

# The Curator's Room

Visceral Reflections from within the Museum

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Michelle Osborne

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*“The museum and the living artist, so poignantly interdependent, must keep a wary distance. This means strain and altercation, but that is the natural order of things, a check and balance”.*

*(Zolberg 1992)*

## Prologue

In the way of museums, certain things have been collected and assembled for a display, a truth, in the form of a private room in which resides the dream world of the curator. Then, as the visual expression of this inner space deepens, they are carefully taken apart, always with respect for the original. Yet the work is not shaped by the hand of a conservator destined to abandon the imagination in favour of a trail of physical evidence. Nor does it reflect the conventional rationalist sensibilities of a museum worker who, by suppressing a poetic understanding of the world is confined by “cold language” (Frame 1992 p.45) and remains caught inextricably in the web of colonial thinking.

Here the imagination is truth (Einzig 1996) and an understanding of the nature of this inner space the key to the locked door. The Anthropologist and the Archaeologist, indeed a whole host of disciplinary specialists may come knocking, but it is the artist that gains access to the curatorial spirit. Compelled as much by a love of the museum profession as a crisis of European consciousness (Spivak in Harasym 1990), objects are assembled for an inner journey to a place where shadow and sunlight chase each other across the landscape (McQueen 2000). This is the dialectic space of both curator and artist, of the rational and the irrational, of inside and outside, and of disciplinary devotion and betrayal.

## Viscera

### Devotion

*Tread softly into the curator's room so that we may take a quiet journey through the breath of conversations past. Here there is companionship and a hint of tobacco succours the air, which is redolent with something rotting by the sink. On the far wall are windows for gentle reverie, tiny drawers for warmth and protection and shelves for open display. A walk-in cupboard is home to a profusion of books and papers, generously stacked for constant reference. A white-coated presence is intent at a long bench.*

### Betrayal

*Draw near into the shadow land of the Great Halls of Man and Nature where past and present sit in uneasy silence, awaiting adjudication. You falter, hesitant to enter this place without armour. A thick mist dims your vision and veils your perception to the point where glasses must be worn for spiritual protection. In this, however, your finest hour, you escape supplication, seeking refuge within. And in the stillness you find a new reality, an order from the heart.*

## Museum Art<sup>1</sup>

The conceptual foundation for *The Curator's Room* is the complex and often contradictory relationship between curator and artist. The disciplines of curator and artist are continually changing and the boundaries between exhibition design and art installation are increasingly being crossed (Putnam 2001). However, the museum as institution has held these disciplines in its grasp and kept them apart for more than a century (Oliveira 2003).

Such a situation is not surprising, given that nineteenth century British Imperialism uniquely legitimized a hierarchical and authoritarian ordering of the world, a “brick wall” of thinking that has since been maintained by vested interests in western philosophy (Littlebear 2002). This is the colonial mould on which the traditional museum is founded (Weill 1990), and which set the standard for artistic quality and defined the roles of the curator and artist.

These roles reflect the Cartesian dualities of mind/body, self/other, subject/object and us/them; a philosophical approach which “cut the world into reason and unreason” claiming the domain of truth and reason for itself and leaving the imagination, a somewhat “truthless domain”, to artists (Antin in Einzig 1996 p.3). Under the sway of modernist ideals, these divisions were further cemented; the scholarly curator and the creative genius, one denied imagination and the other excluded from any capacity to construct the true or the real.

Curators and artists inherit, therefore, a legacy of divergence and conflict, interacting as “suitors, duelists, petitioners, and, sometimes confederates”.

Although the relationship has undergone many changes, it remains characterized today as one of “fretful symbiosis” (Zolberg 1992 p.106). New Zealand artist, Colin McCahon, found his period as curator at the Auckland Art Gallery difficult given the uneasy divide. An increasing sense of professionalism in both disciplines has widened the gap even further, to the point where artists who are also curators have been known not to show their own work while institutionally employed (Rees 2004).

The questions of power and authority which arise from this heritage underlie this thesis and inform investigation into the curatorial and artistic divide (Oliveira 2003). For some museum professionals, a preoccupation with colonialism and the traditional museum tends to “shackle the museum to its negative past” and makes it difficult to view the museum as anything but a mausoleum (Witcomb 2003p.9). For others, it reflects a strong desire for museological reappraisal and reform (Putnam 2001).

This desire has led to exhibitions that depend on a working relationship between artists and institutions. Such an approach is exemplified in the works of artist Fred Wilson. His subtle mimicking of curatorial rhetoric and display methods, or “trompe l’oeil of curating”, has become a way of exposing the museum’s role in cultural oppression and privilege (Wilson in Berger 2001 p.33). In *Mining the Museum* at the Baltimore Museum, 1992, a slave shackle was positioned amongst antique silver vessels in a glass case and entitled *Metalwork*, a Klu Klux Klan hood was placed in a perambulator and entitled *Baby Carriage*, while *Cabinetmaking* consisted of four Victorian parlour chairs grouped around a slave whipping post, like “seats in a theatre facing a lone actor” (Berger 2001 p.9) (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1. Fred Wilson *Cabinetmaking 1820-1960* in *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson 1992*, The Contemporary and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

If Wilson's art acts as commentary and exposure, it is his arrangement of things that arrests our attention and our thinking. This is a process which is critical to *The Curator's Room*. The simple act of bringing ideas and materials together and establishing some kind of dialogue (Hiller in Einzig 1996) is a powerful way of working and sits at the heart of museum practice. Until quite recently, however, it has been an unconscious, patriarchal and Eurocentric endeavour, cloaked in authority and social elitism (Duncan 1995). By repositioning and juxtaposing objects within existing museum displays, another viewpoint can be offered.

