

Parade: Reformulating Art and Identity at Te Papa, Museum of New Zealand

By Paul Williams

In February 1998, New Zealand's new national museum, Te Papa Tongarewa, opened to the public. Te Papa represents one of the world's largest museum projects to be completed in recent years, and the most significant event in the nation's cultural sector for decades. From its inception, Te Papa was imagined as a place committed to the expression of national identity. Exhibitions and public programs would be of New Zealanders and for them. *The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act* legislated for the museum the primary functions of national representation and democratic access. It stated that it is imperative that the museum:

expresses and recognises the mana and significance of Maori, European, and other major traditions and cultural heritages, and that the Museum provides the means for every such culture to contribute effectively to the Museum as a statement of New Zealand's identity (1992: 8, b).

Similarly, the mission statement declares the museum, 'a forum for the nation to present, explore and preserve the heritage of its cultures...' Te Papa aims to construct a revised image of nationhood through the accommodation of a variety of viewpoints. It seeks to make new public meaning through institutional processes such as bicultural collection, research and display policies, community-access galleries and appropriate community advisory groups (*Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Statements of Intent 1997-2001*). The policy priorities and new museological practices adopted by Te Papa place it squarely within the global reinvigoration of the museum industry. These have emphasised a shift from a collections-centred institutional philosophy to one that is relationship-oriented and promotes processes of collaboration. During the 1980s and 1990s, the period when plans for Te Papa were being developed, the museum world was in the process of re-evaluating its social role and its institutional philosophies. Conventional museology was criticised as being too focused

on museum methods, rather than museum purposes (see Vergo 1989). The former national museum came to be considered an anachronism — a mausoleum of cultural ossification. The ‘new museology’ sought to redefine not just museum practice, but who should count as the museum audience. While older museums may find that the combined weight of public expectation and their own institutional practices makes their transition towards greater accessibility and accountability a difficult process, Te Papa, alongside several other new South Pacific institutions, has leapt eagerly into a precarious position at the forefront of museological postmodernity.

While Te Papa’s new vision has been publicly well supported, its exhibitions have been subject to some biting criticism. This criticism, which I discuss at the conclusion to this article, sufficiently concerned the Government to warrant an independent inquiry into Te Papa’s effective use of resources – particularly in *Parade*. While these criticisms have been welcomed by other prominent arts professionals (although often only privately), they have not, to date, engendered any sustained academic dialogue about the role and function of the national museum. It is in this context that this article makes a timely contribution. This article critically analyses several key displays in *Parade*, Te Papa’s main art exhibition, in order to understand how the mandate for a more accommodating and representative institution has influenced exhibition strategies. I begin here by delineating the policy directives that have partly informed the exhibition, particularly those of ‘customer focus’ and ‘commercial positivity’. The body of this article, incorporating three subsections, explores the way that several emblematic displays (featuring two vehicles, a modernist painting, and a fridge and television) are mobilised in the expression of New Zealand identity. An analysis of the ways that artworks are arranged and narrated demonstrates how Te Papa mediates the relations between the visitor and the exhibition. I argue that in order to produce a more publicly accessible exhibition style, *Parade* utilises a broadly postmodern exhibition aesthetic that

seeks to de-emphasise the hierarchies of taste associated with traditional art museums. In turn, I suggest that the validation of the viewer's value judgments produces a range of uncertain effects. My overriding concern is how policies that foreground both visitor accessibility and national identity are translated in an art exhibition format — and alternately, how closely and reliably an art exhibition can respond to these twin demands.

The Policy Environment for *Parade*

The circumstances surrounding the formation of the new museum provided the conditions through which the national art collection could be reworked. This institutional redevelopment initiated changes that would lead to a hybrid art and social history exhibition. It also goes some way towards explaining Te Papa's criticism at the hands of the community of interest that supported the separate development of an independent national art museum. In 1984, the Government cancelled plans, tantalisingly close to realisation, for the construction of a new national art gallery in Wellington in favour of the development of the High Court on that site. A condition of proceeding with the new art gallery development had, in turn, been the abandonment by the previous Government of plans for a much-needed extension of the National Museum (Volkerling 1992: 4). In 1985, the Government made the decision to investigate plans to merge the two organisations within a new entity. Effectively, the national art gallery was subsumed by Te Papa, producing the situation where New Zealand became, as one commentator put it, 'the only developed country without a national gallery listed in the phone book' (*The Evening Post*, 30 March 2000).

In its place, the original concept document proposed an institution that would be a 'vigorous national symbol'; 'an expression of New Zealand as a distinctive Pacific culture'; and 'a twenty-first century nation in which cultural diversity is able to flourish' (Project Development Team 1985: 7-8). The document further stated that,

The forbidding monumentality of the traditional museum has no place in the life of a modern Pacific nation, aware and proud of its identity, nurturing and caring of its diverse cultures (Project Development Team 1985: 11).

A 'modern Pacific' museum would relocate its national imaginary away from its colonial origins to the opposite pole of the earth. Correspondingly, it would distance its institutional concept from the stuffy elitism that is rhetorically associated with European museums and art galleries. If the British Museum, for instance, can be glossed over as a mythical archetype housing the ruins of Empire, Te Papa is imagined in terms of its possibilities as a site for postcolonial reinvention. In this conceptual shift, the new institution would aim to pull apart the relationship between museums and the maintenance of class and cultural distinctions that New Zealand had inherited in its historical imaginary as a 'Britain of the Pacific'.

