

PROSPECT: NO WORRIES

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Prospect: a tactical withdrawal from or advance beyond its near eponym, 'perspecta' and the Latinate markers of the modernist academy implicit in 'documenta'. 'Prospect' is a good word and a good title for the times: its optimism packs in the idea of a fresh, encompassing view, something to look forward to, some fun, and a quest for the real oil (or gold). It has a sense of elevation, as well as of common usage. As it's surely intended to, it offers a brand capable of repetition, but not neutral. It implies a renegotiation of the terms of reference for the biennial or triennial type exhibition. Its official predecessor in 2001¹ assembled an eclectic, curator-driven sampling of current art practice, and made a virtue of its lack of 1990s-style anxiety over contemporariness by incorporating the recent work of senior artists such as Milan Mrkusich, as much to demonstrate that they, too, remain fresh, as to provide a sense of historicity. It also avoided thematic dogmatism (national identity, cultural theory, narrative), and managed to reconcile top-down academy style selection with official culture (the canonical presence of work by iconic artists). Lara Strongman's curatorial note to the exhibition used the 'great white swan hunt' for a whimsical work by Gavin Chilcott to deflate Melvillesque portentousness; the swan 'occupied a place in the real world as well as in the academy', and it exhibited 'good humoured resistance to dominant contemporary paradigms'.² Some critics found the exhibition miscellaneous. Maybe art is. Its tone was pleasurable rather than pedagogic, another aspect of the *Prospect* brand that bears thinking about. So let's think about it.

It may be that Allan Smith began the thinking in 1995 when he curated what was a kind of *ur-Prospect* for City Gallery Wellington, *A Very Peculiar Practice: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting*.³ The title of this exhibition already suggested an intentional split—the interesting, gently punning hook, followed by a familiarly pedagogic, Gordon Brown-esque tag-line: we will intrigue you, and then inform you. This was a crucial instruction on how to read the discourse model of the exhibition. Concentrating specifically on painting as a complex, historical practice, Smith was careful early on to establish what the exhibition was *not* interested in doing. A key epigraph to his catalogue essay quoted Dietmar Kamper ('Art ceases to be a question of current fashionability ...'⁴); Smith went on to assert that 'The significance of painting ... depends on more than the changing fortunes of art world bids for eminence and hegemony'.⁵ Other language in this essay revealed Smith's intention to position the exhibition as a critique of the cultural polity; to investigate the leverage of such terms as 'the history of painting', 'a dominant cultural institution', 'shared public realm', 'legacy', and 'social landscape'. These are all terms that thrust or veer past the taxonomies of art history or the reductive categories of a national canon. They reveal a desire to look at painting—the most familiar 'fine art' practice—within an extended social and cultural field. If this discourse now has any obvious coloration, it is the anxiety of the late 1990s: a combined worry about the final unreadability of the late post-modern's 'empire of signs', relevance, contemporaneity, and an expanding visual culture field. Even then, such anxiety had given way in many quarters to blithe, collaborative, cross-disciplinary behaviour by younger artists: in 1995 it was Ronnie van Hout

who was the stand-out peculiar, mocking his own 'anxiety' (*I'm with Stupid, Stupid's with me* 1993); in 2004 it is hard to imagine Sriwhana Spong (and the ex-Pussies), or Hannah and Aaron Beehre (and Pine)—who were present in *Telecom Prospect 2001*—or Daniel Malone, being co-opted to such concerns. *Telecom Prospect* can continue to investigate a wide cultural polity as well as diverse practice; but it needn't worry about it, and has said it doesn't intend to.