There is a long history of this form of artistic practice. Duchamp's readymades were the inspiration for generations of artists interested in the intersection between the work of art and the museum. Wilson himself has said "he gave me the ability to do what I wanted to do, and for it to be understood as art" (Wilson in Berger 2001 p.38). With works such as *Fountain* and *Porte-bouteilles*, Duchamp wanted to show that everything can be something else and that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone" (Duchamp in Muller-Alsbach 2002 p.43) (*Figures 2, 3*). Fundamental to his work was a perception of meaning beyond a 'pure' aesthetic, a perception that questioned prevailing modernist sensibilities and the concept of the museum.

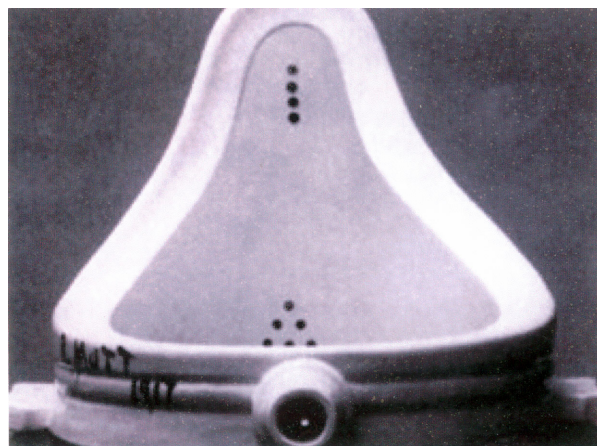


Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp *Fountain* 1917



Figure 3. Marcel Duchamp *Porte-bouteilles* 1960

If Duchamp was the beginning of a postmodern critique of art and the museum, Andy Warhol's *Raid the Icebox 1 With Andy Warhole* 1990, Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design, set a precedent for artists acting as guest curators. In this work Warhol insisted on bringing out all of the objects in particular collections, especially items felt by museum curators to be of 'inferior quality' or poorly provenanced, a process which was particularly challenging to the institution (Putnam 2001). Shoes, jars, parasols and chairs were 'raided' from museum storage and arranged according to "personal whim" (González 2001 p.23).

Since then, artists have continued to be invited into the "curatorial inner sanctum" (Putnam 2001 p.135), choosing and grouping objects in ways that are not restricted or regulated by the museum's historical conventions or ordering systems. (Putnam 2001). For *The Play of the Unmentionable* 1990 Joseph Kosuth selected items from the Brooklyn Museum's collections and

arranged them in such a way as to expose the process of censorship and the notion of iconoclasm that permeates art history. Kosuth wanted to show that artworks are like words in that while each individual word has its own integrity, “you can put them together to create very different paragraphs” (Kosuth in Putnam 2001 p.134). *The Curator’s Room* was developed in this fashion, using the second-hand shop as a collecting source.

The static nature of conventional display methods was the subject for scrutiny in *Rolywholyover a Circus* by John Cage at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 1993. Based around his concept of chance-generated music and a lifelong interest in I Ching, Cage’s random selection of objects changed everyday, to the point where if you came back a second time the exhibition would be unrecognizable (*Figure 4*). His chance combinations in music resonated with Duchamp’s rejection of determinism and with this, truth and objectivity (Molderings 2002). The connection, rather, between truth and the imagination underlies *The Curator’s Room*.



Figure 4. John Cage *Rolywholyover a Circus* 1993 Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

The growth of artists' museum projects therefore owes much to the parallel development of sculpture and installation art, which emerged “in a spirit of anti-establishment experiment” (Barton 2004 p.9), questioning artistic conventions and institutional authority, testing the boundaries and examining the roles of both artist and audience. Alternative environments or “anti-museums” were investigated by a number of artists during the 1960's (Grenier 2000 p.125). Claes Oldenburg created his own spaces *The Street* and *The Store* (Figure 5). Between 1968 and 1972 Marcel Broodthaers set up the *Musée d'Art Moderne* at a number of locations, including his own home in Brussels and the beach on the Belgian channel coast (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Claes Oldenburg *The Store* 1961



Figure 6. Marcel Broodthaers *Musée d'Art Moderne, Section Documentaire* 1970, Belgian Channel Coast.

With the opening of the *Musée d'Art Moderne Département des Aigles* in 1968 Broodthaers wavered between his role as artist/negotiator and his new role as occupier/curator, essentially participating in the museum. This duplicitous position, so eloquently articulated in Broodthaers' mock-Kantian formula "disinterestedness plus admiration" (Broodthaers in Crimp 1989 p.76) is critical to *The Curator's Room*. Broodthaers concerns were reiterated by Christian Boltanski, who described *Holy Week* 1994, Saint Eustache, Paris as being "about relics", but "very much against relics" (Boltanski in Garb p.19). *The Curator's Room* is both for the museum and against the museum, as embodied in the roles of curator and artist.

An underlying ambiguity was also expressed in *View* 1991, a collaborative project by Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clarke. By placing translucent wax panels inscribed with the names of extinct animals and plants over the museum's windows, the artists sought to address the museum's two irreconcilable desires, the desire to collect, contain and preserve and the desire to participate in the impermanence of the world outside the collections (Simon 2002) (*Figure 7*). This installation was part of a series called *Works*, initiated by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and reflects the changing missions and spaces of traditional museums to include site-related ephemeral works that “remind us of all that cannot be preserved” (Hamilton in Simon 2002 p.98).

