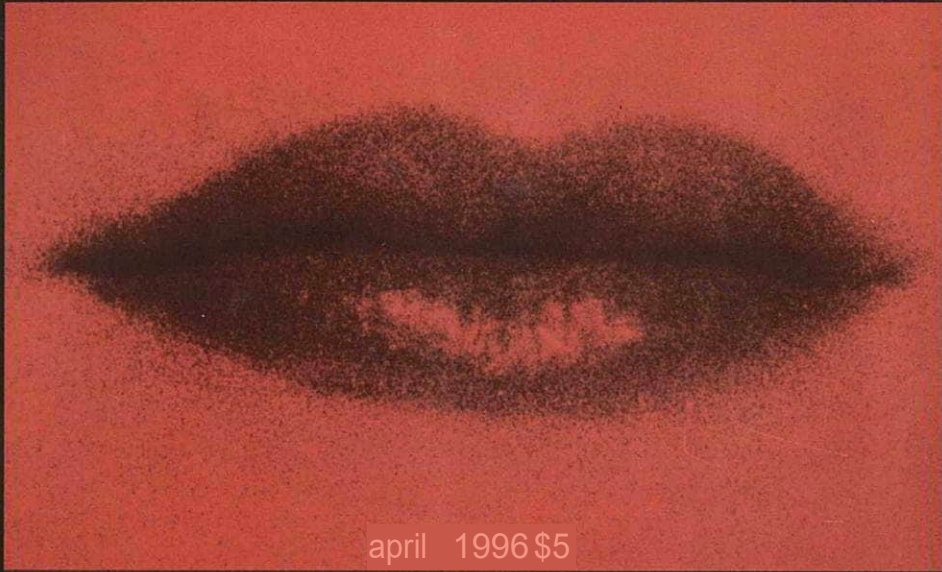


monica



april 1996 \$5

REVIEWS ART



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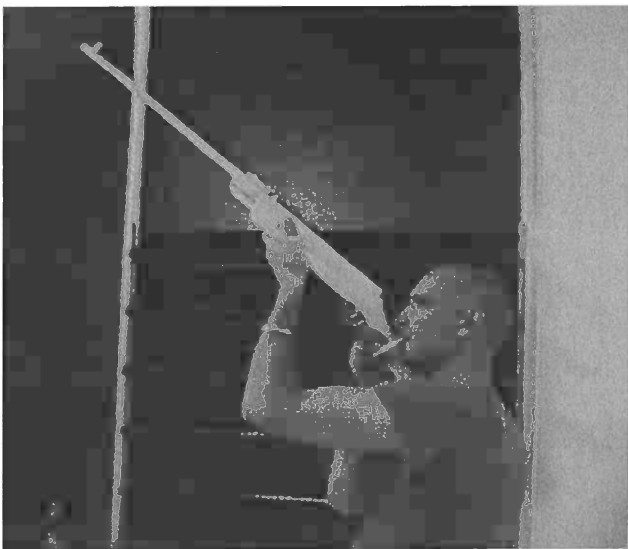
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monica reviews art. And regularly. Well, we had to ... all that coffee and nothing to read! *monica* is bi-monthly, in-depth and up-to-date with a profusion of intelligent attitudes toward art. We love print culture and are set on instigating independent criticism and fostering a desire for debate. *monica* is intoxicated with ideas, as you can see in our pilot issue, we are obsessed by photography, and our next issue will be a star-making spectacular with a fashion focus, *monica* suggests you subscribe now and enter the centre of informed dialogue indispensable to contemporary art and culture. Get a head, get friendly with *monica*.

on the cover

Harold Edgerton, Milk Drop Coronet. 1936 and Man Ray. *Les Amoureux*, 1929 from *An American Century of Photography*, from *Dryplate to Digital*. The Hallmark Photographic Collection, Keith F. Davies, Hallmark Cards, Inc. in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc. New York, 1995.

monica says

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TESSA LAIRD

Perfect

Death

Robert Mapplethorpe,
at City Gallery, Wellington,
Te Whare Toi,
9 December 1995 -
20 February 1996

Mapplethorpe enjoys the privileged status of being simultaneously controversial, and a thoroughly palatable, insipid, and saleable commodity. His estate has won matronly patronage worldwide, buyers of second-hand salaciousness less interested in the images for their titillative value than precisely because their residual dangerous sexuality has been neatly expunged (bar the SM shots which don't get commercially reproduced).

Germano Celant liberally daubed his jaded curatorial speech with the epithet "classicist", which I finally understood to be a euphemism for "purveyor of clichés". It is hard to know

Robert Mapplethorpe,
Calla Lily, 1988,
Estate of Robert
Mapplethorpe,
Courtesy City Gallery
Wellington.

whether Mapplethorpe, whose very name is now an adjective for controversy (Celant's favourite drollery), was an iconographic genius whose images' endless reproduction has led to their redundancy, or if his notoriety outstripped his talent and innovation.

Some works still sear the eye; *Man in a Polyester Suit* for example, the cropping of which reminds me of Alexis Hunter's 70s polyptych *Object Series* representing masculinity in raunchily reductive detail. Celant, no doubt a silk and linen-reared Italian, called the cock magnificent and the suit awful. In my opinion, the polyester and the dick resonate the same repugnant fascination of alien texture, irresistible cheapness, instant gratification (no ironing, drip dry) as well as an acceptance of impossibility; the manufactured garment is just as unlikely a creation as the magnum member.

Implied racism rears its ugly head, so to speak, here and throughout the exhibition. Homosexuality seems to give Mapplethorpe the mandate to objectify black bodies, and the saving grace of irony is just a critical whitewash over his dodgy essentialism (which, by the way, isn't even original. American photographer George Platt Lynes was doing the same

and floral motifs, foregrounded beauty by acknowledging the immanence of its demise. But Mapplethorpe's prize reproductive organs, both plant and human, are posed and poised in the "perfect moment" and its bid to outlive fate, making the same lies about life as advertising.

It could be argued that immortality is a fair obsession for someone with a terminal illness, but consider Derek Jarman's incredibly moving final film *Blue*, in which his own physical deterioration was translated into the medium of film, and the blank blue screen became a painful and poignant reminder of real decay. Mapplethorpe, however, with his defiant black-framed skull-toting self-portrait, only ever wants to be remembered as sexy. Conversely, his most notorious self-portrait with a bull-whip up his arse does work, despite knee-jerk controversy and transparent devilish iconography, precisely because of its imperfection. In his struggle to achieve such a difficult pose with a self-timer, Mapplethorpe's face betrays a complex of emotions including embarrassment. The original Lucifer was no doubt just as bemused and harried when he found himself cast from heaven.

no amount of speak can gloss what is in fact a chintzy piece of magazine art

black & white male nude dichotomy thang back in the 40s and 50s).

The flier tagging along with the exhibition since its installation in Sydney's MCA tries desperately to argue that *Watermelon with a Knife* is really a statement about American racial stereotypes (like the seemingly innocuous photograph of a pineapple by Clarence John Laughlin in the Hallmark Collection, which, according to the caption, bespoke "constellations of dichotomies"). But no amount of *speak* can gloss what is in fact a chintzy piece of magazine art with a corny smoke-generated background, second only in abysmally cheap chic to the venetian-blind shadows which score every second butt and the odd unfortunate aubergine.

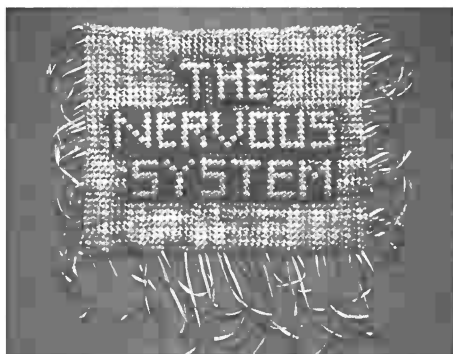
All of Mapplethorpe's work is instinctively 'clean' - his obsession with hairless victims of alopecia suggests a paranoia of imperfection that leads to an unpleasant stasis in his work. There is none of the abundance of the Dutch Masters in his sanitised presentation of flowers. Perfection disallows both the bloempots' *joie de vivre* and calm acceptance of decay. Shakespeare's sonnets, with their homosexual bias

Jean Genet, another Catholic homosexual who can be accused of the same obsessional oscillation between pretty flowers and rough sex, says of vision, "the beauty of a living thing can be grasped only fleetingly. To pursue it in time with the sight and the imagination is to view it in its decline, for after the thrilling moment in which it reveals itself it diminishes in intensity". Mapplethorpe eschews sight and imagination for the superficiality of this perfect or thrilling moment. He is only ever perfectly good, or perfectly bad; Homosexuality vs Catholicism in the ring of perpetual dichotomy.

Mapplethorpe doesn't reject traditional morality, he simply inverts it, like Genet, he makes saints of criminals and suppurating cocks out of virginal flowers. Immorality imposes the same stifling sets of rules; its almost fascist emphasis on excellence belies any notion of the freedom of *amorality*.

Mapplethorpe condemns homosexuality to a banality of endless binarism, which satisfies both ends of the market and leads to a false unification of SM sex practise with the world at large via some saccharine postcards and calendars.©

Hopelessly hopeful illusions of the intellect



Ani O'Neill, *The Nervous System*, 1995, photograph by Michael Roth, courtesy City Gallery Wellington.

If it bore no other resemblance to the Mapplethorpe sensation which followed it, *The Nervous System* was similarly afflated by a belief in the sublimity of the human anatomy. In his curation of the show, Allan Smith found inspiration in Michael Taussig's conception of the body's nervous system as a model through which to understand the restless dynamic of

contemporary culture. Through Taussig's image the audience was shown a contemporary sublime in which disorder boils beneath the surface of all certainty. Our beliefs are "hopelessly hopeful illusions of the intellect, searching for peace in a world that allows of no rest", and "our very forms and means of representation are under siege".

