‘THE AWFUL STUFF’:

**COLIN McCAHON, HIGH ART, AND THE COMMON
CULTURE**

1947-2000

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*Why this sudden uneasiness and confusion?
(How serious the faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so quickly,
As everyone turns homeward, deep in thought?
Because it is night, and the barbarians have not arrived.
And some people have come from the borders
saying that there are no longer any barbarians.
And now what will become of us, without any barbarians?
After all, those people were a solution.*

— Constantin Cavafy, from 'Waiting for the Barbarians', 1904

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the conditions of artistic production at two pivotal moments in the reception of modernism in New Zealand: the emergence of a tradition of modernist painting in the work of Colin McCahon in the late 1940s, and the dispersal of that tradition under the impact of postmodernism and postcolonialism circa 1990 in the work of Michael Parekowhai and Ronnie van Hout, among others. Artists' distinctive engagement with a broad compass of visual culture is considered alongside a critique of local high culture in relation to the culture of everyday life. The reception of this work is figured as emblematic of the historical contestation over the representation of the everyday; a struggle for visibility which reveals the social antagonisms of New Zealand culture.

The first part of the thesis considers the vituperative critical response to McCahon's use of formal devices drawn from comic books and commercial design in the late 1940s, against the background of the establishment of the national high culture. It accounts for the response by exploring the social factors inherent in critical disdain for commercial art and mass culture, which drew on the trenchant opposition of British intellectuals, and suggests that in McCahon's work popular culture is employed as a form of aesthetic primitivism with which to represent the barbarities of World War II, as well as to express the experience of everyday life in New Zealand to a broad public audience. It concludes that fundamental to the antagonism over his work was disagreement over what constituted local cultural authenticity.

The second part of the thesis considers problems of New Zealand high culture figured in antagonistic relation to the culture of everyday life that were advanced by New Zealand critics in the years after McCahon produced his popular-culture inflected paintings. The anti-Americanism of New Zealand culture is considered in relation to the rise of the 'comics menace' as a source of moral panic in the early 1950s. However, the interest of a new generation of New Zealand scholars in popular culture is observed in changing attitudes towards comic strips (and to American culture) in the 1980s. The same scholars also seek new terms for local critical address. A final chapter of this section explores the afterlife of McCahon's work following his death in 1987, tracking the movement of the work out into the common culture and the high culture's contestation of his modernist legacy.

The third part of the thesis opens with an account of aspects of art practice under emerging cultural conditions of postmodernism and postcolonialism in New Zealand in the 1990s, and explores the continued role of McCahon's work in expressing and revising issues of national identity. Central here is 'Choice!' (1990), an exhibition of contemporary Māori art, which introduced Michael Parekowhai's work and precipitated an ongoing discussion on the politics of identity in contemporary art. While Parekowhai located aspects of Māori identity in the traditions of high art and globalised mass culture, other artists interrogated national identity by similar means. The result was an expansion of the terms both of national identity and of the critical territories of the high culture. The thesis concludes by examining the critical furore that arose when Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand's new national museum, opened with the exhibition of a painting by Colin McCahon beside a refrigerator of the same vintage. The debate, which ensued, was largely concerned with the desire of critics to separate the domain of art from the domain of everyday life.

This analysis demonstrates how contestation between the high culture and the common culture represents a recurring and generative dynamic in the history of New Zealand art—in which McCahon is a pivotal figure—during the second half of the twentieth century.

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Michael Parekowhai, *Amiens*, from the series 'The Consolation of Philosophy: Piko Nei Te Matenga', 2001, c-type colour photograph

INTRODUCTION: HIGH ART AND THE COMMON CULTURE

Culture, conceived not as separate 'ways of life', but as 'ways of struggle', constantly intersects: the pertinent cultural struggles arise at the points of intersection.

Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing the "Popular"', 1998¹

Advanced artists ... have habitually recognized a pressing need to incorporate the expressions of vernacular culture: in effect, to admit to their creative endeavour a multitude of anonymous collaborators.

Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*²

As I see it the only solution to the so-often-talked about plight of the New Zealand artist ... The solution is for us to look to the here and now, to concentrate ... on the provincial and vulgar, and develop them to the point where they mean something to people outside New Zealand, to make a meaning out of the drives and behaviour of the common people.

Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers', 1954³

In 1948 art critic A.R.D. Fairburn composed one of the great insults of New Zealand's cultural history when he compared a recent series of paintings by Colin McCahon to 'graffiti on the walls of some celestial lavatory'.⁴ Fairburn strongly objected to the presence of a tradition of 'low' art in McCahon's post-War works, a source which McCahon was to subsequently describe as the 'awful stuff' of New Zealand visual culture—'the signwriting of the towns & the football & the racing & the advertising'.⁵ Integrating this popular modern aesthetics with subjects and compositions derived from the pre-Renaissance paintings that he had experienced only in reproduction, McCahon produced works which in their combination of the banal and the enduring sought to express the cultural experience of everyday life in New Zealand at mid-century, and to communicate issues of faith and doubt. But it was an

¹ Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing the "Popular"', in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, Pearson/Prentice Hall, 1998, p.451.

² Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, p.viii.

³ Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers: a sketch of New Zealand behaviour and its implications for the artist', *Landfall*, vol.6, no. 23, September 1952, pp.201–230.

⁴ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Art in Canterbury: Some Notes on the Group Show', *Landfall*, March 1948, vol.2, no.1, p.50.

⁵ Colin McCahon, letter to John Caselberg, 21 February 1951, quoted in Peter Simpson, *Answering Hark: McCahon/Caselberg Painter/Poet*, Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2001, p.17.

aesthetic strategy at odds with the critical prescriptions of its time. Fairburn's invective drew on the deep antipathy of modernist intellectuals for mass culture. While tension between the disparate cultures of the elite and the mass was a widespread international phenomenon, in New Zealand the antagonism was given a particularly urgent local inflection by the provincial anxieties thrown up in the process of cultural nation-building after World War II. In his employment of the everyday aesthetics of mass-produced comic books and commercial design, McCahon had, in Fairburn's estimation, violated one of New Zealand high culture's defining principles—the degree of its distinction from the common culture.

Fairburn's insult gave voice to a wider anxiety about the fragile status of the high culture in New Zealand society at mid-century, an unease that persisted late into the twentieth century. He spoke from a conviction that not only were the defences of the high culture in imminent danger of being stormed by 'Philistines', but also with a sense of personal indignation on behalf of fellow members, as if McCahon had deliberately opened the door and invited the hordes in.⁶ While Fairburn was ultimately unsuccessful in swaying opinion about the merits of McCahon's work, my interest resides in his commentary as a representation of the cultural tensions which were at play at the time, and which were factors in both the production and reception of McCahon's work. The establishment of the national canon and high-cultural infrastructure was the critical post-war project of New Zealand intellectuals, contiguous with the emergence of a tradition of modernism in New Zealand arts and letters. The 'celestial lavatory incident' positioned antagonism between the high and the mass at the formative moment of New Zealand modernist art, an object of contention for both art and its criticism. What was contested was the representation of everyday experience; what was at stake was the notion of 'authentic' national identity and the local tradition of culture.

It is my contention that antagonism between the high culture and the common culture has operated as an active fault-line in the field of New Zealand modernist art. I propose that this tension—articulated by vanguard artists who incorporate aspects of the common culture in their work, and by critics concerned with the status and power of art within a provincial culture—has represented a struggle for visibility that not only reveals the social antagonisms of broader New Zealand culture but which has over time strengthened and enlarged the

⁶ Wystan Curnow later suggested that Fairburn identified himself 'so thoroughly and compulsively with the possibilities of the high culture in New Zealand' that his career uniquely reflected 'the realities of its failures'. Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. Wystan Curnow. Auckland: Heinemann, 1973, p.161.

critical territories of the high culture. The manifestation of these tensions in the local field of art is intimately connected to the expression of national identity, and has achieved particular purchase at moments of significant national cultural and social change; times when, as T.J. Clark has it, ‘art and politics could not escape each other’⁷. The articulation of national identity is a dominant theme in the history of 20th century New Zealand art, as writers and artists sought from the 1930s onwards to ‘invent’ modern New Zealand culture. Nationalism and its discontents provide the master narrative for local modernist art history; in a certain sense, as Robert Leonard has observed, ‘nationalism was *our* modernism’.⁸ What New Zealand cultural nationalism and the high modernist tradition share is a critical disdain for mass culture, against which elements of the high culture—but not always artistic practice—have at times constituted themselves in implacable opposition.

In this thesis, I explore a counter-theme of the role and visibility of the common culture within the context of ambitious artistic practice in New Zealand. I do not pretend to offer a comprehensive history of New Zealand art’s relation to the common culture⁹, nor have I sought to write a complete history of nationalism in New Zealand art; Francis Pound’s *Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity, 1930-1970* (2010) covers the latter field both elegantly and thoroughly.¹⁰ Rather I focus on pivotal moments when the forces active in local society become apparent within the struggle for definition of the national artistic culture. The first such moment is the emergence of a tradition of modernist painting in the work of Colin McCahon (1919-87) in the late 1940s, in which I focus on the critical antagonism towards mass culture revealed by the ‘celestial lavatory incident’. While the first section deals with the contemporary cultural reverberations around this moment, subsequent sections of the thesis are concerned with its continued resonances over the decades that followed it, in which tension between the high and the common culture remains a generative factor in the articulation of new identities. I do not suggest that the antagonistic discourse of mass and high culture is the only, or the best, way to approach McCahon’s work, nor that his

⁷ T.J. Clark, ‘On the Social History of Art’, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California, 1999 (1973), p.9.

⁸ Robert Leonard, ‘Mod Cons’, in *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, ed. Mary Barr, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992, p.167.

⁹ Such a history could include works by (in addition to the artists I discuss): Billy Apple, Tony Fomison, Dick Frizzell, Ian Scott, Richard Killeen, et al, Julian Dashper, Michael Stevenson, Marie Shannon, Shane Cotton, Seraphine Pick, Terry Urbahn, Simon Morris, Daniel Malone, Dane Mitchell, Saskia Leek, Wayne Youle, Rob Hood, and Rohan Weallans, among many others.

¹⁰ Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity, 1930-1970*. Auckland University Press, 2010.

introduction of the popular is his most profound or distinctive contribution (though I do argue that it is a critical part of his larger project to communicate with a broad audience). What I suggest instead is that it offers a particular lens through which high culture in New Zealand may be understood as a contested space; and as a space that was still being contested in the mid-1990s on the terms that McCahon established in the late 1940s.¹¹

The thesis is divided into three parts, opening with a discussion of McCahon's work of the late 1940s; secondly 'After McCahon', which is concerned with the 1950s through to the late 1980s; and thirdly 'After after McCahon', which examines the continued presence of McCahon's work and the problematicisation of the common culture in debates about national identity in the 1990s. In seeking to account for the vehemence of Fairburn's response to McCahon's work incorporating the aesthetics of the common culture, the first section examines the conditions of New Zealand high culture immediately after World War II. It looks at the context of local art criticism, which had been hitherto marked by amateurism and cronyism, but which subsequently drew from contemporary British literary criticism in order to professionalise the discourse in New Zealand at the time of rapid expansion of the high-cultural infrastructure. In particular, the trenchant opposition of British intellectuals to mass culture is examined in the local context; and the social divide between the realms of fine and commercial art—and McCahon's transgression of this boundary—is outlined. A further chapter proposes that McCahon's use of mass culture represented a form of 'aesthetic primitivism' with which to represent the brutalities of life in wartime, and concludes that fundamental to the antagonism over his work was disagreement over what constituted local cultural authenticity.

The second section of the thesis considers problems of New Zealand high culture figured in antagonistic relation to the mass culture of everyday life that were advanced by New Zealand critics in the years after McCahon produced his popular-culture inflected paintings. Firstly, the cultural impact of the hundreds of thousands of American troops stationed in New Zealand during the War is considered, and is related to the subsequent rise of the 'comics menace' as a source of moral panic among educated New Zealanders during the early 1950s. The general antipathy of New Zealand intellectuals towards comics reveals the fault-line

¹¹ My approach differs from that taken by Richard Lummis in his PhD thesis, 'Modelling the New Zealand Artist: Rita Angus and Colin McCahon' University of Otago, 2004, in which he explores the construction of artist identity in New Zealand through the key figures of Angus and McCahon. I am concerned instead with McCahon's role in the production and evaluation of local high cultural identity.

between McCahon and other high cultural figures, who were predominantly literary figures; while the writers considered comics an inferior form of literature, simplified and dumbbed down in order to appeal to ‘children and jockeys’, McCahon employed the rich and vigorous modern aesthetic of comics to communicate with a broad audience.¹² A second chapter examines key works of New Zealand high-cultural criticism, tracing an antagonistic history in which the common culture is framed as a problematic for the high, and in which New Zealand high culture is therefore viewed as a remedial project. The ‘provincial problem’ of New Zealand modernism is compared with the Australian situation; there are cultural similarities but important differences. The interest of a new generation of New Zealand scholars in popular culture—and admittance of the agency of individuals in working with it—is observed in changing attitudes towards comic strips in the 1980s. The same scholars also seek to problematise the terms of criticism which the cultural nationalist generation applied to its productions—‘reality’, ‘experience’, ‘authenticity’—and to seek new terms for local critical address. A final chapter explores the afterlife of McCahon’s work after his death in 1987, tracking the movement of the work out into the common culture and the high culture’s contestation of his modernist legacy in an exhibition entitled ‘after McCahon’ in 1989.

The third section of the thesis opens with an account of the new crisis of national identity under emerging cultural conditions of postmodernism and postcolonialism in New Zealand in the 1990s. It takes its title of ‘after after McCahon’ from an exhibition of parodies and pastiches of McCahon’s work organised by artists and writers in 1994; it is concerned with the discourse which continued to be generated by McCahon’s works a decade after his death. Its first chapter looks at ‘Choice!’ (1990), an exhibition of contemporary Māori art, which introduced Michael Parekowhai’s work and precipitated an ongoing discussion on the politics of identity in contemporary art. While Parekowhai located aspects of Māori identity in the traditions of high art and globalised mass culture, including in a monumental sculptural reworking of a painting by McCahon, Ronnie van Hout and other artists interrogated national identity through the incorporation of tropes of mass and popular culture as well as by reworking modernist art—and in particular, work by McCahon. The result was an expansion of the terms both of national identity and of the critical territories of the high culture. The thesis concludes by examining the critical furore that arose when Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand’s new national museum, opened with the exhibition of a work by Colin McCahon

¹² Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.225.

beside a refrigerator of the same vintage. The debate that ensued was not so much generated by a collision between modernist and postmodernist politics of display, although this was implicated, but was instead largely concerned with the desire of high cultural critics to separate the domain of art from the domain of everyday life. Critics read the instrumentalisation of McCahon's work in the furtherance of official national identity as an insult to both the artist and to the field of art itself, and argued successfully for the greater visibility of art at the national museum and its separation from the artefacts of the common culture. What was arguably missed, however, in the acrimony of this debate, was the notion of Te Papa itself as an expression of the wider antagonisms of New Zealand society, in which the high culture and the common culture have coexisted in uneasy proximity.

The dialectic of high art and the common culture

This thesis is concerned with a view of culture that is presumed no longer to exist. It is the notion that there is an unbridgeable abyss between high culture (the production, appreciation and criticism of art forms such as poetry, fine arts, classical music, art music, opera, ballet and modern dance, which are associated with educated and social elites, and which incorporate difficulty as a condition of both production and reception) and mass culture (the production and consumption of industrialised forms of expression such as comics, popular novels, Hollywood films, talk-back radio, radio serials, popular music, video games, and television game-shows and soap operas, which are assumed to be cynically constructed and passively received). This point of view has informed much modernist cultural criticism in New Zealand. While a postmodernist sensibility would suggest that there is no valuable distinction to be made between high and mass or popular culture, such distinctions continued, in fact, to be made well into the 1990s. And while the conditions of New Zealand culture had changed as the century drew to a close, the old tension between the common and the high was still apparent in art discourse and remained a subject of address for many artists.

Andreas Huyssen has termed this hierarchical view of culture, whereby mass culture is twinned in a negative dialectic with modernist high art, as the ‘Great Divide’.¹³ In art criticism it was a position most strongly articulated by Clement Greenberg, in his seminal essay ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’, which was written in part as a reaction to the advance of the masses under the pre-war forces of fascism, and which attempted, like Walter Benjamin’s essay of three years earlier, to account for the predicament of art under conditions of mass production.¹⁴ For Greenberg, originality and authenticity would be determined by an emphatic rejection of the mass-produced and pre-processed, though the artist would continually be subjected to the pressures of the mass. While Greenberg’s criticism was not read in New Zealand until the 1960s, local high cultural criticism was informed by modern British literary criticism, which similarly deplored mass culture and popular taste and advocated a return to ‘organic’, vernacular, pre-industrial culture. Mass culture and modernism appeared at much the same time, both as by-products of the Industrial Revolution (as indeed, was the founding of New Zealand by British settlers in 1840). Thomas Crow suggests, however, that mass culture was prior to and determining of modernism; that modernism was effectively a reaction to the spread of mass literacy.¹⁵ In this formulation, explored in a scathing historical critique of intellectual snobbery by John Carey, modernism emerges as a means of excluding the mass public from expressions of culture.¹⁶ Its degree of difficulty is a means of keeping the uninitiated out.

