

Towards a History of the Contemporary



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FRONTISPIECE: **Roger Peters**, *Snowfall*,
installation with closed-circuit television,
1975, part of *Songs of the Earth*, Project
Programme, Auckland City Art Gallery,
courtesy of the artist and the E.H.
McCormick Research Library, Auckland
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Preface

This lecture offers an alternative to the shibboleths of the art history we have inherited, using the game-changer of the arrival of mass communications and their evolution through digital technologies to posit the outline of a history of contemporary art in New Zealand. By canvassing a range of art works, readers will appreciate how artists responded, not only by taking up the new media, but also by figuring the new relations these developments posed to their sense of themselves, to their relation to reality, and to their place in the world. I start in the late 1960s, as this is simultaneously the moment when we fully realised who and where we were—a small nation in the South Pacific with a contested history of complex relations between Pākehā and Māori; inheritors of an Anglo-Christian colonial history that irreversibly impacted both colonised and colonisers—but also with a contingent relation to the wider world and a creeping immersion in its networks. This was the moment when certain hegemonic discourses lost their traction and—though our published histories don't narrate this—when painting's privileged position was tested by a range of new media often better equipped to respond to our changed conditions.

The through-line I've taken, which is just one of several possible approaches, is to track artistic responses to the fact that screens and their insidious visual messaging—starting with the introduction of broadcast television and ending with the ubiquity of our digital devices in the present—have come to mediate our lives. I suggest that artists operate within a continuum of visual and other technologies. They make use of these, yet their responses can be distinguished and valued because they somehow picture

or give shape to what Terry Smith has called our contemporary ‘infoscape’.¹ If these shifts pushed us through post-national and post-modern mindsets to a globalised world of instant communications and collapsing distances, then these are the conditions that underpin and condition our present. Demonstrating their critical relations to and imbrication in mainstream media, I demonstrate that artists were able, consciously or not, to show us what this feels like and means, offering insights into the consequences for human consciousness. This is a contestable claim, one that depends not on scientific method to secure objective fact, but on the capacity to read, to put into words what the art work ‘does’. The discipline of Art History may do no more than this, but it is my challenge, purpose and pleasure to make as much as I can of such an important facility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank colleagues in Art History for the invitation to give the 2017 Lecture—the sixteenth in the series. Thank you, too, to my workmates at the Adam Art Gallery for bearing with me while I prepared it, and to the Lecture’s host: City Gallery Wellington. I am grateful also to Mark Adams, Jim Allen, Geoffrey Batchen, Roger Blackley, Fiona Clark, Bryony Dalefield, Simon Denny, Paul Diamond, Jennifer French, Terrence Handscomb, Geoffrey Heath, Dene Illingworth, Kieran Lyons, Caroline McBride, John Miller, Leon Narbey, Roger Peters, Simon Rees, Lisa Reihana, Meredith Robertshawe, Shannon Te Ao, Luke Willis Thompson, Sophie Thorn, Jill Trevelyan, and Pippa Wisheart for their advice and assistance.

BIOGRAPHY

Christina Barton is director of the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi at Victoria University of Wellington, where she has also been integral to the teaching of Art History since she was appointed to the programme in 1995. Her career has unfolded since 1987 along these two trajectories of gallery and academic work. Her Master’s thesis, completed at the University of Auckland in 1987, remains a vital resource on the history of post-object art in New Zealand in the 1970s and underpins her continuing focus on conceptual and critical practices as they have unfolded in New Zealand and elsewhere since that foundational era. She has held research and curatorial positions at Auckland Art Gallery (1987–1991) and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (1992–1994) and has contributed to the programmes of the Adam Art Gallery since its inception in 1999, leading the institution from 2007. Her teaching, writing, and curatorial work has canvassed art practices as they have unfolded in the 20th and 21st centuries, with critical attention paid to constructing a history of art that negotiates an expanding range of media, the problematics and particularities of time and place, and the politics of gender, to complicate and enrich conventional narratives. She has worked with and written about a raft of local and international artists including Jim Allen, Billy Apple, Bruce Barber, Andrew Beck, Ruth Buchanan, David Clegg, Bill Culbert, Pip Culbert, Philip Dadson, Julian Dashper, Simon Denny, et al, Jacqueline Fraser, Louise Henderson, Gavin Hipkins, Joseph Kosuth, Maddie Leach, Vivian Lynn, Anthony McCall, Julia Morison, Kim Pieters, Pauline Rhodes, Peter Robinson, Allan Sekula, Marie Shannon, and Ans Westra.

Towards a History of the Contemporary

... a good story can begin anywhere the teller chooses.²

What does it mean to be in ‘the contemporary’? When does it begin and where will it end? What are its conditions and how do these manifest? And what role does art play in showing what this looks or feels like? When I use the word ‘contemporary’, I am not referring to a style, as one might have with ‘Impressionism’; nor am I imagining some of-the-moment subject-matter; and I am not simply referring to present times as if ‘the contemporary’ is some universal category of ‘now-ness’. Rather, I am trying to tackle or pinpoint what it means to be in the world in this, our time. And, as an art historian, I am seeking to understand the origins or source of this quality of being, its evolution and metamorphoses. To do this I treat the forms art takes as tools for analysis, trusting the artist as a very particular conduit. My discipline is not a science; it is based as much on what Erwin Panofsky called ‘synthetic intuition’ as it is on logic.³ Less a method with guaranteed results and more a mode of reading, art history faces the special challenge of what Donald Preziosi calls ‘making the visible legible’.⁴

Let me start then with a painting by Rita Angus (Fig 1). Speaking of endings and beginnings, it is the pivotal departure point for my narrative. I have been thinking about this work since it was acquired from the Rita Angus Estate for the Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection in 2016, and the more I’ve looked and the more I’ve learned, it strikes me as disconcertingly prescient. The title of the painting is carefully written in the