In a sharp-looking catalogue Smith's introductory note attempted to spin twelve artists into a kind of late twentieth century melodrama, in which they grapple with "the tangled web of social, psychic and physical forces in which we live". But to echo Robin Neate's observation on an earlier City Gallery show about biculturalism *Stop making sense?*, that collaboration was the star and not the collaborating artists, here, the *curation* was the star. The curation provided the defining vision of the world which the artists embellished as pertinent quotations in an erudite and poetic essay.

The artists were some of the current stock figures of the thematic group show — Shane Cotton, Luise Fong, Jacqueline Fraser, Denise Kum, Ani O'Neill, Michael Parekowhai, Yuk King Tan — and a few who are less often in the limelight — John Lyall, Denis O'Connor, Michael Shepherd, Sanjay Theodore, and Leon van den Eijkel. The joint directorial pen of Paula Savage and Priscilla Pitts in the

ANNA SANDERSON

The Nervous System,
City Gallery, Wellington,
Te Whare Toi,
31 October - 29 November 1995

catalogue foreword spoke with assurance of how "*The Nervous System* and the artists in it contribute effectively to the current negotiation of cultural territories", how "the publication extends this contestation and complexity", that "the artists, through their widely varying texts, add a further and productive complication" and so on. In reality though, theoretical circuits running in *The Nervous System* were relatively untroubled by contradiction. From artwork to explanatory label to catalogue essays to artists' texts, the various statements on each artist ran in smooth assent. Sanjay Theodore may have made a hapless attempt to suggest himself as an outsider by staging a conversation with Malcom X and the Unabomber in which they whisper that he is "not bi-cultural or *Artforum* enough", but even with such wilful disregard for the artworld the curatorial approach to his work was one of total empathy — perhaps too much empathy. The wall label to his *Curious Orange* reads in part: "His use of cracked pepper and garam masala in this painting also continues Theodore's personal reconstruction of the "spice trade" ...crushed paua shells gathered from Eastbourne beach, Wellington, sets the work in a specifically local context".

As well as sounding like the voice-over in a Benson and Hedges Fashion Awards, this commentary showed the viewer just how easy it is to make work which will be considered culturally complex. To it, I would point out that it is one thing to have disparate origins (as we all do) but another for those origins to emerge interestingly in an art practice. And, just because identity issues are placed at the forefront of the work, this doesn't mean to say that the artist has anything interesting to say about identity.

In his catalogue essay "On Being Modern," Peter Brunt established a family tree of sorts for these dislocated postmodern children. James Joyce's fictional character Stephen Dedalus is seen to be a paradigmatic figure of the modern compulsion to self-transformation and subsequent rootlessness. Like his mythical alter-ego Icarus, he both flees from his origins and is necessarily bound by them. The contemporary artist is haunted by these ashes (of roots, origin), which make their demands even through great distance or neglect. Smith shows faith that the

artists of the current global culture are phoenix-like when he says:

“[Their] improvised languages are forms of response to cultural catastrophe ‘arising out of the ruins of culture and communication’...

The level of poeticism in the accompanying material gave the whole show something of a dreamy romantic ambience, leading the work into the realm of the picturesque. Like the instant ruins of an eighteenth century English-style park the assembled pieces were objects of beauty and melancholy instilled to give pleasure to the bourgeoisie. Jacqueline Fraser’s “dignified personages” “pass before the viewer like spirit figures in a dream”. The black eggs suspended in Luise Fong’s *Dragon* “suggest the incubation of some new, mysterious subjectivity.” Michael Parekowhai’s *Ataarangi* has “the appearance of a dream-like object from some primal scene of instruction.” The compulsion to lyricise when addressing art objects is a tradition stretching back into the annals of New Zealand art criticism. Being guilty of it myself, I have pondered its origins and realised with horror that apart from acting as a tribute to artists it stems from a grotesquely sentimental attitude towards art as a realm of everything passionate and beautiful.

Perhaps then, in comparison to the grandeur of the conception of *The Nervous System*, with its “anarchic power surges” and “states of continual emergency”, the exhibition was always destined to look a bit flat. In the harsh light of the gallery, there was the feel of official multiculturalism — paradoxically colourful but dull. The role of the artworks was in many ways an incidental one. Drawn together foremost for how solidly they could illustrate the given polemic, their significance in the show is made solely through it. As any interesting relations between works seemed to be a by-product of the curatorial decision-making rather than a focus of it, the show as a whole only tenuously managed to become more than a sum total of its parts. To turn a failing into a successful complication though, the way in which the pieces sat, in iconic separateness, did seem to exude an essentially urban dysfunctionality.

The accompanying text by interpreting each work in the light of the curatorial thematic, also helped them to be seen only as illustrations of it. The sense of coherent persona beyond the materials used for each figure of Jacqueline Fraser’s *The Deification of Mihi Waka* is underplayed in favour of descriptions of dichotomous difference in her methods. The usual: contemporary technology versus ancient traditions, ‘feminine’, non-art materials versus conventional sculptural media.

To throw the culturally-hybrid nature into such

high relief may have tempted the viewer to observe that the general approach of the artists was astoundingly literal. Fragmented origins equal fragmented artwork. Smith is absolutely right to say that “theirs is a world in which inherited and regenerated cultural material shifts around in broken fragments”, and he is probably just as accurately describing the physical world of the artists’ studios as a loosely poetic ‘world’ littered with historical debris.

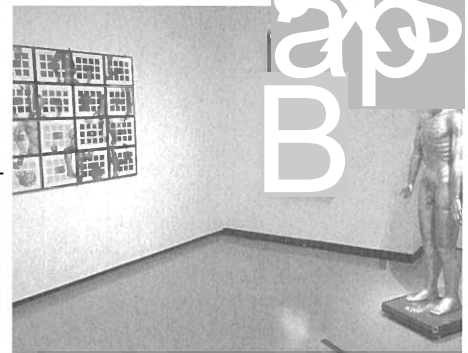
I wonder about this penchant for the aesthetics of deconstruction, and what kind of reflection of contemporary culture it actually constitutes. Because crisis is not an aesthetic, nor does it have any identifiable structure. Why could nothing with a seamless external unity find its way into an exhibition such as this about intercultural complexity? In psychological terms, an attempt at unity would seem to be a more anxious enterprise, and a more likely reaction to the threat of disintegration. If contemporary artists are sifting through the ashes of the modernist impulse

The compulsion to lyricise when addressing art objects is a tradition stretching back into the annals of New Zealand art criticism.

to sever the links to origin, some do wallow indulgently in their disenfranchisement.

Nevertheless the exhibition flyer informs with optimism: “Making new links between dislocated parts, these artists fashion objects and images which can help us think through and feel from the inside the precariousness and vitality of who we are.”

I’m sure that this is a genuinely felt sentiment, but I still would have preferred a show which was precarious and vital in itself to a soft-sell promotion of one that wasn’t. However, the tensions evident in attempting to concisely demonstrate the contradictory forces of contemporary culture, as well as the need to find social benefit in them, made the curation the most compelling example of Taussig’s nervous system model that the show had to offer. With this meta-artwork, *The Nervous System* achieves a remarkable, looping, fulfilment of its aims — and illustrates most clearly how “immense tension lies in strange repose”.®



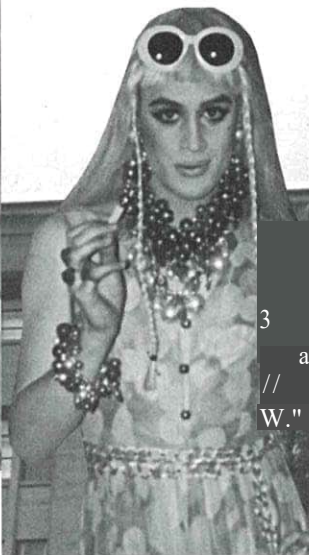
Installation view, photograph by Michael Roth, courtesy City Gallery Wellington.

that's

I call

what

art



Relesia Beaver and
Puppy outside the
MCA.

RELESIA BEAVER

Our Sydney Correspondent leaves her permanent bar-stool at the *Taxi Club* to dish the dog food on Jeff Koons at the MCA.

Like fingernails down a blackboard, so are the days of our lives. Something was not right, I could feel it, it was queer and it was coming from Circular Quay, and my friends *hate* it when I fidget with my earrings! I decided to dig deeper into the syrupy sentimentality that is the Koons hype... Slipping into something a little less comfortable and a little more conspicuous, a Versace ladybird-print playsuit teamed with strappy python mules, and collecting Husqvarna, my companion for the venture, I made

my way to the train. Naturally, with such a *fabulous* outfit I wanted to be seen by as many people as possible. That's what I call art.

After attracting the unwanted attentions of a rather heavily breathing female security guard I decided to discard the patent leather carpet beater I had so succinctly accessorised with, not only because it looked great, but with the additional purpose of warding off any intellectual types who wished to strike up a conversation regarding *Orlan*, *Lacan*, or *Derriere*. So into the nearest dustbin went high fashion; it would have to be a battle of wit.

Our introduction to the world of Koonsiana (which until now I had imagined was a theme park in Florida) began with *Puppy*. This gargantuan monument of flowers perched on the cusp of Sydney Harbour is a portrait of Diana Vreeland. (Actually, I made that up. But it certainly looks like her).

Husqvarna and I identified the various flora which included begonias, marigolds, impatiens, petunias and discovered a rather mystifying shrub with which I was not familiar. These, Husqvarna informed me, were mary-janes, which are non-flowering but have extraordinary buds. I made a note to locate them at Lurleen's Garden Centre, next time I needed cucumber seedlings. Moving across to the sign which listed volunteers on the project, I noted several "institutions" were involved in *Puppy's* construction (I do not use the word lightly, basket weaving is often included in first year curriculums, including that of the Sydney College of the Arts). Judging by the colour co-ordination they will have very few graduate stylists and art directors, and certainly no *drag queens*.