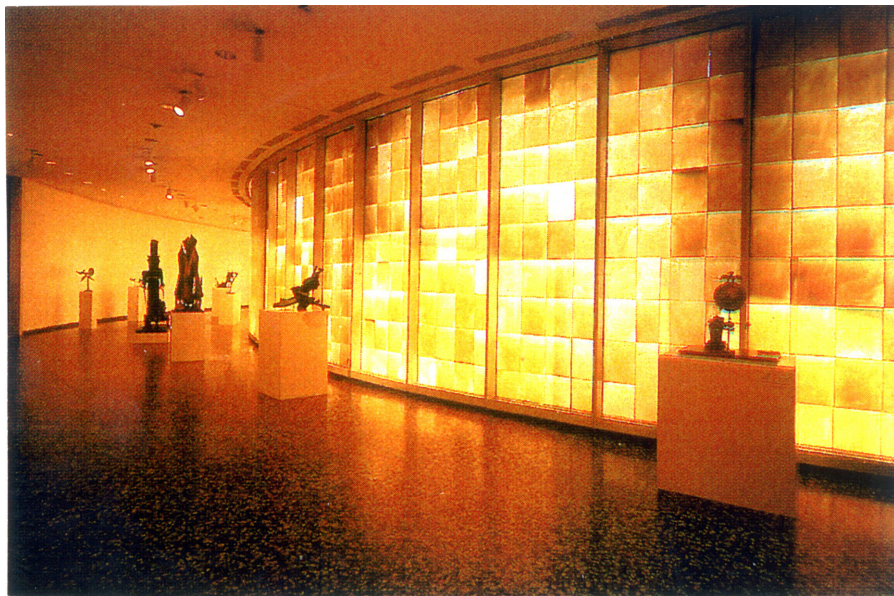


Figure 7. Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark *View* 1991,  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.

In spite of increased institutional patronage there is a continual movement away from projects displayed inside museums (Oliveira 2003). Hans Peter Feldman's family photos, 1994/95, were exhibited in a bus stop in Vienna, in order to draw attention to what is deemed "insignificant historical material" by traditional museums (Putnam 2001 p.191) (*Figure 8*). *The Curator's Room* focuses on objects that are traditionally overlooked by curators, especially when broken or damaged.



Figure 8. Hans-Peter Feldmann *Family Photos* 1994/5, Vienna.

Commentary and debate has not only taken us out of the building but into a realm of the "museum without walls" an idea introduced by André Malraux (Oliveira 2003 p.80). Printed reproductions, video and artists' websites offer another kind of artistic freedom that challenges the authority and the limitations of the traditional museum space. The imaginary Museum 2004, constructed by David Clegg, combined a virtual walking tour of major museums from Denmark to France, with a walking tour of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. This project sought to encourage a new awareness of the museum environment and to

demonstrate connections between a local gallery and its international counterparts.

The value of artist's interventions in museums for dialogue with collections, displays, architecture and public services has only been realized in New Zealand relatively recently. *Two Skyrockets (one for adornment)* by Jim Vivieaere marked an incisive beginning. Exhibited as part of *Art Now* at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 1994, the work consisted of two 44-gallon drums, one of which was chrome-plated, the other painted and covered in symbols. As was the case for Fred Wilson's work the juxtapositions were crucial. By suspending his work above the ethnographic collections of the Pacific Gallery, Vivieaere intended to highlight the ongoing nature of "exchange, trafficking, commerce and reciprocity in the Pacific" (Mallon 1997 p.137) (*Figure 9*).

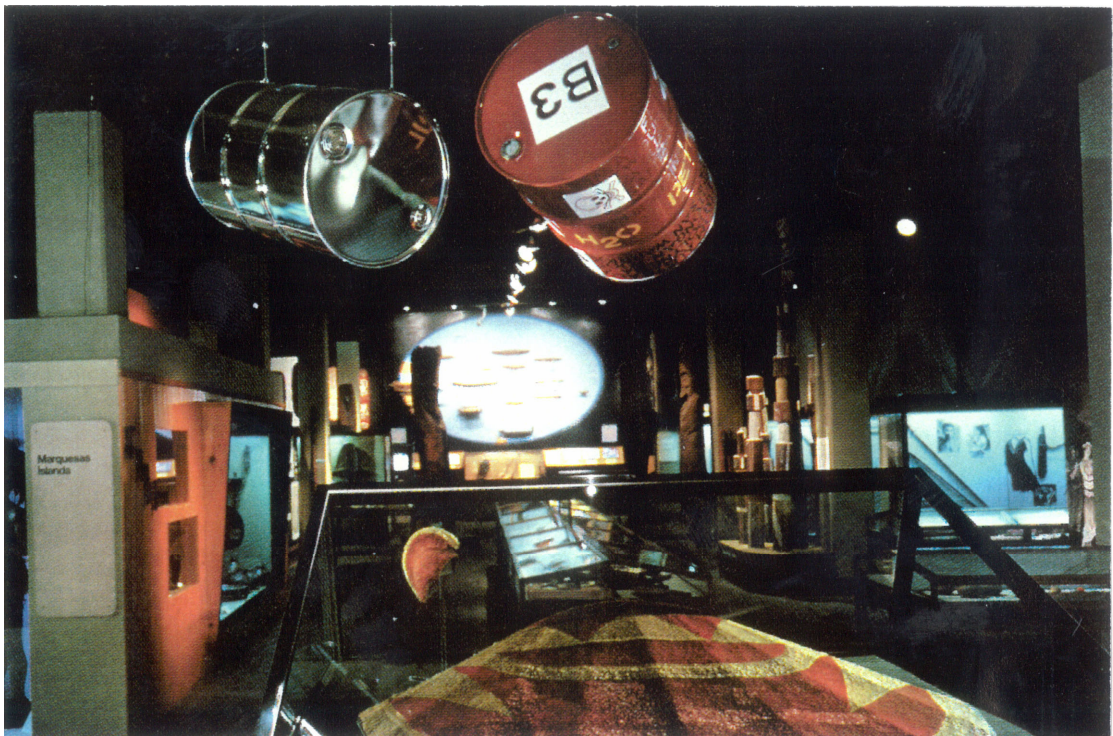


Figure 9. Jim Vivieaere *Two Skyrockets (one for adornment)* 1994, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

*Glorified Scales* by Maureen Lander and Briar Wood at the Auckland War Memorial Museum, 2001, was an investigation into the transformations involved in the preservation, recording and reanimation of artifacts and techniques. Acknowledging a “relational potency of artifacts” (Salmond 2002 p.3) a notion first put forward by Paul Tapsell (Tapsell 2000), this exhibition also served to blur the boundaries between galleries for fine art and museums for science and ethnology.