The approach I take to the dialectic of high art and mass culture acknowledges these histories as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus, in which the exercise and display of taste acquired through the accumulation of cultural capital through immersive experience functions as a means of social positioning in which the many are excluded to the benefit of the few.¹⁷ By means of public criticism and the politics of quiet exclusion, gatekeepers of the high culture indicate acceptable and unacceptable aesthetics and cultural forms within the discourse of high art, and police the boundary between the common culture and the high. The

¹³ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

¹⁴ Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’, *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no.5, 1939. Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London: Fontana, 1992. pp. 211-244.

¹⁵ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, p.10.

¹⁶ See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1800-1939*, London: St Martin’s Press, 1992.

¹⁷ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

result is to preserve the status quo and secure the cultural capital of the elite, maintaining a social division, which legitimises a power imbalance—fine art over commercial art or design, for example—and which makes it appear natural that one kind of visual representation appears in an art gallery and that another does not.

McCahon's early work—and the work by later artists produced under similar terms—was political in that it rendered visible the visual expressions of people who were shut out of participation in the high culture. It also problematised the high-cultural tradition of observing separation between the world of art and the world of commerce, a line of thought that had begun as a social distinction in the first half of the twentieth century, and which was transformed into a high modernist quest for purity and criticality during the second. Implicit in a counter-aesthetic informed by mass culture is the artist's critique of the politics of high-cultural representation. I argue—following Crow—that while such gestures may involve some kind of attempt to make a space within the high culture for those cultural practices that are excluded from it, the result has been to perpetuate and reinvent visual tradition by renewing the connections between the high culture and the everyday. Smuggling the vulgarities of the everyday world into the high culture, the artist also reasserts the relevance of aesthetics as a critique of daily life. Aesthetics which borrow from comic books, or washing powder packaging, or later from advertising, pornography, horror films, video games, prison tattoos, ufology, naïve landscape painting, flower arranging, and mass-produced kitsch souvenirs have been seen as provocative by nature of their deliberate vulgarity, gesturing rudely towards the consensus of taste established by the cultural elite. Such aesthetically transgressive art represents a purposeful disruption to the hegemonies of the art world, to what Jacques Rancière terms its 'police order': it violates the art world's unwritten rules of what can be said, or pictured, or represented, and is part of an ongoing struggle over who belongs and who is excluded, and over who sets the terms for cultural critique.¹⁸

¹⁸ See Gabriel Rockhill's 'Glossary of Technical Terms', in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*. transl and intro. Gabriel Rockhill, afterword by Slavoj Žižek. London and New York: Continuum, 2004, p.89.

The New Zealand situation

In New Zealand, the high culture has sought to reinforce and maintain the concept of the Great Divide between its own expressions and those of the common culture. To some extent this division is a stance inherited from the first days of European settlement, in which the ‘official’ culture through which settlers sought to promote civilisation in their adopted country was juxtaposed against the popular transnational culture of the itinerant workers—whalers and sealers and gold-miners and other fortune-hunters—who travelled between colonies. The high and the common, the local and the global, the prescribed and the organic, have always co-existed in a state of mutual tension within New Zealand culture. The small size of New Zealand’s population has meant that neither one can ever quite escape the other. Because there is neither a longstanding tradition of art philanthropy, nor the wealthy or aristocratic population to support it, the modern New Zealand state has acted as patron of the advanced arts. Here Matthew Arnold’s concept of the high culture as critical to the moral health of wider society remains significant; as well as the association of high culture with the expression of national identity, which continues to inform government cultural policy. The state has sought not only to support art projects (rather than artists themselves) but also to expand the public for art. The result has been less to sustain the specialisation that is required for the production of art at an advanced level than to promote a sense of cultural egalitarianism. The reception of high culture—and hence the concern of cultural producers for their mode of communication and breadth of address—has thus always been at stake in the modern history of New Zealand.

Many critics have seen this inability to distance oneself from the common culture—from the mass public—as one of the great limitations of the high culture and of intellectual life in New Zealand. Although it is arguably a general condition of settler cultures, it has been regarded within New Zealand as a peculiarly New Zealand trait. In the same review in which he lambasted McCahon’s interest in popular aesthetics, Fairburn spoke of the ‘great burden’ of having to paint for the New Zealand public; he believed the weight of public opinion carried on the shoulders of artists resulted in amateurism and the production of cliché.¹⁹ Twenty-five years later little had changed: Wystan Curnow described the ‘weight of the pressure’ of the ‘New Zealand situation’ on local writers and artists, suggesting that the ‘chronic failings in

¹⁹A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Art in Canterbury: Some Notes on the Group Show’, *Landfall*, March 1948, vol.2, no.1, p.48.

New Zealand's high culture' were due to the inhibiting forces of amateurism and the local requirement for versatility consequent on a small population which required its high cultural figures—whose exemplar was A.R.D. Fairburn ('poet, painter, social critic, art critic and historian, pamphleteer and literary critic, a good sportsman and a great talker')—to play multiple roles.²⁰ 'The true specialists,' Curnow noted, 'we export.' [p.159] New Zealand was a particularly hard place to set up as an artist or an intellectual; those who remained in the country—like McCahon, or writer Janet Frame, or poets Kendrick Smithyman or Allen Curnow—faced not only limitations placed on the critical strategies available to them, but also the danger of being 'swallowed up by the general processes of society.' [p.169] With its high culture characterised by thinness and recentness, there was an insufficient gap between art and life in New Zealand to ensure the kind of 'psychic insulation' required in order to produce rich, difficult, and innovative works, argued Curnow. 'New Zealand is a small society, short on history. It is a cultural province and always will be.' [p.157]

Writing from Britain in 1952 on a temporary furlough from the war against New Zealand provincialism, Bill Pearson identified the common culture as New Zealand high culture's primary source of repression. He pictured the New Zealand public personified in the form of a contemptuous everyman eavesdropping on conversations between intellectuals; a deadening presence whether imagined or actual which prevented Pearson and his colleagues from discussing anything remotely intelligent in public ('otherwise you sense the rest of the bus listening united in one unspoken sneer at half-cock').²¹ Art was included among other intellectual activity in the catalogue of public repressions: 'Once in a hotel lavatory an art student and I were talking of Peter McIntyre's drawings when a little man piped up that he was a returned man from the first war and he knew that we knew what we were talking about but there was no need to let the whole lavatory know it.' Fifty-five years later in his 'Short History of "the New Zealand Intellectual"', Roger Horrocks's could still hear the sneering tone of Pearson's man on the bus, detecting his malign presence in the ridiculous furores over contemporary art which continued to play out in the public sphere²², including the infamous

²⁰ Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', op cit., p.161.

²¹ Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers', op.cit., p.210.

²² Pearson's identification of the 'man on the bus' as the personification of the scornful everyman recalls the equally subjective notion of the 'man on the Clapham omnibus', a legal test of reasonableness applied by the British courts from the 1930s to determine negligence. The man on the Clapham omnibus is an imaginary figure, conventional but open-minded, lightly educated but not a specialist, against whose imaginary conduct the defendant's actions can be considered. He represents common sense—the characteristic that Roger Horrocks considers is most used in New Zealand to undermine the discourses of the high culture.

‘braying donkey dunny’ incident on the occasion of New Zealand’s representation in the Venice Biennale in 2005 with the participation of the et al collective of artists.²³ The anti-intellectualism of the common culture, concluded Horrocks, had cast a long and grim shadow over New Zealand’s high culture and continued to inhibit many particularly difficult high-cultural expressions from ever establishing themselves in New Zealand.²⁴ The common culture forced the high culture to censor itself, or suffer public scorn and opprobrium.

This thesis considers New Zealand’s ‘provincialism problem’ in relation to the practice of the national visual arts tradition. It suggests that one of the ways that New Zealand provincialism manifested itself was through cultural nationalist anxiety about local ‘authenticity’, which was particularly evident in the high culture’s rejection of mass culture and its concern with the anti-intellectualism of everyday life. But rather than persist in cataloguing the negative effect of the common culture on the high, I argue—following Terry Smith—that the provincial artist cannot help but be provincial; and further, that the cultural conditions of provincialism—lateness, derivativeness, shallowness, thinness—are precisely the conditions of cultural possibility in and with which vanguard artists living in the world’s provinces work.²⁵ Provincialism is a geographical circumstance rather than a metric by which to measure relative lack of cultural sophistication. Provincial conditions of culture would be more productively recognised as subjects of address by advanced artists living at the world’s margins rather than levelled as criticisms of their practice, or cast solely as objects for reform. In New Zealand, for example, international art was until comparatively recently experienced primarily in reproduction. New Zealand’s geographical distance from the world’s centres has resulted in a historical familiarity with representation as a factor in both the production and reception of local culture. Mass print culture has thus provided the local means of encountering the high culture, and has involved productive misreadings and inventive adaptations that have produced a particular New Zealand version of the modern. As art historian Peter Tomory wrote in 1958, ‘the very absence of works of art ... must surely

²³ It is noteworthy, perhaps, that several public furores over contemporary art in New Zealand have involved toilets; from Fairburn’s celestial lavatory, to the sensation which emerged over the exhibition of Duchamp’s urinal *Fontaine* at the Christchurch Art Gallery in 1967, to the public discussions regarding the representation of New Zealand in the 2005 Venice Biennale by the et al collective of artists, who had just shown *Rapture* (2004), an installation which included a portaloo from inside which a braying donkey could be heard, in ‘Prospect 2004’ at City Gallery Wellington.

²⁴ Roger Horrocks, ‘A Short History of “the New Zealand Intellectual”’, in *Speaking Truth to Power: Public Intellectuals Rethink New Zealand*, ed. Laurence Simmons, Auckland University Press, 2007.

²⁵ Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem’, *Artforum*, September 1974, p.57.

produce a different aesthetic orientation.’²⁶ The traces of New Zealand’s transnational provincial experience—which affords an openness to the way the world manifests itself in the local culture that is foreign to the nationalist paradigm—have inevitably been manifest in the aesthetics as well as the politics of New Zealand’s high culture.

Art and politics

Following Terry Smith’s proposition that there are no ideologically neutral cultural acts, and Jacques Rancière’s notion that aesthetics represent ‘regimes of identification of art’ which are differently determined by different social and historical contexts, this thesis asserts that aesthetics are political in that they carry with them the social context of their origins.²⁷ In this context, artists are positioned as agents within the field of culture, as contributors to a national imaginary who are both subject to, and periodically critical of, the social politics and historical forces which define the moment in which they work. It takes a broadly historical materialist approach, in which art is seen as rooted in the social, economic, and material practices of the society from which it comes. While acknowledging the substantial overlap between the worlds of social history and art history, this approach, however, does not subsume art history into social history, reducing the work of art merely to a visual representation of contemporary political struggle. Nor does it operate with a cultural studies mandate, understanding artworks as symbolic expressions of the material culture of dominant or subordinate social groups, although the Birmingham cultural studies tradition associated with Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall offers insights into the power relations of the art world and contribute to its formulation here as a competitive territory or arena of struggle, the ultimate goal of whose combatants is visibility.

This model of the field of art draws from Antonio Gramsci’s proposition of popular culture as a source and site of contestation. It sees culture as a dynamic network of relationships shaped by antagonistic pressures.²⁸ Although the various dispositions of New Zealand’s high culture

²⁶ Tomory, Peter. ‘Looking at Art in New Zealand’, *Landfall*, vol.12, no.2, June 1958,

²⁷ Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem’, op.cit., p.59. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, op.cit., pp.7-42.

²⁸ Antonio Gramsci, ‘Prison Writings 1929-1935’, in David Forgacs (ed.) *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, New York University Press, 2000, pp.189-391.

are the product of contemporary social forces interacting with the hangovers of colonial history, the periodic challenges to the aesthetic consensus which are mounted by artists are part of the distinctive discourse of art—an a-temporal language of call and response and of looping feedback between artists across time and place. While artists are, like other intellectuals, members of the high culture, this local history of aesthetic dissensus reveals that artists are at times resistant to the prescriptions of the high culture; and that models of the high culture, derived from the literary, are not always formulated in accordance with the praxis of visual artists.

Operating in the fault-lines of culture, advanced artists are like seismographs, alert to subterranean shifts in the social landscape that might take years to be evident at the surface of public discourse. The social effects of economic pressures are often chronicled by artists some time before they appear as a mainstream political narrative. As Nikos Papastergiadis writes, ‘Art may be a precursor of changes not yet fully felt, or witnesses to states either excluded from the frame of hegemonic discourse or still a faint murmur in the heart of everyday life.’²⁹ Artists whose terrain is the subjectivities of the everyday—those who draw attention to the unnoticed or overlooked, who seek to represent the experience of identities marginalised by the discourses of power, who negotiate and articulate the voice of the unheard—inevitably intersect with the world of politics. Tensioned by the same social and economic forces, the struggle both for visibility and for hegemony within the field of art practice frequently mirrors the trajectory of history.

In seeking initially to understand the nature of the cultural antagonism that lay behind A.R.D. Fairburn’s critique of McCahon’s work, this thesis accounts for the generative tension in play between the high and the common culture in the modern history of New Zealand art.

²⁹ Nikos Papastergiadis, “‘Everything That Surrounds’: Art, Politics and Theories of the Everyday’, in *Everyday: 11th Biennale of Sydney*, Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 1998, p.27.

A note on terms

Many of the terms used in this thesis to describe aspects of the dynamic processes of culture themselves have a long cultural history of definition and redefinition. This is because they are concerned with the social production of meaning, and with the cultural and social values placed on modes of production. These concepts are mutable, shifting and evolving over time. This thesis acknowledges their mutability, and seeks to place them in their historical context.

Culture

This thesis acknowledges the great difficulty inherent in the use of the term ‘culture’, its multiple definitions, its ineffability, its essential slipperiness, but also the fact that—to paraphrase James Clifford—culture is a ‘deeply compromised idea’ that it is difficult to do without.³⁰ The great inclusiveness of Raymond Williams’s definition of culture as a ‘way of life’ is useful, as is his notion of culture as the ‘common meanings’ that are produced by humans in their interactions with the physical world. Culture is also used to refer to the arts and learning: as Williams describes it, ‘those special processes of discovery and creative effort’.³¹ Culture is the means by which we make sense of the world, and live as part of society. It is a creative tradition that is continually reinscribed and reinvented by individual contributions. This thesis broadly follows arguments about culture drawn from the field of cultural studies, in particular the works of John Storey and Raymond Williams. It positions culture as a field of struggle for the production (and dissemination) of symbolic meaning among social groups, and—as such—a means of constituting identity through inclusion and exclusion. The interest of cultural studies in the relations of production is a factor in my analysis of the cultural and social distinctions that applied to aspects of art production in the modernist period of New Zealand art. This thesis associates ‘culture’ most particularly with the human production of objects and artefacts, locating in them important and broadly-circulating components of the symbolic ‘stories we tell ourselves about ourselves’, to borrow from Clifford Geertz’s famous definition of culture.³² This thesis figures culture as the practice of representation. As such, I argue that it always has a relationship to politics.

³⁰ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, 1988, p.10.

³¹ Raymond Williams, ‘Culture is Ordinary’ [1958], in Raymond Williams, *Sources of Hope, Democracy, Socialism*, London: Verso Books, p.93.

³² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, London: Hutchinson, 1975, p.448.

High culture

Acknowledging the awkward binary which ‘high’ culture implies is a fundamental concern of this thesis. High culture has always been contrasted with its supposed opposite, or antagonist, whether that is defined variously as ‘low’, ‘mass’, or popular culture. The relationship of ‘high’ culture and the popular has been extensively theorised by sociology, critical and cultural studies. Whereas previously there had simply been a shared public arena of culture, high culture emerged as a field in the second half of the nineteenth century, synchronous with the development of industrial processes of reproduction and arguably representing an attempt to annex particular cultural forms for the use of elite social groups. To use the term ‘high culture’ in 2013 is deliberately to invoke the values of the past; postmodernist thought effectively broke down such rigid (modernist) hierarchical distinctions between modes of production as well as the notion of textual essentialism. The ability to inscribe meaning is no longer assumed inherent in the text, nor the sole function of the author or the educated critic, but is also widely agreed to be generated by the agency of the consumer or the audience.

Though distinctions between high and popular culture have, as John Storey points out, no evidential basis in either textual properties or modes of production, the institutional and social embeddedness of this distinction exists as a subject of study.³³ The maintenance of this distinction is a study of the strategies of power. The term ‘high culture’ almost always implies a judgement in the context of a class division; such a relationship was confirmed by Pierre Bourdieu’s influential studies of the consumption preferences of different social groups.³⁴ Historically, ‘high culture’ has tended to mean the kinds of art forms that highly educated and/or wealthy people prefer.

