

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**BEKAH CARRAN
I REMEMBER GOLDEN LIGHT
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY DAVID CROSS**

BEKAH CARRAN

I REMEMBER GOLDEN LIGHT

Friday 6 March 2009, 00.00–23.59

Outside the National Library of New Zealand, Molesworth St, Wellington

The Alexander Turnbull Library (held in the National Library of New Zealand) was founded in 1918, upon the gift to the Crown of the collection of Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull, a prominent early Wellington citizen. The National Library site on Molesworth Street hosted a temporary annexe for one day in early March. Appearing self-made and informal in contrast to the concrete solidity of the National Library building, I Remember Golden Light offered the visitor only 24 hours in which to study a curious and intriguing collection of found images. The archive contained thousands of pictures, which betray an anonymous, diligent collector seemingly obsessed by collating discarded materials to piece together a record of an impossibly beautiful, ideal environment. Bekah Carran is known for her interest in utopian visions and architectural forms, which she has explored in works such as Welcome Home my Beautiful Optimist (ARTSPACE and Physics Room, 2006). Here Carran created her first site-responsive work by exploring the principles of the Turnbull Library – to enrich public understanding of the present and the past of the land and peoples of New Zealand and the Pacific – but extended those principles to contemporary media and the construction of pictorial representations of an ideal future.

*Commissioned by Litmus
Project Curator: David Cross*

Things I Remember: Things I Never Knew

The National Library in Wellington is one of New Zealand's iconic modernist buildings. Completed in the late 1980s, it combines the defining forms and materials of the International Style with its own distinctive sci-fi eccentricities of shapes and patterns. This imbrication of order and idiosyncrasy parallels the library's collection, whose holdings stretch from the papers of prime ministers to the definitive collection of New Zealand butter labelling from the 1970s. It is not just the collection that is curious, but also the assorted ways in which it is stored and maintained. While most of the materials are conventionally filed in shelved folders, the library, as if in homage to 1960s sci-fi fantasy, also cryogenically freezes aspects of the collection to be brought back to life at a later date.

Bekah Carran has long been interested in the strangeness of archives. For her, they are repositories of complexity that are too often unfairly maligned as warehouses of dull, empirical, and ultimately dusty papers. In her research for *I Remember Golden Light* in the library archive, she discovered remarkable collections of ephemera which straddled the domestic, pop culture and the absurdly obscure, gathered in many cases by unremarkable New Zealanders over the course of their lifetimes. These collections, identified by the library as culturally significant, represent in the eyes of the selectors the diversity of the nation's identity and history.

Carran took this material as her starting point to develop her own archive, constructing a special temporary annexe to the National Library on the building's forecourt. This

annexe was located next to the main entrance and from a distance seemed to be architecturally sympathetic to its surroundings. Modernist in shape, the annexe was clad in what appeared to be faux-marble. However on closer inspection the façade's material was actually far less salubrious: a cheap cardboard used in ring-bound stationery folders. The ersatz modernist aesthetic was continued inside where a small reception area led into the archive itself. Consisting of bench tables and chairs, the room was lined in cheap brown paper which smelt of fresh stationery on the first day of school.

GL060309, as the entrance sign announced, was both familiar as a functional archival space and at the same time clearly contrived in its 'lo-fi-ness' and its deviancy from conventional library aesthetics. What clearly prefaced the site as an archive were the litany of manila folders spread across the desks and benches each one labelled with a filing number and a simple description of its contents. In keeping with the artist's *detournement* of the archive aesthetic, the titles on each file were surprising in their scope. 'People waving', 'Theme Parks', 'Swimming Underwater'; all of the subjects seemed prosaic and strange in equal measure. On opening each folder, the viewer was confronted with an assortment of found photographic images culled from unknown sources. The grainy quality of the images and the flimsiness of the paper suggested the photographs were collated mostly from old 1970s and 80s magazines and books, when in fact large quantities were recent. Ripped from their original contexts, these images of assorted size and shape lay on top of one another, a palimpsest of visual fragments united only by an uncanny consistency of subject matter.

While the range of content in the folders was eclectic, an overarching thematic began to form after a few minutes of perusal. The images seemed consistently ebullient, idealised, and ultimately contrived. Ridden with obsolete fashion statements and cheesy poses, the pictures had a saccharine content of untrammelled happiness; lovers walking hand in hand, people on a beach framed by a perfect sunset, each scene could be read as advertising fodder minus the all important branding or pithy by-line. Yet the inclination to read the work simply through the prism of taste, as an exercise in ironic deconstruction, was carefully deferred by the artist. Not all of the images, for instance were gloriously artificial, such as one in which former New Zealand prime minister David Lange is pictured screaming on a roller-coaster, and the sheer

breadth of material with its many twists and turns negated a one-dimensional reading. While the artist certainly built an archive of seemingly embellished moments filled with 'golden light', the logic of the connections became less clear and definable over time. The more folders one chose to look at, the more elusive the authorial intent appeared to be. Something stronger and less clear-cut was at play, leading one to the conclusion that the artist was carefully muddying the waters as to her attitude to the images. Carran's archive simultaneously aroused in the viewer a heightened level of attraction—part morbid fascination, part projection of our own desires for happiness—and a genuine inertia for the idealised and hackneyed modes of depiction. By activating this space of in-betweeness separating attraction and repulsion, the artist offered a meditation on the conflictual and unresolvable meaning of images that connote happiness.