In this spirit its brand name, 'Te Papa-Our Place', dropped both 'art gallery' and 'museum' from its informal title. Te Papa's logo, a thumbprint, also helped to convey its strong commitment to issues of identity, belonging, and the unique mark the people have culturally imprinted on the nation space. The art and social history exhibitions were focused on questions of identity, and, to this end, the collections and exhibition design were interdisciplinary. In this way, *Parade* is consistent with the other long-term Pakeha (non-Maori settler) exhibitions. *On the Sheep's Back*, *Passports*, *Exhibiting Ourselves* and *Signs of a Nation* provide various lenses through which settler identity might be viewed. These are, respectively, Pakeha as a 'farming people', closely tied to the land; as an immigrant people, reflecting multiple point of origin; as a construct, best highlighted through displays at past international expositions; as a people legislatively enabled by and bound to the political ramifications of the Treaty of Waitangi. *Parade's* physical location amongst these exhibitions encourages the idea that art is principally displayed to support another competing idea – that of a naturally creative and resourceful people.

Policy plans outlined in *A Concept for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa* (Project Development Board 1989), decisively emphasised the need for a more widely accessible and ‘customer focused’ organisation than the existing institutions. Its public accountability would be significantly judged by its ability to attract a large proportion and a wide demographic of the public. On these terms, Te Papa has been very successful: the 723 000 visitation target for Te Papa’s first year was achieved in only three months; in its first year, around 2 million had visited; at the time of writing, three years after opening, this number has reached 4.7 million. To its satisfaction, the museum has also attracted visitors whose age, gender and ethnic identity very closely mirrors that of the population at large. Furthermore, around 93% of Te Papa’s ‘customers’ consistently rate their experience in the range from ‘satisfied’ to ‘extremely satisfied’ (*Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Annual Reports, 1997-00*).

The ‘customer focus’ imperative is part of the commercially inflected policy lexicon increasingly common amongst contemporary cultural institutions. From the 1970s, partly as a result of concepts of cultural development promoted internationally by UNESCO, the New Zealand government sought to provide structures that supported a wide range of cultural activities in local and ethnic communities (Ministry of Cultural Affairs 1998: 39). In addition, existing ‘high art’ institutions were put under increasing pressure to attract a wider demographic. This had the effect of broadening the definition of culture as a domain of Government policy interest beyond ‘the arts’ and into expressions including popular culture and the cultures of ethnic groups. Hence, while formative plans for Te Papa remained attentive to the need to positively uphold the national patrimony, it was envisaged that this could occur in ways that allowed popular participation.

Policies emphasising public accessibility go hand in hand with a commitment to market-oriented fiscal policy, known as ‘commercial positivity’ at Te Papa. New modes of

display are not utilised out of a simple desire to showcase new innovations in communications technology. In Te Papa's case, economic pressure is the mother of museological invention. A strong emphasis on self-generated income, corporate sponsorship, and a pro-active relationship with local tourism constitutes its obligatory fiscal mode. Te Papa's twin 'corporate principles' of 'customer focus' and 'commercial positivity' are conceived in complementary terms: satisfied visitors, in large numbers, create both their own rewards and corporate investment (*A Concept for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa* 1989). Income, in turn, is channelled back into exhibitions, programs and display techniques that feed a public demand for new forms of 'info-tainment' satisfaction. Te Papa's adoption of 'customers' signifies a belief both that cultural experiences are goods to be purchased through normal market mechanisms (Te Papa has a number of charged-for attractions), and also that as a partially taxpayer-funded institution, it remains accountable to its citizen-customers (for this reason, Te Papa has a general free entry). Its corporate language of institutional 'outputs' also somewhat problematically suggests that cultural experiences can be *measured* – and evaluated in fiscal terms. As a figurehead not just of national culture, but of the ways that corporate culture can be applied and adapted to public sector institutions, Te Papa fulfils an ideological function: it embodies confidence in the ability of free market economics to resurrect the vitality of the nation. In 1994, several years before the museum's triumphant public opening, then-Prime Minister Jim Bolger had already proclaimed Te Papa 'a symbol of the nation's economic recovery' (*The Christchurch Press*, 27 July 1994). Te Papa was not just inevitably *affected* by a wider shift towards market-oriented policies, but was positioned as an *exemplary* body for public sector reform.

Neither the museum's corporate policy material nor its symbolisation by political elites captures the creative possibilities for exhibitions and programs opened up by a 'new deal' between the museum and its broad new target audiences. Policy is directed towards producing

statements that stimulate actions. These in turn produce ‘outputs’ whose outcomes can be evaluated and documented. However, programmatic corporate language is largely at odds with the generally esoteric and imaginative nature of art. Judging by Te Papa’s impressive visitor numbers, New Zealanders (and others) crave the dramatic potential of experiencing the national patrimony reworked in a bold and technologically advanced institution. Te Papa’s commitment to public accessibility and accountability is accompanied by a new politics of exhibiting and viewing (see Karp and Lavine 1991). We enter *Parade* asking whether it can translate its corporate principles into some publicly appealing and intellectually exciting form. Its challenge is the reinterpretation of the display of the national art collection, long associated with the maintenance of hierarchies of taste, into some form that illuminates for ‘customers’ something about their identities. This task confronts an obvious tension: of all the objects contained in museums, art, alongside priceless antiques and sacred monuments (such as war memorials), has traditionally possessed a high degree of auratic dignity. In contrast, the notion of achieving a vivid customer *experience* is now produced through a shift in viewing practices from quiet contemplation to immersive sensory engagement. In an environment where artworks themselves form only one device of engagement in this strategy, their fate, and that of the national art history, is open to revision.