Art that takes the form of curatorial practice has also surfaced. *Temples of Wonder* by Peter Wells, at the Hawkes Bay Museum 2002, was a personal re-working of the museum’s historical collections. For Wells, a past resident of the area, the experience of going down into the basement of the Hawke’s Bay Museum’s collections was like entering a department store where he could select whatever he wanted. Objects were chosen for their ability to be commentaries about success, beauty, enigma and elitism and some arresting juxtapositions were created, not without humour, such as a maid’s apron hung next to a bullet-proof vest (Wells 2002) (*Figure 10* ).

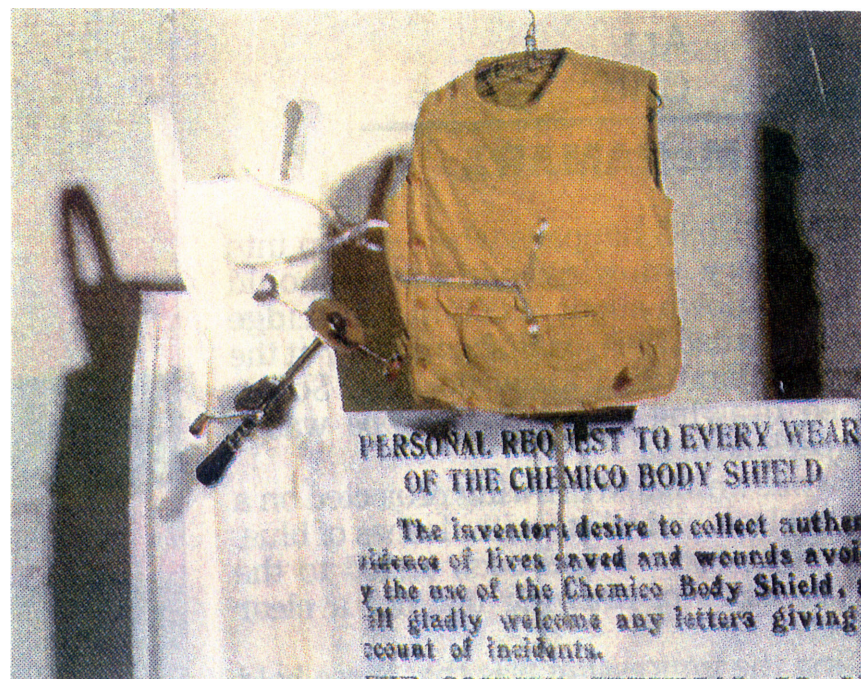


Figure 10. Peter Wells *Temples of Wonder* 2002, Hawkes Bay Museum

*The Bed You Lie In* Artspace, 2004, examined the role of the art world as a social institution. Nine new artists tackled this “volatile territory” in very different ways, from “commercial pastiche, academic critique, social commentary and introspective examination, to formal investigations” (Giblin 2004 p.1). What is particularly clear, however, is that by endorsing such projects the viewer is exposed to the reflexive process not only on the part of the artist but also on the part of the gallery. *The Bed You Lie In* irrevocably raises public awareness of the museum’s contradictions and vulnerabilities as both an advocate for art and a barrier to it.

In larger national museums, however, institutional self-reflection remains tentative and guarded and exhibitions that comment on museum practice are generally hard won. Carole Shephard’s *Museum of Contemporary Art*, 2003, nicknamed the MCA (an irreverent reverence to MCA’s everywhere) was purposefully situated in a downtown space in Auckland, in order to avoid perceived conflicts of interest between working in and offering a critique of the museum as institution. Here Shephard had comparative creative freedom and was able to keep alive the debate that museums are ideologically bound (Kirker 2004). Part of this process was also to negotiate a connected exhibition *Off Site* at te tuhi- the mark, a public gallery that readily supports such art practice.

Similarly, *The Curator’s Room* represents an opportunity to step outside perceived tensions between a growing awareness of the ideological limitations of the museum and institutional inertia. There is a strong desire to speak openly from a museum workers perspective about what has essentially remained private; the undeniably problematic space that is the museum environment. What is especially significant to *The Curator’s Room*, however, is that as Shephard worked to reassemble and re-describe

museum collections, the disciplinary boundaries between artist and curator appear to become blurred (Putnam 2001).

The stacked shelving and collections of glass that constituted *Off Site* and the archives of discarded objects, fragments and mementos in *Lieux de Mémoire* occupied a shadowy space between museum storage, exhibition design and art installation. This is the space of *The Curator's Room* and one in which a dilemma is posed. Which way shall the protagonist slip, towards curator or artist, an abiding understanding of the museum or confrontation with it?

The museum has the potential to be a useful site for an exploration of this profoundly uncertain position and museum workers can offer a valuable contribution by publicly exposing an awareness of their own vulnerability in this regard. To be vulnerable is to be human and if museums are to make a difference in society, the “shared humanity of the museum, its collections, and its visitors must come through” (Wilson in Garfield 1993 p.49).

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#### Notes

1. The title ‘Museum Art’ was employed by the artist to refer to artworks which comment on museum practice and resonates with “Museumist Art” a term used by critics to pay homage to the work of Fred Wilson (Garfield 1993 p.47).  
“Museum” refers to both galleries and museums with permanent collections.

