

# Play On

## **Play On**

Adam Art Gallery

Te Pātaka Toi

8 May-25 July 2010

Julian Dashper

Michael Parekowhai

Ava Seymour

Slave Pianos

Terry Urbahn

Curated by

Christina Barton

# Play On



## Introducing *Play On*

*Play On* brings together five New Zealand artists: Julian Dashper, Michael Parekowhai, Ava Seymour, Michael Stevenson (as a member of Slave Pianos) and Terry Urbahn, whose works variously treat music as a metaphor for thinking about art and art history. Four of the artists are represented by works they produced in the 1990s, while Ava Seymour has been invited to make something new in light of the curatorial brief. Perhaps it was inevitable that someone would come up with the idea of bringing together Dashper's *The Big Bang Theory* (1992–93), Parekowhai's *Patriot: Ten Guitars* (1999), Slave Piano's *Slave Pianos (of the Art Cult)* (1998–99) and Urbahn's *The Karaoke* (1995–97), for all of them make play with the paraphernalia of musical performance as a social form of entertainment and tease out the complications of their presentation as artworks in the gallery environment. They are all ambitious, multi-part installations that deal with substantive issues that challenge expectations, invite (and frustrate) participation and ask serious questions; they have a lot in common.

But the questions that make their re-staging really interesting go beyond superficial appearances to ask why these artists produced these works and what this tells us about the time in which they were made. Bringing them together in 2010, a full ten years after the end of the decade, is time enough to see them as definitive. This is where the inclusion of Ava Seymour's new work comes in, for it invites an artist (of the same generation as her male peers) to offer a new riff from her perspective in the present. Reflecting on the theme and emblematising it in form and function, hers can be thought of as a commentary—like the curatorial one—that helps to clarify the terms and conditions of our recent past.

In a round table discussion on the state of art and discourse in New Zealand conducted in early 2009, contributors endeavouring to come to terms with the critical conditions for art looked back to the 1990s as a counterpoint for their thinking. Peter Brunt, for

example, saw the 1990s as the “watershed years” for contemporary Māori and Pacific art, while Greg Burke described it as the time when New Zealand really began to engage with the new conditions of globalisation. Others recognised that there were critical frameworks that functioned then as drivers for the culture that no longer seemed to be holding, as market forces, institutional shifts and new waves of artists reshaped the picture. Such mulling proves, perhaps, that the 1990s is taking shape as an art historical era.<sup>1</sup> Following on from this discussion, *Play On* provides another context from which we might characterise the decade and engage with its terms critically and without nostalgia.

As Brunt suggests, the 1990s were galvanised by New Zealand’s re-definition as a bicultural nation, with the decade beginning with the 150th-year celebrations of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and its ratification as our founding document. In cultural terms this played out in the development of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa as our first properly bicultural national institution. (This was anticipated in 1990 by the handing over of the spaces of the National Art Gallery to Māori organisers for the staging of *Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake*, a major exhibition of contemporary Māori art, followed soon after (in 1991) by the controversial purchase of two Māori portraits by C.F. Goldie and their redefinition as taonga, and realised in 1998 with the opening of the new waterfront museum, with its merged collections and revamped Māori displays and an exhibition devoted to the Treaty at its centre). It also saw the emergence of a new generation (Jonathan Mane-Wheoki called them the “Young Guns”) of urban-based Māori artists who were adept in handling the visual language of contemporary art and made works that grappled with the hybrid nature of their cultural inheritances, who were accompanied by a new breed of articulate and argumentative Māori art historians, curators and critics, who led debates around the vexed questions of identity and cultural appropriation. If George Hubbard’s exhibition *Choice!* (Artspace 1990) heralded the arrival of contemporary Māori art as a category that existed in complex relation to customary

1 See “Round Table: The State of Art and Discourse in New Zealand”, coordinated and edited by Christina Barton, with Peter Brunt, Emma Bugden, Greg Burke, Natasha Conland, Wylan Curnow, Gavin Hipkins, Robert Leonard and Damian Skinner, *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Visual Culture*, no 3, 2010, pp.6-29.

practice, then the selection of Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson (both with affiliations to Ngāi Tahu) for New Zealand’s first presentation at the Venice Biennale in 2001, marks the completion of its institutional acceptance.<sup>2</sup>

This is the decade too when questions of identity and our place in the world gave crucial shape to the discourse. A critique of nationalism well underway since the 1970s, coupled with a wider cultural turn sparked by such exhibitions as *Magiciens de la Terre* (Pompidou, 1989) and by the critical tools of postmodern and postcolonial theory, opened the way for local artists to question the role of representation in the production of identity and to seek alternative cultural coordinates than those previously imposed upon them. Here, too, tension and irresolution between essentialist and deconstructive positions generated critical heat, giving art practice momentum and leading to a string of institutionally-driven exhibitions (starting with *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art* in 1992) that are key to the decade.<sup>3</sup> And though the impact of the internet was felt only late in the piece (it is salutary to remember that email was not the primary means of communication for a large part of the 1990s and search engines like Google simply didn’t exist), the world beyond New Zealand’s shores became much more a tangible presence and point of reference. This is evident in the string of shows that went offshore, including *Distance Looks our Way* (1990–91); *Headlands: Cultural Safety* (1995) and *Toi Toi Toi* (1999)<sup>4</sup> and the establishment of artist residencies in New York, Sydney and Berlin, which were complemented by reciprocal opportunities for overseas artists to spend time here (in Dunedin and New Plymouth particularly), developments which climax in the decision to establish a New Zealand presence at the Venice Biennale and the staging of the first Auckland Triennial in 2001.

