

# **No Ordinary Museum: The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Contemporary Art and the Contingency of History**

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*Real Time*, 22 February–19 April 1970.

In the aftermath of modernity, art has indeed only one option: to be contemporary. But 'being contemporary' these days means much more than a mindless embrace of the present. Of course all newly forged art is of its moment, and of its time, but perhaps never before has art been made within such a widespread sense that currency and contingency is all that there is in the world, all that there may ever be.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a flurry of activity in critical circles of late as commentators try to grapple with the nature of art now.<sup>2</sup> This has been motivated by the growing realisation that the intellectual frameworks governing art and its accounting are no longer holding, that neither the narrow formalism of modernism nor the sceptical perspectives of postmodernism are able to contain the proliferation of practices as they unfold across multiple and expanding scenes on a global scale. As many have argued, no definitive movement has emerged since pop, minimalism and conceptualism laid claim to the artistic high ground in the 1960s. Indeed, it is the rapid expansion of art, aided by the spread of information and communication technologies, the spiralling growth of commodity capitalism, and the emergence of a new world order in the wake of decolonisation, that has led to a situation where no authoritative position holds—neither modernism's trust in progress nor postmodernism's doubts about the *grands récits* of history; neither nationalism's invention of a geographically bounded identity nor internationalism's call to arms to a transnational avant-garde. Instead, an appetite for what's new, fresh and next dominates and new voices working within and across borders address a complex multitude of perspectives; here everything appears to be in flux, definitions shift, temporalities proliferate and spatial boundaries blur.

Out of this maelstrom a new critical term has emerged. This is what some commentators are now calling 'the contemporary', a period category that some believe follows on from the modern and the postmodern, yet is still intertwined with them. Terry Smith, for one, takes the term to mean "more than a mindless embrace of the present" and defines this as a condition of being "in" and "with" time.<sup>3</sup> He sees it as a particular consciousness that has taken hold, which has shifted our relation to time—past, present and future—whereby temporality is conceived as fluid and multiple, and which has also rendered the spaces in which we now operate—local, global, virtual—relative and contingent.

These are the volatile conditions within which the history of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery has unfolded. They are also the context for this essay, which endeavours to read the Gallery's history in relation to this backdrop, to make the case that it is an institution in, of and for its time. It focuses first on describing those key features that distinguish this gallery from a conventional museum and which prove its suitability as a forum for the contemporary, and then it turns to explore a small sampler of works that have been showcased by the institution, treating these as equally important indices of what this new sense of 'the times' or 'our time' means. In doing so its aims are quite specific: on the one hand to prove the distinctive contribution the Govett-Brewster has made as an open and permeable crucible within which art is produced, that is, as a properly 'contemporary' museum; and on the other, to use it and the works discussed as vehicles for thinking through the situation of culture now. It therefore treats the Govett-Brewster as a case study in mapping the lineaments of art after 1970 and argues for its crucial place in art history as a measure of the contemporary.

In chronological terms, the Gallery's history coincides exactly with the time frame commentators have outlined as the period in which old verities have come unstuck and new conditions have unfolded. Opening in 1970, the Gallery was established when the twin forces of globalisation and decolonisation began to take effect, at the very moment when the New Zealand art scene began its most sustained period of expansion (mirroring growth internationally). A new contender amongst the locally-funded regional institutions that were established to serve communities around the country, the Govett-Brewster took its place within an emergent network of metropolitan galleries, dealers, publishers, funding agencies, and cultural organisations that mark the art world's professionalisation and proliferation in the 1960s and 1970s. And it did so with a very particular mandate: to be a venue for contemporary art and not a bastion of national, regional or local culture.

Neither built from scratch as an entirely new structure nor harking back to inherited tradition, the Gallery was adapted from a building with a history, notably one which belonged to the recent past. The old Regent Theatre was a decommissioned cinema that recalls the golden era of cinema and the first flourish of mass culture; a prescient choice which set the new institution's commitment to the contemporary in a particular relation to its immediate past and embedding the temporal as a trace at the very core of its operations. This was one of a number of innovative moves made by the Gallery's founders; the brainchild of local engineers, artists, architects and politicians and the inaugural Director, John Maynard, a young and forthright Australian. A staunch advocate of current art, Maynard developed policies that enabled the Gallery to narrow its focus to contemporary practice, as well as extend its reach beyond the parameters of national culture to draw instead on the wider 'Pacific Rim', so setting the agenda for the institution in terms of both its collection and exhibition programmes. Leaving almost as soon as things were in place, Maynard established a template for the role of Director as more than an administrator; as someone with an intellectual agenda and the courage to stand by it in the face of local opposition, whose tenure was never so long that he became stale or entrenched.

