

## Panning the Gold

### “Panning for Gold: Curating New Zealand Now” as seen in relation to *Telecom Prospect 2004*

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Discussions of the role and purpose of the curator can often be problematic. As a primarily reactive profession, the responsibilities and tasks of the curator are ever changing. Particularly from a local perspective, the increased emphasis on professionalism in New Zealand’s cultural industry has created a need to reevaluate the role of the curator within New Zealand’s visual arts sector.<sup>1</sup>

This need was addressed during a fortnight of curatorial discussion throughout the North Island, where WINTEC’s ‘Spark’ conference featured discussions of project spaces and curatorial technique, the Govett-Brewster held an international symposium entitled “The Politics of Curating” and the City Gallery Wellington, Te Papa and the Adam Art Gallery co-hosted a symposium entitled “Panning for Gold: Curating New Zealand Now.”

#### Prospecting Prospect

*Telecom Prospect 2004* is an interesting indication of the impasse within which curatorial practice in New Zealand currently resides. Of particular interest is the way in which the exhibition’s presentation and marketing problematised what would otherwise have been a very simple (if not slightly limited) curator-as-auteur style exhibition. This discrepancy between the curator’s conceptual agenda and those of the marketing and advertising departments of a large arts institution such as the City Gallery Wellington, particularly when they are in partnership with a large corporation, is indicative of the difficult terrain that the curator must navigate in order to develop and present an exhibition without being unduly affected by commercial or bureaucratic concerns.

This conflict is particularly evident when one examines the manner in which *Telecom Prospect 2004* was publicly presented. Released as a locked-down blanket explanation of the exhibition, the publicly issued press statement insisted that *Telecom Prospect 2004* offered “...a snapshot selection of the freshest most innovative artwork currently being produced in New Zealand. The exhibition provides an insight into some of the artists who have made, or are likely to make, a major impact on the thinking and identity of our time.” Implicit within this statement are a number of inconsistencies, which despite (or perhaps because of) the statement’s hyperbolic rhetoric, manage to lead the reader to question the accuracy of its claims.

The term ‘snapshot’ for example is an interesting choice. A snapshot is – no matter how seemingly random and casual – a subjective endeavour, if not a highly deliberate one. It is a well-considered and totally authored framing process. This in itself is not problematic. However, when combined with the next few words, “the freshest most innovative artwork currently being produced in New Zealand”, the statement becomes so. The definitive tone of this statement is bold and admirable, however, its accuracy

is quite dubious. Assuming that the exhibition is a snapshot selection, then the nature of the metaphor implies that a single person framed and snapped the scene. How then is it possible that one person has the ability to determine in such absolute terms what is the freshest most innovative artwork in the country? Certainty of this type is not just an enviable skill – it is also an impossible one. As determined by everything from post-structuralism to relational aesthetics to the simple physiology of sight and perception, subjective interpretation is surely the only consistent process for understanding artwork.

Another problematic claim within this statement is the quaint conceit that they can tell which art is actually able to have a “major impact on the thinking and identity of our time.” It does seem slightly anachronistic and definitely a little optimistic to suggest the artist’s role is that of a prophetic soothsayer whose position at the apex of the social pyramid allows them some objective sight capable of changing the course of our thinking and identity. Further complicating this claim is the fact that according to the statement, one person has chosen these artists. This in effect suggests that the position at the apex of the pyramid is actually already occupied by the curator who was responsible for deciding which artists were capable of “making a major impact on the thinking and identity of our time.” So, despite the pretensions of egalitarianism that rest on the surface of this statement, what it actually communicates is a covert though decisive proclamation of the greatness of the curator – whether the curator is interested in this position or not.

This statement’s paradoxical agenda and the implications of these conflicting ideas upon the actual exhibition are examples of why it was necessary to organise a critical forum to discuss these issues. The ensuing curatorial symposium, “Panning For Gold: Curating New Zealand Now” was, in its initial planning stages, intended as a forum within which paradoxes such as these could be addressed and therefore minimise the potential for further compromise to curatorial intention. The original forum was going to be a series of panel discussions that addressed current issues relating to the curation of visual culture in New Zealand against the background of *Telecom Prospect 2004*. It hoped to discuss different curatorial styles – such as thematic, survey, auteur, collection based or media specific, the issues involved in each and their relationship and/or relevance to New Zealand visual arts.