Today (as I begin to write) is the 22nd of March, 2004. On the 22nd of March 1824 the British Parliament voted to purchase 38 paintings to establish a National Art Gallery. The idea of civic or official culture wasn't new: the revolutionary transformation of the Louvre, until 1682 a residence of the kings of France, into the Museum of the Republic in 1793 was a political act that anticipated the reverse redistribution of art treasures to the provinces by Jacques Lang, the former leftist French Minister of Culture, two hundred years later. But the idea of a national collection directly, rather than rhetorically, sponsored by an elected national (or local) body was a new idea. It linked with a Victorian ethos, at once paternalistic and an effect of nineteenth century capitalism, which believed that the masses should be educated and that educated masses would contribute to economic productivity (an idea that has familiar echoes in the current, etiolated jargon of 'knowledge society' and 'creative city').

At this time, ordinary literacy was the preserve of the middle and upper classes, as out of reach for most citizens as were the art collections of the aristocracy, or the activities of the Royal Academy, or university-administered collections such as Oxford's Ashmolean. Somewhat more within reach were the collections (and exhibitions) that shared a border with popular entertainment, such as the botanical curiosities of Kew Gardens, and the animals (and humans) paraded as zoological or ethnological exotica—still, in themselves, the byproducts of scholarly investigations. And even though the 'elected' representatives of the people in Britain in 1824 were effectively elected by class-, property-, and gender-exclusive voters, the idea that official culture might be made available to all through the economic agency of government was still a new one.

The great Crystal Palace exposition of 1851 was the nineteenth century's most spectacular display of the confluence of Imperial capital, Victorian paternalism, public entertainment, and scholarly collecting. It revealed flows as well as tensions between entertainment, learning, institutional collecting, and sensation, which have persisted in many subsequent exhibitions, not least the *Brilliant! New Art from London* at the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, in 1996, and its British Council sponsored successor *Pictura Britannica: Art from Britain* in 1998. The controversy that erupted when the latter was staged at Te Papa was richly symptomatic of the tensions as well as the flows. However, the controversy obscured the complexity of exchanges by reducing them to a trite stand-off between 'artistic freedom' (the academy), and 'public understanding' (the non-art audience), with the

museum (official culture) stuck in the middle as an advocate for both. This over-simplification continues to haunt much official cultural policy. It has also spooked many large, anthologizing, explanatory exhibitions, some of which have become catastrophically trapped in it, for example the gargantuan 1989 *Bilderstreit: Widerspruch, Einheit und Fragment in der Kunst seit 1960*⁶ and its antipodean near-relative, *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th Century Art*.⁷

Even newer than the idea of official culture opening the academy to public access would have been the idea that government (including local government) should support culture as (s)electd by voters. This idea would have to wait—indeed it's still waiting, except where the complex and often conflicted exigencies of commercial drivers, cost of supply, programme or territory competition, and Reithian public service ethics,⁸ produce partial and inconsistent acceptances of consumer-driven public culture. Examples of this may be found in New Zealand On Air-supported television in New Zealand, or in the exhibition schedules of Te Papa. In these zones of cultural programming (as, often, within the expository, carnivalesque zone of the contemporary biennial-type exhibition), the tensions and exchanges between the academy, official, public, and popular culture, are rich, complex, and potentially dynamic, if not rendered inert by risk-aversion, or undemocratic by political or class interference.