Maynard has since been followed by directors who have each engaged and extended his founding plans to shape the programme and the Gallery's collection.<sup>4</sup> This has seen the Govett-Brewster commit to new art forms and modes of presentation. Contemporary sculpture, abstract painting, post-object art, photography, film, video, digital art, and more, have been supported literally as these media have developed. So too temporary exhibitions, artists' projects, and (since 1995) an active artist-in-residence programme have prevailed over the custodial role of the museum. Indeed, Maynard's controversial de-accessioning policy, a linchpin of his vision of the Gallery as a contemporary institution, has been invoked on occasion to cull the collection with the very purpose of keeping it fresh. Thus, emphasis has tended to lie with the artists who have come within the Gallery's ambit, with the practicalities of exhibition-making and the front-line impacts of reception: this is no solemn repository, no bastion of the past or even temple for the future.

From its outset the Govett-Brewster can be distinguished as an institution specially tuned to its situation. This has entailed a complex interplay between recognition of the community which it serves and of the geographical and historical specificities of its location, and (sometimes fierce) independence from the bounds of provincialism, through consistent allegiance to the wider art world. Undoubtedly such grounded freedom has been aided by the fact that the Gallery was not established on conventional museum models. It is not encumbered with an inherited collection, nor expected to comply with a traditional mandate (like those galleries that were established by local art societies), and it received its founding funds from an independent source (Monica Brewster) rather than the city's ratepayers. Enabled by such independence, the Gallery has provided a self-conscious platform for the negotiation of 'local' and 'global' that demonstrates its commitment to and understanding of post-national and post-colonial positions, whilst never losing sight of its responsibilities to the community in which it is embedded.

Thus, the Govett-Brewster stands out from its peers as an institution that eschews tradition, operating in the present to foster practice and critically reflect upon it. Responsive to shifts in global power that have tested the hold of established centres, whether these are metropolitan, national or Eurocentric, it has always negotiated its position literally on the 'edge' of a community, a nation, a region and a world, with all the historical freight, political challenges and creative possibilities this brings.

These various features of the Gallery's make-up and operation align well with current definitions of the character of contemporaneity; they are keys to understanding the institution's responsive relation to present conditions. A deeper means to gauge and understand the contemporary is to explore how artists associated with the Gallery play out this new understanding of the contingencies of time and place, knowingly using the institution as their platform and foil. Operating reflexively between work and frame, the examples that follow are suggestive of what it means to be 'contemporary'.

Leon Narbey's *Real Time* is the very first project that launched the Govett-Brewster in February 1970 and an obvious place to begin. This work, without doubt, literally inaugurates contemporary art in New Zealand, not only by its nature but because of its sensational and immediate impact on the consciousness of the local art scene. Rather than displaying discrete objects in space, the young sculptor treated the entire Gallery as a site to be activated, creating a kinetic, sound and light environment that took over all its internal spaces. Working collaboratively with a team of helpers—fellow artists, Gallery staff and local suppliers and technicians—Narbey used high-tech and innovative materials to transform the Gallery into a series of audience-activated environments. Nothing quite like this had been seen before in New Zealand. It startled and intrigued the crowds who came to experience it (around 5,000 in the first day), leading British-trained and relatively new arrival, art history lecturer Tony Green to describe the occasion as a key sign of the maturing of the New Zealand art scene, as a catching up and coming closer to where art was 'at' at that moment.<sup>5</sup>