This is the cultural backdrop against which all of the artists in *Play On* came of age and its effects (as the commentaries on each artist that follow suggest) can be registered in the works that represent them. But still there is the question why do these artists

2 The same could be said, though to a more modest degree, for the emergence of contemporary Pacific artists and curators who in these years cut their teeth in the mainstream as serious ‘players’.

3 A few such examples are: *Korurangi* (Auckland Art Gallery, 1995), *Cultural Safety* (City Gallery Wellington and Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1995); *The Nervous System* (City Gallery Wellington and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1997); *Hangover* (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Waikato Museum of Art and History, 1995).

approach music as a viable medium to conduct their thinking? Is it possible to see in even such varied usages something that served (and continues to serve) the needs of the day, something that embodies the moment?

One of the key distinctions between artistic production and musical performance is the different conceptions of authorship each entails. Where the art world (and art history) values the creative individual and expends much energy to downplay the fact that the artist is conditioned by a host of factors that compromise any notion of independent creativity, this is not the case when it comes to music. Not even the composer, however brilliant, is thought of as entirely autonomous. Their composition (to be realised) must be played by others, while virtuoso musicians seldom write their own music, and more often than not performance (be it in a rock band or an orchestra) is undertaken collectively (even a soloist is singled out in relation to other players). Perhaps it is just this notion of collectivity, rendered palpable in the actual conditions of staged performance, that attracts and connects the artists in *Play On*.

Replicating music's forms and occasions, these artists test definitions of what art and artists can be at the same time as they address the social, cultural, historical and political frameworks within which art is received. Their works were undertaken at the point where postmodernism's challenges to the myths of authenticity and individuality had become common knowledge, when cultural theory had proposed new ways to think about the relation between culture and society, and postcolonialism had re-written and politicised history. So one response to the broader cultural shifts that were shaping New Zealand was to develop projects that evoked or emulated the ways in which musicians (and their audiences) band together in sociable ways, performing and partaking in highly particularised and close-knit scenes. So too the choice of formats and modes of presentation can be thought of as another sign of the times, where works were designed to be easily circulated by appearing as multiples (sheet music, VHS and cassette tapes) or on readymade

supports (hired piano, borrowed drumkit, rented jukebox or customised guitar) and could be adapted and re-staged for different occasions and in far-flung venues.

Might these works not serve, then, as fitting emblems for that moment when artists made something of their doubts about the artist's integrity as a hallmark of the discrete terrain of 'high' culture, and sought ways to make art a social undertaking, treating the sing-along, the backing beat, the "Māori strum" and the principles of improvisation as new ways to figure how identity might function in the late-modern era? Justin Paton called it "karaoke modernism", which aptly suggests the degree to which these artists re-play and mix up their cultural inheritance and thus reflect on their past and their place in the world. He was proposing that something could be said for bad imitations of international art if gains were to be made from fooling around in our (or any) local context. But I would suggest that what these works posit goes deeper, in their holding out for a way in which each of us can both be and be together, given the conditions in which we are living.<sup>5</sup> The ambitious degree to which all these works take on contemporary culture, contributing actively to the production of discourse, may no longer be needed in the era of YouTube and Facebook, but the models they offer should be remembered.

**Christina Barton**  
Curator

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4 *Headlands* was organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and the National Art Gallery, Wellington and was the MCA's opening exhibition. *Distance Looks our Way* was organised by a group of artists with the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui for Expo '90 in Seville. *Cultural Safety* was organised jointly by City Gallery Wellington and the Frankfurter

Kunstverein, Frankfurt; and *Toi Toi Toi* was curated by René Block for the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany.

5 Justin Paton asks: "What was 20th-century New Zealand art if not karaoke Modernism, an attempt to play along-or better, play the fool-with chart-topping international art?" in "Feedback", *Terry Urbahn's The Karaoke*, Auckland Art Gallery, 1999, n.p.

# Julian Dashper

# Julian Dashper

*The Big Bang Theory* 1992-93  
Enamel and acrylic on drumheads on five drum kits  
1250 x 1500 x 1500, 570mm each  
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

## Thinking Big

*By 1993 I had come to realise that I no longer needed to write any more artists' names on the front of drumheads. The five that I had already made could easily stand in for every artist that had ever been in the world.*

—Julian Dashper, 1995<sup>1</sup>

Allan Smith was undoubtedly right when he described Julian Dashper's *The Big Bang Theory* as a "classic synopsis of New Zealand Art History"<sup>2</sup> but he could have taken it further if we believe Dashper's own thoughts on the subject. What could the artist have meant with such an expansive claim, and how does it colour our understanding of this major work from our perspective nearly twenty years on from its initial undertaking?

In the early 1990s, when *The Big Bang Theory* was first presented, what mattered was Dashper's invocation of a national canon in the context of post-national debates. Central to the work's conception was the placement of five drumkits, each belonging to a fictional band that took its name from a well-known New Zealand artist, in specific locations around the country, which the artist took careful note of in commissioned photographs and texts. So "The Woollastons" was first set up in Toss Woollaston's retrospective at the National Art Gallery in Wellington; "The Drivers" at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery where Don Driver had worked; "The Anguses" in Christchurch in John Summers' famous bookshop; "The Hoteres" in Dunedin where Ralph Hotere lives (using a kit belonging to local band, The Verlaines); and "The McCahons" in the auditorium of Auckland Art Gallery, where Colin McCahon worked in the 1950s and early '60s; all of which drove home the project's localism. The next step was equally important, with Dashper gathering the kits together and installing them as a single installation at Artspace in Auckland in 1993. Thus he encoded (by repeating) the processes by which artists are lifted out of their

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Dashper, "Artist's Notes", *The Twist*, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton, 1998, p.109.