The connections and mis-connections between pedagogy, class, taste, literacy, capital, cultural production, official culture, public culture, and popular culture, have been much discussed in relation to what John Miller has called 'The Show You Love to Hate'.⁹ The conceptual and professional trajectories of celebrity 'mega-exhibition' curators such as Harald Szeemann, Rudi Fuchs and René Block have also been much discussed, in relation both to their late-modernist practice through the heyday of the documenta-type exhibition in the 1970s and early 80s, and also in relation to their subsequent retrenchments around materiality, history, and the museum collection (in part an academic reaction against the relativism of post-modernity). What's less often discussed is the rift between the idea of the conversationalist academy of the eighteenth century (and its institutions such as the Ashmolean), and the idea of pedagogic public-good collections of the nineteenth, and the ways in which this rupture resembles the one that took place between the late-modernist- academy style but collection-free 'mega-exhibitions' of the 1970s and early 80s (including on-the-cusp meditations such as Jean-François Lyotard's *Les Immatériaux* in 1985, the filmic materiality of Peter Greenaway, or the somewhat earlier activism of Judy Chicago) and later radical reinvestigations of the collection as a place of public meaning, learning and resistance by artist-curators including Clementine Deliss, Ivan Karp, and, most famously, Fred Wilson. Also relevant to the current status of 'mega-exhibitions' are the cautious extensions of a modified modernist academy found in the museological approaches of Lars Nittve at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, or at the Tate Modern, and the sympathetic 'relevance' criteria of Peter Jenkinson and Elizabeth Ann McGregor in the north of England, notably at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, where contemporary art was seen as the most critical, imaginative, and successful way of engaging with the community. The entertaining but pathological extreme of this 'relevance' approach may have been reached in Christoph Grunenberg's and Max Hollein's mammoth *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture* in 2002-03.¹⁰

What's also seldom been discussed in relation to the, let's call it 'electivity' of public culture, is the way in which works of art join the company of the elect—works of art whose canonical quality is the exclusive product of neither academy-style nor of public good- or public service-style visibility, access, and citation, but of other forces. Both academy and public service decision-making in respect of what will be shown to the public, where and when it

will be shown, and how the cited iterations of quality benchmarks will be managed, tend to leave out or skirt forces more often associated with the consumerism disliked by Lord Reith. These other forces include nationalist marketing and reification, narrativisation, and populist metonymy: semiotic agents usually associated with grandiose, mainstream and popular national cultures such as the Hollywood/Bollywood movie, or the 'dominions of signs' (to borrow from Nick Perry) which are assembled within mainstream media, especially commercial television, and especially television advertising.¹¹ It's here that popular icons such as New Zealand television's current advertising craze, the semi-rural Kiwi bloke, are fabricated, often providing artists with satirical or *homage* roughage. The fact that the semi-rural bloke's representativeness is in inverse proportion to the majority urbanized population is, of course, symptomatic of the mythologizing forces that generate public culture, epitomized in Saatchi's immortal 'Bugger' ads for Toyota.

An engagingly peculiar example of this—a different kind of semi-rural bloke and sheila—is Thomas Gainsborough's famous painting *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* of 1750. Having spent its life out of the public gaze, the painting entered an official culture domain in the Gainsborough bicentenary exhibition at Ipswich Museum in 1927, but became 'elect' within public culture as one of the images reproduced to brighten up British Home Guard canteens on the home front during the Second World War. Its emotional use as a highly recognisable nationalist rallying image was endorsed when it was exhibited at the Festival of Britain in 1951, a brilliantly positioned and crafted 'mega-exhibition' event that fused history, patriotism, and modernist progressivism, and that also managed to fuse official, public, and academy culture, largely through the agency of works of art such as *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*. It was inevitable that the painting should officially enter the public domain, and it did when the National Gallery purchased it in 1960. It's now one of the best known, most recognized, and most reproduced icons of the English painting canon.

What is the process of legitimation through which such a transformation of cultural ownership and value takes place? The question is relevant to a discussion of the current status and value of biennial-type exhibitions, poised as such exhibitions are between *selective* and *elective* agendas—or, as I suggested earlier, sometimes trapped in a stupid stand-off between 'artistic freedom' and 'public understanding'. I suspect the questions continue to haunt the curators of post-heyday Biennales, including their major successors, the Asian behemoths—and that, as a brand, *Prospect* is an anxiety-diffusing strategy.