Ascending to the second floor of the building, I

men in Hnee- soclis, girls in flats, even

made my way through a herd of "independent minds" cluttering the courtyard, gazing blankly at this huge object and trying to decipher its profoundly elusive meaning - don't ask anybody or risk being enthusiastically quoted Koons' fave aphorism (and I always thought that was a hairdo!) "It's about love". *Puhleeze!*

We endured a quick stroll around the tres dull "Making of *Puppy*" in which the only vaguely capturing exhibit was a terrier carved into thin slices to display the charming shade of green which makes up its interior. Jeffrey Dahmer and the CBD Gallery stable alike will recognise its appeal.

At your own risk enter the John Kaldor Collection. This exhibition, according to the frontispiece, "traces his remarkable sensibility as a private collector". The first work on offer is, surprisingly a Koons, and yet again he has ploughed into controversial and uncharted terrain by obtaining a photograph of his *White Terrier* 1991, covering it with a sheet of mylar and daubing it with dots. It is significant particularly because it is the only piece he has put his hand to. This hideous piece was originally rejected by the curator, sending him into such a shriek that at time of writing he had not yet recovered the use of

his aesthetic sense. Husqvarna and I quickly bypassed the remainder of the Kaldor collection, shielding our eyes lest we lapsed into a coma.

Finally we made it to the hallowed ground of the exhibition we had actually come to see. A pseudo-retrospective, it was reminiscent of my recent visit to the Costume Institute at the New York Met, where all the mannequins were modelled after Christy Turlington. In other words, it all looked the same and didn't even include the body of work *Made In Heaven*. Perhaps this was for the best, here lies an easy solution to all those messy lawsuits should a child of nine days in age or even less be profoundly influenced to pursue sex mania as a potential full time occupation.

My mind was careering with the earth shattering questions the exhibition posed. I wondered *Why does Koons wear so much blusher? Where was his significant early work?* Finally and most important: *Where was the Ladies?* I needed a quick shot of vodka.

We escaped to the merchandise, conveniently located at the exit of the show to capitalise on the public lack of satisfaction. A large fuchsia coloured tome attracted my attention, and perusing its pages I wondered if in a similar financial position would I

grandmothers display an affection for Koons' work.

allow my nether region to sag so dramatically? Arnold Schwarzenegger is his personal trainer, why not Kevyn Aucoin as his personal makeup artist? Jeff could kiss goodbye that crookedly lined "ventriloquist lip" as it is known in the trade.

Men in knee-socks, girls in flats, even grandmothers display an affection for Koons' work. Finally, here is something that the real people can relate to. He has succeeded in his wish to communicate to the mass consciousness using genitalia, what can be left? Save yourself the train fare, the state transit's choice of upholstery fabric is heinous. I do however, recommend a visit to Circular Quay to peruse the Gucci outlet, formerly the MCA Store. Frankly though, who needs literature when they can have the high-heeled thong? *Now that's what I call art.* ®

GIOVANNI INTRA

Derrick Cherrie's *Game Load*,
at the New Gallery
14 February - 24 March 1996

basic instinct

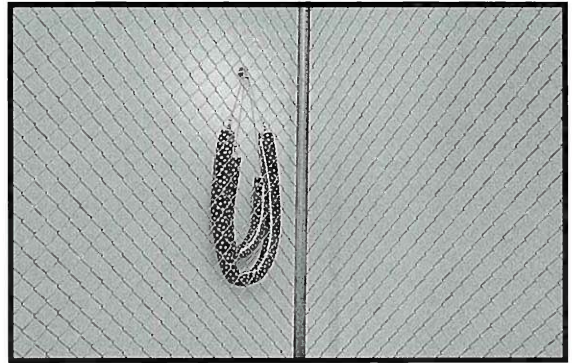
Wystan Curnow believes — he says so in *Artforum* — that Derrick Cherrie, along with Ruth Watson, Julian Dashper et al., is one of New Zealand's most "incisive" artists. Well, "sharp," "clear," and "effective" (OPD) — and, may I add, *irrepressible*, Cherrie is at it again with *Game Load*, a project for the Auckland Art Gallery's New Gallery.

Game Load is one hulking piece of work. Comprising its incisive regimen is everything one has come to expect from latter-day installation art: video monitors, soft sculpture, sound, wire fencing, gaffer tape on the floor, accoutrements of domestic utility which are actually undercover sadomasochistic agents (such as the ever-sinister bath-plug, or the chrome handle with fascist aspirations), etc. And like many other Fort Knox-style emplacements, which spend a considerable portion of their budgets on hurricane fencing — Christopher Wool's or Cady Noland's come to mind instantly — *Game Load* offers, in a vaguely sinister way, an orientation

where the body has been is not
in the least bit as fascinating as
where the mind can go

course of the intellectual variety, claiming influences such as the children's playground, the prison, the cage, or the benign pastel decor of the high-security psychiatric hospital.

Following these 'architectural' influences, and his other announced investigations—sexuality, the body, Matthew Barney, etc.—Cherrie constructs a 'play environment' where artistic fancy brushes up against 'repressed' fantasy. 'Repression Exists,' *Game Load* insists. 'Or there would be no need for such an elaborate protest against it.' The artwork glows with the *internal* promise of amateur psychoanalysis (libidinal free-loading) combined with a disturbing recent interest in sport. And with the audacity of a



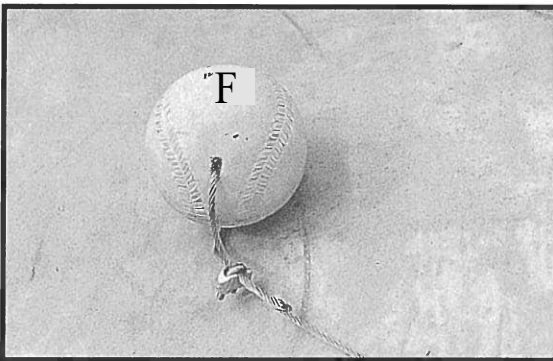
smiling Alcatraz tour guide, *Game Load* whisks us through such atrocities from above. Worse, the installation assumes that it can speak to the terrified subject, caught in the midst of this armageddon of security lights and padlocks, with a cheerful therapeutic message; that the artist, through his macho wielding of simulated catharsis, may offer some relief, to our poor incarcerated psyches which have been so kept since their pre-oedipal debuts in that originary haunted house, the cot.

"The individual is powerless to affect the impact of the social structure on their life and their psyche," the New Gallery didactic informs us. This is another way of saying that the "'adult' interests", (my emphasis) played out in Cherrie's environment terrify ordinary citizens on the Symbolic level. To alleviate disquiet in the grand manner of sport-as-recreation, all the veils of repression are lifted.

Fronting this cause with a particularly nasty prominence are the installation's two videos which feature a lone male — whom we assume to be Cherrie himself — performing two 'acts'. Act A involves the artist taping cigarettes onto his fingers and then lighting them — an extraordinary manoeuvre, which is compelling nonetheless. Act B has Cherrie, or, more precisely, Cherrie's bare bottom, grinning in front of the camera as the artist sensibly begins to attach — again with tape — a baseball to his anal region. We're unsure of our ability to actually interpret this action, but the ball seems to serve the same practical function as a cork in a dike; a rudimentary butt-plug of Mapplethorpean proportions (even though it is not actually inserted and is content to simply bob around the cheeks). The audience, all the time politely transfixed by this action, will gradually notice the graceful wielding of a baseball bat in the corner of the frame, offering accompanying readings of sodomy and death by bludgeoning. Unfortunately, neither of these possibilities are acted upon, but when one has had enough TV, one is encouraged to penetrate the centre of the installation to witness the lion in the cage

— that very baseball bat as it sits, freed from video captivity, growling at the viewer with an American accent.

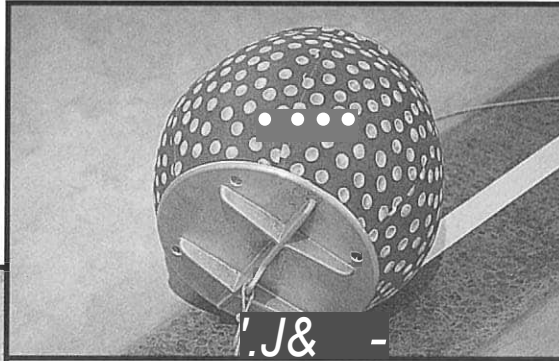
Perversity — and I use this word with an exceptional sarcasm — is one of Cherrie’s great themes. But I have never been convinced that there is anything untoward, let alone distasteful, about his sculpture. Indeed, his is a model of rectitude and simulation — which is why critics have considered Cherrie such a ‘good example’ of postmodernism. Sure, the artist has offered us testicle stretchers, restraining devices of various sorts, impotent conjugal beds, etc., but it seems to me that the more he attempts to multiply his trope-of-choice, the more neutered and normalised his aspirations are revealed to be. Cherrie treats the ready-made cast of perversity like a sex-shop, a place where one can receive instant, but strikingly facile



satisfaction. The result of this, of course, is that his art exhibits an *academic* perversity, if such a thing can be construed. Subsequently, his sex drifts about dully in an abstract environment of stridently dysfunctional puns which offer neither arousal or point of view. This, undoubtedly, is the most fascinating condition which can be gleaned from Cherrie’s enterprise — that he has imprisoned perversion to the extent which he has. Cherrie *quotes* perversity rather than practices it (in either sculptural or clinical terms), a tactic in radical opposition to an artist such as Robert Gober who uses the emancipatory power of the perverse to augment the cause of gay politics resulting in what, brilliantly, amounts to a queer reading of ceiling, floor, bathtub, whatever. Gober’s art comes up with sculptural solutions which may be categorised as deviant, if one is earnest enough to read them against modernism’s straighter orientations. Cherrie has no such demonstrative agenda, but in echoing the innovative solutions of others, he can only produce a grotesque profusion of sex toys.