<sup>2</sup> See Allan Smith, *Big Bang Theory: Recent Chartwell Acquisitions 4 May-25 August 2002*, Auckland Art Gallery, 2002, p.4

# Julian Dashper

real social and cultural scenes to perform in the abstract realms of institutional and discursive space. Given its genesis and its final shape, no wonder much was made of the way these drums could be thought of as setting the beat for others to follow and questions were asked about Dashper's place in the line up. The work was read, then, in terms of the dynamics of cultural nationalism in its active production of a distinctively New Zealand canon.

Dashper's invocation and framing of a nationalist canon proved his distance from it, at the same time as it enabled postmodern critics to link him to it. Now, with that moment behind us, *The Big Bang Theory* seems significant for somewhat different reasons. On the one hand, if, as Dashper claimed, the names on the drumskins don't really matter, then perhaps their presence serves a bigger project. This might be to emblematised historical processes within modernity that are at once universal and contradictory. By turning artists into pop bands, Dashper reminds us how art history and the culture industry single out particular figures, turning a chosen few into timeless icons, but also how they link artists to their moment, so that Braque is to Cubism as the Beatles are to the 'Sixties.

On the other hand, even as the work's significance expands (as its title suggests) so *The Big Bang Theory*'s actual referents—Woollaston, Angus, McCahon, Driver and Hotere—remain steadfastly regionalist. This would suggest that however international Dashper set out to be, he never relinquished his roots at home. The dialectic that put the drumkits in particular places and took them away again (connecting the two through photographs and in reminiscence) is a constant in Dashper's practice.<sup>3</sup> The incommensurability of these two positions, yet the constant trafficking between them, is a salutary reminder of the world Dashper created for and worked in, and its distance from our ever-more-fluid present. Perhaps we can now see that *The Big Bang Theory* captured the critical conditions of its moment in the palpable difference between Dashper's words and his work.

**Julian Dashper** (1960–2009) was born in Auckland, New Zealand. He studied at the Elam School of Fine Arts, graduating with a BFA in painting in 1981 and went on to have a productive career as an artist exhibiting throughout New Zealand and internationally. Though concerned with the history of painting and his place within this, Dashper's works took many forms (paintings, multiples, sculpture, installations, sound and text works, photographs and video); though eschewing the label 'conceptual' his practice entailed a prolonged negotiation of painting as a received practice with its very particular systems of production, distribution and reception. Along with his interest in art and its histories, Dashper was intensely aware of his location in New Zealand and worked hard to establish an international career whilst always returning to his base. This became a content in his work and determined the manner and nature of its presentation. Dashper exhibited extensively in artist-run and dealer spaces in New Zealand, Australia, the USA and Europe. Key exhibitions in public institutions include *Midwestern Unlike You and Me: New Zealand's Julian Dashper*, Sioux City Art Center, Sioux City, Iowa, 2005 (and touring); The Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas, 2001; *The Twist*, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton, 1998 (and touring); *33 1/3*, Centre for Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, 1996; *Cultural Safety*, City Gallery Wellington and Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 1995; *Stazione Di Topolo*, Postaja Topolove, 1994; *The Big Bang Theory*, Artspace, Auckland, 1993; *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1992; *Signatures of Place*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1991; *After McCahon: Some Configurations in Recent Art*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1989; and *Julian Dashper: A Survey*, Centre Gallery, Hamilton, 1987. He is represented in public and private collections in New Zealand, Australia, the USA and Europe. In New Zealand, Dashper's work is represented by Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington and Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland.

3 For example, he later proudly aligned himself to New Zealand even as he celebrated the fact that he was the first artist to achieve a solo touring show in America. See Dashper's survey exhibition title: *Midwestern Unlike You and Me: New Zealand's Julian Dashper*, Sioux City Art Center, Sioux City, Iowa, 2005.

## Michael Parekowhai

*Patriot: Ten Guitars* 1999

10 custom-made guitars (flame maple, spruce, rewarewa, swamp kauri, ebony and paua shell), cases, straps and raisers  
1040 x 430 x 130mm each

*Gitbox Performing Guitar Boogie on Ten Guitars* 1999

Video, directed by Karen McKenzie for Backch@t 1999  
2 minutes 35 seconds  
Courtesy of the Gibson Group

## One More Time

*They say mimicry occurs when colonialism has done its work, but....  
For Parekowhai it was the Māori who colonised the guitar, not the other  
way round...*

—Robert Leonard <sup>1</sup>

It is exactly a decade since Michael Parekowhai's *Ten Guitars* were last seen together in New Zealand. Reunited for the first time since 2000, this is a rare opportunity to recollect their total power (and for a privileged few, to hear them played again). For most visitors, the experience will be a silent one; each guitar will be studied as an object, exquisite craftsmanship examined, paua kowhaiwhai patterns traced, and inscriptions puzzled over. Differences will be sought between one and the next and signs of wear (could that be use?) noted. Thus, to the beauty of the instrument as hand-made object and to the impact of all ten as subtle variations of the same, another investment can be added: the patina of age.