In New Zealand, Wystan Curnow is a crucial theorist of high culture and its place within broader New Zealand society. His essay written in 1973, ‘High Culture in a Small Province’, uses literary critic Morse Peckham’s definition of high culture as ‘marked by extreme richness’.³⁵ Curnow and Peckham indicate that high culture contains a high degree of difficulty, being concerned with ‘innumerable ambiguities and ambivalences and puzzles and

³³ John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalisation*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.xi.

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, 1984,

³⁵ Wystan Curnow, ‘High Culture in a Small Province’, *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, ed. Wystan Curnow. Auckland: Heinemann, 1973.

problems', and that its maintenance requires alliance with political power, social status and wealth. Although open to charges of elitism, including that made by John Carey of modernist difficulty as a means of exclusion, such alliances of patronage can effectively serve to bring high cultural expressions to a broad public audience.³⁶ With the absence of a fully developed patron class in New Zealand, the state has generally acted as patron for the development of high cultural expression. There is a sense, therefore, in which high culture also stands as New Zealand's 'official' culture.

Popular culture: folk culture, mass culture

There has been a long tradition of scholarly debate over what constitutes popular culture, and how it might be defined. The first concept of popular culture to emerge was in the late 18th century as 'folklore', through the anthologising and subsequent study of the distinctive songs and traditional ways of life of agricultural workers, an important factor in the developing nationalisms of the nineteenth century. This pastoral frame around the culture of the people was displaced in the 1930s and 1940s by a view of popular culture as the mass-produced products of the 'culture industry', in writings by José Ortega y Gasset³⁷, Clement Greenberg³⁸, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno³⁹ (who coined the term in 1947). Through the simplistic entertainment provided by popular music, radio shows and films, the masses were pacified and subdued (and encouraged to spend their wages on such products). British literary critics F.R. and Q.D. Leavis deplored the decline of British rural folk traditions under an onslaught of Americanised popular culture, and observed that people's reference to high-cultural texts, including the King James Bible, was being crowded out by novelties.⁴⁰ In contrast to the conception of folk culture as an organic, 'authentic' culture arising spontaneously from the people, mass culture was regarded as lacking in authenticity, a form of ersatz culture 'imposed from above' by the 'Lords of Kitsch', as a tool of control.⁴¹ The culture industry also contributed to the global homogenisation of culture along American lines, and the consequent displacement of the 'authentic' folk cultures of nations.

³⁶ See John Carey, *What Good Are The Arts?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

³⁷ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1930.

³⁸ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp.15-22. Originally published in *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no.5, 1939.

³⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Verso, 1979. (First published in 1947.)

⁴⁰ See Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1965; F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson. *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1942.

⁴¹ Dwight Macdonald, 'A Theory of Mass Culture', *Diogenes* 1, June 1953, pp. 1-17.

The culture industry view was displaced by a subsequent generation of British cultural theorists (known loosely as the Birmingham School) who drew from their own experiences to argue for the agency of ‘the people’ themselves in determining the use and meaning of products of popular culture. Writers such as Richard Hoggart⁴², Raymond Williams⁴³ and Stuart Hall⁴⁴ broke down the distinction between producers and consumers that had occupied the Frankfurt School, while Dick Hebdige⁴⁵ identified resistance to mainstream culture in the diverse styles of British subcultures. The Gramscian concept of hegemony entered British cultural studies in the 1970s, bringing about a new conception of popular culture as a field of unresolved antagonisms between the industrial culture complex and spontaneously arising ‘authentic’ folk culture or working-class subcultures. The cultural relativities of postmodernist thought placed new emphasis on popular culture as memory traces, an element in an archive of personal and community identity; while industrial globalisation and the growth of communication technologies developed new connections between shared but geographically far-flung communities of interest, explored by theorists such as Paul Gilroy.⁴⁶

Throughout its diverse histories, popular culture has been a study of the culture of ‘the people’; Storey argues, following French historian Roger Chartier, that popular culture is a category invented by intellectuals.⁴⁷ It is a field of study which seeks, in part, to categorise the people, whether as ‘volk’, or as industrialised ‘masses’, or as individuals with agency, or as globalised consumers and nodes in a vast network of communications. This thesis acknowledges the impact of these various historical frameworks as they relate to the dynamic relationship between high culture and popular culture in New Zealand art history and art criticism, itself a distinctive field of culture. Unless there is a contextual reason to do otherwise, I use ‘popular culture’ in order to represent both local ‘folk’ expressions and imported mass-produced products and their local variants, recognising the power of the agency that individuals and groups have in making use of both.

⁴² Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1957.

⁴³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1958.

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973.

⁴⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1979.

⁴⁶ Paul Gilroy, Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity and the Challenge of a Changing Same’, in *Popular Music: Music and Identity*, ed. Simon Frith, New York: Routledge, 2005, p.188. (Originally published in *Black Music Research Journal*, no. 11, vol.2, 1991, pp.111-36.)

⁴⁷ John Storey, op.cit., p.xi.

Authenticity

Authenticity is a critical concept in this thesis. Its exploration here arises from the late 19th and early 20th century concept of folk cultures as spontaneous expressions of the people; part of a practice of representation derived from people's relationship with the land. Critics of the culture industry castigated its productions primarily for their lack of authenticity; British cultural critics like F.R. Leavis wrote nostalgically in the 1930s of the vanishing 'organic' ways of life in the British countryside, which were being overtaken by mass production. Raymond Williams describes the supposed authenticity of the country way of life over the culture of the city as a 'structure of feeling', and observes that it is connected to aspects of national identity.⁴⁸

The concept of the authentic is closely related to that of the original: it is the mark of an original work of art as opposed to a fake, as well as the conception of a direct, unmediated expression from an individual. The authentic is thus positioned as the antithesis of the mass-produced copy. Authenticity implies the genuine, the real thing. It is a form of authority, arising out of the lived experience of an individual or the collective histories of a group of people. (For the latter it requires the existence of a supposedly unbroken lineage of tradition; here Paul Gilroy's theory of the 'changing same', in which cultural tradition is revitalised and extended by recombination, has added a layer of valuable complexity, as well as a means of including the history of regional modernisms in the historical account.) Concepts of authenticity are closely related to the representation of experience, and are particularly potent in New Zealand culture which has historically valued capability—doing—over 'too much thinking'.

Authenticity was a critical factor in the cultural-nationalist drive to 'invent' New Zealand's high culture at mid-century. It was manifest variously in the belief that the landscape was the authentic national subject, the source and subject of local representation; that a nation required a distinctive national art to articulate its identity both to itself and to others; and finally that popular culture's mass productions were inauthentic expressions. Such notions were disputed repeatedly from the 1960s onwards both in New Zealand and internationally: Adorno's critique of authenticity disputed its putative nobility, drawing attention to its status

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1973

as a cultural ideology.⁴⁹ Postmodernism effectively challenged any residual notion of objective authenticity, recognising that authenticities are multiple, variously contingent and subjective.

The Everyday and the Common Culture

Like ‘high culture’, ‘the everyday’ almost always implies a comparison with some other supposedly oppositional term. It is generally contrasted against ‘the transcendent’, a legacy of the history of the six day working week followed by communion with God on Sundays. There is a sense in which the everyday—everydayness—stands for drudgery, the quotidian, the mundane, the exigencies of daily habit; it represents a lack of transcendence. Yet as much as the homeliness of the everyday represents boredom, it also represents the capacity for comfort, a space for safely processing the unfamiliar. Various theorists have posited the everyday as a site of resistance. In his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre theorises the everyday as the site in which social structures are internalised by an individual, and in which individuals exert a personal criticality.⁵⁰ Michel de Certeau catalogues and examines the ways in which people personalise aspects of mass culture and everyday experience, making them their own.⁵¹ He describes a ‘diversionary practice’, called in French *la perruque*, or the wig, in which workers convert aspects of their employment (company time, scrap materials) to their own ends. De Certeau asserts such practices are popular culture, and defines them as a refusal to accord the established order the status of a law.⁵² If the everyday can be framed as a site of resistance, then its representation—*whose* everyday experience is being represented?—is similarly a space of contestation. The representation of the everyday has been a significant subject for advanced art since World War II.

The everyday is also the daily experience that is held in common by members of different subgroups within a larger group. The common culture, as the term is used by Thomas Crow, thus incorporates aspects of mass culture and of high culture alongside quotidian daily experience; that which is so mundane it tends not to be recognised as a distinctive way of life

⁴⁹ See Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Northwestern University Press, 1973.

⁵⁰ Henri Lefebvre *The Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, translated by John Moore, London: Verso, 1991. Originally published 1947.

⁵¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

⁵² *Ibid*, pp.25-26.

and thus frequently eludes representation.⁵³ I use ‘the everyday’ and the ‘common culture’ almost interchangeably to refer to these largely invisible shared aspects of culture.

⁵³ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996.

PART ONE: COLIN MCCAHERN 1947-1950: 'SEEKING CULTURE IN THE WRONG PLACES'

Our towns our way of life our people, appear anything but inspiring, yes, and our 'culture' I agree, but do you think we seek in the wrong places for our culture? The awful stuff made by the W.D.F.V. & the signwriting of the towns & the football & the racing & the advertising. Is that possibly the culture, & from there we must start. Not from the imports but the awful stuff around...

Colin McCahon, letter to John Caselberg, 1951⁵⁴

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 backs of those painters who want to escape from the encircling gloom of the Academy by other and more legitimate means.

A.R.D Fairburn, 'Art in Canterbury: Some Notes on the Group Show', 1948⁵⁵

Fortunate the man who, at the right moment, meets the right friend; fortunate also the man who at the right moment meets the right enemy... One needs the enemy.

T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards The Definition of Culture*, 1948⁵⁶

I. Introduction: 'A Vast New Potential'

Between 1947 and 1950 Colin McCahon produced a body of work influenced by mass culture, a gesture unprecedented in the history of New Zealand art. While McCahon's paintings borrowed most recognisably from the populist art form of comic strips, using cartooning conventions such as sequential imagery, bordered cells or frames let into larger images, and speech bubbles, they also incorporated graphic devices drawn from commercial art and advertising, including text figured in juxtaposition to images and 'corner cut-offs.' This was combined with compositions and subjects borrowed from pre-Renaissance paintings which McCahon experienced in reproduction. The works were painted in uncompromisingly garish colours more usually associated with product packaging than landscape painting:

⁵⁴ Colin McCahon, letter to John Caselberg, 21 February 1951, quoted in Peter Simpson, *Answering Hark*, op.cit., p.17.

⁵⁵ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Art in Canterbury: Some Notes on the Group Show', *Landfall*, March 1948, vol.2, no.1, p.50.

⁵⁶ T.S Eliot, *Notes Towards The Definition of Culture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1948, p.59.

McCahon commented later that while the ‘white legends’ of the paintings [the speech bubbles] were inspired by a Rinso packet, ‘the yellow I suppose is from Byzantium.’⁵⁷ Their predominant subject matter was Biblical stories, which McCahon set in an identifiably New Zealand landscape. Yet though the settings were rural, the language of their construction was distinctly urban.

Colin McCahon, *Hail Mary*, 1948, oil on canvas, 927mm x 884mm Collection of the Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Nothing remotely like these works of art inspired by cartoons and soap packets had been seen in New Zealand before, and it would be another twenty years—a generation—before British and American Pop Art provided both a new direction for younger New Zealand artists and a

⁵⁷ Colin McCahon, letter to Rodney Kennedy, 26 January 1947, transcribed by Hamish Keith, Hamish Keith papers, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Archives.

new and more sympathetic critical context with which to re-examine McCahon's earlier work. At a time during which progressive New Zealand writers and artists were engaged in a nation-building project, inventing this country's Pākehā high culture through their collective championship of the rural vernacular, McCahon effectively mounted a counter-aesthetic by using the visual culture of contemporary urban life to describe another kind of distinctly New Zealand experience, at once fearsomely provincial and part of the modern transnational economy of images. Concerned to identify a specifically New Zealand visual tradition within which a modern painter might operate, he settled on the 'awful stuff made by the W.D.F.V. [Women's Division of Federated Farmers] & the signwriting of the towns & the football & the racing & the advertising' as being an authentic expression of New Zealand's European settler culture. 'Our folk art is signwriting and early watercolour drawings, & that's as far back as we go. The extent of our tradition. I don't feel that much was carried out here from England by the settlers,' he commented to his friend John Caselberg in 1950. 'It leaves a lot of freedom...'⁵⁸ At the same time, it presented an extraordinary difficulty for an artist. 'Our towns our way of life our people, appear anything but inspiring, yes,' he wrote to Caselberg the following year. And: 'I really have no answer. And would like to see other places & other ways of life. Meanwhile like as much as I can here. But I do get so fed up with it all & hate the whole thing & long to escape.'⁵⁹

McCahon's mass culture-derived work was received almost as an act of heresy by some prominent art critics during the late 1940s. Its 'shock' was not so much that of the new but of the profoundly inappropriate. Staging Biblical narratives in modern New Zealand occasioned a few adverse comments, but opening up the realm of fine arts to mass culture by importing the aesthetic conventions of commercial art unleashed a volley of complaint and ad-hominem attack against McCahon, foremost among which was art critic A.R.D. Fairburn's tirade in the first issue of the national literary journal, *Landfall*. McCahon's work transgressed against what Jacques Rancière describes as the 'police order' of the high culture—the unwritten laws of convention that govern social practice; of what is able to be said and not said and seen and not seen in a given social context.⁶⁰ Pressure was brought to bear on McCahon's work in an attempt to nullify its potential political impact, out of concern that New Zealand's high culture simply was not robust enough, nor confident enough in its own identity, to

⁵⁸ Colin McCahon, letter to John Caselberg, 12 September 1950, quoted in Peter Simpson, *Answering Hark*, op.cit., p.17.

⁵⁹ Colin McCahon, letter to John Caselberg, 21 February 1951.

⁶⁰ See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, op.cit., p.80, and passim.

accommodate such a direct challenge.⁶¹ The initial body of works which McCahon produced in 1947 was criticised for vulgarity, pretension, and most seriously for opening the door to potential ridicule by ‘Philistines’ due to their apparent (and seemingly deliberate) display of technical ineptitude.

McCahon’s solecism was as much social as it was aesthetic. Like an off-colour limerick at a poetry reading, his tone-lowering crime against aesthetic protocols seemed all the more perfidious for having been committed within the fragile—yet fiercely defended—cloisters of New Zealand’s emergent intelligentsia. The critic E.C. Simpson described the ‘breath-taking shock’ of encountering McCahon’s works in 1948, noting their ‘complete absence of polite parlour tricks and freedom from the savour of art as a plaything of the wealthy.’⁶² McCahon’s interest in ‘low’ forms of expression involved a lapse of taste—a deliberate *lack of distinction*, to use Bourdieu’s term,⁶³ between the separate modes of representation deemed appropriate for the masses and for the elite—which appeared to render the high culture vulnerable to attack from below. On behalf of the high culture, Fairburn fought back, the belligerence and urgency of his tone part of a wider antagonistic relationship that Andreas Huyssen has described as modernism’s ‘obsessive hostility’ to mass culture.⁶⁴ Modernist art, Huyssen suggests, constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion. The defence of its borders fell to its prominent critics; they existed in a perpetual state of anxiety that the purity of higher thought would be sullied and contaminated by contact with the commercialised culture of the masses. The struggle for hegemony between the elite and the mass represented in McCahon’s paintings was not simply confined to the world of arts and letters, however, but was a reflection of general antagonisms in society that were beginning to be increasingly articulated in popular culture and symbolic events.

Although he painted in oils, effectively he was working as a collagist or bricoleur, bringing together images from different contexts to create new relations. Titian’s depositions and Sassetta’s scrolls were conflated with comic-book speech bubbles, crudely painted words and, in the background of *Crucifixion According to St Mark* (1947), a cartoon-ish explosion.

⁶¹ See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. and intro. Gabriel Rockhill. London and New York: Continuum, 2006.

⁶² E.C. Simpson, ‘McCahon’s Raw Paintings Show Audacious, Original Vision’, *Southern Cross*, 10 February 1948.

⁶³ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, 1984, *passim*.

⁶⁴ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. *op.cit.*, p.vii.

The result was neither so much to drag the icons of western art into the gutter of mass culture, nor to raise the lowbrow to an unfeasibly lofty status, but instead to render both equivalent as legitimate sources for the artist in envisaging a way to describe the contemporary world. Of course, the assertion of such an equality involved a disturbance to the existing order comparable with the mushroom cloud detonation McCahon depicted blowing off the roof of the little country church in *Crucifixion According to St Mark*; an image which may be read as a symbol for the various social institutions—including that of the Christian Church itself—that were in the process of being dismantled by the democratising forces of mass culture following the upheavals of World War II.

