

state of the art

new zealand

christina barton

Nearly ten years ago, in 1997, Creative New Zealand and the Chartwell Trust commissioned a report on New Zealand's visual arts infrastructure. *New Vision: A Critical View of the Visual Arts Infrastructure* documented a grim picture of widespread dissatisfaction amongst the visual arts community with the performance of New Zealand's key arts organisations, and highlighted the lack of strategic vision and leadership in the sector, despite also indicating substantial growth in a number of key areas. In taking stock of our situation in 2006, this essay draws on some of the themes and issues raised by that report, to offer a series of (partial, personal and biased) snapshots that consider the state of the visual arts scene in New Zealand.

Let's put things in context

Reading *New Vision* now is a strange experience. I, and Jenny Harper, both art gallery professionals-turned-academics, were part of the team charged with its research and writing (along with Michael Volkerling, its principal architect, Richard Miller and Gisella Carr). I can still hear the urgency I felt to convey our sense of what was missing in the art scene and to find ways to deal with the legacy of more than a decade of new right economic policy that had wrought havoc in the cultural sector. If nothing else, our (small) involvement with the report was a focusing and galvanising exercise. The connection isn't categorical, but it is interesting to note that two years after it was published, and with considerable input from us both, Victoria University opened the Adam Art Gallery, its custom-built university gallery dedicated to presenting and interpreting the visual arts and providing a forum for critical dialogue. Also in 1999 the Art History Department at Victoria University hosted the newly expanded Art Association of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's annual conference, the first to be held in New Zealand. Since then, it has gone on to present and publish an annual Art History Lecture (the Gordon H. Brown Lecture) and in 2006 to establish the Clark Collection Critic/Curator-in-Residence, which saw Lee Weng Choy, artistic co-director of the Substation in Singapore spend six weeks in Wellington. These are all initiatives in keeping with the report's recommendations. It would seem that 'vision' can generate results, an obvious point, perhaps, but something we would do well to keep in mind.

But perhaps Greg Burke's story is even more instructive. As then Visual Arts Advisor at Creative New Zealand, he was the instigator of the *New Vision* report. Given the restructuring of positions that had gone on at Creative New Zealand that saw staff with key responsibilities for particular artforms lose their autonomy to initiate projects and to shape new policy directions, this was no mean feat (though typical of the dogged way in which Burke set out to get what he wanted). With the report under his belt, he was able to galvanise the organisation to undertake a number of initiatives that he could legitimately argue

were implementations of the report's recommendations. These included establishing residencies in Sydney, New York and Berlin; setting up a partnership with Artspace (Auckland) to undertake an International Visitors Scheme, and providing some of the stimulus for New Zealand's representation at the *Venice Biennale*. More than this, as Director of New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand's only dedicated contemporary art museum, Burke went on to realise in microcosm much of the 'vision' mapped out in the report.

A successful model

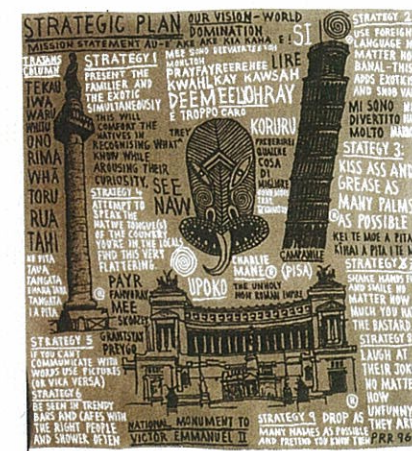
For most people in the contemporary art scene, the Govett-Brewster is a shining light amidst the flashes, glimmerings and sputterings that constitute artistic activity in New Zealand. This institution has a respected history, since it opened with extraordinary fanfare and a real artistic challenge in 1970. A converted cinema, the space is also home to the Len Lye Foundation and an outpost for the New Zealand Film Archive. It has been led by a string of directors (John Maynard, Cheryl Sotheran, Priscilla Pitts and John McCormack being key amongst them) each of whom have undertaken a challenging programme of exhibitions and built a representative collection of contemporary art from New Zealand and the wider Pacific region. Burke's arrival there in late 1998 took the institution to a new level, proving what can be achieved with ambition, know-how to build networks, and the support of your funding body, despite a 'provincial' location.