Enter Parade: Popularising Art through Automobiles

The broad, irregular corridors of the semi-enclosed spaces of the Pakeha art and social history exhibitions advertise themselves through large colourful signs and striking iconic objects positioned at their entrances. Of these I am initially drawn to an old station wagon clad completely in corrugated iron sitting beneath the sign, *Parade: where there are people, there is art*. The ubiquitous roofing iron which armours artist Jeff Thomson’s 1974 HQ Holden was retrieved from a rubbish dump after being damaged in a Nelson hotel fire. The vehicle is

suspended slightly off the ground, as if to clarify its status as art. The Holden is made to appear more crude — and amusing — by its placement next to John Britten’s futuristic 1000cc ‘superbike’. Hung high and surrounded, incongruously, by coffee lounge chairs, the kevlar and carbon fibre motorbike appears weightless next to the cumbersome, industrial excess of the Holden. The ‘story’ of the bike, relayed on a nearby text panel, is that Britten, undeterred by a lack of the massive capital investment required by the big production teams and workshops of American and Japanese motorcycle manufacturers, retreated to his suburban garage with a few friends. Working nearly 24 hours a day, Britten discarded conventional design plans, from the shape of the chassis to the position of the fuel tank, and produced a radically different bike that went on to win a string of international victories. Despite the very different appearance and function of the two vehicles, their combined inference is clear: as an ethos, ingenious local creativity is made evident by art produced from rubbish dumps and suburban garages. The vehicles demonstrate an irreverent do-it-yourself ethic that, once vaunted in the museum, becomes positioned as heroically indifferent towards global industrial standardisation.

The vehicles poised at the entrance to *Parade* strongly project the impression that Te Papa mobilises the national art collection in very different display practices from the former National Gallery, which contained more traditional art objects included on the basis of their art-historical interest or commanding aesthetic achievement (or both). The orderly and quiet galleries encouraged contemplation and decorum. By contrast, the ‘*where there are people, there is art*’ subtitle succinctly communicates a new curatorial philosophy. This rhetorically democratic phrase suggests the rather flattering proposition that the simple fact of New Zealanders’ existence is somehow productive and creative. *Parade*’s rhetorical assertion of the natural relationship between the presence of people and the creation of art is invariably read, in the context of the national museum, as ‘*we, the people*’. Venturing further, viewers

are struck by an array of objects that attests to the creativity that abounds in this ‘creative nation’: airline crockery, high fashion design, plastic miniature All-Black rugby players, folk art made from string, archival television footage depicting a glass-eating man, Goldie’s nineteenth century realist paintings of Maori men and women, domestic and industrial design such as an armchair, television or electric jug, ethnographic photography, a video documentary on the welfare state in post-war New Zealand, modernist abstract painting, a story on the use of moulded plywood in yacht design, extravagantly dressed mannequins of pop group Split Enz, and contemporary sculpture.

Surveying the gallery space, the displays not only cover the walls and the floor, but are also contained in videos, pull-out drawers, and mechanical interactives. The ‘Discovery Centre’ and ‘Inspiration Station’, principally designed for children, feature jigsaws, button-activated sounds, mystery touch objects hidden in holes, and clay or potato blocks that make simple versions of objects. The smallish subdivided spaces that comprise *Parade* feature bright bold colours, mostly yellow, blue and red, and three-dimensional block signs. Some objects, displayed and lit from very high, are designed to catch viewers’ attention either from a distance or at a second glance. The orchestrated clutter encourages multiple viewing. One’s attention is drawn from one object to another, encouraging the viewer to repeatedly circle the exhibits rather than pause at each in turn. The visual restlessness of the space appears intentionally designed to interrupt one’s gaze, drawing it between objects representing vastly different economies of value.

Ian Wedde, the ‘concept leader’ of *Parade*, and a self-professed ‘bricoleur, plagiarist and eclectic’, explains the gallery’s strategy in these terms,

Experience has convinced me that most people are similarly content to channel-surf, and that a rich playground offers plenty of opportunity to stop and attend if the time and material seem right. Out of this subjectivity developed an intersubjectivity: a project on material culture that was eclectic, with unresolved shifts in value and meaning, broadly historiographic but with architectural and narrative sightlines that constantly took you off the track. An exhibition developed as a mall with chapters (*Listener*, 14 February 1998).

Parade's exhibition narrative relies heavily on a trans-textual search for significance. One reviewer has described this strategy as 'learning by osmosis, or art by stealth' (*Metro*, February 1998: 101). Clearly, *Parade* supports a postmodern exhibition aesthetic. Cochrane and Goodman (1988: 38) have characterised this as:

the kaleidoscopic approach, the ambition only to provide a "series of impressions", the abandonment of a master narrative, and the frequent collage-like use of pre-existing statements (films/objects/images).

Postmodern display practices support the celebration of diverse viewpoints, perspectives and narrative positions within the larger demand of a cohesive and unified national framework.

However, the juxtaposition of emblems of anterior cultural periods with familiar fragments of the present, and of art objects which are priceless, lasting and without substitute with those that are mass produced, faddish and ephemeral often produces an unsettling tension between radiance and reassurance, or glorification and subversive irony.