What are the terms whose anxiety-inducing properties need to be diffused? Since, in 1995, Allan Smith opened up a discussion of the cultural polity, we might begin by charting this polity's structure. The terms 'academy', 'official culture', and 'public culture', are useful without being reliable—their borders are vague, and the tensions between them are creative rather than exclusive, just as it's the tension between artistic freedom and public understanding that makes encounters with contemporary art interesting. I'm with Nick Perry again when he writes of the need, in New Zealand, to think with non-oppositional, and non-binary, 'third terms':

[The third term is] a term that refuses the opposition between state monopoly and market uniformity, between political direction and commercial manipulation, between high culture and mass culture, between global and local, in favour of acknowledging the diversity of civil society, the facilitation of plurality, the complexity of the popular, and the cosmopolitanism of the local.¹²

What the 'third term(s)' might be, or might become, is an interesting question to ask in the context of *Prospect* since, like New Zealand television, it's the product of combined academy, public good, government (in this case local authority), and market forces (including sponsorship). In order to explore what benefit these stakeholders derive from *Prospect's* ability to generate a 'third term', we need to define the 'third term' generating forces.

The specialist culture of the academy as an exclusive domain of peer discourse produces lateral selection—peers choosing each other. The brand values of the academy affirm and protect the complicit class distinction of both producers and consumers. The artist's signature adds value to their class; they add value to the signature's exclusivity, its quality control value. The academy game-makers in modern-day New Zealand may be found within a small, wealthy, highly influential lobby of private collectors and benefactors. While their relationship with key opinion-leading dealers, 'collectable' artists, and intellectuals may appear symbiotic, in fact it's frequently they who run the shop in an economy the size of New Zealand's, where the most interesting new art is often, however, found in the dry above major capital flows.

Reithian public service or public good official culture generates pedagogic, top-down selection. Official culture brand values affirm the improving, paternalistic, public-good role of academy culture as the arbiter of official taste. The artist's signature becomes the property of the State, signifying civic virtue. The official culture game-makers in modern-day New Zealand are state agencies, including the Ministry of Culture and Creative New Zealand. There would appear to be 'no surprises' clauses embedded in the contracting of many official culture initiatives. The Minister of Culture's recent characterization of global research into hip-hop as 'silliness' is possibly symptomatic of ignorance; it is certainly symptomatic of paternalistic quality-control and the politicizing of cultural selection—*election* as determined by popular consumption and global cultural economies doesn't get a look-in. Art that deliberately or involuntarily defies definition within official culture ('outsider art', the art of cultural or social minorities, ephemeral and time-based art, taxonomically unruly or cross-disciplinary art, provocative political art, etc) is seldom given official accreditation, except through the processes of 'kitsch', 'naïve', 'folk', or 'avant-garde' reprogramming; exoticising shifts which position their advocates as discriminating rather than the art itself as inherently interesting or valuable.

Public culture combines market forces and populist metonymy to produce nationalist, recognition-value-rich, bottom-up election—usually, however, influenced initially by agencies of official culture. The brand values of public culture affirm the broad, metonymic relevance of national cultural icons. The artist's signature becomes national identity property, signifying collective national distinction.

Public culture game-makers in modern-day New Zealand will tend to be aligned with investment and entrepreneur economies, rather than with the economies of entitlement usually associated with subsidized 'culture'. They will be found among the 'creative industries' of tourism, advertising, independent film, television, and design production, and national niche-marketing. A significant 'third term' paradox of public culture is its unconcern with local-global slippage: a Toyota Hi-Lux may be the chariot of choice for semi-rural Kiwi blokes, Adidas the brand of choice for national sporting heroes, and an unsullied, sublime, primeval, depopulated, Burkean mountainscape the backdrop of choice for a Prime Minister leading the Pacific's largest, mostly urban, multicultural, hip-hoppy, and increasingly Asianised, island society. Sharing the public culture game-maker limelight with creative entrepreneurs will be national and regional agencies that want creative capital to endorse their brands: 'the government', city councils, local product (or content) promoters, and identity impresarios. There will always, however, be art whose

identity within public culture is opaque, which doesn't add recognition value to a national brand, and which doesn't necessarily have an attitude to such potential co-option—art that may often best be described as 'casual': unconcerned about 'production values', often collaborative, quirky, conceptual.