While Milan Mrkusich’s *Journey* paintings in the next gallery are sensationally interactive in the best sense of that word, Cherrie’s perversity, like his other

favoured pendant — Games — are rented strategies which offer only a hermetic meanness. It is not the artist’s fault that the insanely prominent DO NOT TOUCH signs are as conceptually subtle as his hurricane themselves, but, added by gallery officials, they are a grimly appropriate meta-commentary on the resigned inactivity of the whole affair. For “Do Not Touch” is also the installation’s *modus operandi*, and



Details, Derrick Cherrie, *Game Load*, 1996, photographs courtesy Auckland Art Gallery.

its a very frigid motto for such an overtly physical piece of work.

However, Cherrie needn’t be reproached with the ‘doing it’ vs ‘not doing it’ argument which in itself is one of the more ghastly conceits of sexual politics.

Actually, we didn’t care at all that the steppes of Dali’s *Lugubrious Game* were no such place, just as no one labours under the assumption that there *is* a gymnasium where one can go for a *Game Load* workout to de-stress after a hard week. The kind of ethnographic bravado which boasts authenticity above all is easily deflated; for where the body has been is not in the least bit as fascinating as where the mind can go. The whole work has the feeling of a trade fair expose, where one stands, struck dumb with awe in front of the new Kubota tractor. Where’s the key? Sorry Sir, it’s only a display model.

As I said, sport’s evil; but it’s especially ridiculous when somebody who has obviously never stepped into the ring themselves tries to untangle its elaborate sublimations. However, *Game Load* persists with its ‘sporting cure’ for grown-ups who can have a good giggle at what art has become, get up to date on architecture and the body, learn something about transgression (sic) and how there is more to American baseball than meets the eye (nudge, nudge). And when this ride is completed, they can be further entertained by what amounts to the biggest “adult fantasy” of them all — that contemporary art exists.©

casino

"Excuse me,
I'm just here for the art.
Do you have any brochures or
catalogues or anything?"

ALEX CALDER

The pleasant assistant at the information desk neglects to roll her eyeballs as she reaches under the tabletop and emerges, moments later, with a xeroxed handout on the art, along with sundry glossier guides to the facilities and my application for a Sky City Gold Card. It's two in the morning, on the lucky leap year day of February 29. At this hour, I'm not the only the one gawking idly at the pictures, but I am the only one with a xeroxed handout.

"The Art Collection," says the handout uncertainly, "includes work from 25 prominent New Zealand artists, carefully selected to reflect the unique identity of New Zealand."

You have to select artists very carefully these days. Quite a few look like they reflect the unique identity of New Zealand but are really vampires in disguise. The publicity blurb then goes on to explain that as well as being "uniquely New Zealand," the

artworks "at the same time reinforce the fact that Harrah's Sky City is a contemporary entertainment centre." I'm not sure we needed the reinforcing, but I do relish the not unexploitable confidence of that little phrase, "at the same time." From their point of view, there can be no difference between the "uniquely New Zealand" (whatever that means) and Harrah's Good Citizen puffery. The more global the enterprise, the more indigenous the art. This, of course, is the main push behind the Casino's star art attraction: "A mural by Dick Frizzell representing Maui, the magician of the Pacific, [which] rises up from the left side of the atrium to the entrance of the casino floor where it changes from paint into stained glass."

Indeed it does. Your eye follows the fishing rope as it winds through the painted bits until, all of a sudden, there it is in the mouth of a stained glass

rainbow trout. I peek around the corner to get the other view, but it's all jammed up with pokies. Then I turn around, and look into the timeless, cavernous dark of the gaming hall, at the CAT scan colours of the slot machines, at the peristaltic movement of the throngs of people as they jostle through intestinal aisles. It occurs to me that I've been swallowed, hook line and sinker, and here I am in the belly of the whale.

Wrong legend. The handout informs me that the Frizzell mural "flows into the theming of the casino which depicts the fishing ground of Maui." (Just in case you missed that, their next sentence continues: "Measuring 24 metres in height, it flows into the theming of the casino which represents the fishing grounds of Maui.")

Could've fooled me. It's the fucking belly of the whale. And it's swallowed a neon canoe! Actually, it's "the 12 metre long fibre optic canoe sailing above the Canoe Bar in the casino" which has been sculpted by Neil Dawson. It's intended to give you the impression of looking up from the sea; it doesn't, and nor is it anything like 12 metres long, but I kind of like it's eerie Mururoa glow.

I decide to return to the canoe bar later, and make my way back towards the entrance, down escalators that, rumour has it, will soon have white crosses marking the spot where unsteady punters have fallen to their deaths. There's a waterfall, (there's always a waterfall), and down on the ground floor I look up at the twenty metre length of Lyonel Grant's impressively carved vertical Waka. Because it's keel side out, it is possible to move up close and underneath to get an inside view of the laminated timbers. It's sort of like looking up someone's trouser leg, which may explain why I have an obscure sense that I'm not supposed to do this, but nobody seems to mind.

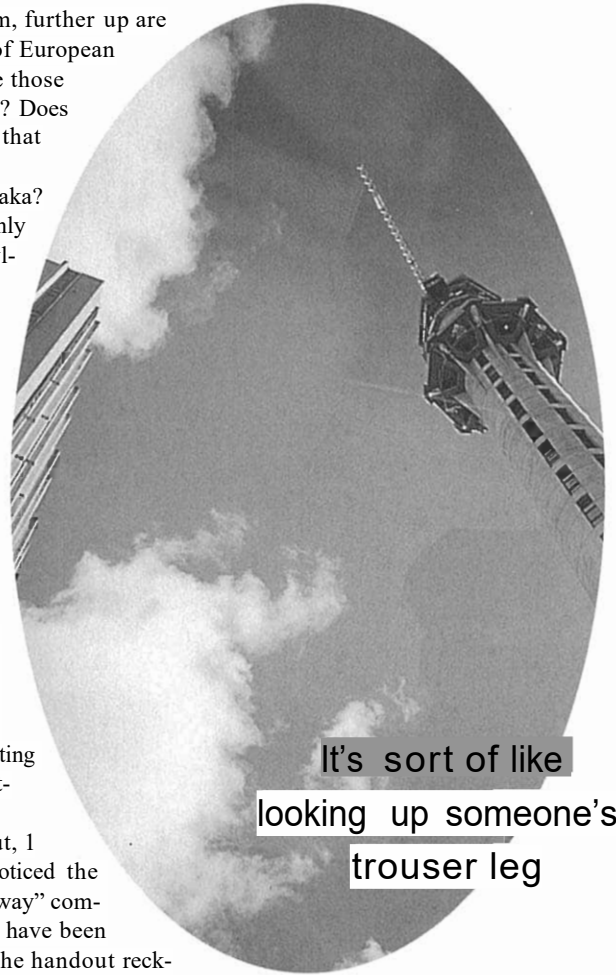
Over on another wall is the most seriously boring artwork in the place — a misplaced airport mural by Philip Trusstum — all the time I'm there, no one pays it the least attention. Most don't notice Christine Hellyer's bronze wreath of nikau palms either, which is in a hole in the floor. The piece itself is unremarkable, but it's quite fun to watch people jump when they discover they are standing on it. But some do peer closely at a nearby mural by Shane Cotton. The handout calls it "Wooden Piece Behind Stairwell" and the inept staircase design does rather block this 20 metre panelled mural from view. It's maybe the best bit of public art in Auckland: I like it because it is so much smarter than the puke-making unique NZ identity and pacific theming hoo-hah of its commissioners.

It seems they think it's a tree, with many

branches, "representing the shared experiences of maori and pakeha," and that on the branches of the tree, "a series of numbers and symbols ... highlight significant events and places in NZ history." In fact, the numbers and symbols are mostly as enigmatic as the faces of cards and dice, and I was seldom confident in working out the ones that did seem to have an historical reference: there's Maui and Kupe at the bottom, further up are the coastal views of European navigators, but are those numbers or a date? Does rua mean Rua? Is that ticked mountain Heaphy's or Parihaka? I got the feeling only some of this knowledge was, like the icon of the Four Square man, national knowledge, and that behind the reticences of the mural a more local and resistant presence was announced. Not that the piece is remotely earnest: an orange basketball bounces from place to place, and the wonderful floating mangaia have a tattooed grin.

On the way out, I realised I hadn't noticed the "Waharoa or Gateway" coming in. This might have been embarrassing, as the handout reckons this edifice stands 6.3 metres high on pillars. It's really much more diminutive than that, (3.6 maybe) and looks more like a lintel than a gateway. Plonked right in front of it, blocking the entrance as well as the view, is one of the building's structural supports. It made me feel sorry for Robert Jahnke's piece. It's meant to symbolise the separation of Rangī and Papa. Tane and company are cutie-pie Illingworth creatures, and they don't look like they could unfurl even an umbrella between their coupling parents. Just a few steps away, the Sky Tower rolls upwards like a concrete condom: beside this over-insistent elevation, Tane and his brothers are reduced to Munchkins.©

Drive by shooting by
Ann Shelton.



It's sort of like
looking up someone's
trouser leg

ANNA MILES

NO IDEAS BUT IN HAMBURGERS?

What makes Peter Robinson's nod to THE COMMUNITY NOTICEBOARD or bargain basement advertisement ANY MORE TRASHY THAN MCCAHOON'S REFERENCE TO THE ROAD SIDE SIGN?

The idea that the best ideas come in a hangover is one I have always viewed with some suspicion. A visit to *Hangover*, the long awaited show at the Waikato Museum of Art and History Te Whare Taonga o Waikato curated by Robert Leonard and Lara Strongman tends to confirm this view. The title immediately announces the shows crucial curatorial problem; something that the curators purport to tell us is new and interesting is

couched in a title indicating only the remains or leftover of something interesting. Right from the beginning it needs to be said that it is not the art but the curatorial work that is hungover.