Narbey's *Real Time* is noteworthy for these obvious reasons, but its larger significance is in its positing of a new approach to time and place—an approach aligned with the conditions of contemporaneity. Refusing the distancing effects of representation, the work established a contingent relation to site, its very nature being determined by the architecture and its full potential only being realised once people entered into it. Laurence Karasek, another sympathetic contemporary viewer, rightly saw the work as a fitting response to the Gallery's previous life as a cinema, in its redeployment of film's key constituents: sound, light and movement.<sup>6</sup> Such blurring of boundaries between media, together with the work's permeability to its context, are sure signs of the demise of modernist principles. Neither pure nor autonomous, *Real Time* denied dispassionate contemplation, thrusting viewers into a here-and-now situation that assaulted various senses and involved them not just visually or mentally but bodily, to make a vivid claim on 'present-ness'. While the ingredients of film may have been invoked, the aim was not to induce passive spectatorship but to immerse audiences in the medium, to render tangible film's material language. It was as if the building's previous life as a cinema had somehow come back to haunt it, so casting doubt on the Gallery's status as a place of rationality and order, and instead making a claim for its role in altering consciousness (such were the ambitions of the day).

But *Real Time* was also only temporary. Once the exhibition closed the work was dismantled and dispersed, a fleeting gesture making no call on the future. Except that Narbey documented the work in his *A Film of Real Time*, which now survives as the project's official record. This film—with its mobile camerawork, quick cuts, radical close-ups and

discordant soundtrack—carries over the intentions of the installation by re-creating in film the work's unsettling effects. If *Real Time*—the installation—advocated immersion in the present, then *A Film of Real Time* acknowledges a distance from 'what-has-been'. The film is self-consciously not the same as 'being there': it condenses three dimensions into two; fixes time by having a determined duration; breaks events into fragments and reconstitutes these in a new disjointed order. It takes 'place' elsewhere and treats the spectator to another kind of temporal experience; as time passes, its imagery becomes historic. Rather than mourn the loss of the original, this document is its necessary witness, an indexical trace that delineates the threshold between present and past, presence and absence, the 'real' and its representation, maintaining a tenuous hold on the '1970s' as our time's foundational moment. Fittingly, it is this document that was accessioned into the Govett-Brewster's collection (in 1972), serving there as a permanent reminder of the transience and contingency of things rather than as a material object or precious treasure.<sup>7</sup>

Narbey's *Real Time* is a prescient leitmotif for a new understanding of art and its purchase on time. On each occasion the documentation is shown we are reminded that something happened, but each time we watch the film we are aware of its passing. 'Now' and 'there' become 'then' and 'here' in a shuffling and reversal that points to an altered relationship to history that undermines the premises of both modernism (which valued the new whilst laying claim to eternity) and postmodernism (which brought back the past only to dismiss the possibility of progress), to posit a play between loss and recovery that implies repetition without any 'real' return. Manipulating the tools and formats of our technological era, Narbey's work defers its status as a static art work; its full meaning resides only in the traffic between actual installation and celluloid record. Such temporal, spatial, and therefore ontological uncertainty augurs and emblematises the new era of 'the contemporary'.

Maynard's invitation to Narbey demonstrated his commitment to the latest moves in sculpture (constructions by Darcy Lange, Terry Powell, John Panting, Stephen Furlonger and Don Driver were some of his earliest acquisitions), including the new post-object art being made under the aegis of Jim Allen in Auckland. This latter category challenged many of art's founding suppositions, shifting attention from objects to ideas, products to processes, taking all manner of 'dematerialised' form in relation to the specificities of context, and often only surviving as photographs, films, videos, instructions and drawings. Though this moment passed, and sculpture no longer functions as the sole preserve within which new modes of working have gestated,<sup>8</sup> the Govett-Brewster has continued to support such practices, most obviously through its commitment to Len Lye—the ideal 'father' figure for these modes of working—but also through regular staging of temporary installations and artist's projects (many of which have directly engaged the fabric of the building)<sup>9</sup> as well as in its renewed attention to post-object art's history as the ground upon which contemporary art builds.<sup>10</sup> This dedication is emblematic of the hold the art of the 1960s and 1970s exerts on contemporary practice, which is best defined by James Meyer as being based on a recognition of that era's 'failures' whilst also recognising its promise, which in another way reiterates the contemporary's changed relation to history.<sup>11</sup>

One might argue, therefore, that though Narbey's *Real Time* is now history, what he initiated is continuing to engender its own complex 'returns', a view that might be used to structure the Gallery's history (as I have done in the preceding paragraph). *Real Time* may even have become a foundational narrative for the institution, serving as a crucial component of its own self-definition. This is true of a second and very recent example, Peter Robinson's enormous installation, *Snow Ball Blind Time* (2008), which was described in the Gallery's publicity as next after *Real Time* to completely fill the Gallery. Just how this connection works, however, must be thought through carefully. Apart from its scale, its unconventional materials and the collaborative effort that went in to making and installing it, there is little, in fact, to link the two; Robinson's work is magnificent for different and critical reasons.