This sense of uncertainty in relation to the content of the archive was also manifest in how the audience navigated the space over the course of the 24-hour period. While respondents often initially laughed and conversed over specific images, such demonstrative behaviour consistently shifted over time as members became lost in the archive. It was as if they had become completely absorbed in searching for that supremely compelling folder that would trump the charisma of the previous one. In this process the behavioural code of the library often came into force and the only sounds heard in the space were the shuffling of paper and rubber bands being snapped around folders to hold the contents together. This rhythm would last as long as the visitors remained constant. Once this dynamic changed and people entered and exited, the archive would once again transform into a space of social exchange and dialogue.

Over the course of the day the audience became more confident in the space and less concerned about leaving the archive as they found it. Not only were the folders messed up and often left unbound but individuals felt compelled to use the books of post-it notes placed by the artist to comment on specific folders or the work more broadly. As the day wore on, the notes began to appear on the walls of the space and on the folders, some simply thanking the artist, others more in the tone of critique such as, "My Aunt is a dick for bringing me here!". Increasingly as the form of the work changed and became embellished by drawings and comments, the audience were more likely to respond and to leave a trace of their presence. The palimpsest

activated by the artist through her use of layered imagery triggered in the audience a desire to make their own collective response. This was a different kind of palimpsest, one in which text and imagery were employed to locate favourite folders, favourite images, but more broadly to engage in an argument about how the work should be understood.

A young student in a Motly Crue T-shirt described an image of lovers hand in hand as 'so bad it was almost good'. A much older woman agreed that it was good but failed to comprehend the finer points of how bad could be good. Two older women were locked in an intense discussion about whether it would be okay to steal a particularly coveted image; a young woman glared her unspoken disapproval.

Fundamental to the strangeness of the work produced by the unusual elision of fantasy with the sober structure of the archive, was the incongruity of the archive's 'publicness', its openness to the library concourse and to foot traffic passing by. When we consider the location of an archive, it is usually buried within a purpose-built bunker, to be sought out by users as a resource with a particular research purpose in mind. Yet Carran's archive was both accessible to passers-by but not a functioning indexical archive in the conventional sense. Her 'facility' was a world you could step into off the street and encounter without a clear and pre-determined purpose in mind. Bringing the archive into a spatially more accessible public zone accentuated the very private and perhaps intimate nature of the material in the collection recalibrating the public/private divide as well as the rules governing how we navigate and perform in such a site.

Carran's fantastical play on the library/archive experience was enhanced by the temporary nature of the work. The National Library annexe appeared out of nowhere and for one day offered regular users, passers-by and intentional arts attenders the chance to re-think and participate in a different version of the nation's library. A number of these audience members actually considered this a new addition and commented on the peculiar direction the institution was taking. For these people, the strangeness of the work's aesthetic and the contingency of the structure itself was not an indication that this was in fact an artwork. Their confusion can only have been magnified by the sudden disappearance of the building the following day, never to be seen again.

Bekah Carran

Bekah Carran was born in Wanganui in 1976. She received a BFA from the Otago School of Fine Art in 1998. Receptive to notions of the everyday and informed by her observations of the contemporary condition, her work is often realised in poetic installations marked by the refined use of unremarkable materials. Responding, in part, to debates surrounding sustainability and environmental decline, Carran manufactures alternative realities, creating opportunities for reflection and hope. Exhibitions include 'Telecom Prospect: New Art New Zealand' (City Gallery Wellington, 2004); 'Welcome to Paradise' (Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2004); 'Welcome Home My Beautiful Optimist' (The Physics Room, Christchurch and Artspace, Auckland, 2006); and 'Cosy Dell: a portable garden' as part of the series *Back Boot* (Dunedin: Blue Oyster Art Project Space). She lives and works in Dunedin.

David Cross

David Cross is an artist, writer, and Director of the Litmus Research Initiative, Wellington. He has exhibited extensively across New Zealand and Australia at venues including the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and Perspecta, as well as in Eastern Europe. He has written extensively on contemporary art in journals including *Art and Text*, *World Art*, *NZ Journal of Art and Photofile*. He is Director of Research and Associate Professor in Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington.

Recommended Reading

Melanie Hogg, *Welcome Home My Beautiful Optimist* (Christchurch: The Physics Room, 2006).

Kate Montgomery, 'Safety For a While' (Christchurch: *The Press*, May 2006).

Sue Elliott, Jenny Nelligan, *Changing Spaces: New Zealand Sculpture Now*, (Wellington: Sculpture Walk/International Festival of the Arts, 2002).