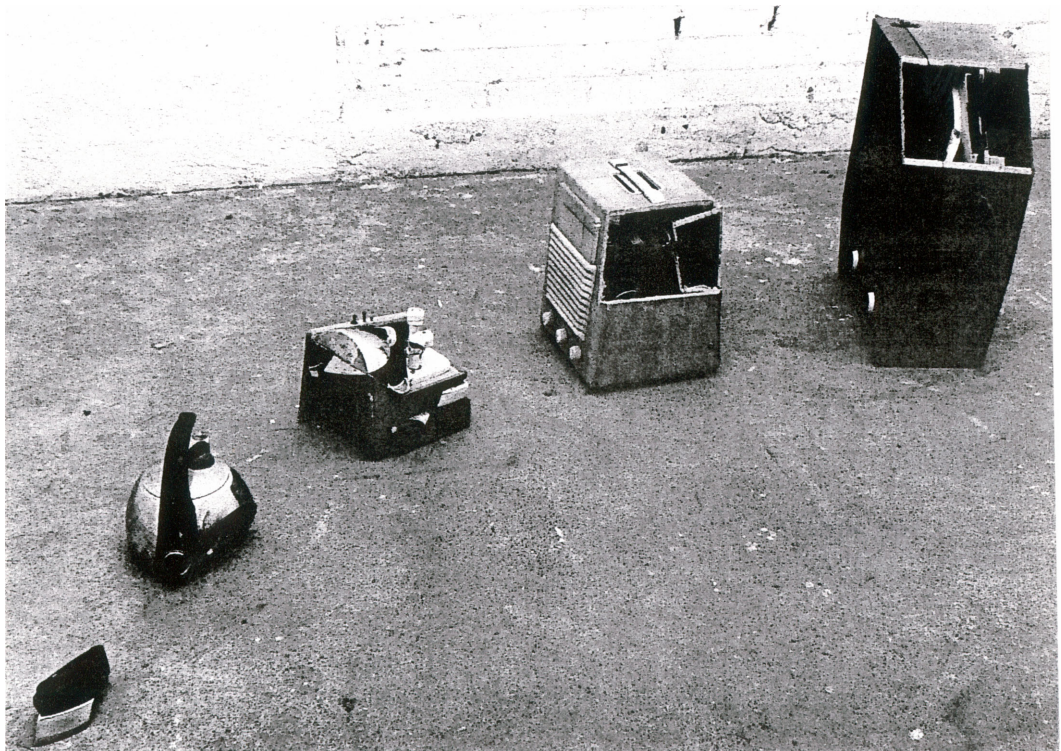
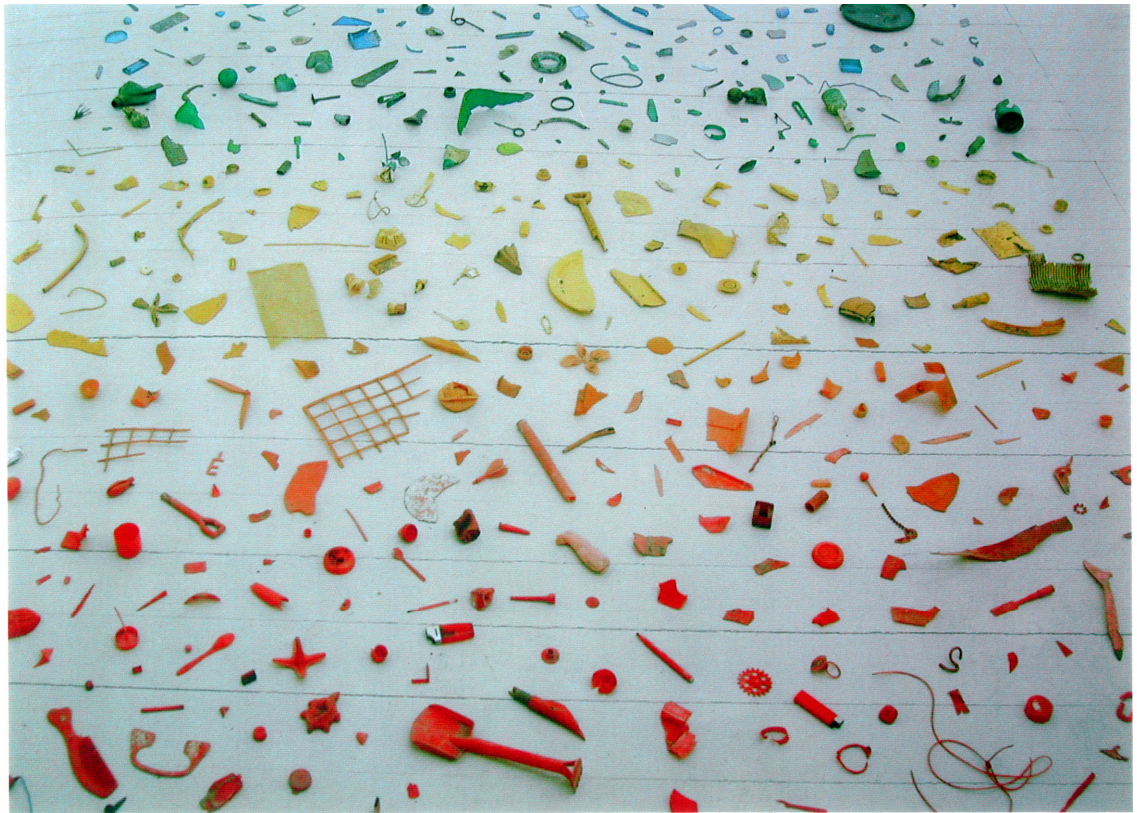
## Collecting and Display

The inclination to collect was a definitive methodological starting point for *The Curator's Room*. Collecting is a universal activity in the sense that there is a well-recognised human tendency to gather things around us, to assemble the material world and to mark off a personal domain (Clifford 1988). In contemporary society moreover this process has become a “major social and individual phenomenon, which reverberates in all facets of life” (Pearce 1998 p.1).