It is no coincidence that McCahon's breach of the boundaries between fine arts and popular culture occurred at a time when popular culture itself was taking on increasingly problematic associations for advocates of high culture. The 'American Invasion' of New Zealand during World War II, whereby over 100 000 US troops were stationed in this country between 1942 and 1946, had a profound effect on New Zealand's popular culture, and represented the first significant occasion since British colonisation in which New Zealand had opened itself up to direct international influence. To paraphrase Stuart Hall on British popular culture, popular culture in New Zealand at this time largely meant *American* popular culture. New Zealand intellectuals engaged in the post-war nation-building project were already ambivalent towards mass culture, which, in its appeal to the sensational and visceral, appeared actively to undermine their notion of culture as a force for social improvement.

This conception of culture as a moral force was derived from poet and social critic Matthew Arnold's influential writings of the 1860s, which figured high culture as a Great (British) Tradition, comprising the 'best of all that is thought and said' in a civilised society, a force for the greater good constituted in opposition to anarchy or barbarism.⁶⁵ A higher spiritual purpose was the thing that both culture and religion had in common; and the links between the two were expanded upon during the 1930s by the criticism of T.S. Eliot and F.R. and Q.D. Leavis in their battle against the increasing commercialisation of culture. Mass culture was a force for active social harm, both morally and intellectually bereft: the tastes of the high culture represented the road to spiritual enlightenment. The people, however, seemed to make little time for self-improvement by means of either culture or religion: while the

⁶⁵ See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955. [1869]

majority of New Zealanders identified as Christian and sent their children to Sunday school, regular church attendance was comparatively low. As for high culture, contemporary historian Erik Olssen questioned ‘with embarrassment’ whether ‘whether the people have not a religion already, in which Derby Day and the dog track play their parts.’⁶⁶

For New Zealand artists and writers at mid-century, the high culture was also seen as the means through which the new nation—New Zealand had gained full autonomy from Britain in November 1947 with its adoption of the Statute of Westminster Act (1931)—could be expressed and understood by its citizens. With its American-inflected internationalism, mass culture represented a threat to the nation-building project. While it had left behind its status as a British colony, New Zealand appeared in danger of being colonised again by the commercial forces of pulp culture. Behind the ‘current song-hits, comic recordings and films and no-so-comic books ... [the] cults that build model aeroplanes, listen to hot jazz, or receive and transmit by short wave’⁶⁷, the New Zealand cultural nationalists detected an insidious and low-grade form of the kind of American cultural imperialism later formulated as a critique of globalism by Herbert Schiller.⁶⁸ Some New Zealand cultural nationalists of the 1940s suffered greatly from the anxiety of contamination and engulfment of authentic expression by mass culture. A.R.D. Fairburn developed a particularly adversarial stance. ‘We are *infected* with the American way of life here,’ he complained in 1953.⁶⁹

As one of the principal architects of New Zealand’s high culture at mid-century, Fairburn was one of many who argued the case for the country’s cultural exceptionalism, a uniqueness reflected in its arts and letters and generated by New Zealand’s remoteness from the world’s

⁶⁶ E. H Olssen, ‘The Conditions of Culture’, (review of T.S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards The Definition of Culture*), in *Landfall*, vol. 3, no. 3, September 1949, p.209.

⁶⁷ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.212.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Herbert Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination*. New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976. Schiller described the process of globalisation as the means by which all cultures were inexorably drawn towards a vortex of American capitalist culture, creating a homogenized global culture which is both reflected in and is a product of international mass media. However, this thesis has been challenged more recently by scholars such as Christine Ogan (1992) and others, who have indicated that there is little supporting empirical evidence from studies of audience reception, arguing that culture cannot be forcibly dumped on societies.

⁶⁹ A.R.D. Fairburn, speaking on National Radio [25 April 1949], quoted in Warren Feeney, *Gruesome!* op.cit., p.2.

Prior to the war, however, Fairburn had championed American literature as a ‘better influence on us than English’. Apologising for making the suggestion—‘hateful to many no doubt’—he commented that ‘However much we lay to our souls the flattering unction that we are more English than the English, we really understand, and get inside, certain aspects of American life more readily.’ A.R.D Fairburn, ‘Some Aspects of N.Z. Art and Letters’, *Art in New Zealand*, Wellington: H.H. Tombs Ltd, 1934, p.216.

centres as well as the supposedly determinist psycho-geographies of its rugged landscape. However, the everyday culture of New Zealand people was, from the beginning of—and arguably even prior to—European settlement, distinctly transnational. The founding of New Zealand in 1840 is synchronous with the birth of photography; from its earliest days, the nation was part of the international traffic in screen culture, initially in the form of photo-engravings and magic lantern slides variously produced and imported for viewing here. This was partly due to the economics of entertainment in New Zealand: it was costly to bring in troupes of actors or musicians from overseas, but films could be shipped cheaply in cans. From the 1890s, New Zealanders watched American, Australian and British movies alongside local efforts. New Zealanders were, and remain, avid consumers of imported books, magazines, comics, and games, as well as radio serials and TV programmes. While the notion of the ‘tyranny of distance’ colours accounts of New Zealand culture at mid-century, and stories of nation-building have defined the way its history—and art history—have been written, it is clear that in a popular sense, at least, the world was at play in New Zealand from the beginning of the modern period.⁷⁰ Historian Miles Fairburn suggests an alternative reading of New Zealand’s cultural history, arguing that: ‘There is good reason to believe that New Zealand’s exceptional physical remoteness made it *more* susceptible to metropolitan cultural influences than perhaps any other society.’⁷¹

The open hostility with which Fairburn greeted McCahon’s early use of the aesthetics of mass culture revealed a complex tangle of latent antagonisms in a society which prided itself on its classlessness: conflict between the educated elite and the unlearned masses, between the connoisseur and the consumer, between modern life as it was imagined by the high culture and as it was lived by ordinary people. Fairburn’s invective went beyond the terms of art criticism into the realms of politics. (As Gramsci noted, when pressure is put on the art of one’s time to express a particular cultural world, the activity is one of politics, not of artistic criticism.⁷²) It was nothing short of a battle for the cultural tone of the nation’s future. McCahon’s challenge to the high culture’s view of itself was met with a show of force. He

⁷⁰ For an account of cultural consumption and leisure activities in New Zealand from 1840 to the present day, which recognises the nation’s participatory role in transnational popular culture, see Caroline Daley, ‘Modernity, Consumption, and Leisure’, in Giselle Byrnes (ed.), *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, Sydney, 2008, pp.423-44.

⁷¹ Miles Fairburn, ‘Is there a good case for New Zealand Exceptionalism?’ in T. Ballantyne and B. Moloughney (eds.), *Disputed Histories: Imagining New Zealand’s Pasts*, Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006, p.166. My emphasis.

⁷² Antonio Gramsci, ‘Art and the Struggle for a New Civilisation’, from ‘Prison Writings 1929-1935’, in *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs, New York University Press, 2000, p.398.

was castigated for incompetence (on technical grounds) and juvenile pretension (for assuming a deliberately crude aesthetic), as well as for vulgarity. McCahon's work of the late 1940s, and Fairburn's accompanying critique, may be bracketed together as oppositional strategic positions assumed on the battlefield of culture: together they represent a critical moment in New Zealand culture.

Although Fairburn did not speak for the whole of the high culture, his was not a lone voice: his critique belongs to the general post-war campaign against pulp culture in New Zealand. This increasing antagonism between the values of the elite and the mass, as well as between the operations of domestic social policy and the international capital market, was fired perhaps most significantly by the desire at governmental level that the nation's culture should develop under the influence of Britain rather than America. It was most vehemently expressed in the culture wars fought over comic books between the late 1940s and mid-1950s, in New Zealand, Canada and Australia—former British colonies which felt threatened by the cultural ubiquity of America—as well as in Britain and in America itself, from where the most strident voices against the 'comics menace' originated. The fight against comic books was one of the first western moral panics to gain substantial traction in middle-class New Zealand. The stakes were high. 'The comics erode the most fundamental habits of humane, civilised living,' declared New Zealand novelist Bill Pearson—a friend of McCahon's who had spent 'many long, beer-fuelled theological debates' with him and James K. Baxter in Christchurch in the late 1940s—and they erode them in the most vulnerable elements of our society, our children.'⁷³

At the same time as McCahon was developing a pictorial schema derived from comic books and product packaging, the battle lines were beginning to be drawn in order to exclude mass print products from the morally-improving Arnoldian cultural tradition, which, by way of the writings of T.S. Eliot and F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, seemed to provide the obvious framework on which to graft New Zealand's high culture in the late 1940s. 'We hasten to affirm our belief in the potency of culture as a spiritualising agency,' James Bartram had assured readers in the first editorial of the Auckland-based progressive literary magazine *Phoenix* a decade earlier.⁷⁴ As a collector of comics, McCahon was therefore at odds with the literati and art writers and

⁷³ For an account of their discussions, see: Paul Millar, *No Fretful Sleeper: A Life of Bill Pearson*, Auckland University Press, 2010, p.57. For Pearson on comics: Bill Pearson, 'Correspondence', *Landfall*, March 1955, pp.94-7.

⁷⁴ James Bartram, 'The Cause of It All', *The Phoenix*, I, no.1, March 1932, n.p.

collectors who were the primary audience for his paintings; the educated people who, like Schiller, collectively tended to regard the forms of mass culture at best as ‘homogenized North Atlantic cultural slop’, and at worst as a force for social unrest.⁷⁵

The furore over McCahon’s work which broke out in the late 1940s encapsulates one of the key twentieth-century problematics of cultural theory—the tension between on the one hand, a Leavisite concept of ‘authentic’ popular culture as ‘folk culture’, an organic, rural culture ‘of the people’, based around folk songs and the supposed dignity of agricultural labour; and on the other the Frankfurt School’s critique of the popular as ‘mass culture’, the ‘inauthentic’ intellectually-bereft product of cynical big business, designed to exploit or control the urban-industrial working class. While the ‘folk culture’ of rural New Zealand provided the intelligentsia with raw material for its cultural nationalist project, the mass popular culture of the cities appeared to threaten not only the distinctiveness of New Zealand’s emerging national identity but at its worst, as with the moral panic over comic books, to actively endanger the nation’s youth. (These arguments are still being played out 60 years later.⁷⁶) At its time of making in the late 1940s, McCahon’s use of the aesthetic conventions of Americanised popular culture to make ‘serious’ art represented a significant challenge to the high culture by one of its own agents. While speaking with a local accent was actively championed by the works of the literary nationalists, employing lowbrow American referents was distinctly problematic.

McCahon’s attempt to broaden the sources of imagery available to the artist represented a challenge to the modernist model of culture. His eclectic reference points suggested a view of culture as continuum rather than hierarchy. Rather than a pyramid structure with the fine arts at the apex and mass culture as the lumpen base, the low and high were figured as distinctive forces distributed along what British Pop Art critic Lawrence Alloway was later to describe as the ‘long front’ of culture.⁷⁷ And by collapsing together the cultural hierarchies that were almost synchronous with divisions between social classes (perhaps particularly keenly

⁷⁵ Herbert Schiller, ‘Electronic information flows: New basis for global domination?’ in Philip Drummond and Richard Patterson (eds), *Television in Transition: papers from the first International Television Studies Conference*, London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1985, p.19.

⁷⁶ The past two decades have seen a similar argument mounted against the presumed culturally and socially deleterious effects on youth of heavy metal music and its variants, as well as rap music, horror films, video games, television watching, participation in social media networks, and texting.

⁷⁷ Lawrence Alloway, ‘The Long Front of Culture’, in John Russell and Suzi Gablik (eds), *Pop Art Redefined*, Praeger/University of Michigan Press, 1969, p.41. (The essay first appeared in *Cambridge Opinion*, no.17, 1959.)

observed in a former British colony for which classlessness was a sustaining fiction), McCahon figured painting as a political gesture. His cultural strategy was one of ‘compressed dissonance’, to draw on Thomas Crow’s term for the conflation of different, opposed cultural traditions.⁷⁸ His attempt to broaden his work’s relevance and expand its potential local audience—to *reinvent the public for painting*, in fact—was interpreted adversely by some members of the high culture who saw McCahon’s gesture towards ‘the people’ as an act of resistance to their own social exclusivity as well as transgressive of shared aesthetic precepts.

However, the everyday populism of McCahon’s source material arguably did not, in the late 1940s, make his works intellectually accessible to the public. This would have come as no surprise to the most influential theorist of high modernism, the American art critic Clement Greenberg, who as early as 1939 noted that ‘The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development.’⁷⁹ New Zealand cultural historian Monte Holcroft said much the same thing in 1940 when he commented that the fate that awaited the New Zealand man of letters was ‘the sensitive awareness of a minority and the indifference of the majority,’ although he cast mass Philistinism as a distinctively New Zealand trait.⁸⁰ At times McCahon appeared to despair of local culture. He wrote bitterly to Caselberg in 1950: ‘But who wants painting in our towns or good buildings or music in the streets. In splendour why are we so small [?]’⁸¹ The gap in comprehension between art’s production and its reception was of continual concern to McCahon. He commented in 1963: ‘Audience must be a factor that the artist is aware of. If you are to say something about the world you live in you must consider the matter of communication.’⁸² Although McCahon’s works drew from the visual culture of the everyday world, it is clear from their negative public reception that the

⁷⁸ In his description of the works of Jacques-Louis David and Gustave Courbet which anticipated the antagonistic nature of later modernism, Crow noted that: ‘The formal qualities that are rightly seen as anticipating fully fledged modernism—the dramatic defiance of academic compositional rules, technical parsimony and compressed dissonance... —were carried forward in the name of another public, excluded outsiders, whose characteristic means of expression these pictures managed to address. In the process, ‘Rome’ or ‘the countryside’ as privileged symbols in a conflict of social values were turned over to the outsiders.’ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, p.11.

⁷⁹ Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’, in John O’Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.10. Originally published in *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no.5, 1939.

⁸⁰ M.H. Holcroft, *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand*. Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1940, p.19.

⁸¹ Colin McCahon, letter to John Caselberg, 12 September 1950, quoted in Peter Simpson, *Answering Hark*, op.cit., p.17.

⁸² Colin McCahon, from a transcript of lecture notes made by Wystan Curnow from a talk given by McCahon to A.U. ‘Little’ Congress, Hunua, May 1963, in Tony Green, ‘McCahon’s Visit to the United States: A Reading of Letters and Lecture Notes’, *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, vol. 3, 1975, p.30.

broad communicative purpose of his works was not readily understood. What were people to understand that they were looking at—serious contemporary art, or roughly drawn religious posters? Works produced in the tradition of the pre-Renaissance painters, or that of pulp American comics? Art whose emotional tone was raw and heartfelt and concerned with timeless matters of life and death made relevant to the contemporary situation, or a mockery of current highbrow taste? While his supporters claimed McCahon as one of the ‘strongest and most intelligent’ of New Zealand’s artists⁸³, McCahon himself apparently remarked on one occasion that his works were ‘exactly the same kind of thing as one sees outside the Salvation Army Citadel.’⁸⁴ But that, of course, was the point: to attempt to communicate with the public for the work in a language which would be commonly understood.

This public incomprehension—the actual *lack* of popularity which was the flipside of his early use of popular aesthetics—was a source of continual concern for McCahon, who, following Eric Gill, believed strongly in the social utility of art and saw the role of the painter as a maker of ‘signs and symbols for people to live by’ instead of ‘things to hang on walls at exhibitions’. He wrote: ‘In this present time it is difficult to paint for other people—to paint beyond your own ends & point directions as painters once did.’⁸⁵ A.R.D. Fairburn thought likewise. ‘Art is not the private property of artists. It belongs to the living traditions of society as a whole. And it cannot exist without its public’, he wrote in 1946.⁸⁶ This concern for the public audience for art was arguably the source of considerable pressure on local artists, and in particular, on McCahon: the pressure of the common culture which Wystan Curnow would later describe as an inhibiting factor on the development of the high culture in New Zealand, but which equally appears as an area for enquiry in McCahon’s work.⁸⁷ While McCahon and Fairburn shared a great deal of common ground, their conflict arguably arose from differing conceptions of what might constitute a ‘living tradition’ for a visual artist in New Zealand at mid-century. The world was changing rapidly; and the progressive artist, always a canary in the mineshaft of society, was quicker to grasp the turbulent new order of things than were his or her viewers. The role of the progressive modernist artist was to push the culture forward, to storm the barricades of the conventional and the established by formulating new visual documents of modern life; while the critic’s job was to affirm and uphold standards of artistic

⁸³ Allen Curnow, ‘Painting in Canterbury’, *New Zealand Listener*, 8 December 1950, p.8.

⁸⁴ Colin McCahon, quoted in James K. Baxter [J.K.B.], ‘Salvation Army Aesthete?...’, *Canta*, 21 July 1948, n.p.

⁸⁵ Colin McCahon, *Colin McCahon/a survey exhibition*, Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972.

⁸⁶ A.R.D. Fairburn. ‘The Arts Are Acquired Tastes’, in *The Woman Problem and Other Prose*, Auckland: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1967, p.160.