Burke built on the achievements of his predecessors to undertake a strong line-up of exhibitions each of which was designed to achieve certain purposes. These included shows which brought together international and local artists around themes that had palpable currency. (*Drive: power>progress>desire* 2000; *Feature: art, life and cinema* 2001); surveys of art practice designed to take the pulse of what was happening around the country (*Leap of Faith* 1998, *Break* 2000 and 2002); solo shows (especially utilising the already-established artist residency) that created substantial opportunities for emerging and mid-career, local and international artists (Pae White, Sam Durant, Lee Bul, Peter Robinson, Ann Shelton, et al., Fiona Clark); and projects that were predicated on and designed to enhance key partnerships with other galleries, curators and art world players (like Giovanni Intra, Fumio Nanjo and Jonathan Watkins).

Burke supported these activities with a string of publications; provided a forum for discussion around an enlarged gallery magazine (*Visit*), and organised and publicised public programmes with an impressive line-up of speakers. He used these means to attract people to the gallery and to get the Govett-Brewster's name out into the world. The results have been remarkable. Visitor numbers have increased dramatically, to the point where the District Council has almost doubled the gallery's budget, in recognition of its value in their efforts to re-brand New Plymouth as a cultural destination. This is against a backdrop of radical cutbacks and restructurings by meddling local authorities intent on rationalising expenditure and enforcing new levels of accountability that have seriously compromised the operations of other regional art galleries, most notably in Hamilton, Wanganui, Palmerston North, and potentially Christchurch, which is currently being run by a manager contracted by the council to oversee what has been called, rather dramatically, a Paradigm Shift Team, which must come up with new programmes to increase visitor numbers. In contrast to such capture by local politics,

New Vision

A CRITICAL VIEW OF THE VISUAL ARTS INFRASTRUCTURE



By McDermott Miller Limited
Commissioned by Creative New Zealand and the Chartwell Trust

the Govett-Brewster enjoys an international reputation. This is because the dissemination of information has been deemed vital (you will find its catalogues on the shelves of more museum shops than those of any other New Zealand institution), but also because the gallery's director made sure he got into circulation.

ABOVE: Cover of *New Vision: A Critical View of the Visual Arts Infrastructure* published by McDermott Miller Ltd, 1998, featuring Peter Robinson's painting *Strategic Plan* 1996, oil and acrylic on jute.

No more distance

Burke has moved on now, taking up the position of Director at the Power Plant in Toronto in 2005. Before leaving, he appointed two new curators, Mercedes Vicente and Tyler Cann. Vicente hails from New York, having recently completed the Whitney Museum's influential Independent Study Program, but is originally from Spain. Cann is American and has just completed his PhD at Harvard on kinetic sculpture, which makes him an ideal candidate to take up the new position of curator of the Len Lye Collection and Archive. They are both proof of an important shift that has taken place in the local art scene which signals the extent to which New Zealand's situation has become more permeable, our isolation diminished: the traffic is beginning to move both ways. Burke's move was followed soon afterwards by Robert Leonard's departure for Brisbane to take up the directorship of the Institute of Modern Art (IMA). Since starting out in the late 1980s, both Leonard and Burke made a mark here as curators and their leaving has left something of a gap in expertise, experience and sheer force of character. Their move is not so much a loss as a signpost of a new era, where a global art world draws its figures from every quarter and location means very little.