If collecting is an all-pervasive human preoccupation, for artists, however, it is also a conscious step in the creative process and is often an integral part of art making (Putnam 2001). This was not always so; the use of found objects, those commonplace things and the literal in art (Potts 2000) is inextricably related to sculptural development. Since Duchamp's presentation of 'readymades' as artworks, ordinary items of everyday use have become more central to sculptural investigation. “The food of an artist is what he sees - what he sees in the street” (Bourgeois in Bernadac 2000 p.144).

Flea markets and rubbish tips provided materials for sculptors Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow working in Britain in the 1980's. The plastic bottles and used toys of Cragg's *New Stones-Newton's Tones* (Figure 11) and reclaimed appliances of Woodrow's *Five Objects* (Neff 1987) (Figure 12) placed these artworks firmly in the world rather than abstracting them from it. Their process is reminiscent of the work of American artist Robert Rauschenberg whose “combine paintings” included newspapers, tyres, lamps, stuffed animals and even a made up bed (Kremer 1990 p.14). A desire to relate art and life and to set art in a broader context continues to

drive artists to experiment with fragments of the everyday, to literally incorporate them in their work.



Figures 11, 12. Tony Cragg *New Stones- Newton's Tones* 1979, Lisson Gallery (above) and Bill Woodrow *Five Objects* 1979, London (below).

These ‘fragments’ form the basis of *The Curator’s Room*. Recalling a time as a museum trainee at the Canterbury Museum under the mentorship of Osteologist R. J. Scarlett, old drawers and boxes were collected as spaces in which fond memories and latent hopes lay cradled. The space developed as a former home, a remote region where “memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening” (Bachelard 1958 p.5).

Seduced by the intimacy and warmth of the domestic arena, the jumbled contents of drawers from a turn of the century Singer sewing machine were added to the shelves. An extraordinary number of things began to fill cupboards and floor spaces, often coming and going between studio and garage. Small and easily moved, they fulfilled the collecting requirement (Pearce 1995). “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories” (Benjamin in Arendt 1999 p.61) (*studio work in progress, April 2004, see below*)



Always in the shadows, however, was an awareness of the desire to possess, to appropriate and to control, an approach that has its roots in Cartesian philosophy, a way of viewing the world as somehow external and objective to the human subject (Pearce 1995). In the west, collecting has been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity

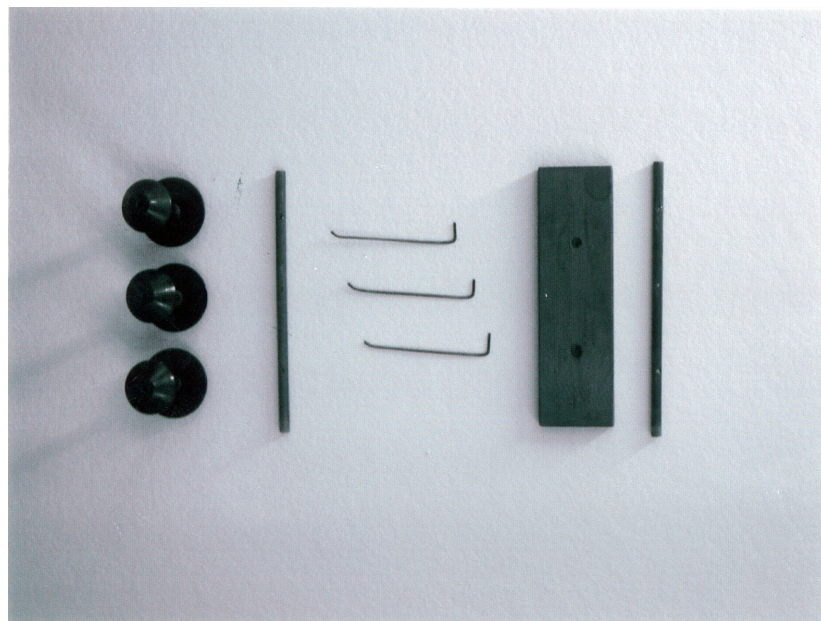
(Clifford 1988) and is causal to our Eurocentric heritage. In much the same way as Broodthaers worked when developing the *Musée d'Art Moderne*, collecting for *The Curator's Room* reflected a preoccupation with the traditional museum as the source of contemporary attitudes about art and culture (*studio work in progress*, May 2004, see below).



Re-arranging and re-working the objects was the next stage of sculptural investigation for *The Curator's Room*. In works such as *Hoover Breakdown* 1979, Woodrow 'dissected' objects as part of the creative process (Jacob 1987 ) (*Figure 13*). This idea has reappeared in various guises such as in *Break Down* by Michael Landy, 2001, in which all the artists possessions were inventoried and circulated on a roller conveyor before being taken apart and publicly destroyed (Oliveira 2003). The process of 'breaking down' was central to the development of *The Curator's Room*, and things were collected in order to facilitate this kind of sculptural activity (*studio work in progress* June 2004).



Figure 13. Bill Woodrow *Hoover Breakdown* 1979



Studio work in progress, June, 2004.