These shifting meanings partly reflect the difficult role assigned to *Parade*: how might it aestheticise a 'national way of life' through fragments of art, technology and commodities? Given New Zealanders' thorough immersion in the material trappings of global capitalism (*where there are people, there are commodities*), how can the museum effectively express local identity through mass-produced material items — the stuff of global popular culture? Although the contemporary period sees a global proliferation of forms of mass media that increasingly unravels both the high/mass culture 'divide' and the local/global distinction, these traditional oppositions remain an important frame of reference for the national museum. As a result, popular culture and media forms like television are incorporated in a somewhat ambivalent scheme. While their inclusion in the national museum demonstrates an acceptance of lowbrow, mass produced cultural forms, *Treasures of the Nation*, Te Papa's original concept document, suggests that the museum should assist New Zealanders in gaining an emergent sense of themselves *against* the onslaught of overseas media:

Individuals can only grow within a culture which recognises them and which they in turn decide to assume. Indeed, one powerful definition of colonial oppression is that of a people whose culture has been smothered by that of a colonising nation and closed to the future. It is not too far-fetched to claim that this is also true, in differing degrees, for both Maori and Pakeha New Zealanders. For the Maori this has been an historical situation, but one which is equally exacerbated for both Maori and Pakeha by the powerful role the electronic media plays in our lives (Project Development Team 1985: 7).

In *Parade* the demands of national identity formation brush against the inclusion of popular electronic media forms — precisely because these products, now more than ever, overflow national borders. Although *Treasures of the Nation* welcomes the development of *New Zealand* cultural products, the paradox is that, in this age of globalisation, it is becoming progressively difficult to identify just what might be counted amongst national popular culture.

Te Papa's response is to frame New Zealand's creative acts in a narrative that emphasises the home grown. Near the entrance to *Parade*, visitors are prompted by a large text panel that reads: *Planting a garden, painting a picture, designing a boat — we came up with solutions. Then what we make takes on a life of its own. Is it treasure or junk? Everyone has an opinion. Is it art? Decide for yourself.* Any national culture, inevitably more heterogeneous and multifarious than any unitary assumptions about national 'character' or 'essence' will allow, is overwhelmingly a rhetorical construction rather than a putative object. In honouring a hobbyist do-it-yourself notion of cultural creativity, *Parade's* rhetoric projects some kind of general relation between *culture* and *personality*.

Whether applied to gardens, boats or painting, the desired implication appears to be that it is New Zealanders' — mythical — practical-minded inventiveness that binds. In place of a long and illustrious art genealogy, a hobbyist narrative emphasises the ad hoc and novel creativity embedded in everyday New Zealand life. While *Parade's* inclusion of commodities suggests an acceptance of mass culture as a valid form of expression, the emphasis on everyday productivity responds to the problematic spectre of a nation whose identity is

defined through passive consumption. Hence, if, as Andreas Huyssen (1986: 55) wrote, ‘the lure of mass culture, after all, has traditionally been described as the threat of losing oneself in dreams and delusions and of merely consuming rather than producing’, *Parade’s* do-it-yourself narrative can be viewed as an explicit attempt to counteract the flattened and indistinct texture of everyday life that is often argued to accompany the postmodern celebration of mass culture.

The equalisation of fine art and weekend gardening or nautical design obscures an important distinction of fine art: its value does not arise from, and is not equivalent to, the labour expended in its production. Instead it relates to a particular fetishisation of aesthetic labour. The populist and anti-institutional idea reinforced by the idea of home-grown creations ‘taking on lives of their own’ disingenuously suggests that it is the democratic tide of public opinion, based on New Zealanders’ common ability to seek out ingenious resourcefulness, that validates creative acts of all kinds. The phrase distracts attention from the plain fact that an object like Jeff Thomson’s corrugated iron Holden has been granted the kind of incomparable lease of life that only comes with its incorporation into an institutional collection like that of a national museum. While vernacular social rituals are reconstructed as spectacular displays of national identity and social cohesion, the public also celebrates these staged affirmations of nationhood. However, this two-way process does not, for the public, erase the distinction between real and mediated or reconstructed experience. In fact, Te Papa’s public popularity itself attests to the notion that the museum’s use of popular mythology in national representations is not necessarily antagonistic to culture lived as everyday life. Simultaneously, as the vernacular is appropriated into artefact form, the status of artefact is itself vernacularised.

Fragments of Nationhood: Allegory as a Way of Seeing

Clearly *Parade* does not construct a comprehensive national art history. Its non-chronological and loosely thematised display strategy distances it from the ‘national survey’ approach which maps the nation’s progress through artistic achievements. Instead, objects offer an allegorical system for thinking about identity. In the logic of collective cultural ownership, every object can be ascribed with some kind of larger cultural ‘truth’, no matter how mundane. (For instance, the Holden might remind us that New Zealand is well-known for its large number of old, run-down cars. Or it might even trigger New Zealanders’ fondness for rubbish-dump salvage.) Certainly, societies have a great capacity for observing attributes in objects that may not be obvious to others, or alternatively, to ignore attributes which may have appeared to outsiders to be an inextricable part of the object. In the display of national icons, the curator must transcend the everyday and culturally familiar in order to be aware of an object’s general potential as a signifier for an international audience, yet identify that which makes it easily recognisable as part of that particular context. A Holden clad in corrugated iron is ordinary in the sense that its materials are easily found in sheds across the nation, yet it is spectacularly representative precisely because its highly unconventional and makeshift creative process is somehow — paradoxically — upheld as one that is quintessentially New Zealand. Its suspension in the museum, traditionally a space associated with ritual and hallowed objects, magnifies and decorates it, and attributes it with an ineffable status as a symbol of identity.

