960s and continued through into the 1970s and some beyond. There are other photographers whose careers range back many years, such as Laurence Aberhart, Mark Adams, Peter Black, Glenn Busch, Anne Noble and Peter Peryer, who are particularly well known today, but none of them was working in the 1960s. Others

Max Oettli was born in Switzerland in 1947 and migrated to New Zealand with his family in 1956. He was brought up in Hamilton and was a trainee press photographer at the *Waikato Times* over university vacations from 1966 to 1969. He applied this experience to his work in student journalism while he studied English, history and art history at the University of Auckland.

From 1970 to 1975 Oettli was technical instructor in film and photography at the University of Auckland Elam School of Fine Arts. During this time he was also founding president of PhotoForum (1973–75) and had four solo exhibitions as well as being included in *The Active Eye* touring exhibition.

Oettli left New Zealand with his wife Simone in 1976 to travel extensively. His most substantial quantity of published work up until 2006 was a selection of photographs from those travels that were reproduced in *Photo-Forum* in 1979.

The couple settled in Geneva, Switzerland, where Oettli worked in architectural and aerial imaging while also teaching photography. In 2007 he came back to New Zealand to take up a position as lecturer in photography at Otago Polytechnic. When the position ended he returned to Geneva and semi-retirement.

Oettli's entire collection of New Zealand negatives is held by the National Library of New Zealand.

Max Oettli

I'm very aware of the fact that I was interposing a machine between me and this actual vibrant beautiful life thing. Maybe hiding behind it to some extent. There are things like sexual desire and so on in there as well, which you can't have but you might get to take a picture. If you're lucky. I think that's probably the kind of understanding of photography that you're getting in Susan Sontag's bitchy *On Photography*. That it is an affirmation of distance, of inaccessibility. But maybe your picture is better and truer than other pictures.

I was obsessed with photographing people, with seeing people in various contexts. And of course I was, and still am, rather shy. You are intruding, there's no doubt about it. I remember showing my friend the vicar some work and him saying, 'This is really cheeky. What are you doing intruding on people like this?' I said to him, 'What did Hogarth do? This is sort of Hogarth country.' He burst out laughing. There was a kind of satirical edge to my best work, always.

My next exhibition, *Night Out*, at the Manawatu Art Gallery in 1972 was quite focused compared to *Visible Evidence*. Luit Bieringa, the new director of this Palmerston North gallery, was interested in photography and had seen my work in a student exhibition. It was a very lovely show. It involved being out a lot at night. And there again there's this thing of longing. *Night Out* is the title of a play by Harold Pinter, but it's also a contraction of 'sometimes at night I feel

myself locked out'. Which of course has all kinds of other connotations. And it's very much slinking around Auckland, between ten at night and four in the morning. I was using wide-aperture lenses, using my considerable technical knowledge to be able to push emulsions very, very far to get a very high film speed and making big prints on black mounts.

And then I had an exhibition in Hamilton in 1974 at the Waikato Art Gallery, on director Campbell Smith's invitation. It was, simply, the 'best of', if you like. It went off quite well, but Hamilton's a pretty quiet place actually. People came in, had a nice glass of wine then went away again. I don't think it was reviewed. This may have been because the art reviewer for the *Waikato Times*, Geoff Fairburn, didn't consider photography art.

As a matter of fact, this whole idea of photography and art is something I never engaged with. I just didn't think that kind of discourse was worth wasting time on. There were contexts for photography and the art context was an interesting one, I felt. It seemed that if photographs weren't publishable in any journalistic way, the default option was to make them into an art. But I wasn't going to start crusading about this, as John Turner did, for example. Fine for him, but I couldn't be bothered. Lots of stuff I couldn't be bothered with. Life's too short. I was out with my Leica.

Nevertheless, I was interested in the idea

of PhotoForum. I think PhotoForum had a very important function. I was president for two, three years, but I wasn't really a club man, and I don't think I was a very effectual president. John would come and say, 'Max, you'd better get your act together and write this and that and the other thing,' and partly because I was sort of the dog boy at the art school, I was used to either doing what I was told or somehow sneaking out of it. Basically I am fairly disengaged, although I've been involved with politics. I was working for the socialist party in Geneva for a while. I've been in a municipal council, all kinds of things, but somehow I've never quite managed to sing in perfect harmony with the chorus. I've just always been slightly, quietly, the dissenting voice. I'm not proud of this, I don't think it's necessarily a good quality. But of all the awkward questions, I would be the one to ask them. Or if there was a stupid joke, I'd be the one to make it. I'm not really fit for society, I think.



→ Max Oetli
Department store,
Auckland, 1972



← Max Oetli
Store, Auckland, 1972



← Max Oetli
Kerb, Queen St -
Wellesley St, 1969



← **Max Oetli**
West Wind Coffee Bar,
 1968



← **Max Oetli**
Mt Eden Post Office,
 1966