⁸⁷ Wystan Curnow, ‘High Culture in a Small Province’, op.cit., p.160.

excellence, to defend culture and to secure a powerful position for it within society. Conflict inevitably ensued, and sometimes spilled into the public arena. Playwright and actor Howard Wadman, editor of the New Zealand *Year Book of the Arts* in 1947, had distinct sympathy for the plight of the modern artist in attempting to communicate with his audience. He wrote:

Presented, then, with a new world of images and released from the historical copybook, the artist stands in a freedom bewildering to the beholder who has not followed the stages of his emancipation. Like modern man himself, the artist inherits a vast new potentiality, and to add to the confusion, new standards of judgment are difficult to apply.⁸⁸

In 1947, McCahon was one of the very few New Zealand artists to grasp the ‘vast new potentiality’ offered by the seismic shifts in culture which occurred immediately prior to and during the war years. With mass-produced printed imagery as its reference point, McCahon’s work was by any measure ahead of its time in New Zealand: the reception of this new work suffered, perhaps, from the application of old standards of critical judgment which determined excellence in terms of technical proficiency and the communication of higher feeling through a refinement of aesthetic. Following the redistribution of wealth and political power that had begun with the stock market crash of 1929 and been hastened by World War II, the old aristocracies were on the wane; while the aristocracy of taste, that is, the artists, the critics, the writers, and other intellectuals of the high culture, were likewise beginning to feel the gradual loss of their hegemony over culture, as connoisseurship began slowly to lose ground to consumerism. (The situation was complicated and made particularly acute in New Zealand both by the national sense of social egalitarianism, and by the high culture’s thinness and recentness.) With its conflation of high and low, McCahon’s work anticipated the coming sea change in New Zealand society after World War II, indicating the beginning of the general democratization of modern culture as well as the ex-colony’s cultural reorientation away from Britain and towards America.

McCahon’s work of the late 1940s represented a different kind of modernism. Not so much concerned with creating an autonomous realm for art, McCahon’s practice sought to engage with the ordinary world, laying itself open to ‘the coarse but tonic assault lying outside the studio door.’⁸⁹ His paintings were inextricably linked with everyday life as lived by ordinary

⁸⁸ Howard Wadman, ‘Editorial: The Shape of things in New Zealand’, in *Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand*, no.4, 1948, p.11.

⁸⁹ Robert Rosenblum, ‘Cubism as Pop Art’, op cit, p.117.

people, reflecting what Laura Kipnis has termed the ‘signifying practices of many other spheres, from mass culture to official political discourse itself.’⁹⁰ It is one of the many measures of McCahon’s import as an artist that he was able to incorporate so many of the signifying practices of everyday life into his work without losing coherence, or most critically the context of the original sources: his works of the late 1940s variously reveal popular practices of appropriation, pastiche, repetition, conflation of hierarchies, and local reinvention of familiar trans-national mass-produced images, many of which continued to be used as viable artistic strategies sixty years later. ‘High art and low, past art and present, turning both ends against the middle—this was part and parcel of a cultural strategy’, wrote Wystan Curnow in 1984, when McCahon represented New Zealand at the Sydney Biennale.⁹¹ Beginning with the religious works in the late 1940s, McCahon’s strategy was to use the full spectrum of culture to communicate with the broadest audience possible.

⁹⁰ Laura Kipnis, ‘Repossessing Popular Culture’, in Zoya Cocur and Simon Leung (eds), *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp.372-87. Originally published in *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.15.

⁹¹ Wystan Curnow, *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon’s Word and Number Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1984, p.4.

Colin McCahon, *The King of the Jews*, 1947, oil on cardboard, 636mm x 518mm, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

II. Critical Reception: ‘The Lavatory Wall’

McCahon’s new paintings were widely exhibited and reproduced in 1947 and 1948. Painted in Tahunanui, Nelson, while McCahon worked as an agricultural labourer, the first of the new works were seen at Modern Books in Dunedin, a progressive left-wing bookshop and cooperative book society, in July 1947. In November that year McCahon showed more works at Modern Books, while five of his religious works—*Entombment: After Titian*, *Crucifixion with Lamp*, *Christ Taken from the Cross*, *King of the Jews*, and *The Angel of the Annunciation*, were exhibited alongside other landscapes and portraits by McCahon in ‘The Group Show’ at the Canterbury Society of Arts’ Armagh Street Gallery in Christchurch.⁹² Four paintings from the exhibition were reproduced in black and white in the inaugural December 1947 issue of *Landfall*, while a widely read review of the ‘Group Show’ in the March 1948 issue of *Landfall* singled out McCahon’s Biblical works for particular attention.⁹³ Other reviews and reproductions in local newspapers and national journals followed—along with a rash of letters to the editors—when in February 1948, a substantial one-person exhibition at Wellington Public Library organized by one of McCahon’s most supportive patrons, Wellington City Librarian Ron O’Reilly; and when another selection of his works was shown at the Dunedin Public Library in September. Finally, six works by McCahon—of which three, *Triple Takaka*, *Takaka Night and Day*, and *Hail Mary* borrowed directly from the aesthetics of commercial art—were exhibited at the annual ‘Group Show’ in Christchurch during October 1948.⁹⁴

McCahon’s works appeared at a moment when the identities of individuals—and of the nation—were going through a process of profound change, following exposure to privation, personal tragedy, and to international forces, including that of mass culture. They were painted and exhibited at a time when the country was gathering itself again following the War; at a time when the Manpower regulations were being relaxed, the troops had come

⁹² The catalogue of The Group’s twenty-year retrospective exhibition in 1947 included the following works by McCahon: *Landscape*, *Nelson*; *Head of a Girl*; *Woman with Lamp*; *Christ Taken from the Cross*; *Crucifixion*; *Hutt Valley*, *Landscape* [later known as *The Caterpillar Landscape*]; *Jesus*, *King of the Jews*; *Entombment* [later known as *Entombment: After Titian*]; *Landscape*; *The Angel of the Annunciation*.

⁹³ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Art in Canterbury: Some Notes on the Group Show’, *Landfall*, March 1948, vol.2, no.1, pp. 46-50.

⁹⁴ The other works were *Dear Wee June*, *The Family*, and *The Sink Hole Landscape*.

home, and people were returning to their old lives to find them irrevocably changed by the experience of war. The Centennial celebrations of 1940 had encouraged a self-reflexivity among New Zealand's progressive writers and artists; a shared desire, intensified by the international politics of the War, to locate a 'home for the imagination' in New Zealand rather than the Britain to which many second- or third-generation New Zealanders still referred as 'Home.'⁹⁵ The centenary celebrations of the Otago and Canterbury provinces (in 1948 and 1950 respectively) provoked similar reflections in which newspaper and literary commentators drew a line under colonial history and examined the possibilities of the modern present. In tone, subject matter and aesthetic, the works responded to these pressures. But rather than being widely appreciated as perceptive readings of the contemporary social climate, McCahon's new paintings occasioned blistering critical attacks—largely on the grounds of technical ineptitude—from members of New Zealand's literary community, as well as quieter—though equally spirited—defences from his supporters.

In contrast to the very public controversies occasioned by McCahon's later work which were exercised in the mass media including television, daily newspapers and talkback radio, the dissent around his work of the late 1940s was confined to New Zealand's nascent intellectual circles, largely appearing as critical reviews and heated correspondence in cultural and student journals. Periodicals such as the *Listener* (the weekly publication of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service—described disparagingly by A.R.D. Fairburn as a 'very intereESTing family journal'), the literary quarterly *Landfall*, the monthly *Here and Now*, the annual Year Books of the Arts, and in the 1950s, *Home and Building*, functioned as forums for intellectual debates which would frequently ricochet between publications.⁹⁶ McCahon was the single most written-about artist in such cultural publications. However, the unforgiving critiques of his work by some correspondents and contributors were neither forgotten nor forgiven by McCahon. Dividing people around him variously into 'believers' or 'betrayers', he wrote two decades later that 'I must admit to an awful bitterness and to a hatred of "them".'⁹⁷ 'They ground me into the muck,' he told a reporter in 1975.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands—Essays in British History*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.10.

⁹⁶ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to Denis Glover, 24 September 1956, in Lauris Edmond (ed.), *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1981, p.251.

⁹⁷ Gordon H. Brown recalled McCahon talking about 'believers' and 'betrayers' in conversation. Brown is quoted in Gregory O'Brien, 'Somebody Say Something', in *Sport*, no.23, Spring 1999, p.31. McCahon wrote about his hatred of 'them' in Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', *Landfall* 80, vol.20, no.4, December 1966, p.364.

⁹⁸ Colin McCahon, quoted in 'They ploughed me into the muck', *Taranaki Herald*, 26 April 1975.

Colin McCahon, *Triple Takaka*, 1948, oil on canvas, 930 x 933mm, Collection of Manawatu Art Gallery

Writing in response to the reproduction in the first issue of *Landfall* of three of McCahon's religious paintings from the 'Group Show' in 1947, an anonymous critic led the offensive in Otago University's student magazine, commenting nastily: 'The paintings of Colin McCahon seem to us a bastard product of a mesalliance between William Blake and Georges Rouault though we must admit the lavatory bowl in *The King of the Jews* is pure McCahon, unless he owes it to the Harpic ads.'⁹⁹ This remark possibly involved a wilful misreading of McCahon's image—the toilet bowl referred to is quite recognisably an oil lamp—but when the critic and poet A.R.D. Fairburn made his notorious suggestion that McCahon's paintings hanging in the 1947 Group Show 'might pass as *graffiti* on the walls of some celestial lavatory', he may have had the earlier criticism in mind. 'Pretentious hocus of this kind ... is bad for the politics of art,' he thundered. 'It gives the philistines a rod to beat the backs of

⁹⁹ Anonymous, 'Art or Ugliness', Review of *Landfall* Dec 1947, in *Critic*, 11 March 1948.

those painters who want to escape from the encircling gloom of the Academy by other and more legitimate means.¹⁰⁰

While Fairburn charged McCahon with both technical ineptitude and ‘home-spun’ artistic pretension (he mentioned the latter twice in two pages), his primary accusation was that of undermining the status of art itself through a serious lapse of taste. His ‘lavatorial’ analogy—an unusually vulgar metaphor in the literary culture of the 1940s, although it should be noted that ‘lavatory’ then, as now, was a word used almost exclusively by the upper classes—underlined that significant issues of taste and decorum were at stake here. Moreover, his description of the hand-written text used in McCahon’s paintings as *graffiti* suggested that Fairburn was thinking of a *public* convenience as the metaphorical canvas for McCahon’s work, and not a particularly salubrious one. Fairburn’s implication was that the work on display was crude, inept, and coarse, and belonged to a different aesthetic register entirely from that appropriate to an art gallery. McCahon had been fishing for inspiration in what Clement Greenberg had described a few years earlier as the ‘common sewer’ of kitsch—‘a wonderful German word that covers all this crap.’¹⁰¹ Worse, given his assessment of the high degree of pretension embodied by the works, Fairburn appeared to believe that McCahon had slipped registers deliberately, although to what end was unclear.

The anonymous reviewer in *Critic* thought he had the answer: the works revealed McCahon as ‘a mere poseur ... following a usual modern road to fame in striving to be outrageously different, but little else.’¹⁰² This was a particularly wounding insult, at the time: as Bill Pearson noted, to wish to be different in New Zealand society of the 1940s and 1950s was to invite immediate accusations of snobbery.¹⁰³ The critique echoed that meted out to Manet eighty years earlier by Théophile Gautier, who remarked of his *Olympia*, similarly a painting of vulgar modern life in the guise of an Old Master, ‘Here there is nothing, we are sorry to say, but the desire to attract attention at any price.’¹⁰⁴ The implication was that McCahon was

¹⁰⁰ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Art in Canterbury’, op.cit., p.50.

¹⁰¹ Clement Greenberg, letter to Dwight Macdonald, February 1939, quoted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays, vol.1—Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944*, ed. John O’Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.xxii. The letter became the basis for Greenberg’s influential polemical essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, first published in *Partisan Review* in 1939.

¹⁰² Anonymous, ‘Art or Ugliness’, *Critic*, 11 March 1948.

¹⁰³ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.224.

¹⁰⁴ George Heard Hamilton. *Manet and His Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954, p.75, quoted in David W. Galenson. *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.159.

playing some kind of confidence trick, deliberately flouting conventions simply to gain notoriety. Fairburn finally pronounced himself ‘distressed’ by McCahon’s ‘experimental cartoons’, commenting that even though ‘they successfully avoid all the vices of the genteel style of painting, they substitute no virtues that can be perceived with the naked eye. In design, in colour, in quality of line, in every normal attribute of good painting, they are completely lacking.’¹⁰⁵ He was in fact so profoundly irritated by McCahon’s paintings that he unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Charles Brasch, the editor of *Landfall*, not to reproduce any more of them, writing privately to Brasch that the works were ‘merely pretentious humbug, masquerading as homespun simplicity. Looked at from any possible angle, they had no merit whatever.’¹⁰⁶ Fairburn’s friend the poet Denis Glover wrote to Brasch that he was ‘sorry to have to protest against the McCahon stuff. It seems to me to be dreadfully dishonest work, poodle-faking of the worst description: likely to put people off.’¹⁰⁷

McCahon’s work, however, was not suppressed by such criticism. Although some were initially cautious, many critics, writers, and collectors including Charles Brasch (who as editor of *Landfall* had printed the review containing Fairburn’s ‘celestial lavatory’ critique) supported him through the late 1940s and beyond. Although he wrote privately to McCahon that he considered his strategy ‘ugly’ and even ‘childish’, Brasch did not make public comment on the matter.¹⁰⁸ But many supporters did. In a letter intended as a rebuttal of Fairburn’s review, poet Hubert Witheford praised the appropriateness of McCahon’s rough technique in communicating ‘the raw and inarticulate quality which is perhaps the native tone of tragedy in this country.’¹⁰⁹ He stated ‘I felt that McCahon had adopted the technique necessary to attain an end for which a smoother style would have been inappropriate. He shows the manifestation in the world of colour and form of that anguish and forgiveness which is to Christians the pattern of existence...’ Like James K. Baxter, who considered ‘the tags of speech...surprisingly successful,’ Witheford commented that it appeared to him ‘no more grotesque than it should be that the tremendous words of the gospels are inscribed on

¹⁰⁵ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Art in Canterbury’, op.cit., pp.49-50.

¹⁰⁶ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to Charles Brasch, 4 December 1947, *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, op.cit., p. 178.

¹⁰⁷ Denis Glover, quoted in Gordon Ogilvie, *Denis Glover: His Life*, Auckland: Godwit Press, 1999, p.239; and cited in Peter Simpson, *Answering Hark*, op.cit., p.19. ‘Poodle-faking’ is a term of army slang which originated in British India; and was used to describe young officers who escorted wealthy local ladies about the town, without the permission of their commanding officers, for social or financial gain: where ‘poodle’ was slang for woman. Glover’s implication was that McCahon’s work sought to ingratiate itself.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Brasch, letter to Colin McCahon, 19 April 1949, quoted in Richard Lummis, ‘Modelling the New Zealand Artist: Rita Angus and Colin McCahon’, op.cit., p.200.

¹⁰⁹ Hubert Witheford, ‘Correspondence’, in *Landfall*, vol.2, no.2, June 1948, pp.161.

labels issuing from the mouths of these unhappy figures.’¹¹⁰ The congenial John Summers on the other hand, an art collector and critic who ran the art department of Whitcombe and Tombs bookshop in Christchurch (‘The store is nicely heated, and there is a free writing and meeting room where you can write your letters and meet your friends’), and who often joined McCahon, Baxter and Pearson for their Saturday afternoon religious debates at the bar of the United Services Hotel in Cathedral Square, was less convinced by ‘the words issuing from the mouths of some of Colin McCahon’s figures (after the manner of comic strips)’.¹¹¹ While comparing McCahon’s religious insights with those of Fra Angelico—the speech bubbles and boxed titles, too, could be read as the scrolling legends which appear in pre-Renaissance painting—Summers considered that ‘writing seems to me as out of place here as the twittering of birds in a pastoral symphony. The thing is to make the paint say everything.’¹¹²

McCahon’s supporters were divided over their assessment of his technique. Writing in the *New Zealand Listener* after having seen McCahon’s exhibition at Wellington Public Library, Wellington academic historian J.C. Beaglehole described him as ‘deliberately all too primitive all too often...gauche, self-willed, violent. Yet for us he is one of the important people. He is a serious artist.’¹¹³ Critic E.C. Simpson agreed: ‘McCahon’s pictures show an audacious and original vision in a tradition as old as religion itself... His raw crudity gives the same sledge-hammer force as the direct simplicity of the Biblical text... McCahon is like a saltwater douche, disagreeable but good for health... a blast of fresh air let into our urban hothouse.’¹¹⁴ Rita Angus joined with ‘J.C.B.’ [Beaglehole] in wishing that there were ‘a church in New Zealand alive enough to buy some of McCahon’s paintings’, adding that McCahon ‘is a courageous painter who renounces what is not essential to him... There is plenty of correct drawing in New Zealand.’¹¹⁵ Charles Brasch, however, considered that ‘like all painters trained in New Zealand [McCahon] is hampered at every turn by an inadequate technique: one can see him again and again attempting something which he lacks the

¹¹⁰ James K. Baxter, letter to Colin McCahon, 30 November 1947, quoted in Peter Simpson, ‘McCahon in 1947-48: A New Date, a “Lost” Exhibition & Some Letters’, *Art New Zealand*, no.100, Spring 2001, p.93.

