**Prisoner of the World**

**By Martin Rumsby**

Recently, after a long illness, I befriended an Englishwoman not long arrived in New Zealand. As she seemed a bit lost in Auckland I offered to show her around. We visited a variety of bars – Irish, English, Mexican, Polynesian, Asian karaoke, high life, low life, and points in between. She wondered where the mythic welfare state had gone. We searched libraries, theaters, reveling in the distractions of a big city. I would have liked to introduce her to experimental film, but there was no dedicated space for media arts. Auckland seemed

hopelessly fractured and lacking a strong sense of alternative culture.

While artist-run centers have played an integral role in sustaining experimental media cultures in North America since the 1960s, these are noticeably absent from Auckland’s contemporary art scene. For me, the appeal of such centers lies in the possibilities they create to challenge the status quo, enabling artists to probe the contentious and uncomfortable, sometimes in forms that are difficult to recognize as art. They can represent rough-hewn manifestoes of oppositional culture and collective art and action, all while operating within networks unaligned to capital or institutional prerogatives. As Brenda Webb at Chicago Filmmakers (since 1973) told me:

There was always a notion that people would help out and it would be more of a community. That’s always been an issue at the co-op. It’s difficult to get people to understand collective models. They want to look at us like a business where they pay some money and get a service. It’s a challenge to make people understand that they can participate. You come in and help out and we can all benefit.[[1]](#endnote-2)

Or Mike Hoolboom on the Funnel Film Collective in Toronto: “The Funnel was a co-op mostly run by volunteer artists. We were interested in the kind of success money couldn’t buy. There was nowhere to get to, no careers at stake, no one had a car or even a TV set… We used culture to create a space that was separate from the Useful Citizen model.”[[2]](#endnote-3)

Artist-run spaces offer exhibition opportunities free from commercial imperatives and institutional demands. Many centers pay artists’ fees, cover shipping and installation

costs along with artists’ travel and accommodation (within reason). In fact, payment for the use of artists’ work is a first principle for many North American centers. In addition to the not-for-profit artist-run model, DIY exhibition initiatives, microcinemas, nomadic exhibitors, and underground film festivals comprise a patchwork of seedbeds for independent artistic activity. Philosophically, they can be seen to represent an impetus toward unrestrained thinking and making.

Things don’t quite work that way in New Zealand. Certainly, there has been some fiercely independent work produced by local artists within the DIY spirit. But beyond the self-distribution efforts of their directors, these works have languished in neglect, superseded by academic forays into art as research outcome and accommodations with the neo-Liberal agenda of art as culture industry. What was once a place of independent and oppositional activity has become a safe zone for academics to play in and for institutions to mark out territories. There are no alternatives. Anything exhibited out of institutional or commercial contexts gets scant attention, marking the marginalization of experimental film here as near fatal for film artists.

There was something like an artist-run media art center in Auckland in the 1990s. The Moving Image Centre (MIC) was set up as a charitable trust in the early ‘90s but from 1996 was on the downward path. Initially operated by the independent filmmaker, writer, and progressive record label owner Keith Hill, the MIC produced well-attended public screenings and DVD releases of local independent films, while promoting a general air of congeniality. It all turned to custard after Hill left to pursue other artistic interests. A new director was hired, a graduate of the public art gallery system rather than a grassroots organizer, and a muddle-headed indifference to artists’ cinema came to the fore. By 2005, screenings had largely petered out, there were no curatorial initiatives, proposals went unacknowledged, a nightclub was purchased (as a nightclub rather than a screening venue), and Board meetings were regularly punctuated by the Director’s suggestion that the newly-christened “National Moving Image Centre” organize a dance party, though in Auckland only.

The MIC was refigured along art gallery lines, favoring installation work, often featuring artists whose films were being shown almost contemporaneously at Artspace, a neighboring, publicly-funded gallery on Karangahape Road. Experimental cinema was cast aside and notions of criticality were non-existent. Numerous complaints were made to Creative New Zealand, the main funder, but operational funding for the MIC continued unabated. British Canadian film artist Chris Welsby finally saved us after the MIC and another organization mismanaged his 2009 moving-image installation, *TIME AFTER*, to the point where Welsby had to withdraw the project. Welsby complained vociferously, and the MIC’s operational funding was itself withdrawn. Millions of dollars of public investment came to nothing – no catalog, no legacy. Only a mortgage to reconcile.

