

# Visualizing New Zealand: A Web of Sites

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Through examples of work made by New Zealand new media artists and television advertising designers, this paper examines the role of new media in visualizing contemporary models of place. This is experienced as a shifting identity of place and its social bodies, where both pre-colonial forms survive and post-colonial social forms emerge. One feature of contemporary New Zealand identity may be examined through an ongoing negotiation between two culturally different models of understanding landscape experienced by the two main ethnic populations. The Western model of seeing land as real estate was imported both economically and culturally during the European settler period and remains dominant. In contrast the Maori (indigenous) model of land, is understood as literally a part of the collective social body, connecting people through whakapapa (ancestral belonging or relationship) that may be traced back to atua (gods).<sup>1</sup>

This tension and the overlaying of these different models of place upon a geographically distinct set of islands forms an ongoing negotiation between cultures.

In this paper I suggest that examples from public broadcast media, and new media, can provide an opportunity for this negotiation to be communicated. Through the examination of stories and images communicated via public and electronic media, in specific works of art and design, we may witness how various positions are being played out. Furthermore through these examples we may recognise a third place, where new models of seeing things emerge.

A recent Air New Zealand marketing campaign for television and cinema values the importance of “being there”. Produced by the Auckland-based office of ad agency Colenso BBDO<sup>2</sup>, the brand campaign reinforces the emotional connection New Zealanders have with their national airline through a liberating sense of flight, celebration of the landscape and powerful moments of connection. One television commercial depicts a person working in a kitchen in Auckland. He walks outside to a jetty looking doleful. He then jumps into the air and flies

the length of New Zealand (with backing soundtrack in te reo Maori) to land outside a landmark building in Dunedin, some 2 hours away by plane, to kiss his girlfriend.

Along with a close metaphoric association with New Zealand’s landscape however, these television commercials draw more upon our familiarity with flying over landscapes in Second Life than they associate with cramped airplanes. These commercials use the themes of displacement and re-connection made possible by travel technology. However the visualization of these themes do not refer to airplanes at all, but the sense of disembodied flight made familiar by new media technologies, and popularized by online worlds and digital game play. The perspective is first-person. Empty plains and mountains roll out beneath us as distance is compressed to keep the story snappy. We see through the eyes of the traveller flying disembodied, above — but not too far above — the landscape below.

New Zealand artist Rachel Rakena’s work *Rerehiko* (2003)<sup>3</sup> uses information and digital communication systems in very different ways. This digital video overlays footage of traditional Maori dancers from Kai Tahu Whanau, with a flow of digital texts collected from email. The dancers however are moving together underwater. The two fluid movements, of text scrolling down and overlaying dancers, both constantly moving and without fixed positions, create a powerful and evocative image. But further, these two types of images reflect ideas about the role of digital communication in contemporary Maori culture. As email travels through the network it produces and supports a collective culture and identity. Email creates a space akin to the traditional whareniui (meeting house) where a community meets and is maintained. Like cyberspace the metaphor of sea/water in which the communication occurs is specifically non-land-based. Rakena explores in this work how contemporary Kai Tahu (tribal) identity also shifts and flows. Using fluid motions and water as a metaphor Rakena’s work references migration and journeying across the ocean.<sup>4</sup>

For this artist vivid visual connections are made between the experience of maintaining a cultural community online and travel, (not unlike the connections made with our Air NZ commercial) but Rakena focuses her travel experience through waters. For Rakena the space between traditional ideas of landscape and contemporary Maori communities creates a question, ‘who are we without land?’<sup>5</sup>

Through these two examples we recognize a shifting identity of place both as a colonial construct or shaping of settler identity, as well as a framework for positioning (indigenous) Maori cultural beliefs in a contemporary New Zealand mediascape. These contrasting views both reside within the unstable, overlaying and contemporary ideas of what it is to live in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The idea that space can be actively and socially produced is explored by Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre. He writes:

We are confronted not by one social space but by many. ... Considered in isolation such spaces are mere abstractions. As concrete abstractions, however, they attain ‘real’ existence by virtue of networks and pathways, by virtue of bunches or clusters of relationships. Instances of this are the worldwide networks of communication, exchange and information. It is important to note that such newly developed networks do not eradicate from their social context those earlier ones, superimposed upon one another over the years.<sup>6</sup>

These two examples offer us different perspectives for considering our relationships of “being here”, being in specific and located geographic and cultural spaces, and being immersed and engaged in mediated spaces at the same time. Lefebvre’s comments from a time prior to the internet continue to have currency as overlaying glimpses of spatial practices are visualized through art and popular media. Both examples refer to land and not-land, and are seen as connected to immersive experience of media, communicated through alternative metaphors of flight, and swimming with traditional dance. I suggest we consider Lefebvre’s clusters of relationships as occurring in this contemporary understanding of location. As processes, media can be read as dynamic operations working within social and cultural frameworks, not limited to their historical moment of transmission and reception yet embedded in the context of that moment. The metaphor of the internet or ‘network’ may be extended to include these contested experiences of landscapes and belonging. The network becomes a way to understand the separate and overlapping cultural complexities of “being here”.

To connect various positions in a network of people and places is part of both the qualities of the internet and learned by us through a long history of travel technologies. While ‘being there’ is the message for the first example, its opposite is also true. ‘Not being there’ or floating and resisting fixed positions allows new perspectives to be developed and in this case older cultural models to be maintained. To allow ourselves to occupy several spaces simultaneously is to acknowledge both the traveler in us all, as well as the affects that travel has had upon us. Travel is never innocent. For both the traveler and the people we meet are forever affected by our passing through or being visited. Through the erasure of geographically situated-ness electronic media both connects and removes us from place. And while this may be experienced as loss, it may also connect or re-connect us with ideas of place in ways that are familiar. For Rakena oceanic metaphors are specific. In the Air New Zealand commercial longing and loss are referred to using gaming metaphors, separating and connecting us simultaneously.

Artists, as well as advertising designers, through the exhibition and distribution of their work can show us relationships to familiar and less familiar ideas in ways that we may not have considered, drawing upon activities that both disrupt and allow us to consider new relationships to place, gathering, travel and home in our busy and constantly mediated lives. The examples demonstrate a simultaneous flow of different types of spaces in time to produce a notion of “New Zealand”, augmented and inseparable perhaps from the media processes and products that represent this place.

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- 1 King, Michael. 2003. *The Penguin History of New Zealand. Auckland*. Penguin Books, p. 77.
  - 2 Colenso BBDO website <http://www.colensobbdo.co.nz/>, accessed 7 July 2007
  - 3 Rakena, Rachel. 2003. More information about this work available at: [http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz/OnDemand/Audio/Collection/Works/128k-mp3/2005\\_38.a-b-128k.mp3](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz/OnDemand/Audio/Collection/Works/128k-mp3/2005_38.a-b-128k.mp3), and [www.intermedia.ac.nz/processingnovelty/papers/rachel%20Rakena%20Toi%20Re.pdf](http://www.intermedia.ac.nz/processingnovelty/papers/rachel%20Rakena%20Toi%20Re.pdf) - both accessed 29 April 2008
  - 4 Rakena, Rachel. 2003. *Toi Rerehiko*, unpublished Masters Dissertation, submitted in partial fulfillment for an MFA degree at Otago Polytechnic School of Art, p. 24.
  - 5 Rakena, Rachel. *Toi Rerehiko*, unpublished Masters Dissertation, submitted in partial fulfillment for an MFA degree at Otago Polytechnic School of Art, p. 23.
  - 6 Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. English translation by Nicholson Smith, Donald. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, p. 86.