Without doubt Michael Parekowhai's *Patriot: Ten Guitars* is one of the most important works of the 1990s. Indeed, as much was said at the time by contemporary commentators. What mattered then was the clever way in which the artist took the traumatic legacy of colonisation and turned it on its head, to offer with good humour and generosity a symbol for bicultural New Zealand. Appropriating a song and the instrument best-suited to play it—neither of which originated here—Parekowhai showed how we made them both our own, to the point that critics wondered whether Englebert Humpledinck's much-loved lyrics, with their refrain, "dance, dance, dance, to my ten guitars and very soon you'll know just where you are" should become our national anthem.<sup>2</sup> But Parekowhai's special talent, then and now, was to treat this as a Māori thing, by honouring a history that saw Māori turning to new forms of popular entertainment as they adapted to rapidly changing conditions. His

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Leonard, "Patriotism" in *Michael Parekowhai Ten Guitars*, Artspace, Auckland, 1999, p.10.

<sup>2</sup> This is the message of reviews by both Mark Amery in the *Listener* (June 24 2000, p.36) and William McAloon in the *Sunday Star Times* (21 May 2000).

take on a post-1960s' history put into another perspective what in some quarters was thought of as an embarrassment as Māori lost touch with their culture and assimilated to the Pākehā mainstream. Parekowhai redefined who Māori were, showing up their losses and gains yet making his point without stridency or rancour.

As the cultural debates of the 1990s settle, what resonates now is the challenge Parekowhai poses to orthodox understandings of selfhood and his clever construction of an art work that can illuminate his thinking without being co-opted as a unique expression of identity. He sees himself not as a solitary 'I' but as part of something bigger, that tracks back in time and goes on into the future.<sup>3</sup> This 'something' relates to whānau but also to the larger cultural forces that shape him (and us) and which increasingly lack geographical boundaries. Given its key status in New Zealand art history, *Patriot: Ten Guitars*, should be in a national collection. The fact that it isn't is one of the work's most important legacies. These guitars model an attitude that is still vital: they can be owned and loved individually, but to be properly understood they must also be seen and heard, collectively. Both object and instrument, individual form and multipart installation, thing of beauty and embodied medium, these ten guitars cannot simply be stockpiled (like the missile from which they partly get their title), they must be lived with and listened to, and this is best done in the company of others.

**Michael Parekowhai** (born 1968, Ngā-Ariki, Ngāti Whakarongo) was born in Porirua, New Zealand. He completed a BFA at Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland in 1990 and his MFA (also from Elam) in 2000, and is now an Associate Professor there. Parekowhai has exhibited widely since 1990, when he first came to attention for his critical contribution to George Hubbard's groundbreaking exhibition, *Choice!* at Artspace in Auckland. This exhibition, which was designed as the gallery's response to the sesquicentenary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, brought to attention a new generation of urban-based, detribalised Māori artists whose work was not beholden to

3 Michael Parekowhai is quoted by Margo White as saying, "I understood from an early age that the self wasn't as important as the collective whole and that was made up of the people around me and people who'd come before me" ("Mike's World", *Metro Magazine*, March 2004, p.58).

customary practices. Since then his works have been included in major exhibitions in New Zealand and internationally, including: *Unnerved: The New Zealand Project*, GOMA, Brisbane (and touring), 2010; *Dateline*, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, 2007-8 (and touring); *Picturing Eden*, George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, New York, 2006-07 (and touring); APT 5 & 3, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2006 and 2000; Sao Paolo Biennale, 2004; Gwangju Biennale, 2004; *Paradise Now?*, Asia Society, New York, 2004; Biennale of Sydney, 2003; *Old Worlds/New Worlds*, Art Museum of Missoula, Missoula, 2000; *Flight Patterns*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2000; *The World Over*, City Gallery Wellington and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1996; *Cultural Safety*, City Gallery Wellington and Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1995; *Localities of Desire*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1994; *Headlands: Thinking through Contemporary Art*, MCA, Sydney and National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1992; *Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake*, National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1990 and *Choice!*, Artspace, Auckland, 1990. Important solo projects include: *The Moment of Cubism*, Michael Lett, Auckland, 2009; *Yes We Are*, One Day Sculpture Project, Wellington, 2009; *The Big O.E.*, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 2006; *Patriot: Ten Guitars*, Artspace, Auckland, 1999-2000 (and touring); *Kiss the Baby Goodbye*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth and Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton, 1994. His work is represented in public and private collections throughout New Zealand, and in Australia and Europe. Parekowhai is represented by Michael Lett in Auckland and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney. He will be representing New Zealand at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

*Patriot: Ten Guitars* 1999: *Tua tahi*, Collection of Maggie Mouat and Gavin Bradley; *Tua rua*, Collection of Ross and Josephine Green; *Tua toru*, Collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, purchased 2000 with New Zealand Lottery Grants Board funds; *Tua whā*, Collection of Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; *Tua rima*, Collection of Anne Coney; *Tua ono*, Private collection; *Tua whitu*, Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; *Tua waru*, Private collection; *Tua iwa*, Collection of Plumbly Family Trust; *Tua tekau*, Collection of Saatchi & Saatchi, Wellington.