Bright white and solid (however lightweight), *Snow Ball Blind Time* occupied space as a knotted and twisting mass of giant polystyrene chains that draped over floors and walls and spilled down staircases, seeming to rest on or be carved from rock-like shapes, the immense 'weight' or protean effort of which was signalled by spreading drifts of granulated plastic debris. Time was invoked here (directly in the title), but it was not the 'here and now' or 'there and then' of its predecessor. Though encountering the work in the Gallery was an experience, it did not entail immersion (indeed the accumulations of polystyrene stanchions served as the museological shorthand for 'do not touch'), nor was there actual movement. Rather *Snow Ball Blind Time* suggested immobilisation, stasis; the incomprehensible slowness of geological time rather than the instantaneity of the trigger switch; it seemed both ruined and prescient: the future past of a coming ice age. Made from the material used in packaging, its very substance embodied both newness and redundancy. This was an apparition not an event, a toxic monument quite other to *Real Time*, one born in the era of global warming and rampant consumerism, our time of excessive production, gross waste and urgent recycling.

And yet—and here the connection to Narbey's *Real Time* looms—such responses were conditioned by comparison, they took shape through the structural play of difference that was enabled, indeed provoked, by this particular context. If Narbey's installation explored the possibilities for a social sculpture using new technology and industrial materials, Robinson's kept its distance with an aura of tragic grandeur. One believed in new possibilities and then held them in

abeyance; the other acknowledged the promise of 1970 but seized the opportunity to expose its blind spots.<sup>12</sup> Together they represent the play of hope and desperation, liberation and domination, and the processes of (im)materialisation, that Terry Smith deems to be the crux of contemporaneity.<sup>13</sup>



*Snow Ball Blind Time*, 13 September–23 November 2008. Peter Robinson filled the spaces of the Gallery with a motionless, knotted and twisting mass of giant polystyrene chains.



My third example has equally important implications for our understanding of the Govett-Brewster's status as an art institution of and for the contemporary, but turns the conversation from time and materials and their experiential effects, to history and culture and thus to the realm of the spatial and the political. This is the gift by Colin McCahon in 1973 of his painting, *Parihaka triptych* (1972) in honour of the Māori prophet Te Whiti, to be held in trust by the Govett-Brewster for the people of Parihaka. While the story of this painting is a fascinating one, and well documented, what interests me here are the conditions of its presence in the Gallery's collection and their ongoing consequences.<sup>14</sup> Wystan Curnow calls the painting a "gift with two recipients".<sup>15</sup> This is signalled by the double dedication painted on the surface of the canvas, which reads, on the left-hand panel, "an ornament for the Pakeha" and, in the centre, "a monument to Te Whiti" and (further to the right) "to the people of Parihaka", but it is cemented by the terms of the donation which ensure that the Gallery and its audiences are reminded of their responsibilities in perpetuity.

The painting, in fact, was commissioned by James Mack, then-Director of the Waikato Art Museum, for a centenary exhibition in Hamilton dedicated to reviewing the historical events at Parihaka that took place one hundred years previously. These were being reassessed by a new generation of New Zealanders, well represented by the likes of Mack and McCahon, who were shocked by the brutality of the invasion of the Māori settlement at Parihaka (in 1873) and fascinated by the stance of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi, the Māori leaders who galvanised their followers to challenge settler encroachment but only with passive resistance. This was at a point in time when concerns over the continuing expropriation of land and loss of culture were becoming more vocal due to the efforts of politicised and urbanised Māori activists as well as traditional Māori leaders still based in tribal areas (that culminated in the Land March of 1975 and led to the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal that year). The painting and its original context serve, then, as cultural signposts for the decolonisation process under way in New Zealand in the 1970s, which made Māori perspectives more visible and threw the aims and tactics of Pākehā nation-builders into disarray.