#### The Symposium

The product of an alliance between the City Gallery Wellington, the Adam Art Gallery and Te Papa Tongarewa, “Panning for Gold: Curating New Zealand Now” was intended as a platform where *Telecom Prospect 2004*’s peculiar curatorial methodology and its public representation could be discussed within the wider context of New Zealand art history and with

particular emphasis on curating.<sup>2</sup>

As I have already mentioned the symposium was originally intended as a way to unravel the inconsistencies within the agenda of *Telecom Prospect 2004*. The involvement of the three institutions would theoretically ensure an objective forum within which to consider *Telecom Prospect 2004* in the much larger history of the survey exhibition in New Zealand. It was initially proposed that by comparing the curatorial techniques used in past survey exhibitions of New Zealand art with those employed in the creation of *Telecom Prospect 2004*, the exhibition could be discussed from a broader, more objective perspective. However, for a variety of predominantly financial and bureaucratic reasons, the symposium became a workshop with the gradual elimination of a critical discussion of curatorial techniques and of *Telecom Prospect 2004* in general from the agenda.

Despite the symposium's reluctance to address critical curatorial issues within its official agenda, it still managed to address several key points in the debate surrounding the role of the curator. As well as this, the symposium signified a heightened awareness and a piqued curiosity amongst the local arts community about the activities and intentions of curators.

The first panel discussion was entitled "The Job of a Curator" and included Rob Garrett (Creative New Zealand) as Chairperson, Tessa Giblin (Artspace), Charlotte Huddleston (Enjoy/Govett Brewster, Megan Tamati-Quennell (Te Papa Tongarewa) and Claire Regnault (The Dowse) as panellists. The discussion addressed the practicalities of the profession such as career options, money matters and funding choices and questioned the curators' responsibility to their audience. Most interesting within this discussion, partially due to the selection of panellists, was the lack of an international perspective. During the discussion of career paths and opportunities, there was no mention of the possibilities for off-shore professional development (which is possibly a reflection on the lack of international experience amongst New Zealand's young curators). This was a surprising omission, particularly when one considers contemporary art's fluid geographical territories and mobile centre. Perhaps the omission can be seen as a determined antithesis to decades of intense cultural cringe, however, the panellist's discussion was persistently local.

The lack of a global perspective in New Zealand curatorial practice and its (mis)representation in the media was further reiterated by Tobias Berger's half-time lecture entitled "Maybe a Few Good Works Are Not Enough." In his talk, Berger proceeded to provide multiple examples of the parochialism of New Zealand media, citing examples such as the scandal he caused through his selection of the winner of the Waikato Art Award in 2002 and the parliamentary debate on the choice of et al. to represent New Zealand at the Venice Biennale. Berger implied that because of our insistence on the primary importance of the local, our sense of perspective suffers, engendering small details with disproportionate importance and encouraging provocation when discussion would be more productive.

The second panel discussion was chaired by Christina Barton and featured Emma Bugden, Simon Rees, William McAloon and Natasha Conland and was

entitled "Inside the Head of the Curator". With the title suggesting a divisive, them and us mentality, the curator was, in this session, presented as an unknown elite whose 'pointy headed' esotericism would soon be revealed through the course of the discussion. Through the persistence of Barton, several pertinent issues were introduced to the discussion, which ensured a lively, if limited, debate about the role of the curator in New Zealand.

One aspect of curatorship that was of particular interest within this discussion was the actual process of curating. The panel discussed a variety of curatorial methods, techniques and approaches, including the extent to which one should be responsive as a curator rather than responsible, and the ethics of a curator being an educator, a mediator and an auteur. There was a general agreement amongst the panellists that models of curatorship that were dependant on a neutral exhibition space were ultimately flawed because of the profound impact that context has on the meaning of an artwork. This idea was teased out through Tina Barton's suggestion that curating was little more than 'following a hunch' in order to investigate meaning, in much the same way that an artist approaches the creation of an artwork.