While the imaginative and often obtuse nature of art would appear to make it well suited to more explorative museum display practices than science or history, this has not historically been the case. Curatorial practice throughout the twentieth century was dominated by a modernist outlook that held that galleries should be left intentionally spare and textually minimal in order not to interfere with the separateness and autonomy of the art (Bennett 1995: 171). However, this reverential treatment of art, which included its separation from science and history material, has not been a permanent historical arrangement. It emerged only after

the French Revolution, and later became naturalised through the formalisation of modernist intellectual disciplinarity. Far from being unprecedented, *Parade's* engagement with popular culture echoes the pre-Revolution museum form. The European 'museums' of the late Renaissance (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) were generally one of two types. The 'cabinet of the world' attempted to encapsulate the 'universal nature' of the known world. These private institutions, such as the Medici Palace, which Hooper-Greenhill (1992) describes as the first 'nodal point' in the development of museums, drew together miscellaneous objects that were named and arranged as essential elements of the empirical world. The 'cabinet of curiosities' was the second type. In these museums, visitors delighted in viewing a haphazard arrangement of unusual, bizarre and often grotesque objects. After the Revolution, public museums emerged which provide a link between older forms and the modern museum. At the Louvre, for instance, paintings were arranged between the windows, while the tables along the centre displayed bronzes, busts, *objets d'art*, clocks, and other curiosities, many of them 'spoils taken from "tyrants", or 'enemies of our country' (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 179). From the nineteenth century, collection material was validated and discarded on a basis justified in rational and scientific terms. Objects were organised around new curatorial concepts and activities such as 'storage', 'conservation', 'reserve collections', and 'temporary exhibitions'. Rather than being classified according to theme, material or size, paintings came to be hung in 'schools' to show 'histories', creating a functional relation between them. However, they were seen to possess qualities distinct from the taxonomic sequence of chronologies and rules of succession that organised science and history (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 180-8).

Meaning in artworks relied on latent allegory residing in the works themselves. While science and history museum exhibitions traditionally constructed a microcosmic image of taxonomic representativeness and projected the idea of eventual completeness, art was seldom serviceable in quite the same way. If, as Walter Benjamin (1999: 211) observed, the collector

‘takes up the struggle against dispersion’, for the allegorist, objects ‘represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated’. Since the successful interpretation of an allegorical narrative relies on knowledge of its semiotic code, we might expect that the interspersions of common and familiar objects will assist in making it more accessible. If it is largely the trained gaze of the aesthete’s eye that has traditionally constituted and validated fine art, the juxtaposition of art with commodities visibly constitutes social contexts that are not the domain of the trained gaze. In his work *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1995: 42) theorised that we live in an historical moment ‘at which the commodity completes its colonisation of social life’. In his analysis, the present age is recognised primarily as a set of social relations of production. The commodity form is the dominant sign in a society made up of an immense accumulation of spectacles. Precisely because the commodity form is so intimate to our lived experience, it is quite effective at conveying a sense of historical distance. Life lived amongst objects other than the ones of our daily existence appears bizarre. The commodity represents irreversible time. Its mode of production emphasises replacement and improvement. As a result we have a finely tuned sense of spectacular novelty and semiotic variance. The old domestic appliances, magazines, foodstuffs, advertisements, clothing, and radio and television voices and images strike the contemporary viewer as comic and thoroughly uncanny. The *unheimlich* nature of material history cannot help but communicate the idea, analysed closely by David Lowenthal (1985), of the past as a form of otherness.

Against those who would justify the pedagogic effectiveness of the interspersions of commodities amongst art in these theoretical terms, I posit that the notable absence of accompanying explanatory art-historical text in *Parade* leaves the viewer with few clues about the social significance of lauded artworks. Although objects from the disciplinary departments of art and social history cross-pollinate one another, the result is not necessarily

socially contextualised art. The lack of more didactic pedagogic tools serves to maintain the distinction between those who can only see what is on display, and those that can see the additional (or invisible) attributes of art. (It also has the effect of allowing those who see these attributes to forget that their own heightened perception of art is itself the product of pedagogic learning.) The fragmented accumulation of visual objects means that *Parade* aims for recognition rather than understanding. The amount the viewer absorbs will depend upon their prior familiarity with New Zealand art and popular visual history. For those with a limited grasp of either, the exhibition may pass in a bewildering blur. While Wedde states above that he favours ‘unresolved shifts in value and meaning’, he appears to presume that visitors will grasp the significance of these shifts. Those lacking local literacies will not only lose the charge and eloquence of the display; they will also readily grasp that they are not at home in ‘our place’. While this may not be an unexpected or unwelcome experience for foreign visitors, it possesses more troubling implications for New Zealanders who take little of coherence from the display. While Te Papa wishes to make all New Zealanders feel ‘at home’, the display of popular culture does not necessarily guarantee inclusiveness — particularly when it is organised by a postmodern intellectual framework.