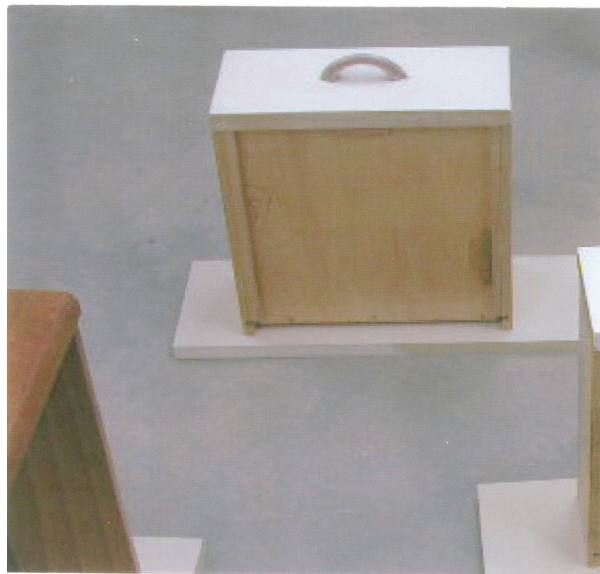
For the final work this process changed, however. Rather than being taken apart physically, the drawers are simply removed and presented alongside their 'host object' on the studio floor. Working in this way is more reparative (Bourgeois in Bernadac 2000) but not without depth and intensity. A careful and tender regard for the objects, the memories they provoke and the feelings they engender has affected the deconstruction method, to the point where it is the arrangement which has become key to the work. This reflects the theoretical concern to portray a respect for the museum as well as a rejection of it.

Accordingly, the chests and their drawers are treated as objects of a display, pared back to a more traditional sculptural form, becoming inert and self-sufficient. Here is the inherent anxiety of the three-dimensional object, the "troublesome facticity" (Potts 2000 p.4) that resonates with the difficult philosophical space between artist and curator. The uncertainty **is** emphasized by placing each piece on a low plinth.

Plinths already play a somewhat ambiguous role, both isolating objects and providing sculptural interest in their own right. Traditionally associated with the museum, they elevate and aggrandise in much the same way as a glass case and in fact the two are often used together. In this way a box of detergent can become a significant artifact, as in *Supremely Black* by Haim Steinbach (Weintraub 1996) (*Figure 14*) and a lowly drawer can become a solid and self-important sculptural object (*studio work in progress, July 2004*).



Figure 14. Haim Steinbach *Supremely Black* 1985, Sonnabend Gallery, New York.



Studio work in progress, July, 2004.

Curiously, however, objects can in fact be lifted off plinths, leaving the new 'object' behind. The perceived stability and permanence is only an illusion. A set of rules for the construction of the plinths was devised in order to realise their potential for posing a question rather than stating a fact, for unlocking the parallel and intersecting concerns of sculpture and the museum as they are continually being questioned and re-invented.

The first rule for the plinths in *The Curator's Room* is concerned with their height, which is a uniform 18 millimeters. In this way the plinths raise the objects only slightly off the floor, an arrangement which renders them even more accessible. Upended and with their handles at the ready, the drawers are potentially very portable, like a suitcase, and bring to mind Duchamp's *Boite en valise*.

Other rules are evident: the plinths conform to a 30 millimeter measurement either side of each object and 80 millimeters from either end. A more individual relationship between the objects and its bearer is immaterial. Painted white and placed underneath each chest and their associated drawers, they are constructed to both suggest and to question sculpture and the museum.

Piles of old textiles, used clothing from Salvation Army outlet stores and 'cast-offs' from family and friends were collected continually throughout the project as possible contents for the chests of drawers. Familiar and personal, they were to be included for their potential to invoke an emotional response. In Christian Boltanski's *Lake of the Dead* 1990 vast piles of second-hand clothing strewn over the gallery floor overwhelmingly remind the viewer of lives once lived and now lost, fragile memories to be saved. They were used to throw light on an absence, the stories and ideas

behind the object, the “small memory” that disappears under the weight of modernist grand narratives (Boltanski in Garb 1997 p.19) (*Figure 15*).



Figure 15. Christian Boltanski *Lake of the Dead* 1990, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Nagoya.

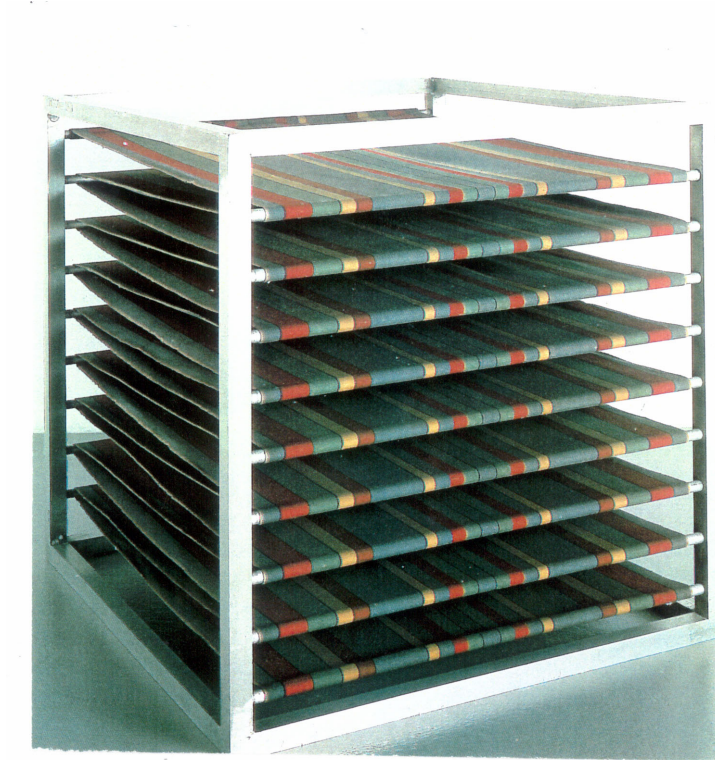
When arranged on the studio floor, some of the items collected for *The Curator's Room* such as underwear and socks appeared unexpectedly humorous, giving momentary relief from the difficult inner space that the work occupies. Subtle humour was also acknowledged in Boltanski's *Reserves: The Purim Holiday*, as the massed expanse of used clothing also inspired children to 'dress up' (Garb 1997). In the manner of artists of the Fluxus movement, collecting for *The Curator's Room* then became more deliberately light-hearted (Smith 1993) and things such as reminder notes, bunches of keys, chocolate wrappers and objects gleaned from hotel rooms have been included in the final work.