Hangover took two years to curate and gathers together eleven artists on the basis of a common reference to trash. But as the 'fanzine' style catalogue that accompanies *Hangover* makes clear, there is more to this trash based premise than initially meets the eye. The claim is that these artists don't just refer to trash culture, they identify with it. It's not the mere presence of trash which supports the curators idea that the work of these artists "represents a different kind of negotiation with the world", what is suggested is that this trash offers a point of "cultural identity" in the work rather than a distanced "ironic" take. Identification is lumbered with a weighty purity in the fanzine, it is defined as an alignment that

excludes irony, and this is *Hangover's* strongest and strangest curatorial point. The denial of irony is linked to the "stupidity" of the *Hangover* art, and in the style of the backhanded compliment school of curation, "stupidity" establishes this art as innovative because in being so "it sidesteps Theory".

In the scramble to sublimate irony, *Hangover* confuses reference and identification, it implies that the artists don't just refer to trash, they make it. This isn't an argument that's easy to sustain and questions of irony persist in returning. How I wonder do you read Jason Greig's gothic *Beatles Reunion* on a charcoal swept moor minus irony? In the fanzine, advertising strategist Louise Greig suggests the post-Baby Boomer generation's recycling from the junkheap of previous style may be about "savouring] ironies - the squeaky clean family values, the politically incorrect attitudes, the crassness of consumer culture in its infancy." This type of dandyism plays some part in the approach of various of the *Hangover* artists, but ironically it's a far more convincing commentary on the curatorial line. Is Lara Strongman sidestepping Theory or trying to prove she's more playful than pc when she explains impersonating Mahatma Ghandi is as simple as throwing on an "old sheet and chocolate brown bathing cap."?

Louise Greig notes recycling fits this generation's

**Hangover,
Waikato Museum of Art and History,
Te Whare Taonga o Waikato
2 December 1995 -
25 February 1996**

“reluctance to expose themselves”, saying “the layers of irony act like a kind of camouflage”. It’s a point worth subtle elaboration, recycling after all has been going on for a long time, what makes it different this time around? What makes Peter Robinson’s nod to the community noticeboard or bargain basement advertisement any more trashy than McCahon’s reference to the road side sign? Seeing Robinson’s work awkwardly placed in *Hangover* prompts these questions, it’s hard to be persuaded that Robinson identifies with these things in a more flaky or unconscious fashion, or things are as simple as McCahon’s “sense of place or identity” being the “noble and utopian” to Robinson’s “porous and tainted”. What is telling is that both Robinson and Bill Hammond decline the opportunity of *Hangover* fanzine interviews.

One intriguing aspect of *Hangover* is the demonstration that when this generation’s curators evacuate the role as we know it, the marketing industry steps in. It’s Greig who supplies the more incisive distinction between reference and identification, gesturing at the complex range of desires and aspirations bound up in borrowing. At odds with Leonard and Stongman she writes “the characteristic Recession Generation approach to “creativity” is distanced and satirical - more commentary than confession.”

Distance can’t escape giving away some indication of a point of view, is this why the curators perform such somersaults to avoid talking about it? Defining something like trash immediately brings to mind a distance likely to be ripe with assumption, contempt, romanticism, irony and idealisation. What of the distance produced by the timelapse involved in these artists references to trash? Much is made by the curators of the artists use of belated trash. Why is this? Is quoting old trash somehow more acceptable in the gallery than Anne Geddes’ photos of today? In avoiding the distances of criticism or ‘Theory’, the curators have also avoided much that is interesting about the work of these artists. What is this trash that the curators are arbiters of? “Much of it American” if not local “tourist tack”, it’s debased, sentimental, popular or cheaply risqué. Everything that is, that isn’t ‘Art’. You might say it’s a definition resting on a fairly limited sense of art and humour.

Oddly, much of the art in *Hangover* refers to art as much as ‘trash’, take the work of Michael Stevenson, Peter Robinson, Robin Neate, Ronnie Van Hout and Marie Shannon. Art instantly opens

up the points where their individual projects diverge, but ‘trash’ is the homogeneous glue that sticks them in a curatorial cul-de-sac. Even the glaring ‘trashiness’ of Judy Darragh’s work is constructed in opposition to a traditional concept of high art while Terry Urbahn’s

Tracey’s world looks at the methodology of the museum as much as that of the teenage diary. The curators have chosen though to operate from a curiously antiquated position, one that ignores the point that art and by association curation may well be trash.

There is an awful lot of embarrassment in *Hangover*, why for instance does the use of the word “stupidity” require such squirmingly laborious explanation? Why do the curators spend so much time apologising for what they perceive in the work? Possibly because they choose to exclude irony. The earnest sense of uncritical identification that’s set up then later disavowed is a result of denying irony. It’s a cringey logic that resorts to the argument that referring to “trashy, ‘white’ ethnicity” saves art from the earnestness of Morris dancing. But then so much of *Hangover*’s anxiety centres around cultural identity. The introduction says our art scene currently tends to look to ‘other’ cultures when choosing to celebrate cultural values rather than critique them. *Hangover* is defined as in part a response to this, but it’s mostly a symptom of it.

Hangover doesn’t celebrate the “trashy ‘white’ ethnicity” it crudely constructs, by definition it degrades it. In assembling this vision of trash the curators identify themselves with a set of attitudes they chastise and locate as belonging to an older generation. But if the curatorial line is aged, it’s also laced with a kind of puerile thrill that couldn’t be further estranged from the jaded melancholy of artists “pulling down all that smells of spiritual or intellectual transcendence”. Reading the *Hangover* catalogue you get the annoying sense of curators yelling “look at me, look at me” as they try to stop themselves giggling at the thrill of dragging all this taboo trash into the gallery. ©

**It’s a cringey
LOGIC THAT
RESORTS TO THE
ARGUMENT THAT
REFERRING TO
“TRASHY, ‘WHITE’
ETHNICITY” SAVES
ART FROM THE
EARNESTNESS OF
Morris dancing.**



Robert Frank,
Movie Premiere,
Hollywood, 1956.

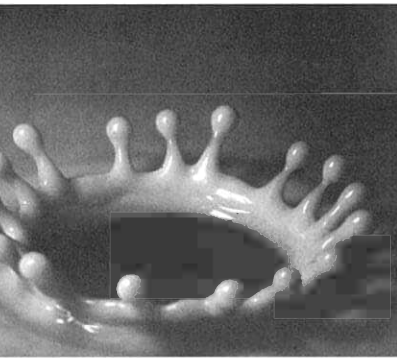
She's not working the room, she's parting the crowd, in that blurry haze moving towards me, the sharp profile of her nose points forward but also skyward, her dress falls from her shoulders like a prow melting into a ship. The way her blur meets the sharpness of the crowd peering at her makes me stand here, staring blankly like the woman behind her with fingers in her mouth. I feel terrible seeing her transience so clearly, concerned that if her jewels or corsage were pulled into focus, her star would fade. The dark hollows of her eyes fall into the familiar pattern of shades. I warm to the idea she's like Joan Didion, diminutive and massively cool behind enormous darkglasses in her author photo. I know all this vagueness allows that slender possibility I might be her, but how could I aspire to such grainy anonymity? I love the thought of streaming through the crowd in such coolly unfocussed fashion but it's Robert Frank's portrait of star as misguided blur which I love as I realise that if I am in this picture, I have no blur, I am the woman unable to contain her curiosity even as she remains tucked behind the earring of the star.

— Anna Miles

the
photos
we love

All photographs from *An American Century of Photography*, The Hallmark Photographic Collection, published by Hallmark Cards, Inc. in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1995.

Harold Edgerton, Milk Drop Coronet, 1936.



Tina Barney, The Sider, 1986.

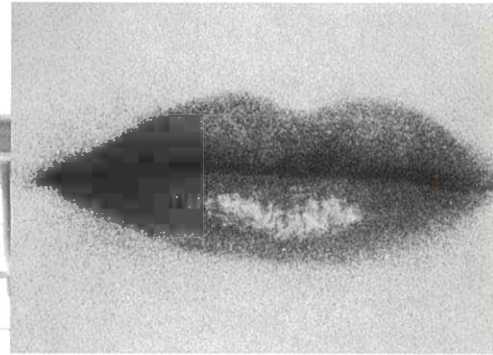


I love this *Milk Drop Coronet*. My arousal flows in accord with a grey sea of surface tension giving way to a prolonged and ductile coronation. The photograph's glory stems from Edgerton's technical mastery of ultra high-speed photography — his stroboscope functions as instrument par excellence in triggering the camera and permanently fixing the ultra transitory moment. For twenty-five years Edgerton liberally documented points in time when beads of milk return to milk ponds. His aesthetic pursuit was a perfectly formed symmetrical milk-crown. *Coronet* was as close as he got.

The photo reflects a perfectionist's melancholia; it swelters with an unfulfilled desire for classically perfect form. Desire itself is the project's unequivocal emblem. Edgerton's milk-dropping-marathon calls on Freud's deictic game, in which the child attempts to appease the shock of the mother's departure by throwing and retrieving a bobbin from the crib. In compulsively dispensing and photographically capturing balls of sweet milk, the cameraman administers himself the double-ender desire and loss love-potion. Drop by drop the milk of human kindness strives deeper into waves of viscous deprivation. If Sartre's 'real sea is black' then Edgerton's milk lake craters are simply unilluminated. *Milk Drop Coronet*, I still love you. — Gavin Hipkins

fair-haired woman to exist unquestioned in the scene, without melodrama or irony, is both subtle and remarkably bold. *The Skier* reminds that the most absorbing and complex entanglement you can have with a fictional character, is with your everyday self. Barney makes the mannered roleplay of Cindy Sherman's urban sophisticate in *Untitled Film Still #16*, seem like a clumsy way to say that we are a complex of social fictions. — Anna Sanderson

Man Ray, Les Amoureux, 1929.