FIG 1: Rita Angus, *Mother Watching TV*, Napier, 1969, oil on board, 537 x 526mm, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, acquired with funds from the Beaglehole Bequest, 2016.

artist's hand on the verso of the work: *Mother Watching TV, Napier*. The date is 1969. This is one of Angus's very last portraits, probably begun when she visited her mother in February 1969, only months after the death of her dearly loved father. She worked on it over the year (well past August, as a letter to her sister attests⁵) and exhibited it only once in The Group's annual exhibition in Christchurch, in November 1969, by which time Angus was in hospital suffering from her final illness.⁶ What is really going on here, in this modestly scaled, straightforward portrait of an elderly woman framed by cushions against a plain painted background? Why was Angus so cross with the hanging committee in Christchurch for leaving off the word 'Napier' from its printed catalogue to the exhibition, which caused her to write in anger to Doris Lusk, describing the decision as 'petty'?⁷ And what should we make of the specificity of the title, when the television set she names is not even in the picture?

To me, the painting, its title, and the documentary evidence suggest that this is no 'mere' portrait. As with so much of her work, there is a deeper symbolism that grants its subject the role of transfigured witness to something profoundly unfamiliar. I'd like to call this 'the future', that unknowable place and state that is literally outside the frame, but which is intimated by the title that names the new-fangled gadget emanating sounds and images in the living room of the family home in provincial New Zealand: the destination of Ethel Angus's gaze and the cause of her eyebrows' green tint.

Angus was well aware that the world was changing. In the preceding

months, she had dealt with her family bereavement, and was in the throes of grappling with the destruction of her beloved Bolton Street Cemetery, to make way for the motorway that was being carved through the centre of Wellington. In correspondence at the time, she had called herself one of the 'becoming... old', a 'race apart' from the new generation.⁸ Positioning herself opposite her subject, she observes—with her particular calm attention—her own mother, bearer of seven children, matriarch and homemaker, who belonged to an even older world. Pressed into her chair as if by the weight of time, Mrs Angus watches with a certain air of pinched attention the very technology that would open New Zealand to the world like nothing before it, and which, through the pulling power of its moving pictures, would turn the next generations on to the screen as the membrane through which reality was increasingly rendered. *Mother Watching TV, Napier* is as much a 'portrait of a generation' in 1969 as Peter Tomory described *Portrait of Betty Curnow* in 1942.⁹

If, back then, Angus saw New Zealand as 'in essence, medieval',¹¹ now she would have to admit it was moving towards a new technological age, one intimately linked to consumer capitalism. Of course, television had arrived in 1960, but in the beginning it was a rudimentary affair, with four stations based in each of the metropolitan centres beaming black and white images just a few hours a day. There was little in the way of local programming—only a few minutes of advertising in every hour and none on Sundays—and film canisters had to be physically transported from one city to the next. Coverage was slow to reach the provinces. It was not

until November 1969, after Angus's painting was completed, that the first networked national news was simultaneously broadcast, connecting the whole country through the one NZBC channel. Still, the medium had an immediate impact, with 500,000 households owning a set by the mid 1960s.¹² Its presence was clearly something Angus wished to register. Imagine what it must have meant to sit in your living room and see the Wahine Disaster almost as it unfolded in Wellington Harbour; watch the bombing of Cambodia, or rioting in Northern Ireland, or Neil Armstrong take the first steps on the moon. This last was an event New Zealand was able to witness on 21 July 1969, only four-and-a-half hours after it happened, thanks to the Royal New Zealand Airforce, which transported footage from Australia, and local technicians, who established a temporary microwave link to enable simultaneous broadcast nationwide. All this while Angus was still working on her painting.

Angus's portrait captures the end, then, of New Zealand's insular and insulated condition and the inauguration of the electronic age. She achieves this by placing her mother as the tight-lipped observer of a new yet still-inchoate situation. Hers is not yet full immersion; she is still at some remove from the object of her attention, marked only by the light cast by an unseen cathode ray. The history from here of course has been one of a trickle, flow, then flood of new technologies, faster communications, and the swamping effects of mass media, which have opened us up to the world and sucked us into their representations.