Colin McCahon's *Parihaka triptych* 1972. (Reproduction permission courtesy of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust)

McCahon's willingness to accept Mack's suggestion that he deposit the work with the Gallery in New Plymouth is therefore a political gesture that puts his personal needs to one side in the interests of drawing attention to tragic past events and pays tribute to the figures of Te Whiti and Tohu. Residing in an essentially Pākehā repository in trust for the people of Parihaka, the painting serves as an injunction that cannot be put to rest, reminding viewers of "past terror" and demanding that "all invasion should be stopped".<sup>16</sup> Past and future, therefore, are suspended in the painting's literal presence; history, it determines, must not be forgotten or repeated. What is fascinating here is that for different reasons and with alternative methods, McCahon produced a work, like *Narbey*, that holds a situation in suspension, his painting serves as a device to engage audiences in the present whilst linking them inexorably to both past and future. There is even the possibility that one day the *Triptych* will also leave the building if the people of Parihaka have their own safe place to house it.

McCahon's primary address is to Māori and Pākehā; two people in one land. Thus his painting's colour, form and symbolism are doubly coded to generate a play of culturally specific binary oppositions that are at once abstract and historically grounded: Christian emblem (the vertical cross) becomes Māori implement (the ploughshare used to resist settler advances); black and white pigments signify darkness and light, land and sky, death and life, guilt and innocence; the words of Māori leaders are appropriated to speak to Pākehā viewers. Notably, too, through the process of painting McCahon shifted away from his original intention to feature the dramatic and instantly recognisable outline of Mount Taranaki (then known as Egmont). Such geographical specificity would have mired the work within the conventions of a landscape tradition about which McCahon and others like him were becoming increasingly ambivalent; as he said in a letter to old friend and then Govett-Brewster Director, Ron O'Reilly: "who wants rhododendrons up Egmont when bashed spirits stand under the Raj?".<sup>17</sup>

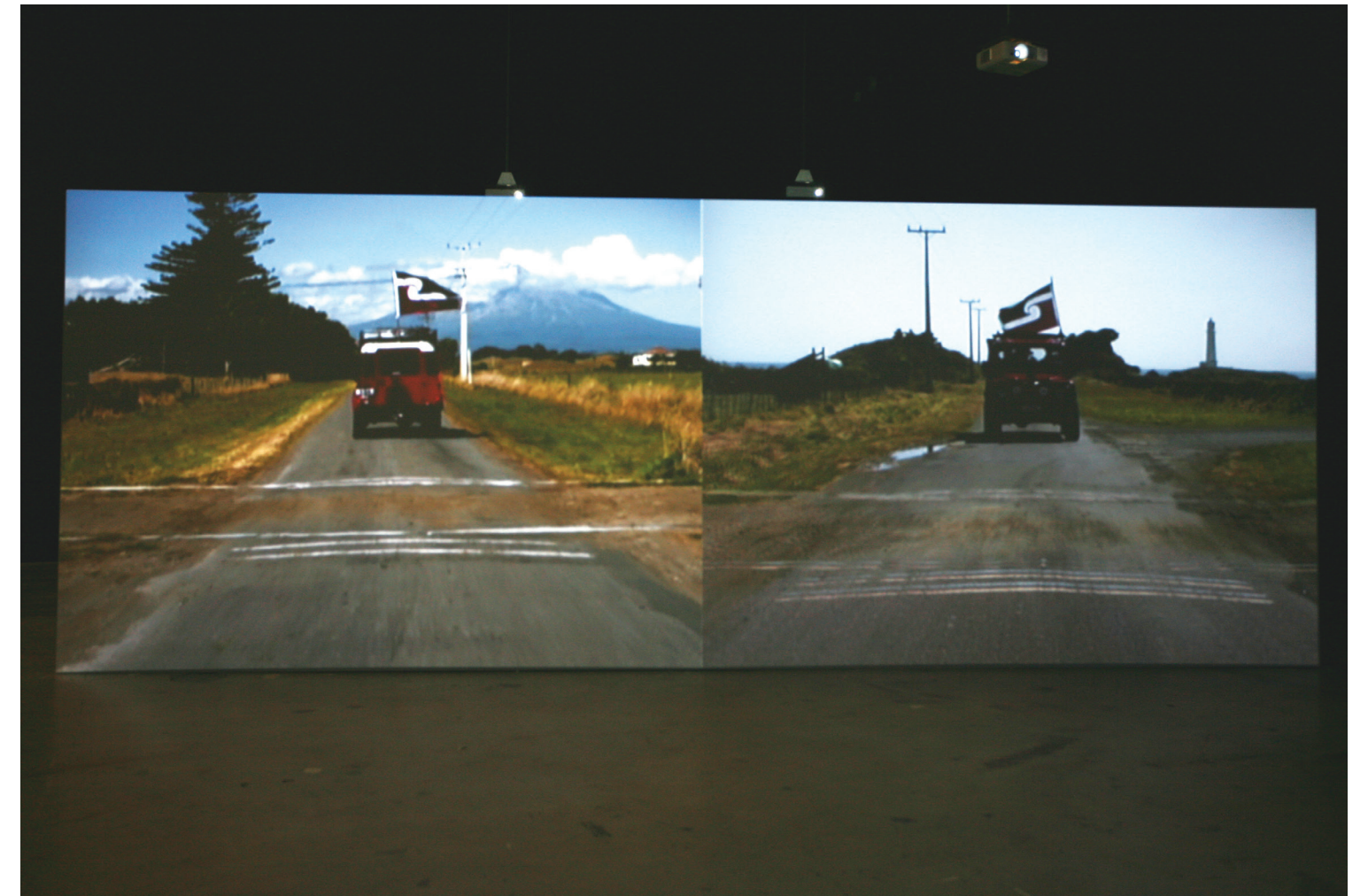
McCahon's eschewal of the mountain in favour of a then dispirited place within its shadow (that, as Curnow notes, the artist could not even find on his map of New Zealand) is an early instance of a new sensitivity to the colonial legacy embedded in landscape depiction. It is the artistic equal to his dedication of the painting to the people of Parihaka. Together, these decisions are another foundational statement in the Gallery's history that renders spatial as well as temporal concerns crucial to its operations. Located at the base of a geographical feature that has always been iconic as a place finder, and which became a key figure in the visual archive of our cultural nationalism, the Govett-Brewster has negotiated its relation to place on many occasions from the most innocent of regards (*111 Views of Mount Egmont* [1971], an exhibition funded by Shell BP and Todd) through to highly critical revisions (Robert Leonard's *Pakeha Mythology* [1986] or Wystan Curnow's *Putting the Land on the Map* [1989]), as well as hosting the work of individual artists—like Michael Smither, Fiona Clark, Jacqueline Fraser, Shane Cotton, and Peter Wareing—for whom the local terrain is a threatened or contested territory.