# Ava Seymour

# Ava Seymour

11 Bars of Oboe 2010  
11 colour photographs  
628 x 852mm each

Courtesy of the artist and Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington

## “Draw a straight line and follow it”<sup>1</sup>

Ava Seymour’s suite of eleven unique colour photographs was produced especially for *Play On*. It was made in response to an invitation to join the other four artists, on the strength of Seymour’s practice of assembling images from various sources and making photomontages in ways that invoke both the glittering and the grubby dimensions of modern life and draw out allusions to a rich history of disruptive and radical cultural production (from Dada to punk). To the extent that she was aware of the artists in the show and conscious of the exhibition’s curatorial brief, *11 Bars of Oboe* is site-specific. But there is nothing slavish in Seymour’s response to the occasion; this work is brand new and distinctly the product of her current artistic inclinations. How then might it be read in terms of the exhibition’s frame and what kind of coda, if any, does it offer to the artistic ambitions evident in those other works all produced in the 1990s?

Seymour’s starting point for these images was to consider how to convey sound visually, seeking analogies to the temporal and auditory concepts of tone, pitch, texture, rhythm and volume in forms, lines, colour, depth and their relationships. The next step saw her draw on the long history of artists exploring just this territory and ponder music’s central place in the evolving history of modernist abstraction, research that was undertaken in the context of her workspace at the McCahon House Residency, the very site where McCahon had made his most syncopated cubist paintings that led in time to his near abstract *Second Gate Series* (1962). These ranging sources were further honed by focusing in on the improvisatory forms of free jazz and minimalist music, which led her to ‘compose’ a series of spare images in which a simple palette of shapes and lines are orchestrated against a dark ground. But embedded within this, and operating as a secret subtext, is

<sup>1</sup> This is the title of one of minimalist composer La Monte Young’s performance pieces in his *Compositions 1960* series.

another line of enquiry that links the work to a more nefarious territory closer to the themes Seymour's oeuvre invokes as a whole.

The clue is in her title, which refers to John Cale's and La Monte Young's code for the exchange of drugs which kept them going as experimental musicians back in the 1960s. As she describes it, "O was for opium (Oboe); a movement was a pound; there are sixteen bars in a movement so a bar meant an ounce". Viewed in this light, the work functions as an order for 11oz of opium, which at the time was considered the perfect drug to induce the trancelike state necessary to generate and appreciate Young's hypnotic music, with its "sustained tones and specific intervals".<sup>2</sup> It is exhilarating to think that what looks like avant-garde art—with its elegant references to the abstract language of constructivism, a revolutionary mode designed to evince a higher form of reality—also operates as a covert affirmation of chemical transcendence as another route to different levels of experience.

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Like her peers, Seymour blurs the boundaries between high and popular culture and recalls historical precedents to connect with a wider community of artists and musicians. She too seems to be making art that operates doubly as a self-reflexive commentary, in her case treating photography as a tool to reflect upon the formal means and transcendental aims of visual and aural abstraction by presenting us with a medium that delivers a faithful copy of her raw material. Made over the summer of 2009–2010, whilst living amongst the kauri trees in West Auckland, adjacent to the home where McCahon resided during his "Titirangi years", Seymour's work exceeds the bounds of its commission, to root itself in a place that is at once physical, cultural and historical. Like the others, she alludes to an artistic 'home' and, like them, she makes a work that puts distance between herself and her inheritance.

With its echoes of McCahon, its riffs on El Lissitzky, and its murmuring references to the New York underground, *11 Bars of Oboe* is a fitting complement to the ambitious earlier works included in *Play On*. Yet in its striking muteness it also differs. Almost obscure, as it hides behind its shield of glass, its manner is less fulsome, more

<sup>2</sup> Ava Seymour, email to the author, 13 April 2010.

contained, as if there are secrets to withhold. Surface and form are reinvested in a manner that moves us ever so subtly away from the appropriated formats of her peers. Could this denote a difference between then and now, proof that a "line" leads or takes us on?

**Ava Seymour** (born 1967) was born in Palmerston North, New Zealand. She studied at Prahlan College of Tafe in Melbourne in 1989. In 2001 she was selected as the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at University of Otago and in 2009 she was awarded the McCahon House Residency. Seymour first came to attention in the early 1990s with her series *Rubber Love*, in which she inserted rubber-fetish practitioners into cloyingly plush interiors, both of which she had collaged from published sources. These were shown at Teststrip in Auckland in 1994. She continued in this manner with *Health, Happiness and Housing*, 1997 (in which she collaged a populace of strangely proportioned misfits in front of state houses she had photographed from around New Zealand) to *The White House Years*, 2006, in which she cut up style-icon Jacqueline Kennedy's wardrobe. Though eschewing overt political commentary, Seymour's photographic practice references a history of photomontage and, like this source, her works have a disruptive force that challenges photography's claims to realism. More recently her photography has taken a more abstract turn, in which the same collage technique is deployed to non-objective ends. Her works have been included in a number of significant group exhibitions including: *Unnerved: The New Zealand Project*, GOMA, Brisbane, 2010 (and touring); *From the Depths of Suburbia*, Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, 2009; *Home Sweet Home*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2005 (and touring); *High Chair*, St Paul St Gallery, Auckland University of Technology, 2005; *Public/Private*, The 2nd Auckland Triennial, 2004; *In Glorious Dreams*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2001; *Folklore*, Artspace, Auckland, 1997; *Sharp and Shiny*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1997 and *150 Ways of Loving*, Artspace, Auckland, 1994. Seymour is represented by Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland and Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington.