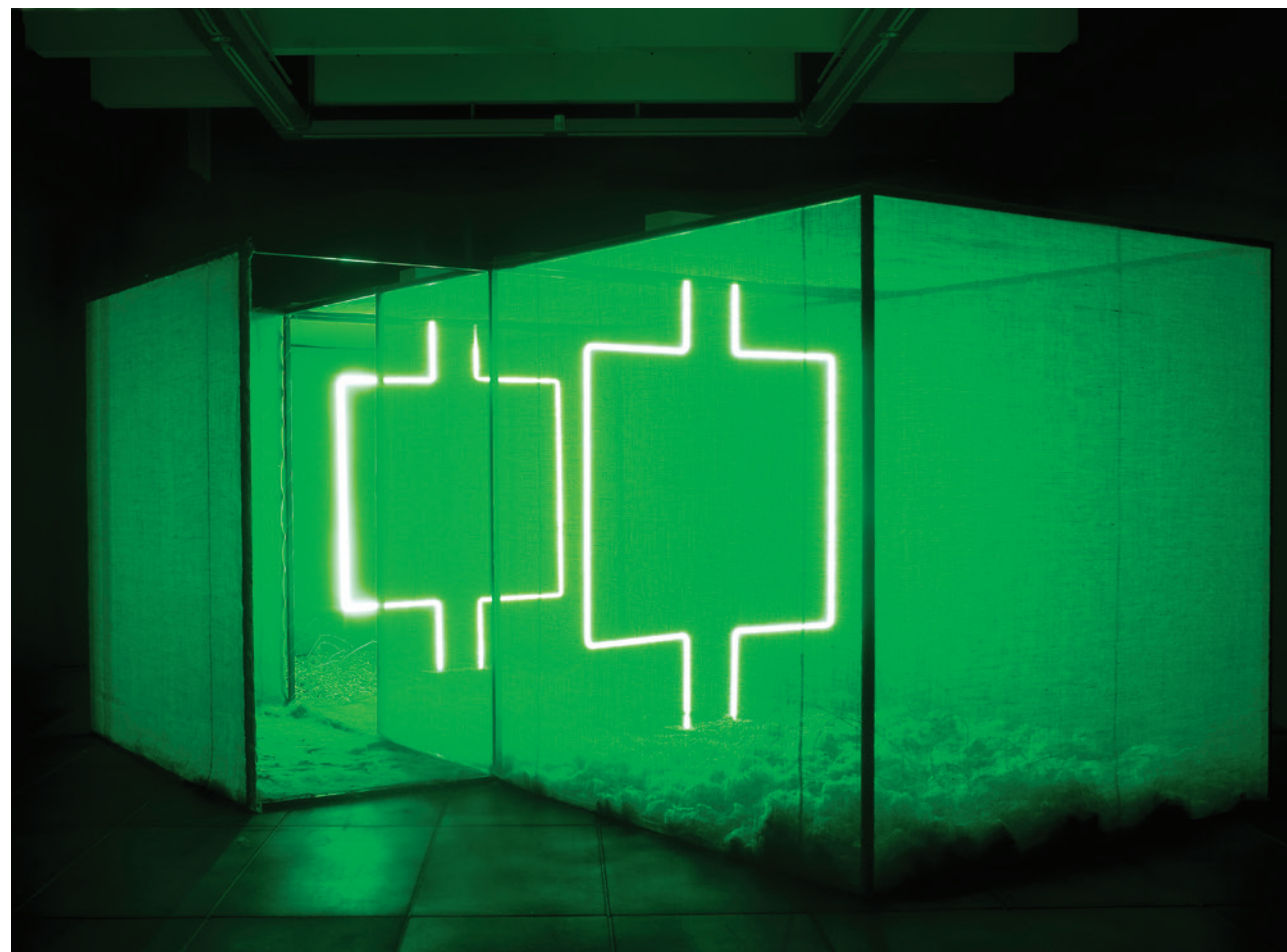
Angus paints her picture on the brink of the 1970s, as our re-

colonisation by advertisers, corny American sit-coms, humdrum British soap operas and our own home-grown gameshows was underway. Television would quickly become a portal and a trap; a powerful unifier—as we all watched the 6.30 news or an All Blacks' test match—and a dangerous social atomiser, isolating us at home as glazed consumers glued to our screens. There is a story here about a medium with which artists increasingly had to contend. Michael Illingworth might have had it in mind when he painted those fascinated subjects, each in their own little boxes, in *Painting with Rainbow 1*, 1965 (Fig.2). But one thinks also of Jim Allen's fully immersive *New Zealand Environment No 5*, 1969–70 (Fig.3), a situation that engaged the body and indeed all the senses, that was designed to transform the viewer into an active participant. Both in their ways were responding to the contemporary conditions caused by modern, urban, technological life, but they have not yet been linked; each currently belongs to separate histories: of painting, and of sculpture.



FIGS 2 & 3: **Michael Illingworth**, *Painting with Rainbow 1*, 1965, oil on canvas, 838 x 965mm, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1965.

Jim Allen, *New Zealand Environment No 5*, 1969–70, steel tube, scrim, tow underfelt, nylon, string, barbed wire, greasy wool, sawdust and neon tube, 1829 x 1829 x 5486mm, collection of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, purchased from the Monica Brewster Bequest in 1970.



*Make things happen. The future's here right now.*¹⁰

The 1970s is a decade I return to repeatedly, as the time when the art world came of age. This was when artists could enjoy speedier access to what was going on elsewhere; when a market for contemporary art was established; when we published our own art histories and started magazines that built knowledge and fostered critical debate. Ironically, at the very moment a local canon of painting was instated, via a persuasive narrative based on the 'hard light' theory of New Zealand landscape painting, art practice was expanding in myriad directions.¹³ In response to the political and social foment that was characteristic of the era, artists adopted new media—photography, video, film, and a mode of experimental, expanded 'post-object' sculpture. They also turned to new content that challenged New Zealand's mythic status as an enviable egalitarian and homogenous society, a natural paradise free of the evils that faced the wider world, to address the reality that the country was in fact prey to global forces, driven by economic imperatives, and riven with racial, gendered, and class-based inequalities.

If we continue with the idea of television as a portal and a trap, and treat this as a guiding metaphor, an emblem of the times, then we can orient a history of this germinal decade around artists' negotiation of the medium. I can distinctly remember going in 1977 to see Roger Donaldson's *Sleeping Dogs*, the first of the new crop of New Zealand feature films that inaugurated the blossoming of a local film industry. I was 'pricked' with surprise to see Dougal Stevenson, the familiar face of the evening news, playing his role in a Hollywood-style thriller about a dystopian future in which New

Zealand was thrust into a state of emergency caused by the assertion of power by an over-zealous leader. The punctum of this encounter was to recognise that the television news I was watching on screen, with which I so readily identified, was embedded in a film that manifested the format and codes of an American genre. Seeing his face and hearing his New Zealand accent in this cinematic setting, was a moment of de-familiarisation and self-recognition. It was an opportunity to reflect on the role television played in binding the nation into what Benedict Anderson has called an 'imagined community'.¹⁴ Our sense of ourselves was constructed and—as the film proposed—potentially controlled, by a national broadcaster who selected and channelled local and international content in ways that shaped and reinforced our sense of who and where we were.

Such a realisation was already in play well before 1977, as our mediation by mass media was the subject for critical reflection in a host of different formats. What makes Fiona Clark's photographic portrait, *Ian – Geraldine at Home*, 1975 (Fig.4) so profoundly unsettling is precisely the shock of seeing this transgendered subject posing in a typical kiwi living room. Standing in front of the blank television set, we instantly understand that what we expect to find 'at home' has been transgressed. At the same time, Clark treats this very environment, in all its familiarity, as a safe space where her subject can show themselves as they please. She thus potently troubles assumptions about just what was normal in New Zealand.