Yet McCahon's *Parihaka triptych* does not limit itself to the local. Its ultimate message is not only for New Zealanders, but also "to people throughout the world", as the painting announces. Importantly, McCahon's trajectory is from Parihaka outwards, an emboldening sign of new geopolitical relations that takes a local narrative and recognises its wider resonance. Such a reversal aligns with the processes of decolonisation that have reshaped the art world globally. Prescient in 1972, such a perspective has become entrenched, enabling the Govett-Brewster to shuck off any vestiges of beholdenness and navigate a path that leads from Taranaki to elsewhere (Old World, New World, East and West, Australia, the Pacific), and which brings the world to it.

My final example updates and relocates the message of McCahon's *Parihaka triptych*. Alex Monteith's three-part performance, *Local Time, Waitangi Day, Taranaki* was executed between 12.00pm and 9.00pm on 6 February 2009.<sup>18</sup> It consisted firstly of a gathering of artists and curators (members of Solar Circuit Aotearoa New Zealand, a digital media network) at Parihaka Pā on the invitation of Te Miringa Hohāia, founder of the Parihaka Peace Festival. This was followed by two motorised 'outings' from this historical site, in which two Land Rovers bearing Tino Rangatiratanga flags drove firstly from Parihaka to Taranaki's westernmost point (the coast at Cape Egmont) and back. Then later that evening, they took a similar return journey along a road that led from the sea to the base of Mount Taranaki. Video cameras installed in both vehicles tracked these journeys, one focusing on the moving vehicle ahead, the other documenting the car behind. The second journey: 8.00-9.00pm. *Tasman Sea Arawhata Rd – Arawhata Rd Tasman Sea, South Taranaki, Waitangi Day, 2009*, has subsequently been presented as a two-channel video installation. Here we see the vehicles—one driving towards the mountain that lines up perfectly before it, the other with the setting sun behind it heading away from the sea—passing road markings and power poles that recede and advance in queasy succession as if the ground is moving beneath the viewer's feet.