At the time of the MIC’s closing, there were widespread feelings of relief and a cautious optimism across Auckland. In 2009, shortly before the demise of the MIC, an ad hoc group of experimental filmmakers called “Floating Cinemas” organized a series of successful screenings, though they later faltered amid the usual Auckland fractiousness. The Audio Foundation, a coalition of sound artists that presents underground music and film programs, shifted from a virtual to a physical operation in 2011, enlivening a sprawling uptown basement space with informal charm. And Mark Williams, from the New Zealand Film Archive in Wellington, got CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand together in 2012, and soon acquired Creative New Zealand operational funding. Though tending to favor academic filmmakers, CIRCUIT is a big improvement on the MIC. The practice is not too far removed from the current scene in England. As James MacKay explains, “[In the 1970s,] filmmakers were in charge,” whereas now “it is generally the funders who are in charge of deciding which type of work will get funded (commissioning calls) and also deciding which projects to support in distribution and exhibition.”[[3]](#endnote-4)

One of CIRCUIT’s projects around independent cinema is the Critical Forum, billed as a monthly discussion group for unaffiliated media artists. I signed up for the Forum in the summer of 2016, hoping to find some sense of alternative community. Convening at Artspace, participants in the Forum pondered questions of social engagement in an era of globalization. The Taiwanese video artist Chen Chieh-jen, then exhibiting at Artspace, stressed the importance of approaches to artistic production in which artists attach themselves to social movements, pursuing interventionist practices that aim to effect social and aesthetic change. Describing an artistic practice that is responsible for its politics, Chen recalled the ambitions of the historic avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century.

Chen also spoke of colonialism as a precursor to globalization, specifically citing the Japanese occupation of Taiwan (1895-1945). He characterized the colonizer as thinking of himself as civilized and of the colonized as being “unclean.” “Cleanliness,” or compliance, is achieved through education and, if resistance is encountered, repression. Chen thought that indigenous cultures would easily recognize this model.

Within a context of globalization, F. Theodore Elliott spoke of his self-financed video *Baseball* (2016) as exhibiting instances of “cultural bleed.” Here,New Zealand accents take on mid-Pacific inflections, thesuburban settings could be as much Calgary as Auckland,and the characters’ dress and manner suggest a genericinternationalism. The characters, played by amateuractors, exist as facile, fragmented individuals speakingin indeterminate sentences

trailing to nothingness, drained of identity, as if exemplifying Arthur and Marilouise Kroker’s idea of Code Drifters: *“*Neither global nor local, today we are mobile – Code Drift is the spectral destiny of the story of technology. No necessary message, no final message, no firm future, no definite goal: only a digital culture at drift in complex streams of social networking technologies.”[[4]](#endnote-5)

Raewyn Turner further explores the theme of internationalist suburbia in the video for her installation *Idealife* (2015). The video consists of a series of linked tracking shots past rows of new suburban houses with manicured lawns and late model cars parked on pristine driveways and curbs. There is no physical human presence until the last house (at the end of the world) where an English immigrant stands in the window talking on the telephone. One longs to see something like the severed ear lying on the front lawn in David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), or maybe a page torn from a book, fluttering in the breeze. Something of the texture of life.

While rediscovering Auckland I had been reading Roger Horrocks’ *Re-Inventing New Zealand* (2016) along with art historian Francis Pound’s earlier *The Invention of New Zealand* (2009), trying to get a sense of the place.[[5]](#endnote-6) In his study, Pound draws a stark contrast between regional realism and internationalist abstraction in New Zealand art. In colonial terms, this historical divergence reflected a choice of influence between English and American art models. For Horrocks, New Zealand art occupies a middle-ground between the local and the international, somewhere near the end of the western tradition. Yet today we increasingly look toward Asia and Europe. Things have changed from a simple dichotomy between nationalism and internationalism. Travel, more diverse immigration policies, the digital revolution and ecological viewpoints have led us to think more globally. Curator Robert Leonard believes that this global outlook has brought us to the end of nationalism and that we need to find another way to talk about our practice.[[6]](#endnote-7)

All too often now when institutional voices speak of internationalism and globalization they do not do so in the name of alternative or oppositional culture, nor of community. Their context perpetuates hierarchy within undefined notions of “quality” and of the arts as cheerleaders of creative industry; an economic driver aligned with marketing, promotion, and grasping ambition. As artists, we are to become bravely entrepreneurial. As individuals, we are privatized.

Increasingly, in the West, citizens have retreated into a private life of consumer distractions, quite removed from social participation. According to the French philosopher Alain Badiou, we have given ourselves over to “The unrestrained pursuit of self-interest, the disappearance or extreme fragility of emancipatory politics, the multiplication of ‘ethnic’ conflicts, and the universality of unbridled competition.”[[7]](#endnote-8) Badiou believes that our ideas about important things, our notions of truth even, have become corrupted. Where once we thought of science, today we think of marketable technologies. Art is now equated with communication, politics reduced to a cross between economy and management, and the idea of love trapped in a contractual conception of the family and sex. He calls instead for an idea of truth as an instrument of reality, a place where language and meaning accord.