Artists and dealers have been more adept at responding to this new situation than cultural institutions and policy makers, who are still wedded to insular nationalist agendas. There is a brisk traffic of young artists leaving New Zealand to further their careers, usually starting with graduate study in places like Melbourne and Sydney, but also and now as frequently, California, Vancouver, London, Düsseldorf, and Berlin. This trend saw its most flamboyant trajectory unfold through the extraordinary life and work of Giovanni Intra (1968-2002), who made his mark as a critical voice even as a graduate student at Pasadena's Art Centre College of Design, and went on to establish China Art Objects, the first of a new crop of influential galleries in downtown Los Angeles. I'm not sure if his torch has been passed, but there is a far-flung network of New Zealanders operating from various centres – David Hatcher, Louise Garrett, Simon Rees, Michael Stevenson, Ronnie van Hout, Francis Upritchard, Denise Kum, Yuk King Tan, Joyce Campbell – whose situations can be distinguished as distinctly of this moment. They are matched locally by a growing number of artists who travel as much as they can afford to and who take opportunities to show in other places whenever they arise. Some have benefited from the three international residencies that have been established, or have been helped by outward-looking dealers like Hamish

McKay, Andrew Jenson, John Gow and Gary Langsford, and Michael Lett, who all show international as well as local artists and make opportunities for them, not least by attending art fairs in London, Basel, Miami and Melbourne.

Equally, a new crop of talented and ambitious foreigners have chosen to come to New Zealand not as a nice place to which to escape, but as somewhere to further their careers. Some, like Heather Galbraith or Jenny Todd, are returning New Zealanders who have left good jobs (in Galbraith's case a key position at the Camden Art Centre for the position of Senior Curator at City Gallery Wellington; in Todd's, running her own gallery in London where she lived for some 18 years, to open a privately-funded project space in Auckland) to take on roles here. Others, like Cann and Vicente but also Leonhard Emmerling (the new director of St Paul St, the Auckland University of Technology's gallery space), Tobias Berger (the colourful and energetic director of Artspace from 2002 to 2005, who is now Director of Para/Site Art Space in Hong Kong) and Brian Butler (Artspace's new director), all come with good credentials from elsewhere. Butler is a fascinating case. He is from Los Angeles and made a name for himself through 1301PE Gallery, the space he ran (from 1991) in the front of his house. He has said he likes Auckland because, like LA, it is a 'second city', outward-looking and unwieldy, but not provincial like New York, the archetypal metropolis. Already his programme is distinguished by its focus on international projects that sit lightly and sensitively in the premises. (Belgian installation artist Ann Veronica Janssen's show was my exemplary art experience so far this year.)

These people may not settle permanently, but they prove the substance of our new more mobile situation and have helped create conditions for new modes of practice that are tuned to the specificities of place but not freighted with the demands of being representative. Their efforts have been complemented by a lively artist-run gallery scene and a nascent network of university galleries which have especially taken advantage of and paid attention to the fluid and shifting frameworks for art practice now. In such contexts distance and location are still at issue but the identity politics are worn more lightly and less reverentially. Here the boon of technology (most obviously the internet) has proven an indispensable tool for outreach and communication, while new research-based funding for the tertiary education sector has galvanised academics to create opportunities for research-led teaching and to set in place mechanisms for quality assurance, to prove what they are doing is world class, with the ulterior motive of increased funding.

LEFT: Postcard produced for Michael Stevenson, *This is the Trekka*, New Zealand Pavilion, Biennale of Venice, 2003. ABOVE: Advertisement for Francis Upritchard exhibition, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, ArtForum, September 2005.

Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th St New York, NY 10011
Telephone: 212 627 6000 Fax: 212 627 5450
www.androsengallery.com

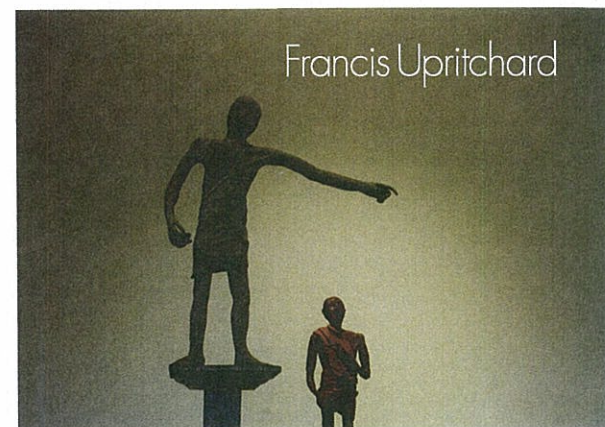
Solón 04
12 East 94th St New York, NY 10128
Telephone: 464 673 9212 Fax: 464 672 9217
www.solon04.com

September 7 - October 6

September 9 - November 3

GALLERY 2

GALLERY 2



Big is beautiful

And biennale fever has hit New Zealand, which is another thing *New Vision* anticipated. Local efforts have met with mixed success. We now have three such exhibitions: Auckland Art Gallery's *Auckland Triennial*, which has manifested twice (in 2001 and 2004) more as a large-scale international theme show than a major artistic gathering; City Gallery Wellington's biennial (or nearly so) showcase of art from around New Zealand: *Prospect*, and Christchurch's *SCAPE Biennial of Art in Public Space*, an event that has evolved since it first began in 2000, but which operates by pairing artists with various 'industries', audiences and situations to stage site-specific projects around the city. Interestingly only the last of these made it onto the world map of biennales published in a recent issue of the British art journal *Contemporary* (21, no 77, 2005, pp 24-25) that plotted 80 such events all over the globe.

We've also had marginally more success recently getting New Zealand artists represented internationally in biennales (not only Sydney and the Brisbane APT, but now also São Paulo, Johannesburg, Yokohama, Lyons and Shanghai). But we have not yet found our way into *Documenta*, nor into the curated components of the *Venice Biennale*, nor are we ever likely to enjoy the kind of attention outsider cultures like Russia, China or Africa have variously received. This is partly because we have never developed an integrated strategy nor made the necessary financial investment to consistently have our presence felt, but it also may be because we are too small and too distant to ever make a major splash in the international arena, at least in the field of visual art. Opportunities may yet present themselves on the back of our successes in fashion, music and film (the Peter Jackson effect), but there are pitfalls



TOI TE PAPA
ART OF THE NATION
1940-TODAY

Over 100 of New Zealand's most significant artworks and taonga are on display in *Toi Te Papa Art of the Nation: 1940 – today*, the first part of the *Toi Te Papa Art of the Nation* long-term art exhibition. On now at Te Papa.

Exclusively sponsored by

Level 5, Free Entry

AIR NEW ZEALAND

TE PAPA

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Bill Hammond, detail of *Traffic Cop Bay*, 2003, acrylic on canvas

in bracketing what artists do with the full-on workings of the culture industry (more on that later). An equally complex set of issues surrounds the outcomes of any possible turn to the Pacific as the last virgin terrain to fascinate Europe and America (again), not only because of the charged politics of our (post)colonial situation but also because Maori and Pacific networks are not coequal or coextensive with the mainstream systems within which the art world operates. (The mixed success of *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific* curated by Melissa Chui for the Asia Society in New York in 2004 is testament to this. Being designed specifically for a New York audience, the show was never intended to be staged at home. Here, it would have met with a lukewarm reception both because it brought together works that were overly familiar and because it corralled artists with very different practices expressly on the basis of the problematic notion of a shared Pacific identity.)