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# Slave Pianos

# Slave Pianos

(Danius Kesminus, Michael Stevenson, Rohan Drape & Neil Kelly)

*Slave Pianos (of the Art Cult)* 1998–99

Player piano, key top player, hardware, software, MIDI file player, cable, remote control and sheet music

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased with the assistance of the Chartwell Trust, 1999

# Slave Pianos

## Serious Muzak

When Michael Stevenson was included in *Toi Toi Toi: Three Generations of Artists from New Zealand*, René Block's survey exhibition curated for the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany in 1999, *Slave Pianos (of the Art Cult)* was the work that was chosen to represent him. A key feature of the exhibition, that perhaps only a curator of Block's stature and experience could have gotten away with given the geographically-specific premise of the project, was the fact that so few of the artists he selected were resident at the time in their home country.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the line up of artists put paid to the idea (articulated so eloquently by Toss Woollaston in the 1940s) that New Zealand art could only be made by artists who were born and resided here (at the time of the show only five of the 14 actually met these criteria).

Stevenson's work fitted well with the literally eccentric curatorial framework for a number of critical reasons. Most obviously, he was then living in Melbourne and had largely abandoned the small-town subjects that had galvanised him before he left for Australia in 1994. But more interestingly he was working on a collaborative project that entailed collating and translating the work of other artists in a process that rendered the specificity of their origins redundant by connecting them through their use of sound as a medium. *Slave Pianos (of the Art Cult)* was therefore a work that transcended time and place, nicely mirroring the curator's own thinking about the history of artists from New Zealand.

But Stevenson challenged the premise of the national survey show by other more troubling means. Though the catalogue does not acknowledge it, *Slave Pianos* is the title not only of the work attributed to Stevenson, but also of the artists who conceived and executed it. Being one of four (two artists—himself and Danius Kesminus—and two composers—Rohan Drape and Neil Kelly) and the only New Zealander (the others were all Australian) Stevenson should not in truth have been granted unique authorship. His

<sup>1</sup> Organised by seniority, the artists were Colin McCahon, Len Lye, Rosalie Gascoigne, Billy Apple, Bill Culbert, Ralph Hotere, L.Budd et al, Boyd Webb, Jacqueline Fraser, Ronnie van Hout, Lisa Reihana, Peter Robinson, Michael Stevenson and Yuk King Tan.

contribution to the show, then, was an intriguing riposte to the idea that the individual artist serves their country by making work that is exemplary. Indeed the installation itself refused to comply with any such limits, mixing together European, American, Australian and New Zealand exponents of experimental music and sound art, and stripping them of their individuality by turning even complex multi-instrumental or atonal noise pieces into scores for piano.

Given its form and function, *Slave Pianos (of the Art Cult)* was a critical work for a venue which every five years is host to *Documenta*, probably the key European stage where the intellectual drivers of contemporary art are assessed (at least since the 1960s). For it consists of a vast and still growing catalogue of avant-garde artists who have used sound in their practice, many of whom would have been known and respected in Germany. Starting—pointedly perhaps—with a collaborative piece by Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys originally recorded on vinyl by René Block, it includes Jean Dubuffet, Jean Tinguely, Dieter Roth, Katharina Fritsch, George Brecht, Nam June Paik, Mike Kelley, Louise Bourgeois, and many others. But this extraordinary archive is not pure homage to the west's most musically and artistically advanced; its motives are more complex. For the slavish replication of the look of conventional western sheet music and the tongue-in-cheek invocation of a Fluxus aesthetic was designed to unnerve sophisticated gallery goers, while the 'music' that resulted from the complex process of translating sound pieces into conventional notation and then playing these by mechanical means on an automated piano levelled the variety and shock value of the originals. As one alarmed critic reported, the sounds of 20th-century modern music were "all boiled down to an awful Erik Satie ballet score".<sup>2</sup>

But this was only partly their critical point. Another key confusion was the inclusion of many artists who were not known in Europe (Daniel Malone, Domenico de Clario, Ronnie van Hout, Ivan Zagni and L.Budd amongst them). This brought to light a host of peripheral figures in an effort to re-draw a world map of avant-garde practice as a

2 Charles LaBelle, "Mike Stevenson & Danius Kesminas", *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 53, June-August 2000. See [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/mike\\_stevenson\\_danius\\_kesminus/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/mike_stevenson_danius_kesminus/), accessed 4 February 2010.

corrective to the narrow focus of Euro-American art history. Perhaps it is in this regard that *Slave Pianos* offer an Antipodean perspective. Their project grows from the idea that in this part of the world we are used to seeing and hearing things watered down in reproduction. We also understand the harsher truth of the 'slave' piano, with its mechanical arm forcing the keys to follow instructions in a power relation that mirrors the logic of colonial domination. But rather than worrying over our subservient status, *Slave Pianos* may also have turned the tables, colonising that instrument of middle-class entertainment, which has served here as a potent symbol of European culture (think Jane Campion's *The Piano*). Forcing this instrument to play the unconventional repertoire of an "Art Cult", they offer a tongue-in-cheek riposte to mainstream taste, at the same time never losing sight of the processes that lead to the experimental becoming a 'tradition'. By linking themselves to a field of endeavour (the avant-garde in general) and broadening its purview by including a host of local practitioners, *Slave Pianos* messed with the politics of artistic identity, just as they upset the relation between centre and periphery and rewrote history. Their work signalled both a belief in the archive's balancing effects and a strategic confidence that the art world was really expanding to include them.