This same effect is generated in 1978 by Mark Adams in his documentation of the traditional practice of Samoan tattooing being



FIGS 4 & 5: **Fiona Clark**, *Ian–Geraldine at Home*, 1975, colour photograph, 243 x 162mm, courtesy of the artist

Mark Adams, 7.10.1978. *Triangle Road, Massey, West Auckland. Tattooing Tom. Tufuga tatatau: Su'a Sulu'ape Paulo. Solo: Arona and Leo Maselino*, 1978/2008, R.A. analog colour photograph from 10x8" negative, printed as C-type on Fuji Crystal Archive paper, 1000 x 1200mm, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, purchased 2008.

undertaken by the great tattoo master Sua Sulu'ape Paulo in a house on Triangle Road in west Auckland (Fig.5). Like Clark's, Adams' approach is documentary; in other words he captures with remarkable clarity everything that appears before his lens. However, his picture of the survival and continuance of an ancient Polynesian practice transposed to a working-class home of Samoan migrants in New Zealand, conveys far more. In its mix of ancient equipment and pandanus matting in the midst of plastic-covered furniture and venetian blinds, it captures an uncanny disruption of the temporal registers of past and present and the disjunctive meeting of two cultures. And, cutting through the image, his own intrusive presence as a literal outsider is reflected, with his camera and tripod, on the television screen before which the scene unfolds. This image is no snapshot; it has been carefully framed and its participants pose with all the semiotic complexity of a history painting.

If the first generation of artist-photographers could use television as a cipher for social commentary, sculptors turned to video as a new, immediate means of image capture and dissemination that enabled a more direct and self-conscious interaction with physical situations and with people. Video, for the first generation of 'post-object' artists, was a third term, at odds with film and television. It offered a pointed alternative to the suspension and capture of audiences by the economic and corporate forces that controlled mass media. The arrival of the hand-held video recorder around 1972 was liberating. Artists could go out into the field and take pictures and play them back instantaneously, as a way of bringing the world into the work in its 'raw' state. Or they used closed-circuit technology to transmit images

directly from one place to another, thus rendering the autonomous realm of the gallery permeable to its everyday surroundings, or discombobulating viewers by showing them somewhere other than their current location. Or they would use their bodies as a live medium, documenting actions on videotape and playing these back to allow audience and participants to reflect on what had happened, literally witnessing the process by which immediate events are granted meaning through re-presentation and reflection.

As well as disrupting the process by which viewers were rendered passive consumers, such strategies had an unsettling effect on art's ontology. Understanding the live action as the 'real' event, the videotaped record served only as documentary trace. It was a secondary supplement that could not be commodified as an art work without recognising its temporal and spatial displacements and the ease with which it could be copied and disseminated. Video also brought the television monitor and its electrical circuitry into the art arena as a sculptural readymade. It became a physical presence in the gallery, beaming images counter to those we received at home or that filled the cinema screen, closer in kind to surveillance footage and other reminders of how technology was taking control of our everyday existence. (Fig.6)

A whole new category of artist video evolved from the mid-1970s. It defied the easy seductions of conventional narrative, toyed with the medium's technical characteristics, and circulated as stand-alone, time-based works within the art system as self-conscious alternatives to the blandishments of Hollywood or the TV networks. Yet the era is also marked



FIGS 6 & 7: **Kieran Lyons**, *Superimpression*, 1974, documentation of performance as part of *Four Men in a Boat* series, Auckland City Art Gallery, courtesy of the artist and the E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (photo: Bryony Dalefield).

John Miller, *Forecourt, Parliament Buildings, Wellington, following the official reception for Whina Cooper and the Maori Land March, Monday, 13 October, 1975*, 1975, silver gelatin print, 203 x 254mm, courtesy of the artist.

by several instances where Pākehā and Māori artists and filmmakers took to television as a projective device to redress a traumatic history. In this regard one might say that the 1970s was a golden era for a small flurry of independent productions that found their way on to our screens; armed with the conviction that the medium could work for them, these filmmakers saw television as a tool of decolonisation. I am thinking of Barry Barclay's *Tangata Whenua* series of 1974, a six-part documentary produced by Pacific Films and broadcast on primetime national television. This provided intimate insights into Māori life and culture: a unique experience for many of its Pākehā viewers, and a potent precedent for later efforts to introduce Māori language and content into New Zealand television. Paul Diamond has called the series a 'gift to the future',¹⁵ grounded as it was in Barclay's commitment to cultural sovereignty. It was a viewpoint he shared with fellow members of Nga Tamatoa, an activist organisation established by urban Māori who lobbied for the restitution of Māori land, and for the preservation of te reo. Though fronted by the Pākehā historian Michael King, who was also the series' scriptwriter, Barclay's project is notable for its respectful approach to its subjects. Filmed on their own ground, with camera and crew far enough removed so that interviewees could almost forget their presence, Māori were able to speak for themselves, often in their own language and without the imposition of subtitles. As viewers, we witnessed rituals and exchanges, listened to narratives and memories that describe loss, survival, and renewal, that reinforce the bonds of community, and bind people to place, even as we were also shown irrefutable signs of usurpation and change.