While embracing the inventiveness and 'largesse' of installation there was a concern that this could result in a diversion from the difficult interior space that the exhibition is meant to occupy, something that could only be expressed within the confines of traditional sculptural form. Positioned between affection for the museum and confrontation with it, *The Curator's Room* is the ambivalent space of curator/artist. Vacillation and indecision are also the mark of contemporary sculpture as it lies "poised on a fault-line between an installation-oriented conception of art and a continuing concern with sculpture as some kind of object" (Potts 2000 p.22).

The group known as Arte Povera were artists par excellence for balancing daily life with an interest in the traditions of high art (Curnow 2002).

Defined by the use of heterogeneous and 'poor' materials and techniques, their work was, however, more complex than this. For *Zig Zag*, 1966, Alighiero Boetti wove striped cloth reminiscent of deckchairs in a zig zag configuration within a cuboid aluminium frame. As in *Venere degli stracci* 1967 by Michelangelo Pistoletto, which consisted of a reproduction of the statue of Venus whose face leans into a mountainous pile of rags, formal

sculptural concerns are referenced in order to negate them (Celant 2002) (*Figures 16,17*).



Figures 16, 17. Alighiero Boetti *Zig Zag* 1966, (above) and Michelangelo Pistoletto *Venere Degli Stracci* 1967, (below).

So too in *The Curator's Room* familiar sculptural methods, including plinths and formally shaped piles, are a negation rather than a reactivation of the sculptural (Potts 2000). As evidenced in Eva Hesse's work *Contingent*, a tight and formal methodological framework may offset a sensitive and fragile work where stability is merely an illusion. Boltanski's *Room 1* 1969, consisting of dated tin boxes containing small objects "from the life of Christian Boltanski" placed carefully in small towers on the edge of the gallery, has an autobiographical note and a psychological complexity that resonates with the idea of a room as inner space (Garb 1997 p. 17).

The objects of *The Curator's Room* are arranged close together in order to form an enclosed interior arena, in a similar manner to the 'cells' of Louise Bourgeois. The objects are largely to be walked around, although studio experiments showed the desire for viewers to walk through the work and some concession to the spaces between them was made in the final work. This formal demarcation acts to contain the vulnerable and uncertain space between curator and artist that the work is intended to occupy. As in *Cell (You Better Grow Up)* and *Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands)* 1993 *The Curator's Room* is an invitation to share the artist's inner anxieties (*Figures 18, 19*).

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Figure 18, 19. Louise Bourgeois *Cell (You'd Better Grow Up)* 1993, (above) and *Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands)* 1993, (below).

## Conclusion

*The Curator's Room* is a sculptural investigation of the disciplinary boundaries between curator and artist. Traditionally they form an impervious philosophical divide and one which has thrived on mutual exclusivity. To work as both a curator and an artist is to uniquely experience this uneasy divide, to operate within “the strain and altercation” of opposing interests (Zolberg 1992 p.105). Far from being part of a natural order, a check and a balance, these boundaries are rather a site of profound disturbance.

*The Curator's Room* is located theoretically in the shadowy space between the disciplines, a space poised between an understanding of the potential of the imagination and an allegiance, a binding, to an inherited western philosophical position. A collection of small chests discretely displayed on low, white plinths with their ‘contents’ arranged in piles nearby, both conforms to and deviates from formal sculptural practice. This is “not a work of art” in the traditional sense (Broodthaers in Mosebach 1989 p.176). Further, while there is a suggestion of classification and authority, the objects chosen and their manner of display are rather a parody of collecting and exhibiting conventions. This space is not a museum (Crimp 1989) and the maker is also ‘not a curator’.

*The Curator's Room* is part of the wider concern by artists to explore the museum as an institution, an idea and a practice (Putnam 2001). It follows a well-established artistic pathway to museological awareness, one which is currently gathering new momentum in New Zealand. The way in which other artists have sought to address the issues surrounding objective scholarship and elitism and to expose the museum’s fundamental

contradictions and fallibilities therefore have a bearing on *The Curator's Room*. From Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* to Carole Shephard's *Museum of Cultural Anxiety*, the works selected have at their very core knowledge of, and divergence from, the museum as institution, although they are realised artistically in very different ways.

In order to conclude, a return to the beginning is required. The thesis revolves, “moves forward to the place it came from; a wheel that turns on an axis of strength” (King 1992 p.4). The prologue is a statement of artistic intention which describes an inner journey from curator to artist. This is an apprenticeship which acknowledges the role of the imagination in affecting change (Kremer 1990). The journey is not smooth, but an ‘unveiling’ filled with and hesitation and apprehension (Cixous 2001). *The Curator's Room* is therefore a declaration of vascillation and uncertainty, a “radical acceptance of vulnerability” (Spivak in Harasym 1990 p.18) from which there is no turning back.

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Figure 20. *The Curator's Room* (View 1) December 1-10, 2004, Xspace, Auckland University of Technology.

Photographer: Ross Liew



Figures 21, 22. The Curator's Room (View 2 and View 3) December 1-10, 2004, Xspace, Auckland University of Technology.

Photographer: Ross Liew



Figures 23, 24. The Curator's Room (View 4 and View 5) December 1-10, 2004, Xspace, Auckland University of Technology.

Photographer: Michelle Osborne



Figure 25. *The Curator's Room* (View 6) December 1-10, 2004 Xspace, Auckland University of Technology.

Photographer: Michelle Osborne

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