¹¹¹ Advertisement for Whitcombe’s Bookshop, *Canta*, 21 July 1948, n.p.

¹¹² John Summers, ‘Catacombs to Ngamoti’, *Student*, Wellington, no.3, May 1948, p.9. Richard Lummis’s observation that McCahon’s audience would have been familiar with written inscriptions on 19th century landscape photographs and topographical watercolours, is perceptive: these are regimes of image-making which arguably belong to McCahon’s local ‘folk art’ category. Richard Lummis, op.cit., p.200.

¹¹³ J.C. Beaglehole. [J.C.B.] ‘Colin McCahon’s Pictures’, *New Zealand Listener*, 5 March 1948, p.7.

¹¹⁴ E.C. Simpson. ‘McCahon’s Raw Paintings Show Audacious, Original Vision’, op.cit., n.p.

¹¹⁵ Rita Angus, letter to the Editor, *New Zealand Listener*, 21 May 1948, p.5.

resources to bring off.¹¹⁶ Summers felt similarly, but considered it a trade-off, commenting that McCahon 'loses in technical fluency what he gains in emotional depth.'¹¹⁷

Several weeks' worth of letters to the editor appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* between April and June 1948, variously painting McCahon as an artist of considerable significance or as a charlatan. No other artist of the time appeared to cause such public consternation, nor create such clear-cut division of opinion. He was an artist whose works were argued over in private and in public. Votes of confidence in McCahon followed hard on the heels of slights: it appeared that no insult or omission could go unanswered and no defence unchallenged. A spate of letters followed a review of the recently published *A Century of Art in Otago*, in which Charles Brasch spent a lengthy paragraph castigating editor H.H. Tombs's 'gross error of judgement' in excluding McCahon, who had grown up in Dunedin and produced his early work there, from the historical account.¹¹⁸ McCahon was a divisive figure: 'P.W.R.' of Timaru was affronted not only by his work but by the support offered to it by 'serious' commentators. 'I considered that the whole exhibition was an insult to one's intelligence ... To boost McCahon in serious magazines is to give him an importance out of proportion to his ability.'¹¹⁹ Finally, John Summers offered a cautious explanation for the furore raised by McCahon's work: 'In all aesthetic judgment personal and objective standards intermingle in a curious and sometimes contradictory manner.'¹²⁰

One of the very few critics to engage sympathetically with McCahon's use of popular culture in any depth was poet James K. Baxter, who did not contribute to the articles collected as 'Democracy and Culture.' Writing in Canterbury University's student magazine in July 1948, Baxter provided a thoughtful analysis of the 'main difficulties found in the appreciation of McCahon' in the face of the 'considerable controversy' his recent works had aroused.¹²¹ Observing that 'for most critics, opinion and prejudice are the same thing', Baxter divided McCahon's critics into two camps: 'those who regard his work as being on a par with bad posters, and those who regard it as being original and naïve though technically limited.' Having received enthusiastic endorsement of McCahon's work from the 'three well-known

¹¹⁶ Charles Brasch, 'A Note on the Work of Colin McCahon', *Landfall*, vol.4, no.4, p.339.

¹¹⁷ John Summers, 'Catacombs to Ngamoti', op.cit, p.9.

¹¹⁸ Charles Brasch, 'Book Review: A Century of Art in Otago', *New Zealand Listener*, 7 May 1948.

¹¹⁹ 'P.W.R.', 'Letters: Colin McCahon's Pictures', *New Zealand Listener*, 23 April 1948, vol.18, no.461, p.5.

¹²⁰ John Summers, 'Letters: Colin McCahon's Pictures', *New Zealand Listener*, 30 April 1948, vol.18, no.462, p.5.

¹²¹ James K. Baxter [J.K.B.], 'Salvation Army Aesthete?...', *Canta*, 21 July 1948, n.p.

artists' whom he had engaged in casual conversation on the topic (he reported that one ranked McCahon as 'the most vital artist now painting in New Zealand'), Baxter concluded that it was 'difficult to dismiss him as a poseur and eccentric.'

Like other supporters of McCahon, Baxter identified the aesthetic of his new works—the thick black lines, the simplified forms, and the comic-book framing—as deliberately, rather than accidentally, 'primitive'. 'I think you put onto canvas something I know about N.Z., but have not learned to say,' he wrote privately to McCahon six months before the review appeared. 'The raw vitality and brutal simplification.'¹²² While expressing confidence in the sincerity of the artist, and the 'fire and originality' of the work, Baxter was less certain than Witheford and Summers about the spiritual convictions of the paintings: 'It would be untrue to describe McCahon's painting as "mystical"—there is nothing woolly about it, and the device borrowed from the cartoon brings it nearer to satire,' he wrote.¹²³ While many of his interpreters concluded that McCahon aimed to express a timeless humanist truth, Baxter—whose family background of political engagement and conscientious objection encouraged him to see the artist's role as an agent of social change—was one of the few who gestured towards the critique of contemporary society he saw in McCahon's work. He detected in it the traces of an irony that enabled him to approach it as a critical tool, to paraphrase Jeffrey Weiss on the motivations of the early-modern collage artists in Paris; but he was the only critic of the time to do so.¹²⁴

The critical response to McCahon's work formed one of the two great art controversies of the late 1940s. The notorious *Pleasure Garden* incident similarly divided the New Zealand art world into 'progressive' and 'conservative' camps. It also provided a comparable vehicle for the expression of general public antagonism towards modern art and its champions. The two sides squared off against one another in full public view: the *Pleasure Garden* battles took place in the newspaper, at public meetings, and even by public exhibition in a shop window. It is significant, perhaps, that both controversies blew up in Christchurch, home to many of New Zealand's most forward-thinking modernist artists, yet a deeply socially-conservative

¹²² James K. Baxter, letter to Colin McCahon, quoted in Peter Simpson, 'McCahon in 1947-48: A New Date, a "Lost" Exhibition & Some Letters', op.cit., p.93.

¹²³ James K. Baxter [J.K.B.], 'Salvation Army Aesthete?...' op.cit., 1948, n.p.

¹²⁴ Jeffrey Weiss. *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and Avant-Gardism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994, p.xv.

place described by one frustrated correspondent to the newspaper at the time as ‘a curious and amusing backwater in the world of art’¹²⁵.

W.A Sutton, *Homage to Frances Hodgkins*, 1948, oil on canvas, destroyed in 1950.

In October 1948, the British Council sent six paintings by expatriate New Zealand artist Frances Hodgkins to the Canterbury Society of Arts in Christchurch for potential purchase, where they were exhibited adjacent to the 1948 Group Show, not far from three works by McCahon. The paintings dated from Hodgkins’s late career: it was intended that one should be acquired for the city’s art collection. A series of increasingly desperate political manoeuvrings ensued by those opposed to modern art. The Art Society’s Council initially declined to purchase any of the works for the collection: their secretary W.S. Baverstock suggested that they could use their funds more wisely. When local artists started a petition seeking a review of the decision, its ringleaders were not re-elected to the Society’s Council. A subsequent public subscription to purchase *Pleasure Garden* for the city’s art collection was over-subscribed, but the Mayor rejected the gift, advised by three academics from the university’s School of Art.

¹²⁵ ‘Englishwoman’, ‘Letters to the Editor: Paintings of Frances Hodgkins’, *The Press*, 17 November 1948.

In June 1949, Hodgkins's work was displayed for a couple of days in the window of Beath's department store on the corner of Cashel and Colombo Streets in the commercial heart of the city. A heated public correspondence in the local newspaper followed. Progressive local artists including Theo Schoon, Leo Bensemann, Doris Holland [Lusk] and Olivia Spencer Bower championed the purchase of the work and deplored the 'natural dogmatism, narrowness, and intolerance' of the Art Advisory Committee.¹²⁶ Artist Bill Sutton, a young lecturer at the art school, registered his protest by painting a large composite portrait of Hodgkins's supporters grouped around the work. It was an imaginary meeting; an image likely to have been based on Henri Fantin-Latour's *A Studio in the Batignolles (Homage to Manet)* (1870), now in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. While all the major supporters of the *Pleasure Garden* purchase are depicted, including artists Lusk, Spencer Bower, John Oakley and Sutton himself, the tension of the painting is in the tautly-drawn relationship between the aging Hodgkins and a young McCahon, who is portrayed with his hands in pockets and one leg insouciantly crossed over the other, leaning on Hodgkins's easel. Hodgkins is the modern master, the internationally-successful New Zealand artist: McCahon is the young contender. While Hodgkins looks sideways at McCahon and the gazes of the other figures are disposed variously around the room, Sutton has painted McCahon looking forwards, past Hodgkins, and out of the painting. In the foreground, a discarded copy of *The Press* lies crumpled on the floor.

Hodgkins's supporters were countered by commentators who professed themselves unimpressed by her work: 'I should have imagined that I was studying the efforts of a child'.¹²⁷ Such commentators praised the action of the committee of university lecturers in refusing it; 'The "Valiant Three" ... have earned the gratitude of the great majority, and can well afford to be amused at the bitter attacks, like spears, which have been hurled against them ... The craze for all that is ugly in painting, sculpture and music will pass, like side-elastic boots, willowy whiskers, and optical illusions.'¹²⁸ The ugliness of modern art, it seems, was regarded as an ephemeral thing, a fashionable whim not part of a Great Tradition and hence not worthy of being acquired for a public collection—albeit an institution

¹²⁶ R.S. Lonsdale, 'Letters to the Editor: Frances Hodgkins Picture', *The Press*, 21 June 1949.

¹²⁷ 'Unbiased', 'Letters to the Editor: Frances Hodgkins Picture', *The Press*, 28 June 1949.

¹²⁸ Anne M. Barrell, 'Letters to the Editor: Frances Hodgkins Picture', *The Press*, 22 June 1949.

described by one of the supporters painted by Sutton, R.S. Lonsdale, as ‘a badly arranged museum of Victorian art ... that had died when photography came in.’¹²⁹

McCahon contributed two bitter letters to the debate, detecting ‘the smell of death’ hanging over the Canterbury Art Society following its decision in November 1948 not to buy Hodgkins’s work. In June the following year, when the gift of the work was rejected by the Art Gallery’s Advisory Committee, McCahon expanded on his theme. ‘These gentlemen must be proud of the three tombs of dead art they have helped preserve so well and for so long in this city ... [but] like all freaks and oddities, we know that in the end they will mean nothing.’¹³⁰ When he wrote in support of Hodgkins’s art practice that ‘It does happen every now and again in this country some independent spirit dares to create something new, and in doing so, disturbs the peace of the dead’, he was no doubt drawing upon his own recent personal experience as a target of public opprobrium. It must have come as a particularly bitter irony when, in 1960, the gift of his work *Tomorrow will be the Same but not as this is* (1959)—which again, had been acquired by a public subscription, got up by the city’s librarian, art patron Ron O’Reilly—was refused by the newly-appointed director of the Christchurch Art Gallery, W.S. Baverstock, who had been instrumental in the rejection of Hodgkins’s work a decade earlier.¹³¹

As one of the most hard-hitting—and colourfully-expressed—volleys among the barrage of negative criticism which accompanied McCahon’s work of the late 1940s and beyond, in later years Fairburn’s ‘celestial lavatory’ remarks have frequently stood, alongside the *Pleasure Garden* incident, as a historical shorthand for the modernist artist’s battle for acceptance in the face of conservative mid-century New Zealand society. History has simplified the debate, however: considered in its own time, the context for an understanding of Fairburn’s critique was considerably more complex. While the *Pleasure Garden* incident saw the collision of reactionary and progressive forces among the art scene amplified by public confusion about modern art, by contrast the skirmish over McCahon’s work was primarily inwardly-focused, taking place within the precincts of the educated and progressive

¹²⁹ R.S. Lonsdale, quoted in Gordon H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting 1940-1960: Conformity and Dissension*, Wellington: Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, 1981, p.25.

¹³⁰ Colin McCahon, ‘Letters to the Editor: Paintings of Frances Hodgkins’ *The Press*, 19 June 1949. ‘The three tombs of dead art’ he referred to were presumably the city’s art institutions: the Canterbury Society of Arts, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, and the School of Art at Canterbury University College.

¹³¹ After an argument lasting nearly three years and in the teeth of fierce opposition from a council official, McCahon’s painting was finally accepted into the city’s collection in 1963.

cultural elite. In 1947-8, the battle was not yet between McCahon and a Philistine public; but nor did Fairburn represent the forces of art world conservatism. Like McCahon, Fairburn was an outspoken supporter of Frances Hodgkins; she had been a formative influence on his own work when he had met her in Britain in the early 1930s; before her death in 1947(which had precipitated the British Council sending the six paintings to Christchurch) he considered that she had ‘some claim to be considered the greatest living woman painter.’¹³² Far from representing opposing camps in a debate about the merits of cultural modernity, Fairburn and McCahon were on the same side, as colleagues and sometime friends within the small group of artists, writers and academics that constituted the most progressive force in New Zealand culture at mid-century, and whose self-generated mission was to throw off the shackles of British colonial cultural dependence by developing a distinctly modern New Zealand cultural voice. They simply disagreed about the most effective means to do so.

The primary ideological ‘enemy’, for Fairburn and his peers, was represented not so much by new ideas but by worn-out old ones: the same ‘tombs of dead art’ that McCahon had described. A few pages before his critique of McCahon, Fairburn bemoaned not only the ‘encircling gloom’ of the academy but the prevailing dullness of New Zealand art during the 1940s, even among the ‘really talented painters’, suggesting that it may not be the fault of the painters but ‘simply a cramp that is caused by carrying too heavy a burden—the burden of having to paint for the New Zealand public.’ It is clear that the basis for Fairburn’s criticism of McCahon’s work cannot be reduced to the historical cliché of a querulous reactionary struggling to maintain the status quo in the face of avant-garde provocation. There was something at once more subtle, and more critical for the historical account of New Zealand culture, at stake.

¹³² A.R.D. Fairburn, *The Woman Problem and Other Prose*, Auckland: Blackwood and Janet Paul, 1967, p.188.

III. Cultural Context: 'The Shape of Things in New Zealand'¹³³

'The first condition of good work here is that for the artist the tradition must be localised.'

Charles Brasch, 1947¹³⁴

Until the late 1940s art criticism in New Zealand had been a fairly lack-lustre affair, often hackneyed and fawning in tone, comprised primarily of pieces in which conservative artists attempted to boost the careers of their acquaintances and themselves.¹³⁵ In hindsight, several critics of the next generation stated confidently that the 1920s had been the dulllest decade in the history of New Zealand art. A.R.D. Fairburn described the art scene of the 1920s as a 'stagnant pond', and the annual exhibitions of the Auckland Society of Arts as 'an orgy of the commonplace.' 'I shudder to think of the total acreage of canvas that was given over, in those years, to mediocrity and dullness,' he wrote in 1944.¹³⁶ Literature of the 1920s and early 1930s was characterised—in the view of the coming generation, at least—by a mannered and deferential colonialism, whose primary exponents were the so-called 'Kowhai Gold' school of genteel lady poets who added embellishments of decorative local fauna to sentimental verse in the Georgian style (and were privately apostrophised by A.R.D. Fairburn as the 'menstrual school' of New Zealand poetry).¹³⁷ The visual arts of the period between the wars were likewise generally considered by critics of the late 1940s and 1950s to be lacking in substance, decimated as they were by the casualties of World War I as well as by an expatriate exodus to Britain and Europe in the first years of the century; few of the prominent artists returned, and, as Peter Tomory wrote in 1960, 'none of the better artists between 1918 and 1930 was forceful enough in style and temperament to open up new avenues.'¹³⁸

¹³³ Howard Wadman, 'The Shape of Things in New Zealand', *Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand*, Wellington: The Wingfield Press/Harry H. Tombs Ltd, no.4. 1948.

¹³⁴ [Charles Brasch.] 'Notes', *Landfall*, vol.1, no.1, March 1947, p.5.

¹³⁵ See, for example, Arthur Hirst, 'The Future of Fine Art in New Zealand', *Art in New Zealand*, no.1, 3 March 1929, p.178, quoted in Wystan Curnow, 'Doing Art Criticism in New Zealand', *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, vol.3, 1975 p.10.

¹³⁶ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'The Auckland School of Art', *The Arts in New Zealand*, December 1944-January 1945, vol.17, no.1. serial no.65, p.23.

¹³⁷ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to Denis Glover, 8 June 1935, in *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, selected and edited by Lauris Edmond, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1981, p.95.