Here, as in much of Monteith's work, the camera is utilised as a drawing tool (one divorced from hand and paper) that inscribes a line through a landscape as an action not a mark. Rather than a figure drawn over and set against a ground, this gesture shifts perspective to a horizontal trajectory, using the camera's frame to keep two vanishing points in view. It is as if viewers are carried along in and with the line, caught in a motion that is beyond their control. Such 'drawing'

figures space and time anew, dragging us into the picture to discombobulating effect, yet suspending us between two points to hypostasise both departure and destination. We are caught between arriving and leaving. And yet *this* journey has a purpose, it moves towards and away from a sacred mountain, and it forms one coordinate in a triangulation that links mountain and sea to Parihaka, a site of great historical significance to Māori and living centre for its surviving people.



If McCahon had difficulty locating Parihaka and when he did he found it disheartening, Monteith is here documenting its resurgence as a focal point for a culturally-engaged and newly outward-looking Māori identity. No wonder that she makes such efforts to precisely delineate its location and the date and times of day (not any day, but Waitangi Day, the occasion when the signing of the Treaty is commemorated). Likewise, her vehicles come and go in relation to this still but sociable centre. Now a Māori leader is host; he grants licence to an event in which Māori and Pākehā participants traverse a landscape deeply incised by history.

Times have changed, Monteith's project proposes. And yet some things stay the same. Though bearing the flag of Māori self-determination and coloured red in deference to indigenous tradition, her two Land Rovers bear with them the whiff of empire. For the Land Rover is a sturdy vehicle of famously British manufacture, built for rough terrain (the sort still not fully tamed) and with military associations that speak of offensive incursions into enemy territory. As in McCahon's painting, these are mobile and ambivalent symbols, doubly coded as British imports appropriated to a Māori cause and as tools of conquest now deployed on well-sealed roads. But the ultimate irony (one not lost on the artist, no doubt) is that the company that makes these vehicles is no longer British, indeed has not been for some time. Today the Land Rover is owned by the global automobile corporation Tata Motors which is based in Mumbai, India. This company bought Land Rover (and Jaguar) from Ford in 2008 (which had in turn acquired the make from BMW who bought it from British Aerospace in 1994). So it serves here as a potent reminder of the way in which national industries have been turned into global brands and of the mobility of capital and goods that defines our contemporary era.

Still from 8.00–9.00pm. *Tasman Sea Arawhata Rd–Arawhata Rd Tasman Sea, South Taranaki, Waitangi Day, 2009*. This two-channel video installation was part of Alex Monteith's major survey *Accelerated Geographies*, shown in the Gallery 25 September–28 November 2010.

But it is also a surreptitious sign of shifts in global power, where the 'Old World' is giving way to the new, the example here being India, once a jewel in Britain's imperial crown. India's independence was facilitated by Mahatma Gandhi, using his unique brand of passive resistance. Parihaka's prophets are now recognised as equally courageous, having developed non-violent means to resist colonial oppression more than half a century earlier. So here a line is drawn not just in 'local time' but between two nations united by a shared colonial history.

McCahon's painting continues to inscribe difference by using the Gallery as its necessary frame. Monteith picks up and re-inscribes his challenge by both taking her camera out into the contested landscape and bringing her footage back as a video installation (shown at the Govett-Brewster in 2010). She thus draws another line to thread Parihaka to the Gallery (and vice versa).<sup>19</sup> By such means histories (of people, objects and places) are re-traced and interwoven and new realities documented, in an endless relay between past and present; place and its representation; appropriation and resistance.