High Modernism in Parade: Updating McCahon

If the vehicles at the entrance to *Parade* offer a homespun analogy for New Zealand identity, one might anticipate that a more traditional and elite reflection of New Zealanders’ belief and ritual would be located in a painting like Colin McCahon’s sublime *Northland Panels* (1958). I focus on this iconic work in some depth work because it serves as a revealing case for demonstrating how art from a previous epoch is put to the service of identity in *Parade*. Te Papa’s treatment of McCahon’s work is particularly striking because he is both arguably New Zealand’s best-known modernist artist, and also one renowned for his highly personal and

serious subject matter. While this means that the stakes in displaying his work are particularly high, it is fair to maintain that the McCahon example is illustrative of the whole gallery. Hung at the rear of *Parade, Northland Panels* consists of eight large strips of canvas positioned vertically alongside one another. Several panels depict the semi-circular arc of a dominant hill; others suggest a latent dense scrubland. The alignment of discontinuous, unframed landscapes is disquieting and produces the sense that these raw landscapes are neither romantic nor placid enough to advertise New Zealand visually. The sublime dark and light spaces of the paintings gives the untouched land a sacredness that appears almost biblical. Indeed, McCahon's work is often appreciated in sanctimonious terms. For instance, Gordon Brown suggests that, for McCahon, 'land is the stage upon which is played out the life and death drama of human salvation' (1993: 1). We most directly gain a sense of this through a well-known inscription on the fourth panel, which reads, 'a landscape with too few lovers'. This foreboding expression relates McCahon's ardent response to a land he felt was both environmentally and psychically endangered by popular indifference.

Northland Panels was received within a certain tradition of cultural criticism that organised the artistic search for identity in post-war New Zealand. While the quest for national distinctiveness is an inescapably political project, in New Zealand it tended to produce self-critical rather than idolatrous results. Since around the 1930s, artists articulated themes of loss, isolation, loneliness and repression in relation to their perceived infusion of New Zealand social conditions. The alienation that plagued — and charged — the perennial crisis of Pakeha identity was often symbolically refracted through the prism of landscape. Before the Second World War, New Zealand painters' attention to landscape — the focus of the colony's claim for distinctiveness — had been criticised as romantic and derivative, as a poor imitation of nineteenth century European and American naturalist traditions (Batten 1989: 216). More authentic artworks that emblematised New Zealand were supposed to depict

realist scenes, typically consisting of, ‘a lone kauri stump, a patch of ravaged bush, an old shed, a cream can, a tattooed Maori, a cabbage tree or an old colonial church’ (Batten 1989: 215-6). By the mid-twentieth century, New Zealand artists, influenced by the abstraction of high modernism, began to produce a more complex style that went deeper than the pictorial level by evoking a spiritual connection with the land.

Predictably, this internationalist turn did little to allay concerns about an authentic New Zealand style. Cultural critics concerned with issues of national identity were troubled by the evidence that the deeper the artist’s consciousness, the less visible were the signs of a ‘New Zealand art’. Poet Rex Fairburn implored artists to capture New Zealand’s ‘hard, clear light’, rather than ‘monkeying about with European culture’. In a letter written — somewhat ironically — from Britain, he dismissed Post-Impressionism, Bolshevism, and Modern Literature as ‘about as irrelevant to NZ as ham to a synagogue feast’, and wrote that, ‘I would like to live in the backblocks of NZ, and try to realise in my mind the real culture of that country. Somewhere where I might escape the vast halitosis of the press, and the whole dreadful weight of modern art and literature’ (cited in Sinclair 1986: 244). Of McCahon’s paintings, Fairburn (1948: 49-50) wrote,

Even though they successfully avoid all the vices of a genteel style of painting... They might pass as graffiti on the walls of some celestial lavatory...but that is about all. Pretentious hocus of this kind...is bad for the politics of art: it gives the philistines a rod to beat the back of those painters who want to escape from the encircling gloom of the Academy by other and more legitimate means.

Fairburn’s prescription for a New Zealand style that was neither genteel nor pretentious amounted to a rigorous, realist mode neither excessively romantic nor abstract — in other words, a socially responsive art that reflected the experience of living in New Zealand.

Andreas Huyssen (1986) has argued that modernist artists and intellectuals inscribed the ‘great divide’ between high modernist culture and mass culture with a gender dimension. As anxieties about a rapidly expanding mass culture developed in Europe in the latter half of the

nineteenth century, it became denigrated as a feminised domain. The serious, disciplined and masculine style of high modernist criticism was proclaimed to be above and beyond the indulgent, frivolous and seductive world of mass culture. In settler societies like New Zealand, the gendered nature of this ‘great divide’ was inflected differently. Jock Phillips (1996), author of *A Man’s Country?* and ‘concept leader’ of the Pakeha history exhibitions, has argued that masculinity has provided the chief frame of reference in the Pakeha image. New Zealand males, faced with the extreme nature of the environment, historically held intellectualism and book learning in low regard. Literate Englishmen who made it to the colonial frontier often found little respect for their training (24-25). A popular culture that heavily emphasised physical work and sport developed as an egalitarian reaction to the feminised bookish conceits of the ‘colonial chum’. For this reason, intellectualism, modernist or otherwise, never became coded as a disciplined, masculine pursuit. An emphasis on egalitarianism favoured popular culture, but not one that celebrated the trappings of material mass culture, which was not only feminised, but generally foreign in provenance. In the logic of settler culture, the expression of ‘real’ national identity was to be found neither in high modernist books and fine art nor in television and magazines, both of which were imported. An active and productive popular culture — a do-it-yourself culture — emerged as a pragmatic expression of identity.