Later that year, in September, I attended another Critical Forum meeting, which considered a piece of writing by Adam Westbrook.[[8]](#endnote-9) The resulting discussion centered on the idea that, in sweeping away all that came before it, the digital revolution demanded new responses. Westbrook contends that the conditions of the database offer new possibilities for artists, which are still largely undiscovered. Or are we to restate old things in new media, shining new light into old spaces?

As Jean Cocteau predicted, the camera is today as ubiquitous as the pen. We are all given the means of image making and dissemination through cell phones and social media. Viewers are drawn to the very center of distant events such as protests in Missouri or Baltimore against American police shootings, or genocide in Syria. We witness events subjectively, from the protagonists’ – sometimes even the victims’ – points of view.Here, the “balanced” objectivity of the mainstream media appears distant and out of touch, merely reacting, often after the fact and from a safe distance. This shift in viewpoints suggests that the equation is changing. In the shadows we begin to see again, in darkness we find ourselves.

Reflecting on the Critical Forum, it occurred to me that the digital domain can be a site for community, anonymity, and patterns which actively reshape our lives. Sometimes, digital media can facilitate experiences that seem more real than daily life in an arena that greatly exceeds the reach of artist-run initiatives. The imaginative and creative world of video games, for example, creates intensely emotional experiences as gamers project themselves into their games, making decisions and living with the (virtual) consequences. As Pippin Barr notes: “[Video] games give us worlds to explore, victories to seize, experiments to conduct. They draw us closer to our friends… and they make us part of an enormous community of people across the world.”[[9]](#endnote-10)

How are we to live in the world? How may we touch it? What would the art world offer? Considering these questions, I went to see some new work being exhibited in a series of small public art galleries that have recently emerged across suburban Auckland. Funded by the city, these galleries provide another option for moving-image installation artists and are our nearest equivalent to North American artist-run centers. They are generally staffed by friendly artists and first-rate curators with an eye for both contemporary and community art forms – real exercises in taking art to the people.

Crossing town from south to east then west on public transport took time, though the shifting demographics of Manukau, Pakuranga, and Hillsborough offered a little relief. It’s good to see contemporary art in the suburbs. Back in the day, only pop music, movies, and sports broadcasts made it this far. And books of course.

I stopped at Te Tuhi gallery in Pakuranga to see Sorawit Songsataya’s *Bronies* (2016), his play with recreational culture (“Bronies” being the name given to adult lovers of the children’s entertainment franchise, My Little Ponies). Combining 3-D animation, sculpture, and painting, Songsataya invests his animated figures with a fetishized sensuality in exploration of how humans spiritually empower objects.

Later, I visited the Pah Homestead in Hillsborough – not a public gallery, but the home of the TSB Bank Wallace Arts Centre. Intermedia artist Sam Hamilton took his play to the world in *Apple Pie* (2016), a pastiche of experimental film and performance art. Filmed in New Zealand, Samoa, and Oregon, the film leads the viewer on a journey from the transnational to the interplanetary. Unfolding in ten chapters that loosely connect with ten celestial bodies, the film muses on scientific, philosophical, and mythological knowledge, at one point calling for a redrawing of the Meridian Line to reconceive time in a renewal of our human relationship with the planet.

Further argument could be made that artist-run spaces are driven by concerns more social than aesthetic, they lack the rigor of academia, or the corporate muscle required for marketing to a globalized world. Co-ops may be good for social cohesion but ultimately operate on the level of cottage industries and rarely produce work that speaks to wider communities and international audiences. Besides, technological innovations now favor individual rather than collectivist modes of production. In a world of diminishing resources, it is a matter of priorities.

The day may not be far off when artists and artist-run organizations get by on crowd funding and lotteries. Though the recent proposal to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States went unheeded by the U.S. Congress, the future of federal support for the arts does not look good. We may get to eat cake but we will not be dining at the table. According to the law of unintended consequences, federal proposals to defund the arts may lead to more contentious and fractious socially-engaged art that is less beholden to the market or public funding – art that will not sit easily in any golden tower.