We haven't talked about popular culture, whose makers and consumers don't think hip-hop is silly, and whose audiences may be stubborn when it comes to consuming Reithian public service television. Popular culture isn't interested in the weird transgenic identity forged by public (and official) culture in rebranding New Zealand as an economic miracle Middle-Earth repositioned as a primeval landscape with hidden geniuses; it just enjoys the movie and thinks Peter Jackson is cool. Public culture seeks popular culture's audience loyalty and disposable income, and knows that the audience's willingness to spend its wages on entertainment is the only way out of the 'culture of entitlement'.

How can *Prospect* substitute enjoyment for the anxiety that builds up around these positions; what are the third terms that will engage with complexity rather than establish dumb binary stand-offs; and where are the artists (unmentioned as yet) in all this?

Another case study: It was a gallery director's vision (Doug Hall's) that fused the apparently serendipitous combination of wealthy cultural philanthropist (the Myer Family), Commonwealth Government economic agendas for cultural diplomacy in Asia, Queensland Government agendas for regional brand development, and the international rise of art from Asia, into the sequence of events that came to be known as the APT; the Asia-Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane. The key stakeholders here are as above: an academy linking collector wealth (Myer) and professional selection (curators and dealers); official culture interested in rebranding Australia as part of a new, Asia-Pacific region and keen to encourage public acceptance of and knowledge about the region (what might be called the 'art with dipping sauce' strategy); and public culture interests vested in the Government of Queensland and, eventually, the City of Brisbane. Prominent among the sponsors and supporters have been Australia's major cultural agencies, the cultural foundations and agencies of contributing countries, and major tourism, education, and broadcasting interests. In 1993, when I attended the first APT exhibition, the audience was small, specialised, and sceptical. In particular, they were sceptical of the official and public culture motives of the project, especially its apparent economic drivers, and the sense of Australian hegemonic interests in this rather suddenly embraced geo-cultural proposition. The exhibition experience was really a suite of privileged encounters between the specialist audience and the artists. The citizens of Brisbane were largely absent, and the only on-floor interpretive context provided was a reductive regional map in which contributors were defined by nation, ethnicity, state religion, etc—an imperial taxonomy which many of the artists found offensive.

The fourth APT in 2002 represented the probable culmination of a twelve-year arc. While much reduced in scope from its three predecessors, it was notable for several things. First, it had by now won the pride of a large citizen audience—the town came en masse to the two huge, generous bashes with which the exhibition opened. Like the art, don't like the art, who cares—this is happening in our town, it's weird and interesting, and you get to see it every three years. Second, there was a sense of ease in the audience's acceptance of the project's major premise—that a relationship with Asian cultures is both interesting and appropriate—remarkable given Queensland's well-known propensity for One-Nation racism. Third, the project had immensely assisted public culture's investment in a

Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, including the Australian Centre for Asia-Pacific Art, scheduled to open in 2005, with a collection substantially built through the APT process. Fourth, the initiative had almost certainly been the key driver of cultural urban renewal initiatives by the City of Brisbane. And fifth, there was a clear sense of loyalty, pleasure, and appreciation among the artists.

There was an overall sense that by sustaining and linking the interests of its key stakeholders, remaining relaxed about their different agendas—playing to rather than stressing out over tensions between them—being hospitable to audiences and artists, and keeping its nerve and patience with respect to long-term objectives, the APT had nurtured a set of third terms. These were mostly to do with pleasure and the public domain of museum scholarship. The APT respected the expertise of its curators, and audiences came to enjoy the sense of discovery and encounter the event provided, rather than feel excluded. It made the pedagogic goals of official culture pleasurable and inclusive—interpretation and education facilities around the fourth APT were exceptional, and widely used by families with kids. It encouraged the public culture stakeholders to open the event up to a wide audience, and supported this with loud, carnivalesque parties, at which art performances were presented as entertainment, and regional cuisines served free and in bulk. It included artists in hospitality and free public programmes wherever possible. The third terms were the products of processes, and often *were* processes in themselves—not states or positions. They were cumulative and mutual, and resulted more from mistakes and patience than from instant solutions. There was a sense, at the fourth APT, that the project's long-term objectives had always been relatively clear, had remained consistent, and were finite.

