

QUANTIFIABLY QUIRKY

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My brief for this essay was—in my niche role as a European curator currently based in New Zealand—to hold an international lens up to the New Zealand art world. I was encouraged to think about things like the impact of globalisation on countries like New Zealand, which are physically so far away from the traditional art world centres. How New Zealand presents itself to the world (and how the world receives New Zealand). And that perennial favourite—what constitutes a New Zealand artist in this day and age?

I grew up in post post-war, pre-unification West Germany. This has left me with the sense that it is very difficult to write about art as defined by a territory or state. What is German art, New Zealand art, or Asian art, other than a strange construct defined by more (in Germany) or less (in New Zealand) artificial borders? Look at the history of a state like Germany, where ideologies, borders, alliances and size have changed with almost every generation. The Germany my parents grew up in was very different to the Germany I grew up in, and nowadays it looks much different again. New Zealand seems much simpler in this regard. It has always been, by and large, the two main islands (bearing in mind the various forays into the Pacific in the 20th century). While New Zealand's territory is pretty much concrete, the idea of *who* is a New Zealander seems to be the much more interesting and complex issue.

I was very happy when I learned that for the national Census everybody in New Zealand is free to define which ethnic group they belong to—very much in contrast to the more genealogical definitions that other countries employ. Ethnicity in New Zealand, the Census tells us, can be entirely defined by yourself and by your personal feelings (although things become more complicated if you want to take part in the claims certain groups have against the Crown):

Ethnicity is the ethnic group or groups that people identify with or feel they belong to. Thus, ethnicity is self-perceived and people can belong to more than one ethnic group. Ethnicity is a measure of cultural affiliation, as opposed to race, ancestry, nationality or citizenship.

<http://www.stats.govt.nz/census.htm>

I think that every artist who feels close to New Zealand should have the right to call themselves a New Zealand artist. There are a number of artists who have lived overseas for decades who still consider themselves New Zealand artists, as do many newly-arrived immigrants. Young Asian students who arrive here to study are sometimes more connected to New Zealand art and its history than to their own identity. The treatment of ethnicity within the Census is an interesting benchmark for both New Zealand and international artists who are considering their ethnicity. Theoretically, there are no restrictions on what people wish to define as New Zealand art (although again, this becomes more complicated when you start to think about where you sit in relation to Creative New Zealand's funding criteria). Every country has its own definitions; in some it depends on citizenship, in others on a certain period of residence—in New Zealand it depends on how you perceive yourself.

It's impossible to define New Zealand art with one word, one sentence or even one article. A year ago, fresh off the boat, only slightly aware of the New Zealand art scene, 'quirky' would have been my best stab at a definition. I associated quirky with strange, naïve and a bit odd, words that for me imply not insult, but interest. Having just finished a year in Lithuania, I was eager to engage with the language and the culture of my new home. Sometimes a nice place to start is with the Thesaurus Game. Insert a word, find its synonyms and go from there. For 'quirky' it goes like this:

QUIRKY

PECULIAR

odd, strange, weird, unusual, irregular, abnormal, atypical, eccentric, uncharacteristic

ODD

strange, abnormal, unusual, out of the normal, peculiar, anomalous, weird, funny

STRANGE

odd, bizarre, outlandish, eccentric, weird, weird and wonderful, extraordinary, out of the ordinary, peculiar

IDIOSYNCRATIC

personal, individual, distinctive, all your own, eccentric, peculiar, particular

INDIVIDUAL

for one person, particularized, personal, special, exclusive, particular, private

UNIQUE

sole, only one of a kind, single, exclusive, exceptional, inimitable, distinctive, matchless, irreplaceable, rare

ECCENTRIC

odd, unconventional, unusual, peculiar, strange, weird

UNUSUAL

strange, odd, curious, extraordinary, abnormal, remarkable, bizarre, atypical

UNPREDICTABLE

random, erratic, changeable, impulsive, volatile, fickle, irregular, capricious, variable, arbitrary

The nice thing about the outcome of this game is that—other than the results for 'unpredictable'—all the synonyms are a real compliment for an artwork and / or artist. Who doesn't want to be unusual, peculiar and weird, to name just the most commonly generated terms? So maybe it's not so bad to be quirky, live on an island and do your own work without being directed by the rest of the world. It is possibly this very scenario which makes New Zealand art so interesting: it has its own style, without being detached from the world. I am constantly amazed by the knowledge of the international art scene shown by some curators and artists, considering that New Zealand dealer galleries (with some exceptions) and public institutions don't really show international art (other than some Australian work). There are ways to get around this: residency programmes, curatorial visitors' programmes, the odd international exhibition. But New Zealanders, it seems to me, get most of their information second-hand, through international art magazines like *Artforum* and *Frieze*, and the books, stories and impressions that those people who do make it overseas bring back and pass around.