The Lovers can today be answered for by those masters of pathos Man Ray and Hallmark Cards, who invented their flattened, anthropomorphic semblance. I'm talking about the 'fine art' card market. Four-by-five inch mantle piece allotments purchased by those soccer-hooligans of sentiment — friends of the deceased and the sucker who is in love.

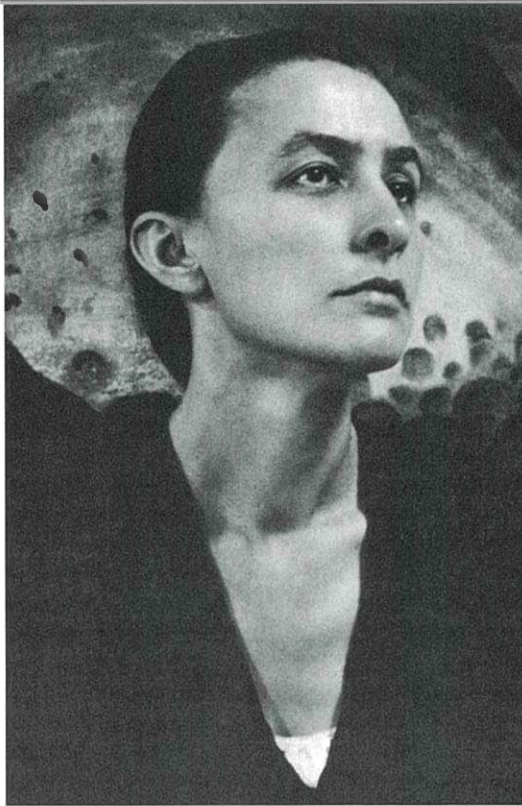
Thanks to this, though, we have such a thing as the serial reproduction of *Violin d'Ingres*, *Les Amoureux*, and more lips, tits and bums than a boatload of madmen would ever care to be entertained by. More florid meadows, more nubile models pouting

for St Valentine and more kisses for us in return. And in eternal gratitude, we love them all — lipstick manufacturers, Cops, our friends in the 'fashion industry' — for they built a capitalism of love against that dark brothel of mastication which pummels chuddy and harbours more germs than an elderly alsa-tion.

It's true to say that we're as sick of the poetry of the mouth as we are afraid of going to the dentist. But in the end who gives? It's certainly more entertaining than Rudolph E. Kuenzli who considers Man Ray a "sexist." So which would you prefer — la bouche a la Kuenzli or la bouche a la Man Ray?

— Giovanni Intra

Because I hate having my own photo taken I always feel anxious for the subject of a photographic portrait. I think of O’Keeffe in 1918, younger than she looks here, holding this 8 x 10 proof of how she resides in someone else’s gaze. Even as she takes in the threequarter profile, those dark temples and shaded clavicles, recognises these features as unmistakably her own, I imagine the security of her recognition being hollowed out from inside, by a sense of not living up to the representation, and so of knowing herself the smaller for it.



Alfred Stieglitz,
Georgia O’Keeffe:
A Portrait, 1918.

This makes me, I suppose, a poor viewer of the Steiglitz portrait. I know that everything within the frame arcs toward an abstract formalism, that the dress is not a dress but a black mass anchoring the lower half of the composition, the plunge of the neckline completely naive, simply a way of marking light from dark and allowing that throat and head to stem up and bloom outward into the obscure canvas backdrop. Even so, even knowing how to read the signs of its modernity I find myself reading the catalogue instead and pulling the photograph away from formalism back toward narrative. From the time he meets her in 1917 until the end of his photographic career Steiglitz will take over 500 prints of O’Keeffe, dissolving for her untold chemicals and a marriage of thirty years. From this angle his formalism starts to look like an alibi, abstraction a guise, the wonkiest of beards thrown on under the lifetime moustache. He makes a genre of her, the O’Keeffe portrait, as though these hundreds of images resembled his sequence of clouds and art might bestow a legitimacy or constraint on an otherwise obsessive love. A completely ordinary love that is that makes her beauty, and her aging, a vigil he keeps. He only falters at 73 when his wrists are too weak to any longer hold that heavy Graflex. However I feel about the cruelty of snapshots I am strangely at home before this portrait; anyone could set up house inside that desire, and its disavowal. — Lee Wallace



Weegee,
Girl_ShptJr_om.
Cannon, ca. 1943.

Photographs can seem less about history than about time: Weegee’s *Girl Shot From Cannon* has at its heart not 1943 but $1/500$ th of a second. It turns out that a death-defying act is nothing more than thousands of ordinary moments. Weegee’s girl hangs in the air over the cannon, her feet not yet blown clear of its mouth. She stands there as casually, as vertically as any of us have stood at a street corner or outside a familiar door which, in a moment, will be opened. A blunt cloud of smoke, backlit by a row of spotlights, floats behind her like an unlikely explanation.

A cross between Jean Batten and a beekeeper, the cannonball girl’s eyes are an out of focus gleam in the holes of her face mask. Anticipating not moon landings but *Star Trek*, her white jumpsuit is banded with dark stripes, a flattering V pointing across her breasts to the buckle of her matching belt. It is hard to say whether it is the shape of her thighs or the force of the explosion that blows the pants of her suit into jodphurs. She does not have the daredevil’s expected brashness. Her heavily gloved hands are held, palm outwards, at the height of her shoulders which are raised in a slight shrug: it is the internationally recognised sign for self-deprecation. *Anybody could do it.*
— Annamarie Jagose ©

SNAP!

STEWART GARDINER

MORPHIC RESONANCE AT THE AUCKLAND ART GALLERY

An American Century of Photography
17 November 1995 - 11 February 1996

Peter Peryer, *Second Nature*

17 November 1995 - 18 February 1996

Christine Webster, *Black Carnival*

3rd December 1995 -

30th January 1996

Auckland Art Gallery

The Hallmark *American Century of Photography* is the kind of corporate art roadshow that Aucklanders are now used to occupying the Heritage Gallery. The title of this one makes a typically extravagant claim, *From Dry Plate to Digital*. Compressing 100 years of American photography into a survey of 253 images is as near to an impossible task as one can get. Curator Keith Davis responds to it by repackaging the Hallmark collection into a ready-made narrative of modernist triumphalism. In the first half of the exhibition, the dominant pictorialism of the late 1890s is re-read to be a "reluctant modernism" destined to explode into radical experiments with abstraction in the 1920s. The relentless forward march of US industrial culture is the 'benevolent provider' of new photographic technologies to an avant-garde intoxicated by the medium. Thus Davis audaciously reclaims European innovators and US cultural exiles like Kertesz, Moholy Nagy, and Man Ray for America in a narrative which says as much about the imperialising self-importance of US art historians as it does about art.

Curatorial overtones aside, it cannot be denied that the early work in the exhibition contains some exhilarating images that perfectly convey the dynamism of the era. It is the second half of the exhibition that disappoints. Perhaps the most important trend in post-war American

photography has been the project of interrogating popular culture and its attendant notions of glamour and celebrity. In the hands of Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Andy Warhol, the seedy underbelly of the American Dream has provided an abundance of

powerful images. Yet the project of deconstructing US popular culture is seriously under-represented in this exhibition. The focus is instead on the evolution of increasingly introverted modernist practices in the post war era.

In the adjacent Wellesley wing, Peter Peryer's *Second Nature* provides the perfect counterpoint to the jumbled perspectives of the American exhibition. Peryer has the eye of an auteur, evoking a cinematic quality of existence beyond the frame.

Working entirely in black and white, Peryer's characteristic strategy is to render the everyday alien. Rows of jam rolls and doughnuts take on a sinister aspect, becoming studies in regimentation. Animals and birds knowingly return the gaze of the viewer. Nearly every photograph jars and surprises.

Perhaps the most accomplished works in *Second Nature* are the landscapes. Peryer's camera scans over an unsignifying terrain for signs and patterns of meaning. *The Alexandra Clock* and *Trig* confront the viewer with European symbols of domination dropped like UFOs into the midst of a barren landscape. The search for a language with which to make sense of one's surroundings becomes explicit in *Seeing*, an uncanny close-up of a braille text,

which shares the same texture as his more conventional photographs of scattered shells and rock formations, forming a new and parallel landscape. No matter how unfashionable it may be in the 1990s, here is an artist who is clearly not afraid to grapple with that ancient bete noire of pakeha male art, the theme of national identity and the land.

Glossy, brash, super-confident, in a word, 80s, Christine Webster's *Black Carnival* is the perfect exhibition for the New Gallery. Webster's signature style is by now very familiar; massively enlarged cibachrome prints depict actors in costumes and poses that challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality.

And challenge it does, according to a photocopied leaflet which accompanies the show. During the tour of the provincial cities

which preceded the Auckland opening, *Black Carnival's* 'pornographic' content roused more than one councillor to a state of righteous indignation. Despite this a good many Aucklanders responded to *Black Carnival* with a yawn. Ponce Road and years of Hero parties has made the kind of outre sexual deviancy peddled by Webster a little passe. Viewing *Black Carnival* it strikes one that Webster has become the Anne Geddes of local camp, like Geddes she has mastered a particular variation on the contrived studio shot, only she substitutes transsexuals for babies, leather and dildos for bumblebee outfits. There is little question that Christine Webster is a talented photographer, but it is hard to see how she is going to get any more mileage out the giant cibachrome enlargement. As we enter the late 1990s, this trademark style is wearing thin. ©

Webster has become the Anne Geddes of local camp...

ADULT TESSA
LAIRD

CONTACT

meet the ambassador

In one of the final issues of *High Performance* magazine, Jacki Apple attempted to summarise the current performance art scene as well as contextualising it historically.