¹³⁸ Peter Tomory, 'Art', in *The Pattern of New Zealand Culture*, ed. A.L. McLeod, Melbourne: Oxford University Press and Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1968, p.180.

Published in 1934 when he was thirty, A.R.D. Fairburn's 'Some Notes on New Zealand Arts and Letters' was a call to arms. The essay was both a tirade against and an antidote to dullness. It laid down the terms for much subsequent art criticism in New Zealand. In it Fairburn advocated the development of an indigenous art free from dependence on the 'umbilical cord of butterfat' which tied New Zealand to the British 'motherland'; speculated that such an indigenous art would be found in the expression of 'the character and singularity of our national landscape'; and acknowledged the pressing need to develop an educated and serious-minded audience for the expressions of the high culture. He made little distinction between what was required of visual art or of literature: both were to be at the service of the cultural nationalist agenda as the primary means by which the 'authentic' New Zealand might be articulated and understood.

Benedict Anderson has theorised that the concept of nationhood is largely a modern phenomenon made possible by the exponential growth of 'print-capitalism' and the rise of popular literacy following the massive social readjustments brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the British Education Act of 1870. He describes nations as 'imagined communities', existing primarily as an idea rather than a geographical certainty: the citizens of a nation are held together by a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' which operates 'regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail' in their homeland. Mass communications allow geographically-distant citizens to be drawn together, rendering a diverse group of people as the homogenous subject of interpellation or address, and enabling a sense of belonging through the representation of national symbols and common experiences. Ernest Gellner considers that national identity is constituted by the sharing of a common culture and by the fact of mutual recognition of membership, and by adoption of the responsibilities towards other citizens that derive from membership. Like Anderson, he does not consider that a nation exists prior to its culture, waiting to be reflected by it; instead:

Cultures define and *make* nations: it is not the case, as nationalists believe and proclaim, that independently and previously existing nations seek the affirmation and independent life of 'their' culture. Cultures 'have' and make nations; nations initially neither exist nor have or do anything.¹³⁹

New Zealand poet and journalist Louis A. Johnson said much the same in 1945 when he observed: 'A national culture is not something appended to the state like curtains to a room.'

¹³⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997, p.69.

Within the life of a people it develops of itself, and as Whitman has said “To have great poets there must be great audiences too.”” While approvingly acknowledging the struggles waged by ‘our present front-line—Fairburn, Curnow, Glover, Mason, and the like’ towards the development of a national high culture, Johnson noted that New Zealanders were not yet sufficiently self-conscious to be supportive of their own developing national identity. The battle to establish a high culture was hard fought, but the war to win the hearts and minds of a national audience would drag on for decades, forcing some New Zealand artists into exile overseas. Such an ‘intolerant and impossible atmosphere’ was not conducive to the production of high art. ‘We regard local art as obscene yet are ignorant of its development,’ wrote Johnson, describing a vast gulf between the New Zealand artist and the New Zealand audience that would only be narrowed by the effects of history and the ‘increasing public intelligence’ of citizens.¹⁴⁰

In New Zealand, as well as in other former British colonies such as Canada and Australia, the cultural project of nationhood was associated almost exclusively with the expression of landscape, since, as Stewart Murray comments, it is landscape ‘which is the first indicator of difference in the colonising moment.’¹⁴¹ The ruggedness of the New Zealand landscape in comparison to the soft folds of the hazy golden English hills, its ‘hard clear light’ which ‘revealed the bones’ of the land underneath were identified by Fairburn as the source of both an indigenous aesthetic and a national consciousness.¹⁴² The landscape would provide a distinctive identity for its people. ‘We are hungry for the words that shall show us these islands and ourselves; that shall give us a home in thought’, wrote academic and political activist Eric Cook in 1932.¹⁴³ It was as if the ‘real’ New Zealand were waiting to be written, or to be painted (though Fairburn suggested that drawing was a more appropriate medium through which to capture the land’s harsh contours); as if the land lay like a virgin territory waiting to be discovered all over again by its artists, who would come to understand themselves by knowing it. ‘New Zealand wasn’t truly discovered until Ursula Bethell, “very earnestly digging”, raised her head to look at the mountains,’ wrote poet D’Arcy Cresswell in

¹⁴⁰ Louis A. Johnson, ‘Notes on a National Culture’, *The Arts in New Zealand*, September-October 1945, vol.17, no.5, p.14.

¹⁴¹ Stewart Murray, *Never A Soul At Home*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1998, p.17.

¹⁴² A.R.D Fairburn, ‘Some Aspects of N.Z. Art and Letters’, op.cit., p.215.

¹⁴³ Eric Cook, article in *Canta*, 9 May 1932, quoted by Lawrence Jones, *Picking Up the Traces: The Making of a New Zealand Literary Culture 1932-1945*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2003, p. 25.

1948.¹⁴⁴ The land was the source of the new nation's authenticity, and it was the task of the high culture to represent and interpret it with a distinctive national voice. 'It is through the eyes of painters that we shall increasingly see New Zealand,' wrote Charles Brasch in 1946.¹⁴⁵ McCahon, later recalling the view across the Taieri Plains from his youth in Otago, confirmed that:

I saw something logical orderly and beautiful belonging to the land and not yet to its people. Not yet understood or communicated, not even really yet invented. My work has largely been to communicate this vision and to invent the way to see it.¹⁴⁶

Colin McCahon, *The Promised Land*, 1948, oil on canvas, Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

¹⁴⁴ Walter D'Arcy Cresswell (1948), quoted on the dust-jacket of Mary Ursula Bethell, *Collected Poems*, Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1950. Cited in Alan Loney, 'Typography and the Great New Zealand Pop-Up Poetry Canon', in *A Book in the Hand: Essays on the History of the Book in New Zealand*, eds. Penny Griffith, Peter Hughes and Alan Loney, Auckland University Press, 2000, p. 133. Mary Ursula Bethell was a British-born poet and gardener of note who wrote from her cottage on Christchurch's Cashmere Hills. Her first poetry collection was published in 1929.

¹⁴⁵ C[harles] B[rasch], 'Review of Arts Year Book, 1946,' *Landfall*, vol.1, no.1, March 1947, p.73.

¹⁴⁶ Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', op.cit., p.364.

A formative influence on the way McCahon saw the New Zealand landscape was the clear, linear diagrams of geologist Charles Cotton, whose book *The Geomorphology of New Zealand* McCahon and Anne Hamblett had received as a wedding present in 1942. It is significant that even in his depictions of the landscapes that he knew well—the Otago plains, or the Nelson hills—McCahon’s imagination was first mediated by an existing printed image. Cotton represented New Zealand’s characteristic hilly landforms in simple, elegant cross sections, or from an elevated, almost bird’s-eye view in which serried ranks of hills meet the horizon with a staccato crispness. His no-nonsense scientific aesthetic was adopted by several artists of the 1940s including McCahon and Doris Lusk, whose paintings similarly depict the rugged contours of the landscape under a strong clear light without atmospheric recession into depth. Although Lusk often chose views which contained evidence of new technologies and industry—the hydro constructions in *Landscape, Overlooking Kaitawa, Waikaremoana* (1948), for example, or *Tobacco Fields, Pangatotara, Nelson* (1943)—neither artist, living in semi-industrial Christchurch in the late 1940s, painted the urban environment of their everyday lives: the ‘real’ New Zealand that they set out to depict was rural.¹⁴⁷

In New Zealand, cultural nationalism and modernism arrived at much the same time, and arguably amounted to very much the same thing. In the late 1940s, the drive of writers and artists to express the ‘real’ New Zealand in a simple and direct manner overlapped with the modernist search for the expression of ‘essence’, a pure mode of thought untrammelled by association with low popular culture. The New Zealand landscape—pristine, barren, uncompromising, waiting to be discovered—was the touchstone for both sensibilities. Writing from Britain in 1932, Fairburn stated ‘I would like to live in the back-blocks of N Z, 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. For we really are people of a different race, and have no right to be monkeying around with European culture.’¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Doris Lusk, *Landscape, Overlooking Kaitawa, Waikaremoana*, 1948, oil on board, Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery. Doris Lusk, *Tobacco Fields, Pangatotara, Nelson*, oil on cardboard, 1943. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery, gift of Colin McCahon, 1966.

¹⁴⁸ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to R.A.K. Mason, 6 January 1932, in *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, ed. Lauris Edmond, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp.62-3.

Charles Cotton, diagram of landscape formation, from *The Geomorphology of New Zealand*, Whitcombe & Tombs, Christchurch, 1942 (first published 1922).

For Fairburn and the other cultural nationalists, the New Zealand ‘everyman’ was a rural figure; a capable, stoic, hard-working man of the land. Yet, by the late 1940s, such a character was, if not quite a fiction, certainly not representative of common experience. At a point at which more than 70% of working New Zealanders lived in towns and cities and were engaged in secondary and tertiary industries, the progressive New Zealand writers and artists were predominantly concerned with exploring modern rural life.¹⁴⁹ A notable exception was the socialist politician and writer John A. Lee, who argued in a semi-autobiographical novel *The Children of the Poor* (1934) that urban crime and vice were the products of poverty. Eric McCormick noted that the subject matter of Lee’s novel ensured that it enjoyed—much like McCahon’s paintings that drew on urbanised mass culture of the late 1940s—a *succès de scandale* that placed ‘undue emphasis on questions of little relevance to criticism and obscured the book’s genuine merit.’¹⁵⁰ Much of the specifically *literary* criticism directed at Lee’s novel dealt, like the critiques of McCahon’s early work, with its supposed technical limitations. McCormick considered Lee’s technical limitations inevitable, writing as he was ‘without precedent.’ He also suggested that one of the reasons for the paucity of New Zealand painting dealing with the urban environment was the relative provincialism of its cities, and of urban life in general: the ideas embodied in such works were ‘too superficial and too

¹⁴⁹ E.A. Olssen, ‘The Conditions of Culture’, op.cit., p.213.

¹⁵⁰ E.H. McCormick. *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Centennial Surveys Series, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p.173.

transitory to justify a treatment in the permanent medium of oils.’ The *real* history, McCormick implied, the enduring stories really worth telling in paint and print, took place not in the cities but in the back country.

New Zealand artists and writers, however, lived almost exclusively in the towns and cities. In painting or writing about the rural heartland, they were constructing an image of somewhere else, a place they may have passed through or grown up in, but in which they did not reside. The back blocks, source of national authenticity and wellspring of artistic inspiration, were not where the artists chose to live. Moreover, they were not where the audience for their works placed themselves. Describing the novelist as ‘something of a spy in enemy territory’, Bill Pearson noted that the contemporary problems that obsess writers and artists are those that ‘Littledene has hardly heard of’—by which he referred to the provincial hinterland captured in Crawford Somerset’s ground-breaking sociological study of Oxford, a farming community on the plains out of Christchurch.¹⁵¹ The country and the city, he suggested, were different worlds. For all intents and purposes, the rural hinterlands existed as a subject for the arts of the city.

The tension between the country and the city, argues cultural theorist Raymond Williams, has been a constant theme of English literature since the 16th century. From Thomas More onwards, the golden age of the countryside is always ending and being usurped by the ugly brutalities of urban life. The countryside is a dignified place with a fine moral code; the city is a den of vice and misery, a cesspool of filth in which innocents are exploited and deprived by unscrupulous commercial interests. Williams describes this sensibility as a ‘myth which persists as a memory’, and identifies it in a ‘precarious but persistent [British] rural-intellectual radicalism: genuinely and actively hostile to industrialism and capitalism.’¹⁵² In New Zealand, this imported literary sensibility, radicalised in the critical antagonism of British intellectuals such as F.R. Leavis towards mass urban culture during the 1930s, met—and was amplified by—a similarly enduring myth of pioneering capability, based on the interactions of European settlers with the pristine ‘new’ landscape. The standard New Zealand histories, notes Caroline Daley, cast the European settlers as escapees from a dirty, polluted, industrialised Britain, travelling to the far end of the world in search of a rural

¹⁵¹ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.230. See Crawford Somerset, *Littledene: a New Zealand rural community*, New Zealand Council for Education Research, 1938.

¹⁵² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1973, p.36.

Arcadia as an ‘anti-modern antidote.’¹⁵³ The disease from which they fled was modern industrialised commercial culture. In his use of sequential images and speech bubbles from comic books, and the garish colours and gridded structures of product packaging, McCahon was drawing upon the characteristic forms of modern visual experience, much in the same way Virginia Woolf has Orlando drive fast through London and experience the city in a series of partial impressions; yet to do so without overt criticism of industrial modernity was to invite the immediate censure of the cultural nationalist generation of critics, steeped in the glowing rural memory-myth of both Britain and colonial New Zealand.¹⁵⁴

British historian John Pocock, who lived in Christchurch in 1946 and developed lifelong friendships with writers of the influential group he described as the ‘Caxton poets’ (whose members included Charles Brasch, Allen Curnow and Denis Glover), observed that their fundamental concern at that time was to ‘find a home for the imagination’ in New Zealand.¹⁵⁵ As second- or third-generation descendants of European settlers, home was not *elsewhere*; but it had not yet really been established in New Zealand either, a place without—it seemed to the Caxton poets, and other members of Fairburn’s circle who chafed against the genteel late colonialism of an older generation of writers—an artistic tradition and distinctive voice of its own. Without tradition, there could be no sense of belonging. The as-yet unimagined land offered itself as a foundation on which the new tradition might be built. New Zealand cities were provincial, provisional, their characteristic building materials wood and tin, their civic architecture pastiches of British styles, devastated by great earthquakes within living memory. Unlike European cities whose central streetscapes had remained much the same for several centuries, it seemed nothing here was permanent; everything was capable of being razed to the ground and built all over again. Only the land endured. The imagination of New Zealand artists and writers was stimulated, on the one hand, by the formidability of the landscape, a ‘cold threshold land’ in which ‘the mountains crouch like tigers’; and on the other, by the vastness of the ‘encircling seas’ which surrounded the new nation at the end of the world.¹⁵⁶ But Pocock suggests that it would be the interaction between the imaginative

¹⁵³ Caroline Daley, ‘Modernity, Consumption, and Leisure’, in Giselle Byrnes, ed. *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.423.

¹⁵⁴ ‘We have a rural population only in a formal sense,’ commented Erik Olssen in 1949. ‘The influence of mechanised transport, the press, and particularly the film and the radio, has meant the imposition of urban values upon the rural hinterland so that, in the main, what the farmer wants is to enjoy the advertised amenities of the city.’ E. A. Olssen, ‘The Conditions of Culture’, op. cit, p.213.

¹⁵⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.10.

¹⁵⁶ James K. Baxter, ‘The Mountains’, 1942. M.H. Holcroft, *Encircling Seas*, Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1946.

touchstones of New Zealand—place and distance—and *tradition* (‘what had come in with the ships’) which would present the greatest challenge for its interpreters.

The ocean had been traversed, and what came out of it—‘always to Islanders,’ wrote Curnow, ‘danger is what comes over the sea’—was not the unknown, but history; a history we already knew, which might overwhelm or smother our attempt to make a history out of our encounter with the land and ourselves, and might present us with problems—there was a world war in progress—that we had not made and might not be able to solve.¹⁵⁷

As World War II ended, New Zealand’s writers and artists found themselves caught between two worlds. ‘We speak with a European tongue; we think thoughts that are European, if with a difference; but we look out on the Pacific,’ wrote Brasch.¹⁵⁸ He imagined a future for New Zealand art informed by ‘sound scholarship’ and by the adaptation of the European tradition for local conditions: a future constructed by the efforts of hard-working artists in which New Zealand (a ‘province’) would have ‘something to contribute to the centre.’¹⁵⁹ He noted that:

The European tradition is not static, and there are many branches of it; all the branches depend on the main tradition, but are constantly adding to it and modifying it. ... Working in his own place and time [the artist] is drawing on a tradition which has been formed in so many places and times that it now belongs to none exclusively but to all. ... there is no reason why a New Zealand artist too, ours being a European society, should not absorb that tradition and work within it and add new forms to it in New Zealand. But the first condition of good work here is that for the artist the tradition must be localized... He must at the same time reincarnate the tradition on a local form, and embody his local and personal material in terms recognizably of the tradition, however modified.¹⁶⁰

But for many, that future in which New Zealand art would form a distinctive offshoot of European culture had been a long time coming. ‘We ... look to an England we have never known as the centre of our mainly synthetic “culture”; while our real lives are rooted in these islands... We are waiting to be born yet will not leave the womb,’ observed James K. Baxter of the New Zealand experience, in a conscious echo of Matthew Arnold’s lines from ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (1855):

Wandering between two worlds, one dead

¹⁵⁷ J. G.A. Pocock, op.cit., p.11.

¹⁵⁸ [Charles Brasch.] ‘Notes’, *Landfall*, vol.1, no.1, March 1947, p.7.

¹⁵⁹ [Charles Brasch.], *ibid*, p.6.

¹⁶⁰ [Charles Brasch.] ‘Notes’, *Landfall*, vol.1, no.1, March 1947, p.5-6.