Something similar is evident in *Te Matakite o Aotearoa: The Maori Land March*, a thirty-minute documentary following the hikoi led by Dame Whina Cooper in 1975. This march began in the far north and made its way from marae to marae, over Auckland's harbour bridge, and eventually to the steps of Parliament in Wellington where a petition of rights was delivered to the Crown seeking the cessation of further sales of Māori land (Fig.7). I've talked elsewhere about this film as a remarkable collaboration between three young Pākehā artists—Phil Dadson, Leon Narbey and Geoff Steven, all of them trained to use new media as a means to embark on an engaged art practice—and the Māori organisers who allowed them to record their journey. Made for South Pacific Television, this is another instance of the kind of committed film-making that set out to address the problematic legacies of post-colonial New Zealand. Choosing to infiltrate its message into people's homes via television, rather than the rarefied space of the art gallery, the filmmakers understood the march as a representational act, mirroring human motion and its purpose as a collaboratively produced 'performance'.¹⁶

The Land March film is a precedent for the work of Merata Mita, whose documentaries *Bastion Point Day 507* (1978–80) and *Patu!* (1981–83) were both conceived to be shown on television. Their visual language gathered power from the fact that her crew members were involved in the action as politicised participants rather than objective witnesses, their footage playing to stark counter-effect against images and commentary produced by the mainstream media. But by 1983, when *Patu!* was completed,

FIG 8 (OVERLEAF): **Simon Denny**, *Channel 4 Analogue Broadcasting Hardware from Arqiva*, Sudbury, 2012, various broadcast transmission hardware waste from analogue/digital TV transmission switchover in April 2012, installation view, *Remote Control*, ICA, London, 2012, courtesy of the artist.



MAIN LINE

ENTRANCE

00

OFFICE

PLATFORMS

STORAGE

1M meters

AA 300

DOMESTIC SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'X'

UNREG. TECH. SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'X'

REG. TECH. SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'Y'

UNREG. TECH. SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'X'

REG. TECH. SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'Y'

REG. TECH. SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'Y'

REG. TECH. SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'X'

REG. TECH. SUPPLIES FUSEBOARD 'X'

UNREG. TECH. SUPPLIES 'X'

DOMESTIC SUPPLIES 'X'

UNREG. TECH. SUPPLIES 'X'

STATION HEATING SUPPLIES

REG. TECH. SUPPLIES 'X'

STATION HEATING SUPPLIES

MAIN AMPLIFIED SUPPLY

HEATING SUPPLY 'X'

Small technical specifications or safety notices on the bottom right panel.

two years after the traumatic events of the Springbok Tour that is its subject, we might say that this golden era was well and truly over. Refused state funding and denied access to the airwaves, Mita chose to release the documentary in cinemas (several of which refused to screen it). This was a political decision that proved the strength of her convictions but also registered the consolidation of television's ultimate position as a medium 'against democracy', as David Joselit puts it.¹⁷

It is almost inconceivable that programmes such as these would be given prime air time today for several critical reasons. More than ever, television in New Zealand is run as a business rather than a service, and programming is decided by ratings and an ability to attract advertisers. But, more importantly, the medium began to lose its cohesive force once pay TV saw the proliferation of channels. We no longer sit down together and tune in to our favourite programmes at allotted hours each night or week. The very medium that bound us together as a nation has been diluted and dissipated, so that its social potential to convince and connect has been attenuated.

As Simon Denny, the arch-documenter of our tech environment, our archaeologist of the digital, has so comprehensively chronicled in recent works like *Channel 4 Analogue Broadcasting Hardware from Arqiva, Sudbury, 2012* (Fig.8), the end of analogue broadcasting, rendered obsolete by new digital technologies, has shifted our relation to the screen. We have gone from watching a fixed set with its menu of programmes beamed in from a single source and all the hardware that enabled this, to receiving myriad sources of digitized information via a multitude of devices through that thoroughly

global portal, the internet. And all the while, the solid box that sat in the corner has slimmed down, multiplied and been re-set as a streamlined surface that is more likely embedded in the skin of our architecture, carried round in our bags, or held in our hands. Soon it will be wedded to our eyes, as Jesse Bowling anticipates in *Apple of My Eye, 2016*, a short silent digital video included in the Adam Art Gallery's 2017 exhibition *The Tomorrow People*. In this work, the artist films himself alone in bed scrolling through his smartphone feed, the glowing rectangle of his iPhone perfectly reproduced in each of his pupils.

*The movies make emotions look so strong and real, whereas when things really do happen, it's like watching television—you don't feel anything.*¹⁸

But can we track these changes by means other than the facts of technological change or even their artistic representations? Can art register these shifts in some deep sense? How is consciousness itself affected? What new relation to the world does the technology deliver? Can art be a point of resistance? If Rita Angus painted her mother at some remove from the equipment alluded to in her title and, by doing so, articulated a linear relation between the past and a yet-to-be-determined future, what spatial and temporal coordinates are mapped by artists now? I'd like to introduce my final remarks by way of two transitional works that bridge the trajectory from Angus's premonitory canvas and the direct, engaged practices of photographers, post-object sculptors and film-makers, to the present.

Firstly, to Lisa Reihana's short stop-frame animation *Wog Features*,

1990 (Fig.9), which was included in the notorious *Choice!* exhibition curated by impresario-cum-curator George Hubbard at Artspace in Auckland in that sesquicentennial year.¹⁹ This is a pioneering work by a key figure in a new generation of art-school-trained Māori artists. It tauntingly comments on the media's role in the production and perpetuation of stereotypes that condition the differential status of women and people of colour in mainstream society. Here Reihana is both animator and subject: she is outside the work as creative manipulator of a new palette of editing tools and special effects, and inside the box, morphing between Māori maiden, Island princess, Indian squaw, black-face entertainer, and children's TV presenter. She thereby channels her own tele-visual experiences growing up as one of the 'What Now?' generation, and taps into the antic energy of the new era of MTV music videos. *Wog Features* 'works' as an appropriation and replay of the medium it draws upon, proving the powerful role television played in the socialisation of children and the exploitation of youth culture. No longer an organ connecting us to lived reality, video here is a constructed medium. It is a tool where the production and maintenance of identity by mass media could be proven and pilloried, by someone whose cultural identity history has shown was particularly susceptible to exploitation.