Her phrase "What happened to the art in performance art? For one thing an entire generation of visual artists went back to the wall or the object," sounds like stock art historical rhetoric. And indeed, until the last couple of years, local students were taught that performance art in this country had pretty much died after Peter Roche 'retired' to sculpture. Work that occupied the margins of theatre and literature were seen as undeserving of the 'art' moniker, while genuinely informed work by students was just, enfin, student work. So that Roche's return to the live arena engendered an almost feverish

tered any image of himself as slick or static. The fiction of his cool, contemplative sculpture was destroyed by raw actions, ugly in their very kinesics.

White Fright at Teststrip and the inauguration of The Ambassador, Roche's new theatre space, occurred on the same October night.

At Teststrip, Roche's installation of fluorescent tubes and impassioned pleas in pencil were launched in an event that was frankly quite dull, leading me to wonder about the process of art historical writing. Perhaps all the Roche performances my art history lecturers were so keen to tout had also been boring, and perhaps Roche's apotheosis simply served then current theoretical trends as well as alleviating academic impotency via association with his machismo?

Roche issued his audience with sunglasses then proceeded to gather the lit tubes in a slow, lilting motion; definitely a *grim* reaper. Eventually, he lifted the entire load and dashed it to the floor. There was a bang, more subdued than expected, and the crowd burst into cheap applause. Somewhere during the performance the mood had slid the slippery slope from quiet veneration to the hedonistic egg-ing-on of mates around a yard-glass. Machismo became the only tangible (indeed, applaudable) quality. The problem was not, as with most performance art, that he's 'not genuine', but maybe that he's *too* genuine.

Because of Roche's penchant for the 'raw', events at the Ambassador were deliberately disorganised, leading, I felt, to a decrease, rather than a proliferation, of possibilities. The lofty and ornate space could

"What happened to the art in performance art?"

anticipation amongst the set who had been spoon-fed tales of a Golden Age of *real* performance art. Roche himself seemed to share a Homeristic nostalgia for this 'Golden Age', with his phalanx of self-bestowed heroic shields, in memoriam to great and dirty deeds.

But he had obviously been aching to come 'off the wall.' His latest installation, *Tribal Fictions*, exhibited some of the symptoms of short-fused ennui, employing such a nonchalant leaning of the disc-shaped sculptures that slippage was inevitable. Taking the credo of Michael Jackson to heart ("Living Crazy; It's the Only Way") Roche slaugh-

have been used in a literally spectacular fashion of Robert Wilson-like proportions. Instead, a handful of performers and bands drowned each other out in the half dark. As one of these performers, I never managed to achieve the mandatory liminality, and spent the entire evening and the following months trying to extract meaning from this (non)event.

The supposed finale was scheduled to take place beneath the stage, with Roche collaborating with the newly ubiquitous David Townsend, prodigy of self-mutilation. With more of Roche's rods to light the way, yet another technical hitch occurred when Townsend fell down the hole and smashed all the

fluorescent tubes, making an 'orphyal mess' (and arguably the night's best performance). Their combined bloodlust called for improvisation, and one of Roche's blank black discs was commandeered as a wrestling ring.

The two protagonists attacked each other with gusto while most people tried to concentrate on the live music (SHAFT, by the way, were excellent, with a tight raw energy far exceeding that of any of the 'art' on display). By the time Townsend and Roche called it quits, both were liberally daubed in their own and each other's blood (Townsend had broken the unspoken code, and slashed Roche's scalp with a blade).

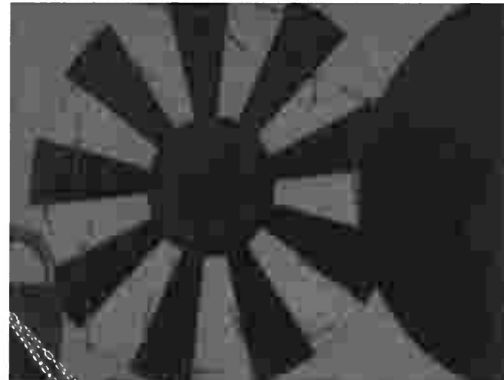
Controversy ensued over the proximity of blood in an AIDS aware crowd; it is doubtful Roche and Townsend demanded to see each other's negative HIV test results before they pitted themselves in combat. Compare this to the hugely controversial, but thoroughly safe performance work of American Ron Athey, in which HIV infected blood was shed, under the supervision of medical authorities. Athey's work seriously examined issues of death, danger and disease, while Roche and Townsend, in a carnival of stupidity and debilitating menstrual envy, seemed only to be saying 'blood is scary' and 'aren't we naughty'.

I declined to take part in *Stamina*, the second night at the Ambassador, deciding instead to view it through the same alcoholic haze that seemed to inspire the performers. Arriving in a lull, nothing pulled my focus, and so I left, only to be later relayed tales of nudity and public fucking. I also heard positive reports of genuine fear during Roche's extravaganza, in which he swung a chainsaw, axe-like, through a ring of lit fluorescent tubes. More than one person likened this piece to 'blowing out birthday candles', which I felt to be a quaintly oblique gloss on juvenility; a way of packaging and making safe unruly and unpleasant work.

The next event on the Roche agenda consisted of yet more systematic extermination of fluorescent tubes, this time with an air rifle at 23A Gallery. A camp cowering prevailed in the audience; we knew we wouldn't be hurt, but we flinched politely all the same. Roche swaggered about the gallery, undermining performative inebriation with a very sure aim. He then made an impressive explosion by attaching a fire cracker to a tube and taping it to his arm.

Having come straight from an exposition of women's stunt wrestling where stylised violence included all the trappings of dialogue, screams, lights, music, and costumes from latex to rags, there seemed a certain poverty in Roche's target practise. Both events were about the pretence of danger, but

the notion of pretension in the gallery struck me as being far more obscene than in the ring of the Boxing Federation. Violent work can be generous, but from intimidating machines to art-scene bullying, Roche's oeuvre has always practised an abstinence of emotion. In a jovial impersonation of Freddie Kruger, Roche demands submission from his audience and then punishes them for their patience. We all know



A swinger from way back, Peter Roche at *Stamina*, The Ambassador, 9 December 1995, photograph by Ann Shelton.

that 'life's a bitch', but Roche eschews solutions for the pleasure of becoming part of the problem. The one proper response — fright — has lost its currency through repetition, and leads to a peculiarly frustrating numbness.

The former earnestness of Roche's work seems to have been replaced by self-parody.

He has become a stock character whose predictable repertoire wins him a perverse popularity; witness my own willingness to further his notoriety in print. After all, Roche's state-funded destruction provides the necessary 'transgression' quotient in an art scene addicted to some cosmic yin-yang notion of the redemptive quality of violence. No one is really afraid of broken glass and buckshot, but they are fearful of making a canonical blunder. God knows, the art you criticise today might be remembered as yesterday's avant garde tomorrow!

So while institutional liberalism is keeping the fringes clean and the establishment fashionably dirty, anyone with a CV can enjoy libidinal posturing and catharsis at the audience's expense. Become a performance artist today and make your anger management pay!®



K GET SHORTY - *brief takes* J

In House: Toby Curnow's open home

GREGORY ADAMSON

Throughout my life I have had the pleasure of being entertained by a curious fascination with all things symmetrical. Be it the simple beauty of a volcanic peak or the uncanny similarity of a friend's past and present lovers, I am always filled with a strange and unexpected delight.

At Toby Curnow's inaugural "In House" exhibition, resemblances both strange and unexpected danced before my eyes in such a kaleidoscopic manner that my delight was hard to contain.

You could forgive me for observing that symmetry is an obvious trait in the Curnow dynasty. From poetry to painting there is always a sort of hand me down quality which accompanies the name. Toby's bashful and rather elegant ungainliness in the hallway instilled a sense of *deja vu* - I could have been in some darkened corridor of the English department. In fact, if one were to draw a line directly through Auckland Harbour between Birkenhead and Herne Bay, one would find that father and son were not so much mirror opposites but, well, reflected in one another.

As I proceeded I became intrigued at how this union of the geographical with the geneological proliferated throughout the exhibition. I was met with two, symmetrical, collections of young people both orientated towards an older individual.

Politeness led me to the table of Ralph Paine who in the company of several Elam students brought to mind Jake Hansen's appearance on 90210. Even though aware the veneration of his being a "professional" artist and consequently that his observations would become instant aesthetic facts, his modesty forestalled any smugness

producing a rather charismatic charm. And when it was learned that he wished to swap one of his own works for John Collins' piece a consensus of success was soon communicated amongst the exhibiting artists and friends.

Outside things appeared a little cooler. Peter Roche had the appearance of Ron Wood fraternising with "Take That." Which saddened me a little as I wondered why a group of such attractive young men should wish to chain smoke and starve themselves in order to look twenty-one going on fifty.

I discovered the exhibition was through the kitchen in an enlarged pantry. Initially I was overcome by a feeling of apprehension. There were five attractive, stylish objects facing me silently and dispassionately, but alone, in the pantry, it suddenly hit me that it was I who was the centre of focus. Stuck for something to say I realised that these paintings demanded that I engage them. Each work was, like their producers, rather taciturn and passive, but that was their function.

They were there, in the pantry, waiting to be entertained.

By the time I emerged from the exhibition, abstraction had taken on a whole new meaning. It no longer implied for me the attempt to express universal relations of form and colour but rather a sort of demand for attention. These paintings were waiting to adorn the walls of anyhome.