Forty years after its original critical reception, *Northland Panels* is again held accountable to the demands of national identity, and again, the relations between art and mass culture provide the dominant scheme in this formation. *Parade* encourages a viewing strategy that makes McCahon’s work only one item in a loosely organised link of signification alongside more mundane and easily accessible objects on display. If the larger system of experience in *Parade* means little to the viewer, and if the painting fails to activate a viewer’s desire to think about their own relationship with art and creativity, then *Northland Panels*

becomes little more than a decoration — a painting on the living room wall of ‘our place’. This domestic metaphor is fitting: sandwiched beside *Northland Panels* is an old television set playing advertisements and a Toby jug on one side, and (along with some Hamada pottery) a 1959 Kelvinator Foodarama refrigerator on the other. The fridge is framed within a Farmers department store period window display. The principal connection between the fridge and painting, related on a nearby text panel, is their creation in the late 1950s. This juxtaposition constructs a particular image of that period that is affluent, and culturally comfortable. The domestic items not only attach New Zealand to a universal Western suburbia, but emblematised a decade when New Zealand’s standard of living was amongst the best in the world. They effectively counteract the sublime unknown quality of the *Northland Panels*: if McCahon’s New Zealand is unnerving in its human absence, the Farmers department store version is cosy and nourishing.

Parade’s treatment of McCahon’s work reinforces the notion that the visual contextualisation of art within fragments from the larger society does not necessarily produce a deeper understanding of the work. While artworks are inescapably produced in social and cultural contexts, they do not necessarily aim to reflect this. Denis Dutton satirised the juxtaposition by writing that, ‘knowing that they are from the late 1950s is as significant as learning that Lord Rutherford and Mae West were both Virgos’ (*New Zealand Herald*, 21 May 1998). Art is often hermetic, anti-social and confounding. By situating it within the world of commodities, art such as McCahon’s is both stripped of the disciplined high modernist art-historical context in which it was created and denied its artistic singularity of vision. This point is upheld by art critic Robert Leonard (1998: 42), who has argued that, ‘[a]lthough New Zealand artists have long dodged the mandate of national identity, the display at Te Papa will only reinforce the perception that our art is parochial, recruiting work to illustrate social histories’. McCahon’s lack of stylistic sophistication may well express the

rough New Zealand landscape, yet it is equally testament to the purely artistic influence of high modernist artists like Cezanne, Braque, Picasso, Gris, and Mondrian, and later, post-war Americans like Pollock and de Kooning (Brown 1993: 87-94).

What then is Te Papa's justification of the juxtaposition of a fridge or television and *Northland Panels*? Sir Ronald Trotter, Chair of Te Papa's Board, has supplied one blunt response that is certainly 'commercially positive' in intent: 'if we hang a Colin McCahon alongside a Kelvinator refrigerator, then Fisher & Paykel [the refrigerator manufacturers] pay for it — in a big way' (Cottrell and Preston 1999). More critically, Ian Wedde (1996) justified the hang on the grounds of their cultural impact. New Zealand's cultural history, he says, was at least as affected by the arrival of television as by *Northland Panels*. For Wedde this juxtaposition is especially poignant because, he claims, McCahon longed for the kind of popular audience that television achieved. Extending the television metaphor, Wedde (1996: 1) asked why 'some people go on believing that what programmed McCahon was in some way more responsible or meaningful or serious within the culture, than what programs television', while 'other people believe that what programs television is meaningful but that whatever programmed McCahon was a kind of hoax...called 'modern art'. Wedde's claim that McCahon desired a larger audience denies him the autonomy and abstention from mass culture that makes sense of McCahon's own cultural periodicity as a modern artist. As part of the New Zealand avant-garde, McCahon was, when he painted *Northland Panels*, confronted with a media-driven mass culture that was, despite the lag of isolation, transforming the contours of day-to-day New Zealand life. The painting's assimilation into a technologically developed postmodern media culture in *Parade* effectively attests to the triumph of that culture in the forty-year interim.

Amongst the multitude of signs in *Parade*, an icon comprised of two large plastic hands, one thumbs up with approval, the other down for disapproval, most closely

emblematised Wedde's response. The thumbs direct the viewer to make their own value distinction: has high or mass culture been a more formative influence on their identity? The question itself signals a remarkable inversion of the usual priorities of the art museum. Instead of conveying the social factors that influenced New Zealand artists, the exhibition is more interested in the social developments and cultural innovations that influenced all New Zealanders. In this logic, the *visitor* — not the artist — becomes the central object of inquiry. A gallery substantially consisting of culturally familiar objects raises the question of relative expertise. The glorification of the everyday creates an environment where taste validation is transferred from the curator-expert to the visitor, who, to bend the cliché, might not know much about art, but knows what he or she believes should qualify as such. The aim of making art and commodities equal partners in social and historical inquiry is to produce a co-operatively evolved text, where the object is denied transcendence and the visitors are ostensibly granted the right of interpretive authority above the curator. Although the performative thumbs-up-or-down motif suggests audience participation, there is little opportunity for such expression in *Parade*, with the interesting exception of the 'Choice Trail'. In this, the museum has asked both well-known and unknown New Zealanders to arrange ten items of their choice, from *Parade* and from amongst their own possessions, in a trail for others to follow. Acknowledging that, given the spatial and interpretive freedom to do so, visitors' always construct their own personal route through exhibitions, the 'Choice Trail' aims to creatively extend this principle by allowing visitors to take the curatorial project into their own hands. In this strategy, personal memory contributes to understanding through the construction of a walk-through that ideally spurs other visitors to hypothetically construct their own trail. This tactic implicitly acknowledges that the art of display is less innocent and more self-reflexive than formerly. The foregrounding of the constructed-ness of installation,

combined with various manifestations of the forum metaphor, highlights the role of the artwork as a discursive object (Curnow 1995: 104).

