



Nicola Loder, *The Apprenticeship of Silence*, 1994.  
Installation detail Centre for Contemporary Photography.

## The Apprenticeship of Silence

Nicola Loder

Zara Stanhope

Centre for Contemporary  
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A form of optical coherence is implicated in the Modernist ideal of an abstract public territory, reducing the city to what Henri Lefebvre termed “the undifferentiated state of the visible-readable realm”<sup>1</sup>. The continuous suburban spaces produced by contemporary urban sprawl, transport and communication systems are disrupted when the specificity of actual, local space is admitted. Nicola Loder’s installation triggers the viewer’s cognisance of these very relations between place, vision and consciousness.

*The Apprenticeship of Silence* comprises 850 small black and white photographs separated

into three grid-shaped installations. The quantity of Loder’s work might imply an archiving project, a flattening and fixing of meaning into a documentary hierarchy. However, Loder’s form of presentation is distinguished from the collective arrangement of photographs by artists such as Sophie Calle and Christian Boltanski. The content of Loder’s images subverts the applied order of the grid and its associated implications in the areas of urban design, cartography and technology. The repetition of disjunctive views and scales within the organisation of each grid of works minimises any sense of cohesion or idea of infinite extension beyond the grid. Only in the periodic recurrence of images, so that one place

becomes interchangeable with any other space, is there a sense of a geographic space.

Each group of photographs draws attention to modes through which we recognise and negotiate the urban space. One group comprises reproduced 1950s aerial photographs of Melbourne drawn from the collection of the State Library of Victoria. The others are Loder’s own photographs; an architectural model shot from various angles with a micro camera and rows of photographs of horizons at various light levels. The black and white medium gives a veneer of commonality across the varied temporalities and subject matter. By varying scale and orientation within each grid, the elevated view (the historical condition of the map or the location of surveillance) is as privileged as the close-up. Within each series spatial and temporal boundaries are blurred by the juxtaposed viewpoints and focal lengths, lack of fixed perspective and variation in exposure. This incongruently results in the fragmenting of conventional, descriptive representation, replacing content with an awareness of the mediation of perception. The construction of the viewing position by reference to vision, illusion, familiarity, replication and recognition indicates the complex process of consumption that controls the silent production of meaning.

For Merleau-Ponty, the most objective effect of the visual experience was the sense that we are immediately present everywhere and situated

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nowhere. Loder complicates the process of vision by activating recognition of subjective interactions of place, memory, scopic intrusion and the selective discourse of representation. Her "snapshots" taken from impossible angles, of indistinct scenes, bodies and times are analogies for the violent disjunctions and heterogeneity that comprise lived space. In the late 1950s the Situationists rejected the encyclopaedic summation of the aerial photograph preferring the "type of blindness" of the pedestrian experience of the city<sup>2</sup>. Their desired perception was in the form of the *derive*, a drift whose perception incorporated cultural and social relations of space, without the class and gender privileges of Baudelaire's *flaneur*. Loder interrupts her imaginary sites with random glimpses of Melbourne architecture, intrusive reminders of geographical and political place. The familiarity of the imagery raises different associations, ranging from the nostalgic and romantic to recognition of a site of cultural tourism and state income.

Descartes posited blindness as protection against the illusions and deceptions of vision. In the same sense, Michael de Certeau discusses holistic visual knowledge as derived from the city being placed on display for the voyeur whilst its ordinary practitioners walk "below the thresholds at which visibility begins... (i)t is as though the practices organising a

bustling city were characterised by their blindness."<sup>3</sup> The subjectivity of the walker in the city is analogous to the viewer's position, which renders some places invisible by their absence and distorts and fragments others according to social and individual practices. Loder presents fields of information, with their excesses and elisions, to be integrated into the physical and abstract processes of vision and to register the conductivity between representation and knowledge. Rather than a different seeing or knowing, Loder provokes processes of sight and recognition of their structure, in contrast to the erotics of de Certeau's all-seeing eye with its lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.



Zara Stanhope is assistant director, Monash University Gallery.

### notes

1. Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, London, 1991, p355.
2. Thomas F. McDonough, "Situationist Space" in *October*, 67, Winter 1994, MIT Press, p73.
3. Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall, California UP, Berkeley, p93.