**Slave Pianos** was formed in 1997 by Michael Stevenson and Danius Kesminas who invited composers Rohan Drape and Neil Kelly to work with them on an elaborate (and ongoing) archival project which collects and translates a whole history of artists making use of sound, staging performances of this material with the aid of, amongst other things, a mechanised piano. *Slave Pianos (of the Art Cult)*, was their first presentation outside Australia and was included in *Toi Toi Toi: Three Generations of Artists from New Zealand*, (Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, 1999, where it was attributed to Michael Stevenson), and in *The Queen is Dead* at Stills Centre for Photography in Edinburgh (where it was installed and fronted by Danius Kesminas, also in 1999). *Slave Pianos* has since been exhibited in

New York (Lombard Freid Fine Arts, 1999), Los Angeles (China Art Objects, 2000), Melbourne (International Biennale, 2000), Sydney (Darren Knight Gallery, 2000), Malksten, Dusseldorf, Germany (2001), Berlin (Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007) and most recently in *The Same River Twice*, IMA, Brisbane, 2009. David Nelson recently joined Slave Pianos and is assisting on a new installation is planned for the Sydney Biennale in 2010.

**Michael Stevenson** (born 1964) was born in Inglewood, New Zealand and studied painting at Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland, graduating with a BFA in 1987. He lived in Melbourne between 1994 and 2000 and since that date has been based in Berlin. His involvement with Slave Pianos was most intense between 1997 and 2000. Aside from his involvement with Slave Pianos, Stevenson is known for his intensively researched reconstructions of events and objects that link the art world to the larger sphere of economics and politics, such as *Call me Immendorff* (Galerie Kapinos, Berlin, 2000), *This is the Trekka* (New Zealand Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2003) and *On How Things Behave (Last Ride in a Hot Air Balloon, 4th Auckland Triennial, 2010)*. Key shows in which Stevenson has been included are: *Not Quite How I Remember It*, The Power Plant, Toronto, 2008; Panama Art Biennial 8, Panama City, 2008; *Lender of Last Resort*, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands, 2008; *Persepolis 2530*, Arnolfini, Bristol, 2008 (and Art Unlimited, Basel 2007); *c/o the Central Bank of Guatemala*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 2006; APT 5, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2006; *Monuments for the USA*, CCA Wattis, 2005 (and touring); *Art of the Eighties and Seventies*, Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, 2005; *Argonauts of the Timor Sea*, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, 2004; Sydney Biennale, 2002; *Genealogy* (with Steven Brower), Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2000; *Pre-millennial* (with Ronnie van Hout), Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, 1997 (touring Australia and New Zealand); *Badlands*, Gregory Flint Gallery, Wellington, 1993; *Distance Looks*

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*our Way*, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui and Expo '90, Seville, 1990–91 (and touring), and *After McCahon: Some Configurations in Recent Art*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1989. Michael Stevenson is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney; Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, and Vilma Gold, London.

**Danius Kesminas** (born 1966) was born in Melbourne, Australia. He completed a BFA in sculpture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne in 1989. In addition to his work with Slave Pianos Kesminas is known for his largescale outdoor fire performances (executed with Ben Morieson) and for his work with the 'art' band The Histrionics. Some recent exhibitions since 2000 are: *The Communism of Forms: Sound + Image + Time—The Strategy of Music Video*, Art Gallery of York University, Toronto, Canada (The Histrionics), 2009; *Punkasila—Punkasalsa*, Tenth Biennale of Havana, Cuba, 2009; *COVER - REENCENACAO + REPETICAO*, Museu de Arte Moderna, MAM, De Sao Paulo, 2009; *VODKA SANS FRONTIERS*, Klaipeda Art Exhibition Hall, Klaipeda, Lithuania, 2005; *DE OVERKANT/DOWN-UNDER*, The Hague Sculpture, The Netherlands, 2005; *Saloon at Moscow Biennale*, Moscow, 2005; *A Constructed World*, VCA Gallery, Melbourne, 2004; *NEVER MIND THE POLLOCKS—HERE'S THE HISTRIONICS*, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2003; *This was the future...Australian Sculpture of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s + Today*, Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2003; *Uncommon Worlds*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2000. Danius Kesminas is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

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# Terry Urbahn

# Terry Urbahn

*The Karaoke* 1995-97

Laser disc player, interactive control panel, 10 artists' videos, sound system,  
video monitor and projector, dance-floor and mirror ball

Variable dimensions  
Courtesy of the artist

## Empty Orchestra<sup>1</sup>

“Empty orchestra”, the English translation of the Japanese word “karaoke” is a good place to start thinking about Terry Urbahn’s interactive installation *The Karaoke*s. The phrase suggests the hollow nature of the popular entertainment Urbahn replicates, where the singer in the bar fills the space of the absent performer whose song he or she is singing along to, returning the tune to the live act and so redeeming it from the jukebox that has sapped it of its humanity. Or flipped the other way, where the sorry patron proves his or her lack of originality by only mimicking the real singer in a pathetic gesture of structured escapism. It also gives rise to a sense of the occasion of karaoke both in the real world and in its gallery setting: the noisy bar where boozed friends throw off their inhibitions and get in touch with their inner pop star; the cinematic cliché of the party’s aftermath where the microphone, which first served as a magnet for the characters, stands abandoned amongst wasted revellers; the awkwardness of the installation without the warmth of a properly social setting or any kind of lubrication, or the literally ‘orchestrated’ performance for an assembled audience or the camera.