What might *Prospect* do to establish long-term objectives, find the patience to sustain a consistent vision, and open itself up without anxiety to 'third terms'? If its emerging mission is to regularly dip-stick new art in New Zealand, it (and its audiences) might continue on tracks opened in 1995 and 2001 by asking the following questions:

What is the art produced and advocated for within the capital flows of the academy? What are its alternatives? How do they differ from, and relate to, each other?

What are the key markers of official culture today? What alternatives to official culture are apparent at present? What processes are under way to co-opt them officially? What are the refusals?

What art has public culture visibility and acceptance? What is the art that won't be nationalized, whose identity within public culture is opaque, which doesn't add recognition value to a national brand—which is 'casual'?

And finally, what are popular culture audiences looking at? How does this relate to the other cultural spheres? How does it continue to inflect the other spheres' priorities?

ENDNOTES

1. *Telecom Prospect 2001: New Art New Zealand*, curator Lara Strongman, City Gallery Wellington, 11 April – 1 July 2001.
2. Lara Strongman, curatorial statement for *Telecom Prospect 2001*, <http://www.city-gallery.org.nz/mainsite/Prospect2001.htm>
3. *A Very Peculiar Practice: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting*, curator Allan Smith, City Gallery Wellington, 10 June – 3 September, 1995.
4. 'Art ceases to be a question of current fashionability and presents itself as grappling with the dread that we could forfeit all connection with other human beings, as a result of a lack of shared perceptions.' Dietmar Kamper, 'At the End of an Age of Mirrors', *Flash Art* 157, March/April 1991, pp. 85-87.
5. Allan Smith, 'A Very Peculiar Practice: A User's Guide', *A Very Peculiar Practice: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting*, Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 1995, p.6.
6. Translates as *Picture-argument: Opposition, Unity and Fragment in Art since 1960*. Curated by Carmen Gimenez (Kultusministerium Madrid), Knud W. Jensen (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek), and Nicholas Serota (The Tate Gallery, London). Staged under the auspices of the Ludwig Museums, Cologne, at the Kolner Messe, 8 April – 28 June 1989.
7. *The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th Century Art (Art is Easy)*. Curated by René Block as *The Eighth Biennale of Sydney*. Staged under the auspices of the Biennale of Sydney at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Bond Stores, 11 April - 3 June 1990.
8. Lord Reith was the first Director General of the BBC. He is credited with the concept of Public Service Broadcasting, whose remits have been rather vaguely defined as to 'inform, educate, and entertain'. Reith saw entertainment as a minor goal, but (paternalistically) the education of viewers and listeners in matters of taste in entertainment as a major one. Reith viewed the advent of commercial television in Britain in 1956 with alarm, and Reithian doctrine has continued to advocate for a public service definition of audiences as citizens not consumers.
9. John Miller, 'The Show You Love to Hate: a psychology of the mega-exhibition', in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (eds) *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 269-275.
10. *Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture*. Curatorium directed by Christoph Grunenberg (Tate Liverpool) and Max Hollein (Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt). Staged at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt 28 September – 1 December 2002, and Tate Liverpool, 20 December - 23 March 2003.
11. Nick Perry, *The Dominion of Signs: Television, Advertising and Other New Zealand Fictions*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994.
12. Nick Perry, "'Getting the Picture": State Regulation, Market Making, and Cultural Change in the New Zealand Television System', in Roger Horrocks and Nick Perry (eds) *Television in New Zealand: Programming the Nation*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 74-90.