The best and most effective way to get connected, to present your work and get a feel for what is going on in art, is not different to most other businesses. You have to be present at the big trade fairs, conferences and festivals. If you want to sell cars you show at the Detroit motor show, if you want to sell books you have a booth at the Frankfurt book fair, and if you are anything in computer games then Las Vegas is the place to be. For contemporary art nothing beats the Venice Biennale, where every two years the art world congregates, not only to see work from up to 50 countries, but also to discuss new trends, finalise co-productions and meet new people. For a country like New Zealand, a small presence in Venice is more valuable than any other venture into the international scene.

One of the most fundamental questions that every institution faces when considering showing international artists is how to decide who to invite and who not to invite. How many international artists should we invite and where should they come from? How do we justify the huge airfares for these artists? These questions are particularly crucial when it comes to biennales and other large-scale group exhibitions. The idea of curating in concentric circles offers a solution. I developed this idea for the Baltic Triennial in Vilnius in 2002. The basic concept is quite simple and more or less common practice: the further an artist has to be brought, the more important they must be to your exhibition. This places a stronger emphasis on the local artists without losing the international context, and it makes you look harder at the home front, as you put local artists into the context of international art practice.

As a curator, it's your job not just to provide the local artists with good exhibitions, but also to give them opportunities to exhibit with international artists. Curating in concentric circles is a guideline for putting together exhibitions that allow this. It also seems to be a quite logical approach in today's global art world, where the Western world no longer rules the contemporary art scene, and where you find contemporary art spaces in almost every country. The time seems to be over when artists were included in exhibitions just because they were from an exotic place or part of an exotic minority. This is a world where we find artists who spend more time travelling between their different exhibitions than in their studio, which is reduced to a shiny laptop.

The concept of curating in concentric circles also justifies the existence of a governmental institution that helps finance the arts. New Zealand, so far away from other centres, needs to bridge the distance: otherwise, the exchange between the local and the international scenes threatens to disappear. Funding should be a two-way street. Not only should governmental bodies think about exporting their own culture: they also need to recognise the importance of bringing artists, curators and writers, and all their new ideas,

into the country. At the moment the emphasis is, by necessity, on inviting artists who themselves come from places with strong governmental funding. As a result, the majority of artists brought out to New Zealand are German, English and Dutch, and it is surprisingly seldom that you meet an American, Russian or Chinese artist in person. We need to invite a wider spectrum of artists to New Zealand, but with the subsidies the governmental institutions are offering, and the small budgets the galleries are working with, it is sometimes very difficult to present an accurate picture of today's art world which is more complex, more interesting and more connected than ever before.

Globalisation did not come as a huge surprise to the art world. With not one but a number of dominant centres—Paris, London, New York—it has always been a fairly global network. At the moment this is changing. The new centres exist only temporarily: they are called biennales now, and for one weekend Venice, Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Vilnius or Sydney become the art centre of the world. This has had huge consequences for the way art is produced, exhibited and marketed. We see the initial consequences in the rising interest in artists such as Francis Alys, Santiago Sierra or Olafur Eliasson—artists who work in installation and performance, media that are preferred in biennale contexts, but less favoured in galleries and museum exhibitions; work that is difficult to sell, transport and store but wonderful to see, reflect upon and remember.

Returning to New Zealand. For me this country feels like a small laboratory: big enough to reflect reality, but small enough to watch. A place where you can comprehend the game and understand how things are played. It is connected to international discourse, but maintains enough distance to do its own thing. It is blessed with a diversity of cultures that do not compete for dominance but learn, respect and profit from each other. To top it all off, New Zealand even has its own über-artist in Colin McCahon, a local Picasso who has given artists both self-belief and a style to work on, against or with. Maybe New Zealand is a bit like how the perfect art world should be. Quirky or what?