In Urbahn’s case, as well, the term suggestively mirrors the format and aspirations of his project. For Urbahn not only produced his own video clip (a version of The Stranglers’ “Peaches”) for audiences to interact with, but invited nine other artists (Anthony Bedard (USA), Jeff Belt (NZ), Kirsty Cameron and Rachel Shearer (NZ), Violet Faigan (NZ), Michael Hodgson (NZ), Nobuhira Narumi (Japan), Leah Singer (USA), and Ronnie van Hout (NZ/Aust)) to make over a tune with video and superimposed lyrics. Ranging from Elvis to punk, pop love songs to heavy-metal guitar solos, even to silence, with low-budget production values and over-the-top performances, the resulting works collectively celebrate a home-made aesthetic, even as they make a hash of their various pastiches. And don’t forget that Urbahn organised a national tour (which took place in 1998-99)

<sup>1</sup> The translation of “karaoke” was pointed out by Justin Paton in “Feedback”, *Terry Urbahn’s The Karaoke*s, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, 1999, n.p.

# Terry Urbahn

to bring *The Karaoke*s “to a gallery near you” with the promise of exposing his talented crew to far-flung audiences, but delivered a work where the assembled artists were never present.

So this “empty orchestra” was no feel-good attempt to make galleries friendlier, more interactive spaces. Indeed Urbahn seemed more intent on affronting the tastes of the average museum visitor and undermining their expectations by choosing artists, like him, whose music and manner was confrontational or mocking. Commentators were quick to pick up on this unruliness, seeing it either as a cynical critique of the institution’s lame efforts to connect with its audiences (“interactivity” being an industry buzzword that masked the real need to increase visitor numbers to meet performance objectives) or as a democratic attempt to open up the definition of culture and celebrate a do-it-yourself mentality.<sup>2</sup> While the former was a response to the new museology that was reshaping the museum industry, the latter pointed to the focus on identity politics that dominated the discourse. Lara Strongman, for example, made a case for Urbahn’s staging of “white identity”—what she defined as “New Zealand European culture figured as white trash”—that she saw taking its place alongside other ethnic and racial positions; a sophisticated reading that refused to essentialise Urbahn or his art by recognising the bad boy aesthetic as an adopted posture and using this to argue for the work’s effectiveness despite (or because of) its self-consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Encountering *The Karaoke*s again, a decade later, perhaps through the lens of a younger artist like Sarah Jane Parton—whose performances as a star-struck adolescent lost in a world of soap-opera fantasy of her own self-conscious construction—it is the poignancy of the installation that is striking, not its strategic position taking. On the one hand it seems surprising that the work was ever really posited as even potentially interactive, for who in their right mind would really perform as the setup invites them? Would it be too harsh to say not even inveterate exhibitionists, unless of course they could not recognise the occasion or were being told to do so? Such a conclusion would suggest that the threshold of the gallery has still not been breached. And on

2 For the first position, Robert Leonard calls *The Karaoke*s an “exercise in layered cynicism” (See Robert Leonard, “1998/ Poseur”, in *Terry Urbahn*, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, [2004], n.p.), for the positive reading of the work as an instance of homespun democracy see Justin Paton, op.cit.

3 Lara Strongman, “The Beautiful Futility of the Revolutionary Gesture”, in *Terry Urbahn*, op.cit., n.p.

the other, isn’t the video of Urbahn applying his makeup and adopting the guise of punk guitarist for his wishful performance alone at home, exactly an emblem of and an anthem for the way in which each and every one of us is both colonised and liberated, alone and together? Might this suggest that ‘truth’ as a concept still has legs, in spite of the doubts postmodernism placed before us?

**Terry Urbahn** (born 1961) was born in New Plymouth, New Zealand. He studied at the Canterbury School of Art in Christchurch between 1981 and 1985 where he was also involved in the alternative music scene. In 1986 he returned to New Plymouth to take up his first position as a museum professional, working as Exhibition Officer at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Since that time he has held numerous roles in museums and galleries in New Zealand, as well as for the New Zealand (2005) and Australian (2009) Pavilions at the Venice Biennale. Urbahn has undertaken a number of substantial installations that explore his dual interests in art and popular culture such as *The Sacred Hart*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2007 and Auckland Festival, 2009; *The Karaoke*s that toured New Zealand in 1998–99; *Urban Museum Reality Service*, Artspace, Auckland and Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1997; and *Alien Space*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1995. His works have also been included in group exhibitions: *View Finder—Four Decades of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2006; *World Famous in New Zealand*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2005; *Feature: Art, Life and Cinema*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2001; *Telecom Prospect*, City Gallery Wellington, 2001; *PALeo Neo Video*, The Film Centre, Wellington, 1999; *Close Quarters: Contemporary Art from Australia and New Zealand*, Monash University Gallery and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 1998 (touring 1999–2000); *Hangover*, Waikato Museum of Art and History and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1995 (and touring); and *Art Now: The First Biennial Review of Contemporary Art*, Museum of New Zealand, 1992. A survey of Urbahn’s works, *Terry Urbahn—Selected Works 1994–2008*, was staged at the New Zealand Film Archive in Wellington in 2009.

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This exhibition is dedicated to Julian Dashper (1960–2009)

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