Secondly, Terrence Handscomb's single-channel video *The Revelation: The Passion According to Andrei*, 2005 (Fig.10) similarly posits a relation to his media-scape that collapses the distance between maker and his subject, as a charged response to world events in 2003. Made in his apartment in Santa Barbara, it shows the artist adopting the poses of Iraqi prisoners held in captivity by American forces at Abu Ghraib, images of which were leaked and



FIGS 9 & 10: Lisa Reihana, *Wog Features*, 1990, video still, courtesy of the artist.

OVERLEAF: Terrence Handscomb, *The Revelation: The Passion According to Andrei*, 2005, video still, courtesy of the artist.



shown on various news channels and then became the object of intensive scrutiny and recrimination. The shocking complicity of photography in the torture and humiliation of these prisoners was the artist's real subject: to what extent has our power to record events desensitised us to human suffering, and what role can the artist play in making such suffering real again? Handscomb's answer was to turn himself into the victim, treating his camera as the perpetrator and literally bringing that distant atrocity into his living room. Here video is used *against* television. Misrecognising the horrors of the nightly news as somehow personal to him, he collapsed the distance between the producers of the news and their passive recipients, using his camera to make the event real. Yet we see his actions only as shadowy images flickering across a screen, his *re-enactment* proving, perhaps, the obscene truth of our helplessness in face of representation's distancing effects.

Handscomb's is an embodied response to the future Angus imagined her mother was beginning to see. Beyond the differences of time and medium there is a projective trajectory that links them, especially because they both locate their subjects at home. For Handscomb, a displaced New Zealander finding his feet in Southern California and grappling with the strange disjunction between life there and the traumatic external events associated with America's 'war on terror', home was hardly settled. In contrast, home for Angus was her parents' place, somewhere she knew intimately and returned to frequently, where she belonged: in 'Napier'. But, as Avital Ronell has suggested, television interrupts the sanctity of home, it brings the world in, proves what she calls 'the impossibility of staying at home', showing you instead, the 'deracinating grid of being-in-the-world'.²⁰

Remember, television in its early years in New Zealand was largely made up of 'foreign' programmes. No wonder Angus minded when her title was truncated. She somehow intuited the alienating effect technology would have on our sense of what it meant to be 'New Zealanders'.

In invoking these works by Reihana and Handscomb, I have skated over two decades of art production, to arrive in the present. It is no accident that both utilise video; for the purposes of my argument, and the route I have taken, their choice of medium is critical to their works' meaning. They were both made to be shown on TV monitors, treating the looped video format as their means to intervene in and reflect upon the *televisual* landscape which surrounded them. They are transitional to my final examples because, compared to now, the situations they were responding to were still shaped by the linear dimensions of broadcast television. Reihana's work precedes the internet; Handscomb watched the torture of prisoners before Facebook went live—full immersion was not entirely upon them. Now of course we are inundated, screens are everywhere, media convergence has caught us in its web, and this has had its consequences.

Let's think first about our changed relation to time. In late 2016, Shannon Te Ao showed a single video projection in Wellington at Robert Heald Gallery. *Untitled (Malady)* is an almost-silent film loop in which two young women dance in close embrace in a dark room beside a window that bathes them in late afternoon light (Fig.11). One topless, the other clothed, they hold each other with a quiet tenderness that conveys a calm and complete absorption. Nothing happens except their slow rhythmic rocking. Despite the lack of action, the work subtly betrays a structure and duration.



FIG 11: Shannon Te Ao, *Untitled (Malady)*, 2016, digital video, courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.

The camera circles its subjects as the light gradually fades, the shuffle of footsteps marks time and in the distance the sound of traffic comes and goes. In fact, this sound is the linking device that marks the point where the image stops and starts, as if the busy world is out there somewhere, its imperatives only vaguely felt. The scene mesmerises; it seems to suspend time as well as to attune the viewer to its passage.

A ‘malady’ is an old-fashioned term for illness or disease, a sickness that can afflict the body but also the mind and soul. This malady, the artist seems to propose, may also be the ambient condition from which these women have quarantined themselves. Despite its morbid title, or perhaps because of it, this work’s purpose seems positively curative. It has a strangely calming effect, offering hope in the form of human contact. Hyphenated from external reality, the pair’s quiet intimacy and repeated rotations momentarily blot out the world and its incipient threats. Here, Te Ao creates a space for feeling and reflection. In contrast to conventional media, his film conveys an ethics, rather than producing or serving the normal urgings of desire.

Against the speed, insistence and seductions of ‘life’ out there, the artist uses video to both *make* time—his attenuated moment repeated—and destroy its relentless trajectory from past to future. This is an instance of what Boris Groys has called the ‘time-based’ artist producing ‘art-based time’.²¹ Groys sees the ‘practice of literal repetition’ as capable of ‘rupturing the continuity of historical life and creating a non-historical excess of time by means of art’. This, he claims, is the ‘point’ at which art becomes ‘truly contemporary’.²² If Angus conveyed a scene in which

the logic of modernity still prevailed, Te Ao shows us the contemporary as a kind of stalled ‘present’. According to Groys, the video artist makes works that ‘waste time’, that are intrinsically unproductive. In so doing, they thwart modernity’s imperatives: its trust in progress. But as well as stalling our forward impetus, he argues, our relation to the past is also shifted. He claims that being ‘stuck’ in time allows history to unravel as an arbitrary and unreliable proliferation of narratives. This is true of the work of Te Ao, whose film is informed by two pre-existing ‘texts’: one, a lament relating to a Ngāti Tūwharetoa ancestor who was suffering leprosy and mourning the loss of both a father and a potential husband; the other, a film called *Killer of Sheep*, made in 1977 by Charles Burnett, an African-American filmmaker whose neo-realist portraits of black life in Watts California have been applauded as gritty rejoinders to Hollywood’s glitz. Neither conscious homage nor ironic quotation, these narratives lie latent in each of Te Ao’s depicted characters. Hovering beyond the viewer’s grasp, they can only be accessed as textual supplements.