ABOVE: Advertisement for *Toi Te Papa Art of the Nation*, Te Papa, Wellington, 2004, *Art New Zealand*, no 113, Summer 2004-5 featuring W.D. Hammond's painting *Traffic Cop Bay* 2003, acrylic on canvas, collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

The big breakthrough has been our belated attendance at the *Venice Biennale*, three times now, in 2001, 2003 and 2005. Our presence has been coordinated by Creative New Zealand, with government funding (guaranteed for three presentations), and with private sponsorship making up the difference. Each time a different venue outside the Giardini has been found to serve as the New Zealand pavilion, and each time the organisers have got better at managing this enormously challenging exercise. But while the selected artists (Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, Michael Stevenson, and et al.) have risen to the occasion to produce substantial projects offering complex and resonant responses to the situation, each of which have received modest critical acclaim, all, and most notoriously et al.'s *the fundamental practice*, have generated negative press from the media at home. This has meant continued representation at this crucial international event is now being debated by government officials as if the investment may not have been worth it.

Trouble at home

This brings me to the thornier issues besetting the art scene in New Zealand today. I've accentuated the positive because there is much to suggest we are taking advantage of a fluid situation with attention and sensitivity to the nuances of our moment, but this is not so clearly the case with some of our most established institutions, and it is complicated by the cultural, social and economic agendas of successive governments since neoliberalism took hold after 1984. Since the changes of the late 1980s, public institutions have been forced to work according to market models, with the new priorities of accountability and access displacing their older responsibilities. They are now more focused on sponsors and the public than their traditional stakeholders. This has made programming risk-averse and more media friendly and less visible dimensions of their work, especially scholarly ones, harder to realise. While marketing departments have grown, curatorial staff numbers have shrunk, and little has been done to create proper career paths for the next generation of curators to make their way through the system.

Although good quality monographs on a range of established artists have been produced (this being a key focus of recent institutional work and a partial fulfilment of *New Vision's* advocacy for more publications) there is still a dearth of exhibitions, books and catalogues that provide well-researched and deeper readings of the broader aspects of New Zealand's rich and complex art history.

This situation is further complicated because we are still caught up in the wave of major infrastructural investment that got underway in the 1990s which has seen the construction of new museums (Te Papa, most notably) and galleries (Dunedin, Christchurch and smaller centres in Masterton, Tauranga and Taupo), and the expansion of established ones (The Dowse, Govett-Brewster, Sarjeant Art Gallery – though its redevelopment is currently on hold for lack of funds – and, still to come, the massive \$90 million revamp of Auckland Art Gallery that will see it virtually closed for three years). While this has considerably improved facilities, it has meant that funds raised from sponsorship have largely gone into bricks and mortar; staff have been sidetracked by the pressing needs of redevelopment, and, once up and running, operational budgets have hardly kept up with the increased costs of the expanded infrastructure.

In terms of the visual arts, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), the singular new entity that has combined the collections and functions of the old National Museum and National Art Gallery, which opened its grand \$300 million building on Wellington's waterfront in 1998, is our greatest shame. Despite the fact that Prime Minister Helen Clark, wearing her Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage hat, stepped in recently with a substantial cash injection to ensure the museum created better spaces for the visual arts, their presentation still falls short of what one would expect of a national institution. If visitors wish to see more than a scattering of paintings, sculptures and photographs they are still better served in Dunedin, Christchurch or Auckland, which each have institutions dedicated to visual art and collections richer and deeper than what used to be those of the National Art Gallery. The latest fiasco is the postponement of the second instalment of *Toi Te Papa Art of the Nation*, a major survey of New Zealand's visual culture, a portion of which (1940 to the present) opened in 2004. This exhibition was meant to serve as a showcase for a reinvigorated visual arts programme, but it has been set aside for a reprise of an exhibition of costumes and props from the *Lord of the Rings*, which the museum first staged in 2002 to capitalise on Peter Jackson's Oscar-winning trilogy.