If these examples have been very particular, they are consciously chosen because they belong to the earliest history of this gallery in New Plymouth, and the most recent. They are exemplary especially because they demonstrate the quality of contingency that is critical to our understanding of the contemporary. I have argued that this quality imbues their work with a currency that renders them unfinished; they seem to hover between past and future, in a febrile state of 'present-ness'. What is more, there is a permeability between work and frame which is paradigmatic of how contemporary practice understands its relation to the scenes and sites where it is made. That the Gallery has provided a platform for all their work and continues to grapple with the consequences of their lessons are clues to its value as a fitting container for art now. As Narbey and Robinson, McCahon and Monteith demonstrate, if history is to serve it must be engaged with critically; with this in mind, it is safe to say the work of the Govett-Brewster is far from over.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2010, p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Four examples immediately spring to mind: the discussion called forth by editors Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle in issues 11 and 12 of *e-flux journal* dedicated to the question 'What is Contemporary Art?' (December 2009/January 2010, [www.e-fluxjournal.com/](http://www.e-fluxjournal.com/)); Terry Smith's recent book of the same title (*What is Contemporary Art?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2010); the roundtable discussion orchestrated by Hal Foster in the journal *October* ("Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'", *October*, 130, Fall 2009, pp. 3–124); and issue three of *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Visual Culture* (E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, 2009) in which editors Christina Barton, Natasha Conland and Wystan Curnow brought together a range of texts that addressed our current critical uncertainty with their thematic title 'Art Goes On'.
- <sup>3</sup> Terry Smith, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Noteworthy here is the fact that the position of Curator was not established until 1992 when John McCormack appointed Robert Leonard to work with him.
- <sup>5</sup> See Tony Green, 'Sculpture's Most Remote Province', *New Zealand Listener*, 21 September 1970, pp. 21–22.
- <sup>6</sup> Laurence Karasek, 'Real Time—A Sculpture to Walk In', *The Press* (Christchurch), 3 March 1970, quoted by Christina Barton in 'Pushing the Envelope: Developments at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery', *Art New Zealand*, No. 87, Winter 1998, p. 57.
- <sup>7</sup> Of course, by its nature *A Film of Real Time* is also no longer tied to its location. Though the Gallery owns a copy of the film it has been and can be more widely disseminated. Dislocated from the space that was home to the original installation it functions now, ironically, as a highly mobile artwork.
- <sup>8</sup> One might say now that all art is 'post-conceptual', or we are operating within what Rosalind Krauss has called a 'post-medium' condition.
- <sup>9</sup> Billy Apple's *Altered Staircase* (1980), Julian Dashper's *The Drivers* (1992), and Callum Morton's *Now and Then* (1993) are three such examples.
- <sup>10</sup> There are many relevant instances here. They include: the Govett-Brewster's involvement in *Action Replay*, a multi-venue exhibition dedicated to re-presenting post-object art initiated by Artspace in Auckland in 1999 and involving a consortium of curators from various institutions (Robert Leonard, Wystan Curnow, Christina Barton and John Hurrell); Mercedes Vicente's exhibition and publication on Darcy Lange (2006), and most recently, the exhibition *Points of Contact: Jim Allen, Len Lye and Helio Oiticica*, curated by Tyler Cann and Mercedes Vicente, which opened in late 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> See James Meyer, 'The Return of the Sixties in Contemporary Art and Criticism', in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, Contemporaneity* (eds.) Nancy Condee, Okwui Enwezor and Terry Smith, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2008, pp. 324–332.
- <sup>12</sup> One 'blind spot', for example, is what happened to the materials after Narbey's installation, as this is never discussed in the literature. Conversely, Robinson and the Gallery were at pains to point out that the polystyrene used in *Snow Ball Blind Time* would be recycled.
- <sup>13</sup> See Terry Smith, *op.cit.*, especially pp. 264–271.
- <sup>14</sup> For insightful essays on McCahon's work see Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, 'An Ornament for the Pakeha: Colin McCahon's *Parihaka Triptych*' and Wystan Curnow, 'Muriwai to Parihaka', both in *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance* (eds.) Te Miringa Hohaia, Gregory O'Brien and Lara Strongman, City Gallery, Victoria University Press and Parihaka Pā Trustees, Wellington and Taranaki, pp. 128–138 and pp. 139–144.
- <sup>15</sup> Wystan Curnow, *op.cit.*, p. 140.
- <sup>16</sup> McCahon quoted by Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, *op.cit.*, p. 137.
- <sup>17</sup> This is taken from the letter from McCahon to O'Reilly (18 July, 1977) quoted by Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, *op. cit.*, p.136.
- <sup>18</sup> Conceived and executed in collaboration with Natalie Robertson a fellow member of Local Time, a collective of artists and writers all working in academia (also including Danny Butts and Jon Bywater).
- <sup>19</sup> Alex Monteith's major survey, *Accelerated Geographies*, was staged at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery between September and November 2010.