Parade's excess of signification aids popular recollection and explorative associations with other objects rather than personal transcendence. In his stinging critique of Te Papa, Theodore Dalrymple compares the shift in museum philosophy towards sensory stimulation to similar changes in the modern hospital. While its wards are now alive with the sound of music and television, once the almost monastic silence of the hospital was regarded as part of the patient's treatment (*New Statesman*, 12 February 1999). For those visitors who invest in the traditional idea of museums and galleries as a form of personal sanctuary, Te Papa's excited atmosphere is a symptom of a society that does not seek to salve its collective psyche. McCahon's landscape may have had too few lovers, but it is now ensconced in domestic bliss. In this, *Parade* counteracts the isolating Puritanism that formed the basis of McCahon's social critique. It is denied the kind of austere and rarefied space of quiet contemplation conventionally assumed to befit transcendent modernist art — not unlike a church, to compliment McCahon's recurring biblical theme. However if *Parade* is a space that facilitates the avowal of civil religion, to apply the Durkheimian concept, it does so not by mimicking the church. Civil religion works from the idea that modern societies have to restate with regularity the collective sentiments and ideas that provide their unity. Hence, the recurrent practice of nation-creation involves a re-fashioning of values, memories and symbols according to the needs and aspirations of contemporary society. In this process *Parade* attempts to construct for New Zealand an image of cultural postmodernity by showing the distance that New Zealand has travelled from the now traditional separation of high art and mass culture. If modernism coincided historically with the heyday of nationalism, postmodernism coincides with a period of critique of unitary forms of nationalism. *Parade*

celebrates diverse and diffuse cultural forms as a way of updating the national image to include a broad social spectrum of values and identifications.

Conclusion: Parade Under Review

As a way of drawing towards a provisional conclusion to the analysis of what is an ongoing exhibition, it is revealing to describe *Parade*'s current situation. From March-June 2000, a small Review Team assembled to examine several aspects of Te Papa's performance, the most pressing of which was its display of art (Griffin et al. 2000). The review responded to the concerns of new Prime Minister Helen Clark (who also became the new Minister for Culture and Heritage). Theodore Dalrymple's scathing article particularly troubled Clark. Dalrymple likened Te Papa to an amusement arcade and deemed it 'the institutional exemplar of the lowest common denominator turned into official cultural policy'. He further cautioned that a museum of its type 'stands as a terrible warning to the rest of the world' (*New Statesman*, 12 February 1999). In a similar vein of criticism, Denis Dutton called the museum a junk shop that tries 'never to exceed its own dumbed-down conception of public taste' (*New Zealand Herald*, 21 May 1998). Implicitly rejecting the populist standards through which the museum had previously measured its success, Clark said she 'had to cringe' at these attacks, and warned that, 'We [the Government] are entitled to require, on behalf of the public, that we make sure the museum receives critical acclaim. There are some quality issues that need to be addressed' (*The Dominion*, January 25, 2000).

Clark's comments came on the heels of Te Papa's briefing papers to the Government, which outlined a precarious financial position, stating that it required from the Ministry an extra \$11 million per year (in addition to \$18 million already received). If evaluations of Te Papa's 'commercial positivity' had previously rested on the efficient and accountable use of resources entrusted to them, Clark's concerns signal a shift towards debate over the *effective*

use of resources in terms of a positive outcome within the community. It appears that despite the maintenance of impressive visitor numbers, criticism from ‘expert’ sources came to ultimately judge whether the nation’s taxpaying ‘customers’ were receiving value for money. The Review Team suggested wide-ranging solutions that included more information about the objects in *Parade*, the linkages and layering of information about those objects, and the positioning and design of the exhibition’s ‘graphic identity’ (Griffin et al. 2000: 31). We may now expect to see *Parade* move towards more conventional display strategies that affirm the value of the national collection and dedicate less space to the rhetorical validation of customer’s taste.

This outcome may have the advantage of more effectively informing visitors about prestigious New Zealand art – which, after all, many both expect and find pleasurable. This does not need to entail a cold, didactic display approach, and nor does it necessarily reinforce differences in ‘cultural capital’. However, by reworking New Zealand’s art history through a different economy of value from the traditional museum, Te Papa chiefly succeeds in performing a disservice to the most important works in its collection. While an equal accent on *everyday* creativity and national inventiveness may be evocative, it remains an idealised and idealising force that reinforces an uncritical vision of national identity. Paradoxically, many of the artworks of the national canon, hung in isolation from everyday ephemera, perform a penetrating critique of New Zealanders’ — and human — identities. By diverting attention from these meanings, *Parade* may actually be undermining its own exhibition narrative and motivating purpose.

Note: To visit Te Papa online (including pictures and a description of *Parade*), go to:

<http://www.tepapa.govt.nz>

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