"In House" appeared to be subtly aware of this imperative. And with the arrival of Ms Smith and Ms Malone which coincided with the departure of the art world this subtlety gave way to the more frank demand that an art opening is primarily a reason to entertain. ©

Video Reviews: New Releases from Michael Stevenson

DANIEL MALONE

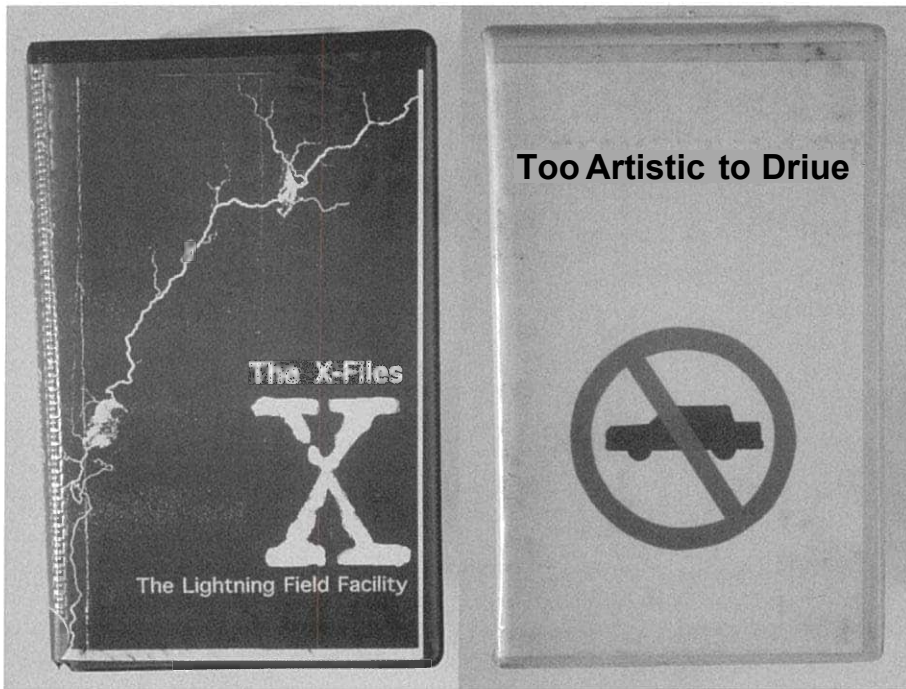
Too Artistic to Drive

At a time when most road accidents are caused by alcohol and Asians, artists are the next biggest problem. This video is a hilarious spoof at their expense and if you thought *Planes, Trains Not Automobiles* was funny you'll love this. The same team are at it again, with hidden cameras and microphones, setting up situations where artists simply have to drive. Most prove themselves to be more incompetent than you'd imagine; watch the face of a well known painter as he makes his fresh oils more abstract in 30 seconds of driving than 25 years of painting. Contemporary trends aren't spared either as two young artists have a terrifying experience in the car of someone they believe to be the ambassador of performance art (a plant); just how in control of the car is he? An adventurous and alluring attack at artists attitudes about automobiles. 362mins ♦♦♦

Decline of Western Civilisation Part 3: the Minimalist Years

Finally this major work has been adapted for video. A thorough investigation that establishes why minimalist artists had the lion's share of the art market for so long and just exactly what it meant to get more for less. This video goes beyond the double-dealings and international artgate affairs. Informal interviews with maligned assistants speak of the decadent and destructive private lives specific to various minimalist artists. Certain scenes are almost too painful to watch because of their emotional rawness.

This film is an informed investigation beneath the surface and an urgent condemnation of the white cube; a deceitful purity that as you will see, housed more than just occult geometry. n6mins ♦♦♦



The X-Files; The Lightning Field Facility, & Too Artistic To Drive, Michael Stevenson, 1995, photographs courtesy of the artist.

Nixon: Can you impeach an artist?

"I enjoy drawing, its a deeply ingrained habit," Nixon remarks near the start of this excoriating documentary. Nixon's abilities as a draughtsman are beyond question but he also comes across as a profound misanthrope who exorcises his demons through his art. The film was shot in 1993 and is one of the last Nixon tapes. Whether Nixon is, as critic Robert Hughes claims in the film, a Breughal for our times is a moot point. The film neither judges him on his perceived lack of political correctness nor endorses his idiosyncratic sexual politics' and works as much as a study of a dysfunctional family as a portrait of the artist. 95mins ♦♦♦

BranchJuddian Minimalism

Thanks to advances in micro-film technology we are now able to see a lot on our screens that previously has only been possible through dramatisation. Most of the scenes in this brave and uncompromising look within the compound walls of

Donald Judd were shot using this technology. It doesn't make for sublime cinematography, but this is not a pretty picture. Containing footage of actual contra weapons deals, border skirmishes (not for the squeamish), and drug payments, its rawness only makes the reality of what you're seeing hit home even harder. The quality of sound is not always up to scratch but secretly taped conversations, bristle with accusations and ambitions that leave little doubt of the effect of Judd's addiction. This film finally makes sense of literally thousands of documents found in drawers scattered in endless configurations in galleries around the world, roymins ♦♦♦

Room with a Poo— Decrepit Body Art in the 90s

This is one of the least successful in a series of art watch-dog videos. Ostensibly focusing on the recent resurgence of so-called body art, it needed to cover a lot more art practice than it does. Spending too much time on L.A. artist Keith Boadwee became nauseating and boring. This time could have been better spent examining more insidious and seductive trends such as the work of Cyber-Artists including Stellarc whose third arm can

only be seen as the grossest tantric appendage. It is disturbing that a perversion of the flesh has only been exchanged for a fetishization of technology. nqmins ♦♦

The X-Files- The Lightning Field Facility

When the young Walter de Maria (played by Leonardo di Caprio) is picked up hitchhiking in the New Mexico desert by Robert Irwin (Ken Wahl) he has no idea just how far the end of the line is. But it takes more than a thrilling plot or lush special effects to make good entertainment. Like most episodes of the X-Files the appeal lies in the story touching on real phenomena, so it's all the more disappointing when such compelling family entertainment contains so much misinformation. In this case *The Lightning Field* (artwork) is suspected of use in a N.A.S.A./ U.F.O. program and no consideration is given to the massive amount of environmental damage that has been done through its capacity as an ion conductor. The only acknowledgment of the increase in rainfall caused by its installation is in the opening scene when Mulder and Scully argue over the one C.I.A. raincoat they've been issued. qSmns. ♦♦

Richard: Portrait of a Serial Murderer

This is a hell of a frightening film and as the blurb says one of the great untold stories of our time. Beginning with holocaust like images of skeletons uncovered in the field of *Shift* it painstakingly reveals death after death caused by this heavy metal sculptor. It shows why, like Christo, Richard Serra has not been stopped. After years of making Public Sculpture, at last the Public find out what they have a right to know. io5mins ♦♦♦♦©

GET SHORTY - *brief takes*

Korurangi: the New Gallery says "Kia Ora"

ROBIN CRAW

Korurangi: New Maori Art,
at the New Gallery,
Auckland Art Gallery,
1 October - 26 November 1995

Korurangi was the sort of show that should have been on a decade ago. After all, the first curated exhibition of contemporary Maori art; *New Zealand Maori Culture and the Contemporary Scene* was held in 1966. That it took almost three decades for what claims to be the nation's leading art gallery to stage a similar show simply demonstrates the Auckland Art Gallery's credibility gap. Every other important public art institution in the country has been a lot quicker at climbing on the bi-cultural, cross-cultural and trans-cultural bandwagons that were towed through anthropology and other academic circuses in the 1970s and 1980s. Why have these suddenly become "issues of the nineties" for Auckland's official Art Academy?

Initially titled *Brownie Points* (for that's what the Gallery was hoping to acquire) the show was conceived in 1992 by independent curator George Hubbard. The project was soon highjacked by a Pakeha curatorium in search of cultural safety. From the day the Gallery's staff took up the role of overseers, presentation and representation danced, staggered and ultimately came to grief on a variety of oppositions that the artists' works supposedly addressed. The Gallery's glossy advertising cards spouted a binary rhetoric of "identity and history, language and land" (my emphasis), and positioned Maori artists between two cultures. But for Maori, language is identity, and identity is history, and history is land, all four form a continuum. All Maori artists know this, even if the set texts — Bhabha, Bakhtin and Baudrillard — so beloved of Pakeha critics and curators suggest otherwise. As displaced curator Hubbard sagely put it

: "Maori art is art made by Maori people" (Time, October 16, 1995).

Rather than trying to demonstrate biculturalism through the written word, the Auckland Art Gallery had a unique chance to act on its commitment with the Dianne Prince flag incident. Prince's piece contained a New Zealand flag over which one was invited to walk. Acting on complaints from the public and invoking the obscure Flags, Emblems and Names Protection Act of 1981, the Gallery management insisted that the flag part of the piece had to go. Here was an occasion for the New Gallery to display its commitment to art, to act on its own rhetoric, and they welched. In the end, the whole work walked to appear elsewhere (the Hawke's Bay Museum) in an amended form.

Legal proceedings were never a serious threat. Section 25 requires the consent of the Attorney General for "certain prosecutions", including one for "dishonouring" the flag. In the unlikely event of a prosecution proceeding, and being successful, it was hardly a life sentence of dry bread and hard labour that artist or Gallery staff faced. Maximum penalty would have been an initial fine of \$500, and \$50 for every day the offence continued making a total fine of \$3300, which is less than the bill for food and wine at a Gallery opening. Here was an issue of identity, history, language and land in practice, and the New Gallery gave in to pressure, participating in an act of artistic censorship.

The debacle that was *Korurangi* afforded no challenge to the oppressive power relations and that are rife in the New Zealand art world. The worst of the excesses of the past - colonial authority, curatorial hegemony and post-modern ideology — have crossed the road from the Heritage Gallery; there's nothing new about the New Gallery except the paint on the walls. ©

* THE AMBASSADOR F



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Daniel J. Martinez
How to Start Your Own
Country What's the shortest
distance between two points?



Point A 1995 View of Pacific Ocean, Venice
Beach, California, United States, North America
pin hole camera landscape

Point B 1995 Los Angeles County (Sheriff) Mens
Central Jail, Vignes & Bauchet Sts, on the bank of the
Los Angeles River pin-hole camera landscape

April 3-26

Daniel J. Martinez
installation

Michael Ghent
Cloning Miranda N92 -
A Street Level Industries
Enquiry

May 1-24

Andrea du Chatenier
Whales in Space/
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Constance McArdle
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