But Groys’ final point is not to condemn contemporary artists for their loss of historical perspective or their lack of forward momentum: rather, he commends them for producing a specifically contemporary condition within which we can experience ‘pure being-in-time’. This is a state that cannot be co-opted either by ‘our modern economy’ or by politics.²³ The meaning of Te Ao’s film derives from the synchronicity he achieves between form and content: this digital video playing on repeat is mirrored by the motion of his subjects who are shot in a light-filled room that looks like the inside of a camera. Here technology is wrested from its usual functions. Instead of

recording 'real life', the artist creates a refuge of sorts, a new kind of fictive 'home' that is cinematic rather than spatial.

The film medium is likewise deployed in my final example, which, like my very first, is a portrait. As with Angus, this figure is situated in relation to the screen, but here technology, rather than handcraft, has made and contains her. We are not home in Napier now, but out in the world, the work's maker part of a Pacific diaspora, the film's subject found on Facebook. This is Luke Willis Thompson's *autoprotrait*, 2017 (Fig.12). It was presented in mid-2017 at Chisenhale Gallery in London as the culmination of the artist's 18-month residency and recently installed at Hopkinson Mossman, the artist's gallery in Auckland. The work is a silent, black-and-white, 35mm film, a portrait in two four-and-a-half-minute segments (the length of a roll of film) made in collaboration with its subject, Diamond Reynolds. She came to Thompson's attention after she livestreamed on social media her immediate reactions to the shooting by Minnesota police of her partner, Philando Castile. Speaking to her phone from the car seat beside his bloodied body, she managed to bear witness to what had happened. She knew full well that the killing of an African American for nothing more than a broken tail-light was highly unlikely to result in the authorities being brought to justice. Reynolds' video went viral on social media, her distressed messaging joining the abundance of live recordings of traumatic events made possible by the ubiquity of smartphone cameras. These feed our appetites for the shocking reality we now encounter, not just on the nightly news, but through our personal feeds that are constantly updating



FIG 12: Luke Willis Thompson, *autoprotrait*, 2017, 35mm, b&w, silent film, 8mins 50secs, commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery, London. Installation view Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland/Wellington.

with the latest mass shooting, terrorist bombing, highway-patrol chase or natural disaster.

Thompson took Reynolds' Facebook livestream as the basis upon which to produce a counter-image: a silent, monumental portrait that could only be experienced properly in pitch darkness along with the whirring projector in the gallery setting. He talks about 'calling' her 'back' by using 35mm film to grant her a presence unlike the visibility that had been foisted upon her.²⁴ Larger than life, she fills the screen, her skin, hair, glasses and clothes a study in shades of silver, white, black and grey. Although almost motionless, you can see her breathing, watch her mouth move as she appears to speak or sing, observe the small gestures that prove the effort of maintaining her composure. Lifted out of her life, she fills the gallery as someone we don't recognise from her Facebook profile. She never looks at the camera and nor can we see enough of her body to understand how else she occupies the time. There are no props or cues as to her location, though briefly we catch a glimpse of the cellphone that so defines her reflected in her glasses. These deflections turn her from a frantic victim into a calm survivor, but one still caught and held by technology. We are left wondering who it is we are actually seeing.

The meaning of Thompson's film in large part relies on its difference from that other imagery and its modes of circulation, by which a poor black woman in the American Midwest got herself seen. Her still and silent presence is as alien to the visual language of social media as it is to the live drama of the nightly news. It is distant too from the sexualised and commodified images of African American popstars or cinema's raft of

stereotypical black characters. And yet Diamond Reynolds is not nobody, she is not 'just' a real person. She has become something more through her online circulation. Transferring her image from the media (in general) to a specific medium (film), Thompson invites her to take control of her own appearance. She thereby gains credibility, not merely as a person to whom something has happened—in the traumatic past of history—but as a live presence, a true 'celebrity' (the word comes from Latin, to be 'honoured', and in Late Middle English it means 'solemn ceremony'). Her screen image functions as a political vehicle to prove both her singular humanity and her representative status.

As Thompson's title suggests, she is her own character, conceived in large part by the wrong done to her but not the statistic or victim the media would make her. Reynolds is what David Joselit would call an avatar: a 'political agent' that brings 'persons and pictures face-to-face to produce publics'.²⁵ Alone on the screen and with the work, subject and spectator address each other as a private matter at odds with the media circus. Here, a provisional subjectivity is projected that is other to the stereotype the media would make of her (and us), yet which is constantly being created by the technologies to which she is (and we are) wedded.

Gordon Brown [sic] recalls: 'Up to then [1983], McCahon still occasionally spoke of getting back to his painting; unfinished canvases of promise waited in his studio. But any glimmer of hope was abandoned when he turned to a world as watched on television. Year after year he had resisted the attraction of its screen; he had been emphatic that no television set was to be in the house. As a visual being, he feared its tunnel-vision imagery and its power to absorb the

*seeing eyes' independent visual receptiveness. He had been Saint Anthony Abbot [sic; he means 'Abbot'] resisting temptation, fighting to preserve the visual purity of his own artistic vision. And now he accepted defeat without realising he had been defeated. It was clear, McCahon's career as a painter was over.*²⁶

Perhaps it is a stretch to connect Rita Angus and Luke Willis Thompson, but I would argue that they can be brought together through their keen observance of the relation between people and technology. My goal in this lecture has not merely been to chart a half-century of technological advancement and its impact on artistic production. My aim is to produce a more porous account of this period that sees art as one operation amongst others, a medium amongst media that has unique value because of its critical function as a tool for thought and reflection. Whether rejecting new technologies and valiantly endeavouring to shore up a high ground, as Gordon H. Brown posits McCahon did, or 'capitulating' by making a living in the various media industries—like the several artists who made their way into the television and film business—or any of the roles in between, every artist takes a position vis-à-vis the media landscape of contemporary existence. The art I have discussed addresses these conditions and endeavours to act in relation to them. What's at stake then, in this era I'm calling 'the contemporary', is the ongoing negotiation of a world dominated by the networked circulation of images and the evolving conditions for subjects who live under their sway.