Stuck in Middle Earth

Te Papa's deal with New Line Cinema to exclusively showcase Jackson's products is typical of that institution's capture by a particular economic agenda and a new set of cultural imperatives. That the museum can undertake this project without any sense of its obligation to provide some critical and reflexive distance, and at the expense of its art collections, is surely a dangerous precedent. When the Labour Party won the general election in 1999 and Helen Clark took the cultural portfolio, immediately injecting a sizeable sum of extra funding into the sector, many in the art world felt immensely encouraged. Her personal advocacy has helped to

better secure a place for the arts in the hearts and minds of many New Zealanders. Her programme has been to promote culture as a valuable mechanism for self-definition and nation-building and as a vital means to brand ourselves in a global marketplace; to better understand and exploit the arts' economic and social benefits. Bureaucrats speak eagerly now of cultural 'capital' and of creative 'industries', pointing to job creation and economic gain as positive outcomes of increased investment. There has been an exponential growth in tertiary education, with new courses in visual arts, design, film and new media burgeoning to meet the demands of young people who now hope to make careers in these new more entrepreneurial conditions. They have been buoyed by a vibrant art market that has seen strong returns for local artists and the expansion of the dealer network to fill a wide variety of new niches.

But, as we ride a wave of pride in the achievements of our artists, filmmakers and designers, shouldn't we pause to consider just what is at stake here, and what is being overlooked and forgotten? The government's investment in the cultural sector, rhetoric aside, is actually very modest; the real players are those private individuals and corporations that benefited most from New Zealand's economic revolution. The new rich are the powerful cultural brokers in New Zealand today. They are the ones buying the art, building their sculpture parks, and fronting up as big-dollar benefactors to fund new buildings and establish major art prizes (like The Walters Prize, launched in 2002, which gives \$50,000 to one artist selected from a short-list of four by a major international figure, like Robert Storr in 2004). They are a direct outcome of New Zealand's embrace of new right economics. At least they don't make any bones about what they are doing: culture brings them kudos, and why shouldn't they enjoy this? But now with the government and key public institutions also captured by capitalism's lures, we need to view with circumspection their solicitation of the culture industry, and especially their invidious championing of the middle-brow. New Zealand has always prided itself on taking an 'arm's length' approach to its support of the arts. In 2005 Helen Clark and her associate minister, Judith Tizard, crossed a line when they criticised the selection of et al. for the *Venice Biennale*. The art world needs to secure that gap, by finding new means to promote critical thinking, complicating and historicising discursive frameworks, and safeguarding art that speaks of difference, irresolution, that won't play their game. Maybe 'relational aesthetics' has done its dash as buzzword of the moment; perhaps we should resuscitate an older term, 'oppositional' aesthetics, and see where that takes us? ☹

Christina Barton is a writer, curator and art historian. She is currently Programme Director Art History, School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

Local Transit
An Exhibition in Two Parts

in collaboration with Artists Space, New York
20 May - 1 July 2006

- Dan Arps (AKL)
- Kylie Duncan with Keely O'Shannessy and Gerald Phillips (AKL)
- Simon Esling (AKL)
- Sara Greenberger Rafferty (NY)
- Jennie C. Jones (NY)
- Jennifer Nocon (LA)
- Blake Rayne (NY)
- Sriwhana Spong (AKL)
- Lisa Tan (NY)

Annual New Artists Show
22 July - 2 September 2006

Peter Robinson
16 September - 14 October 2006

Meg Cranston
28 October - 25 November 2006

National Drawing Award
2 December 2006 - 3 February 2007

ARTSPACE^{NZ}

Level 1, 300 Karangahape Road
PO Box 68418, Newton, Auckland, New Zealand//Aotearoa
Phone +64 9 303 4965, Fax +64 9 366 1842
artspace@artspace.org.nz, www.artspace.org.nz
Hours: Tuesday - Friday 10am-6pm, Saturday 11am-4pm



ARTSPACE



Artlink - new zealand Contemporary Art Quarterly | vol 26 no 2
Volume 26 No 2 © 2006
editor Stephanie Radok

new zealand **Artlink**
contemporary art

- \$13 aus
- \$14 nz
- \$10 us
- \$13 can



installation
artist-run initiative
photography
public art

turangawaewae
a place to stand