Barton's suggestion that curating is an intuitive process implies that curatorship has as much to do with curiosity as it does with scholarship. When considered in this light, the similarities between the curatorial process and that of art making become clear. Both are essentially investigations of meaning and ideas and their material or conceptual representation. Yet, this relationship between art making and the practice of curating can be seen as problematic, and often the mediation of the exhibition space by the curator is seen as an imposition of meaning upon an already laden artwork. Opposed to this is the suggestion that the curator's role is to simply present artworks in a professional and respectful manner, where the works are foregrounded against a 'neutral' context rather than implicated within an investigation based on the curators 'hunch'.

However, assuming that the gallery space, simply because of its typically white walls and 'non-specific' architecture, is neutral is to deny the vital role that context plays in interpretation. Whilst the symposium discussion very rarely referred directly to specific examples, *Telecom Prospect 2004* provided an excellent background on which to play out a debate on curatorial practice of this kind. The exhibition as an auteur exhibition reinforced the exhausted notion of the curator as a gatekeeper of culture, whose word, however apparently playful, is responsible for the development of a collection of works that "have made or, are likely to make, a major impact on the thinking and identity of our time."

The curatorial methodology employed in the development and selection of a national survey such as *Telecom Prospect 2004* requires further analysis. It is not, for example, an accurate marker of the country's cultural moment (a highly problematic intention as it is), if the curator is positioned by the institution as a dictator of taste or currency, determining the artists' worth through a type of best of 'top ten'. Instead it could be useful for curators of this type of survey exhibition (may they rest in peace) to build an exhibition based not only on the conceptual and

aesthetic relationships between the works, but on the architectural connotations of the space and their wider cultural context.

In a group survey exhibition such as this, the display of the work is equally as problematic as the selection. The implication that the works would be able to 'speak for themselves' within a group exhibition of this kind is only true in so far as the artworks are able to 'converse' with the other objects in the exhibition space. One would suppose then that in lieu of the artists being more involved in the physical (and therefore conceptual) contextualisation of their works, which would be ideal but is a bigger undertaking than most institutions could manage, and, rather than presenting the works as a (not so) casual snapshot within an unmediated or 'unimposing' environment, it could be useful for the curator to investigate and understand the affect of the institutional environment upon the artworks.

The exhibition spaces that housed *Telecom Prospect 2004* were essentially textually unmediated environments. The groupings within the exhibition were often oblique or connected through the works' physical rather than conceptual aspects, and there didn't appear to be any attempt at contextualising the groupings with the use of wall texts or other didactic material. However, this 'hands-off' approach to this aspect of curating a group show such as this only extends the curiously paradoxical nature of *Telecom Prospect 2004's* rationale. It is difficult to read this reluctance to 'impose' upon work as a desire to minimise curatorial interference, because, as has been discussed, this textually-absent curator is the same curator who purportedly made this very deliberate "snapshot selection of the freshest most innovative artwork currently being produced in New Zealand."

With curatorial practice in New Zealand institutions so lacking in criticality or cohesion, it is of little surprise that three curatorial symposiums were initiated to discuss the continually shifting role of the curator in New Zealand. Additionally, considering the complexity of the issue, it is also of little surprise that after the talk and fracas have passed the issues remain unresolved. With the 'guts' of the matter still hanging in the air, it is beneficial to consider that the discussions, their accompanying confusions and partial resolutions, all now reside in the perpetually expanding conversation that is and should be the role of the curator in New Zealand.

#### Notes

1. Evidence of this increased emphasis on professionalism can be found in the proliferation of postgraduate Museum Studies programmes internationally, support for internships and CNZ's increased support for professional development activities for young curators.
2. I wish to make clear my understanding that *Telecom Prospect 2004* was in no way the product of one single vision, nor were its failings due to any one person or organising body. Instead *Telecom Prospect 2004* was the product of a much larger mechanism that extended far beyond the City Gallery Wellington to include the greater corporate rhizome from which the project stemmed.

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