When Leon Narbey made a film of *Real Time*, his gallery-wide installation for the opening of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1970, he

intuited that actual experience was only one dimension of the contemporary event. The other increasingly important part was the ability to re-live it via representation. To achieve this, Narbey created a formal equivalent to his immersive, kinaesthetic environment, a film cut into a disjunctive montage of edited moments overlaid with raw and electronic sounds (Fig.13). He knew this record would never be an adequate replacement for the live event, yet he also understood that, once his installation had been dismantled, the film would stand in for the experience. A document unhinged from its place and moment, it is now something to be replayed and disseminated, a means to recall the past but never relive it. A patchwork of temporal shards, *A Film of Real Time* opens the portal to our times, at the same time snapping closed a door to the past it records.

To the hard light of New Zealand's meteorological conditions, we must add the shimmering glow of the electronic screen. At once transfixed and transported, we are suspended in its time. I'm calling this 'the contemporary', our unhomey present. Without doubt this is a place with which we are still coming to terms, and there is much work to be done to grapple with its multifarious dimensions. As I hope my examples have proven, I believe my discipline—art history—has more to offer in making sense of the shape of 'our times', not only by deploying the objective tools of the historian, but also by trusting that artists can intuit and render palpable the conditions within which they find themselves, and by imagining that we have the insight to put their findings into words.



ENDPIECE: Leon Narbey, still from *A Film of Real Time*, 1970, 16mm colour film, collection of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

ENDNOTES

1. Terry Smith defines the 'infoscape' within which we are immersed as 'a spectacle, an image economy or a regime of representation ... capable of the instant and thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere'. See Smith's 'Introduction' in *What is Contemporary Art?*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2009, p. 6.
2. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962, 1970, p. 2.
3. See Erwin Panofsky, 'Iconography and Iconology: an Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art' in *Meaning and the Visual Arts*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, [1955] 1987, pp. 51–67.
4. Donald Preziosi, 'Making the Visible Legible', *The Art of Art History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, [1998] 2009, pp. 7–13.
5. Letter from Rita Angus to Jean Jones, 24 August 1969, MS-Papers-8636-006, Collection of Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa. Reference kindly provided by Jill Trevelyan.
6. The 69 Group Show, CSA Gallery, Christchurch, 15–29 November 1969.
7. Letter from Rita Angus to Doris Lusk, [December 1969], MS-P-5887, Collection of Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa. Reference kindly provided by Jill Trevelyan.
8. Letter from Rita Angus to Doris Lusk, 17 August 1968, MS-P-5887, Collection of Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa. Reference kindly provided by Jill Trevelyan.
9. P.A. Tomory, 'New Zealand Art: Painting 1890–1950' in Hamish Keith, P.A. Tomory, Mark Young, *New Zealand Art: Painting 1827–1967*, A.H. & A.W. Reed, Wellington, Auckland, Sydney, 1968, p. 23.
10. 'Make Things Happen', Labour Party TV commercial, 1969, Collection of Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, Ref C1600. See <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/video/labour-party-tv-ad-1969>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), accessed 16 February 2018.
11. Rita Angus, artist's statement in *Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand*, no. 3, 1947, p. 68.
12. See Laurence Simmons, 'Television then', in *Television in New Zealand: Programming the Nation*, edited by Roger Horrocks and Nick Perry, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2004, p. 59.
13. The 'hard light' theory was most effectively communicated in Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith's 'Introduction' in *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839–1967*, Collings, Auckland, pp. 9–11.
14. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, [1983] 2003.
15. Paul Diamond, 'Tangata Whenua: A Gift to the Future', written for NZ on Screen, 16 June 2017, <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/tangata-whenua-1974/series/background>. Accessed 14 February 2018.

16. The marchers were members and supporters of Te Roopu o Matakite, the pan-tribal organisation conceived and instituted by the instigator and leader of the march, the respected Māori elder, Dame Whina Cooper. *Te Matakite o Aotearoa*, was produced, directed and edited by Geoff Steven, with camerawork by Leon Narbey and sound by Phil Dadson. It was made under the aegis of the film company Steven and Dadson had formed in 1973, SeeHear Films, with funding from Nga Tamatoa, the Polynesian Panthers, the World Council of Churches, TV2 and the QEII Arts Council. Subsequently screened on TV2, it provided a coherent summary of the progress of the march and an insider's view that complemented the extensive daily media coverage. See Christina Barton, 'Between Art and Action: Te Matakite o Aotearoa', unpublished conference paper, Seventies Conference, Te Papa, 2004.
17. David Joselit, *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2007.
18. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, quoted by David Joselit in *Feedback*, p. 116.
19. George Hubbard also worked on the sound for Reihana. See Anna-Marie White and Robert Leonard, 'George Hubbard: The Hand that Rocked the Cradle', *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture*, no 8, 2018, forthcoming.
20. Avital Ronell, 'Video/Television/Rodney King: Twelve Steps Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, edited by Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey, Bay Press, Seattle, 1994, p. 283.
21. Boris Groys, 'Francis Alÿs: How to Do Time with Art', [2010], *Particular Cases*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2016, p. 158.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
24. Luke Willis Thompson quoted by Miss Rosen 'Life after Death: Diamond Reynolds through the Eyes of an Artist', *Crave*, 25 July 2017, <http://www.craveonline.com/art/1301123-life-death-diamond-reynolds-seen-eyes-artist>. Accessed 19 February 2018.
25. Joselit, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
26. Gordon H. Brown, quoted by Marja Bloem and Martin Browne in 'Chronology', *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, Craig Potton Publishing and Stedelijk Museum, Nelson and Amsterdam, 2002, pp. 232–233.