In *This Model World*, his book on contemporary New Zealand art, Anthony Byrt states that much recent work already engages the political:

One of the most striking consistencies that has emerged for me is the way almost every one of the artists [Byrt writes about, such as Peter Robinson and Judy Millar,] tackles questions about the efficacy, and legacies, of late capitalism. And they do this with an awareness that they operate within an art world that is itself a product of the same system.[[10]](#endnote-11)

It seems that even being at the “top” of New Zealand art is not a lucrative calling, for artists at least. Citing the example of Robinson, Byrt tells us that Biennales do not actually pay artists very well and it is often up to artists themselves to fund their participation in these events. The Biennale ethos is the opposite to that of artist-run spaces. The question this raises for arts policy makers is which is more important, a limited participation in international marquee events or the broader-based appeal of artist-run and DIY initiatives?

New Zealand’s contribution to the 2017 Venice Biennale helps to clarify the country’s current priorities when it comes to the moving image. Representing New Zealand, Lisa Reihana’s large-scale five-screen video installation, *Emissaries* (2017), reworks her earlier *Pursuit of Venus* (2015),telescoping the viewer to the beginnings of the dialogue between the North Atlantic and South Pacific, and the initial encounters of their sometimes-competing values. The setting for this work is a landscape as depicted in a nineteenth-century French wallpaper, *Les Sauvages de la mer Pacifique*, as a Polynesian heaven on earth. The wallpaper serves as a backdrop for super-imposed live action performances, based, to some extent, on the writings of anthropologist Anne Salmond.

*Emissaries* is comprised of a slow tracking shot over an idealized eighteenth-century South Pacific landscape, defying the notion of a center or any narrative coherence. It presents instead a series of vignettes of early Polynesian and European interaction, presenting the Polynesian viewpoint of arriving Europeans. The formality of the work’s setting as wallpaper makes it amenable to a view that New Zealanders like to hold of themselves: one of tolerant bi-culturalism where an earlier national aspiration of homogeneity is replaced by one based on identity. It announces an arrival at a place where we already are. Hence, it’s suitability as a marketing tool for the cultural sector of Brand New Zealand.

There is another disconnect here in that, in our present era of international migration issues and refugee crises, “official” New Zealand chooses to present a comforting revision of colonial-era inter-cultural interaction rather than address present realities. Toward the pursuit of Venice, the national arts council awarded $NZ700,000 to install and promote the work at the Biennale, an amount sufficient to cover the operational funding of at least two local artist-run centers for a year. The rationale being, I believe, that New Zealand art has now reached a point where it must sit upon the world stage and that this requires capitally-intensive projects. For me, the difference in emphasis between the marquee or artist-run route represents the difference between the bourgeois and the proletarian branches of art. Marquee events serve a well-heeled international audience, curators, and arts managers. Artist-run events, on the other hand, are grassroots organizations which play a nurturing role sometimes within critical frameworks, offering possibilities for networking amongst communities both nationally and abroad. The emphasis and stresses here are quite different; artistic development or audience development? It’s not much talked about.

Mike Hoolboom puts it like this: “We live in a city of winners, a neo-lib triumph… What could resistance look like? Are collective models sustainable, and could they take shape to serve community needs… What could the organization of disorganization look like?”[[11]](#endnote-12)

My English friend decided that for her the answer lay in Maori. In a globalized world, she reasoned, New Zealand’s Polynesian heritage made it unique. She set off on a singular quest to find out for herself. We had found that we cared about different things and had no way of talking about them. It may have been a cultural difference. She was not a Kiwi and I was no man of the world.

1. Martin Rumsby, “One Day in Chicago” in *Illusions* 27(Winter 1998): 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Chris Kennedy, “Funnel Vision,” *tiff*, 27 January 2017 <http://www.tiff.net/the-review/funnel-vision/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. James MacKay, Daniel Fawcett and Clara Pais, Eds., *Microcinema: New Artists Moving Image Then and Now* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Film Trust, 2017), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, “Code Drift,” *CTHEORY*, 14 April 2010 <ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=633>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Roger Horrocks, *Re-Inventing New Zealand* (Pokeno, NZ: Atanui Press, 2016); Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity 1930-1970* (Auckland, NZ: Auckland University Press. 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Robert Leonard, *Nostalgia for Intimacy* (Wellington, NZ: Adam Art Gallery, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay in the Understanding of Evil* (London, UK: Verso, 2012), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Adam Westbrook, “The Web Video Problem,” *Adam Westbrook // Journal*, May 2013<journal.adamwestbrook.co.uk/the-web-video- problem-why-its-time-to-rethink-visual-storytelling-adam-westbrook/#20>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Pippin Barr, *How to Play a Video Game* (Wellington, NZ: Awa Press, 2011), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Anthony Byrt, *This Model World* (Auckland, NZ: Auckland UP, 2016), 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Chris Kennedy, “Funnel Vision,” Op cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)