The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.¹⁶¹

A certain frustration with the delay is evident in Baxter's description of a nation 'waiting to be born.' Interrupted by war, the birth of modern New Zealand culture had had a lengthy gestation. E.H. McCormick had concluded his centennial history of New Zealand art and literature in 1940 by quoting Arnold's lines; nothing much of any consequence seemed to have happened in the interim.¹⁶² The call to actively invent New Zealand's 'nationality' (as Pocock suggests, a more accurate word than 'nationalism' to describe the project undertaken by New Zealand writers and artists) had begun to be heard as early as 1932, in Christchurch's student magazine, *Canta*, and in contributions to the short-lived Auckland University-based literary magazine *Phoenix*.¹⁶³ The visual artists were slower to respond than were the writers. By the late 1940s, A.R.D. Fairburn reported that little about the New Zealand art scene had changed. 'Most art shows in New Zealand are unexciting,' he wrote in 1948. 'There is nearly always a predominance of the sort of dull trash that is thought of by the public (and most artists) as being "traditional".'¹⁶⁴ Lamenting elsewhere that New Zealand was 'still, for the most part, in the stagnant condition of English painting before the first world war,' Fairburn called for some 'genuinely naive painters, to shock the schools and to help bring *spirit* into painting': an urgent antidote to the 'persistent dullness that passes for "orthodoxy".'¹⁶⁵

The end of the war marked the changing of the guard, a generational shift in New Zealand arts and letters. The angry young literary men of a decade earlier were increasingly in positions of cultural power. In 1947, the government cultural fund and literary fund were established, and the first professional national symphony orchestra gave its premiere performance. The national literary journal, *Landfall*, was launched from the Caxton Press in Christchurch. It was an exciting time; the enemy—identified as the dull late colonial orthodoxy of the previous generation—was clear and present (albeit, as enemies often are, conveniently misrepresented for political expediency's sake); there was overall a feeling of being in on the ground floor, at the time that a distinctively New Zealand culture—and hence

¹⁶¹ James K. Baxter, 'Poetry in New Zealand', in 1946: *Second Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand*, ed. Howard Wadman, Wellington: H.H. Tombs, 1946, p.112.

¹⁶² E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Centennial Surveys Series, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p.195.

¹⁶³ J. G.A. Pocock, op.cit., p.11.

¹⁶⁴ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Art in Canterbury', op.cit., p.46.

¹⁶⁵ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Some Reflections on New Zealand Painting', op.cit., p.53, p.55, p.50.

the nation itself—was in the process of being invented.¹⁶⁶ ‘Strictly speaking, New Zealand doesn’t exist yet, though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and on some canvases,’ stated Allen Curnow in 1945.¹⁶⁷ When Fairburn wrote two years later that there was ‘no such thing so far as “New Zealand painting” in the sense of a body of work that has a definite character deriving from the life of this country’, it was in effect to declare a starting point, a Year Zero, a tabula rasa seeking the inscription of a new tradition.¹⁶⁸ His call for a ‘genuinely naive painter’ suggested that a New Zealand visual art tradition should start from scratch. While subsequently its lineage might be refined by the intermarriage with European cultural tradition, such an art would naturally be primarily subject, as Curnow wrote in what perhaps remains the quintessential exposition of New Zealand cultural nationalism, to the ‘peculiar pressures ... arising from the isolation of the country, its physical character, and its history.’¹⁶⁹ Over a period of some fourteen years from 1934, Fairburn held open the door for a new New Zealand painting: he was horrified when Colin McCahon, with his comic books and Rinso packets, his black singlets and speech bubbles, his contemporary religious tableaux staged in the grounds of the Nelson Golf Club, finally sauntered through.

Fairburn seemed unable to reconcile his assessment of McCahon as a ‘man of talent’ with what he regarded as the seemingly deliberate crudities of his work. ‘It is, I think, fairly obvious that Mr. McCahon ... is trying to get away from the sort of dullness I was complaining about,’ he mused. ‘The motive is an excellent one; the mode of escape not so admirable.’¹⁷⁰ His suggestion that McCahon’s Christian-themed paintings would find themselves at home in ‘an Aimée MacPherson temple’ is revealing.¹⁷¹ While the connotations of this remark have faded with the years, Fairburn’s readership would have readily grasped his meaning: Aimée Semple MacPherson was an international celebrity of the 1920s and 1930s, a Canadian-born Los Angeles-based evangelist who notably used modern mass media

¹⁶⁶ The feeling of intergenerational antagonism was mutual: the older ‘bookmen’ looked on the brash new work with some disdain. Writing about the newly-launched *Landfall*, Pat Lawlor might have been thinking of the reproduction of McCahon’s paintings as well as short stories by Frank Sargeson when he commented: ‘Admittedly the old writer has been squeamish, fearing to look at a strong word or a woman’s stocking; but the modernist goes to the other extreme and has thrown open his awful closet of profanities and obscenities.’ Pat Lawlor, quoted in Chris Hilliard, *The Bookmen’s Dominion: Cultural Life in New Zealand 1920-1950*, Auckland: Auckland University Press Studies in Cultural and Social History, no.3, 2006, p.97.

¹⁶⁷ Allen Curnow, ‘A Dialogue by Way of Introduction: Speakers Allen Curnow and Ngaio Marsh’, *Year Book of the Arts In New Zealand*, Wellington: H.H. Tombs, 1945, p.77.

¹⁶⁸ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Some Reflections on New Zealand Painting’, op.cit., pp.49-50.

¹⁶⁹ Allen Curnow, ‘Introduction’, *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960.

¹⁷⁰ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Art in Canterbury’, op.cit., p.49.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p.50.

including radio and movies to preach her brand of Christian fundamentalism.¹⁷² She was notorious for working the events of her everyday life into her sermons; one address was entitled ‘Arrested for Speeding’, while the failure of a plane’s landing gear on a flight she chartered became a contemporary parable involving the devil and Jesus as rival pilots. To cite Aimée MacPherson in a critique of McCahon’s work was to raise the spectres of bogus religiosity, Hollywood hucksterism, and show-business masquerading as sincerity. Its effect was not only to trivialise the content of McCahon’s work, but also to associate it closely with (‘at home in’) the shallow vulgarities of American mass culture. Though the least-quoted passage from Fairburn’s notorious ‘celestial lavatory’ invective, it is quite possibly the most hard-hitting.

At his back Fairburn had not only the courage of his own convictions and the urgencies of the post-war nation-building project, but also—as a stiffener—the corpus of modern progressive British literature and literary criticism. Like McCahon, as a New Zealand art critic Fairburn was working in a new national tradition largely of his own invention. There was little art criticism worth the name in New Zealand prior to his effective manifesto of 1934. In a letter to Denis Glover in 1935, he described criticism in New Zealand as ‘a sort of gang-warfare conducted with pea-shooters.’¹⁷³ Literary criticism was in a similar state: ‘Critical writing on New Zealand literature is small in bulk and almost invariably poor in quality,’ noted E.H. McCormick in 1940.¹⁷⁴ As much as Fairburn called for a ‘genuinely New Zealand painting’ to be developed, there was a corresponding need to invent a tradition of indigenous art criticism to support and strengthen it. With Fairburn, Brasch and McCormick as its pioneers, modern British literary criticism provided the framework for ‘serious’ art criticism in New

¹⁷² Perhaps Fairburn spoke more truly than he knew: in the late 1950s, while travelling on a bus to work at the Auckland City Art Gallery, McCahon confided to a friend that when he was young, he had wanted to be an evangelist. This was a response, perhaps, to the time he had spent in Mapua with Toss Woollaston’s uncle Frank Tosswill, a member of the Oxford Group and a supporter of moral rearmament, an evangelical social movement which targeted the upper echelons of society and which was described as a ‘Salvation Army for snobs.’ One of its early slogans was, ironically given Fairburn’s comparison of McCahon with the broadcaster Aimée Semple MacPherson, ‘a spiritual radiophone in every home.’ McCahon’s comment is recounted in Murray Bail, ‘I Am’, in Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*. Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum and Nelson, Craig Potton Publishing, 2002, p. 46.

¹⁷³ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to Denis Glover, 6 April 1935, in Lauris Edmond (ed.), *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, op.cit., p.92.

¹⁷⁴ E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Centennial Surveys Series, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p.199.

Zealand: primary to both was the need to negotiate a new role for history within a society whose outlines were changing at rapid speed.¹⁷⁵

In their purposeful establishment of a New Zealand canon, the cultural nationalists of the 1940s found the means of discernment in the high-minded literary criticism practiced by Cambridge don F.R. Leavis (1895-1978), and his wife the essayist Q.D. Leavis (1906-1981), as well as the critical writings of poet and editor T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). In particular, F.R. Leavis's strongly-expressed notion that literary criticism should be an active and influential force in the shaping of modern society was in line with the cultural nationalists' ambitions for New Zealand, as was the preference for pre-modern 'authentic' folk culture over Americanised mass production. It was not so much that the *Phoenix* and Caxton generation wished to throw off the yoke of British cultural influence, more that they wished to choose a different set of British influencers; moderns like themselves.

New Zealand arts and letters had a direct line of communication with F.R. Leavis. E.H. McCormick, who became one of New Zealand's preeminent art historians, studied with the Leavises at Cambridge between 1931-3, and was a regular guest at their weekly tea parties. He corresponded with them for many years after his return to New Zealand in 1933. (The critical magazine he attempted to start with a fellow student from India became Leavis's famously caustic mouthpiece *Scrutiny*.) McCormick completed a master's thesis under F.R. Leavis's supervision, changing his subject—at Leavis's suggestion—from a treatment of an Elizabethan manuscript to a view of New Zealand literature within the wider national culture, a version of which he republished in 1940 as the influential *Letters and Art in New Zealand*. McCormick was in the company of the Leavises during one of their most productive periods, while Leavis published his influential *New Bearings in English Poetry*, and his wife Q.D. Leavis published her work examining the sociological background to the popular literary tastes of contemporary Britain, *Fiction and the Reading Public*. McCormick later commented that following two years with the Leavises, 'I had at least begun to comprehend, however dimly, what it means for a country not only to possess scenery but a visual tradition, recorded and constantly enriched.'¹⁷⁶ It was the development from landscape as scenery to landscape

¹⁷⁵ From the 1940s until the mid-1970s, high art in New Zealand was interwoven with literary culture: McCahon's first exhibitions were held under its auspices, in progressive left-wing bookshops and Wellington Public Library.

¹⁷⁶ E.H. McCormick, *An Absurd Ambition: Autobiographical Writing*. Dennis McEldowney (ed.), Auckland University Press, 1996, p.124.

as the basis of a national visual tradition that he hoped to hasten along with the publication of *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, a government-funded volume in the Centennial series of which he was also editor, and which remained the standard text on the subject for at least two decades.

With *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, along with the Leavisite rigour of critical analysis with which he set the standard for subsequent New Zealand cultural criticism, McCormick identified a potential restriction to national cultural development: the great width of the comprehension gap between the New Zealand artist and the New Zealand public. Charles Brasch agreed: the arts had become ‘disastrously isolated’ from everyday life, and were in danger of losing their relevance—which Brasch described as the function of ‘relating’—to the majority of people.¹⁷⁷ Like Fairburn, Brasch regarded the separation of the arts and everyday life in New Zealand as problematic for both the arts and for the general civilisation of society: ‘it is only through [the arts] that the everyday activities in which men are immersed can be felt ...as belonging to some greater order.’¹⁷⁸ The problem, it seemed, lay with the previous generation’s lack of ‘vigour’: a matter addressed, in McCormick’s view, by the ‘intellectual distinction’ and ‘critical intelligence’ of various New Zealand poets of the 1930s (including A.R.D. Fairburn, Allen Curnow, Denis Glover, and Ursula Bethell, among others), who had ‘broken down barriers that divided New Zealand verse from some of the most vital interests of the New Zealand people.’¹⁷⁹ The novelist Bill Pearson, however, saw a mistrust of art and artists—and indeed, of intellectuals of any stripe—as a national proclivity:

The New Zealander fears ideas that don’t result in increased crop-yield or money or home comforts. The wise man never mentions his learning, after the same pattern as the popular ideal of the returned soldier who never mentions his battles.¹⁸⁰

New Zealand was ‘a country where the class divisions have never been rigidly defined’, as Monte Holcroft noted in 1940.¹⁸¹ However, the situation in regards to art was complicated. The cultural nationalists saw a need for the arts to articulate the essence of everyday life, yet New Zealanders who advertised their interest in culture risked general social ridicule and

¹⁷⁷ [Charles Brasch.] ‘Notes’, *Landfall*, vol.1, no.1, March 1947, p.3.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁷⁹ E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Centennial Surveys Series, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p.188.

¹⁸⁰ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, *op.cit.*, p.210.

¹⁸¹ M.H. Holcroft, *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand*. Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1940, pp.14-15.

accusations of ‘pretending to be better than the ordinary chap.’¹⁸² Pearson commented from personal experience:

Anything that threatens instruction or ‘improvement’, selfconsciousness, imaginative effort, resolution or self-control—it may be the New Testament or Marx, Shakespeare or John Gilpin, symphonic music, a foreign film, an Anzac Day speech or a verse in an autograph-book—they know it’s ‘all bull-shit.’ ... It is common for some people to accuse people who go to symphonic concerts of not understanding the music and going out of snobbery.

Fairburn noted that the word ‘intelligentzia’ [sic] had become completely pejorative in New Zealand society by 1946. ‘To accuse a man of being a member of it is to imply that he is rootless, gutless, and lost in the snowy woods.’¹⁸³ W.J. Scott, who carried out a survey into the reading, film and radio tastes of New Zealand high school students in 1947, felt similarly. ‘To most people,’ he reflected, ‘a highbrow is either a person with queer abnormal tastes, or a humbug.’¹⁸⁴

It was an awkward position. To be a writer or an artist in New Zealand was to be by definition an elitist, even if one were, like Frank Sargeson, to incorporate the everyday voice of New Zealand in literature for the first time (‘the speech of the street, the government office, the middle-class household’), or like McCahon, to paint in an aesthetic borrowed in part from the visual experience of everyday life.¹⁸⁵ In Pearson’s analysis the people did not wish to participate in high cultural discourse and actively preferred to maintain a firm distinction between themselves and the intellectual elite.¹⁸⁶ But equally, that distance was also preferred by many intellectuals, who, mused Pearson, were able to feel socially superior because of the value they placed in cultural discrimination: ‘[The intellectual’s] cultivated sighs and languishments at vulgarity and commerce are the luxury of one who is grateful that they exist because they are the condition of his superiority.’ Writing in 1947, artist Eric Lee Johnson saw cultural distinction as a divisive factor in contemporary New Zealand society:

¹⁸² Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers: a sketch of New Zealand behaviour and its implications for the artist’, op.cit., p.216.

¹⁸³ A.R.D. Fairburn. ‘From a Notebook’, *Book*, no.8, August 1946, unpaginated.

¹⁸⁴ W.J. Scott, quoted in A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Education—for What?’ *New Zealand Listener*, 26 December 1947, pp.15-17.

¹⁸⁵ E.H. McCormick, *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, Centennial Surveys Series, Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p.180.

¹⁸⁶ ‘For us who are trained in a sophisticated self-conscious tradition of art it is very difficult because the audience we would like to reach will never read us even if we were to start back with folk-tales.’ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.230.

‘The complete historian of snobbishness should treat of intellectual and aesthetic snobbishness too. The intellectual and aesthetic snob despises his brother of lower level (or in some cases merely different) pursuits and preferences.’¹⁸⁷ In an ostensibly classless society, culture might serve to drive an invisible wedge between people as great as any provided by accidents of birth in a more formally stratified society. Snobbery, in the New Zealand context, equated to pretension: being caught in the act of pretending to be what one was not. And advertising one’s interest in the high culture was considered the height of pretension. Fairburn’s castigation of McCahon’s work as ‘homespun pretentiousness’ is effectively an accusation of reverse snobbery: rather than ‘pretending to be better than the ordinary chap’, McCahon, Fairburn’s criticism suggested, was slumming it.

In many ways A.R.D. Fairburn was New Zealand’s version of F.R. Leavis. Like Leavis, Fairburn was an outspoken public intellectual who believed that it was the responsibility of the educated elite to maintain high critical standards for the health of wider society. Fairburn’s ‘hearty contempt for shoddy goods’ informed, according to his friend and obituarist Bob Lowry, much of his cultural criticism: he also had a ‘terrific bump of irreverence for many such modern phenomena as snobs, prigs, stuffed shirts, orthodox economists, Americans, marching girls, respectable citizens, militarists, wowsers, bank-managers, monopolists, gallery directors, H-bombs, seats of government, brass bands, insurance companies, and the bitch-goddess, Success.’¹⁸⁸ While his prejudices were engagingly idiosyncratic, in taking on the shoddy goods of mass culture he was part of a distinguished intellectual tradition. Mass culture was spreading across the globe like a virus: it was up to ‘an armed and conscious minority’ comprised of public intellectuals like Q.D. and F.R. Leavis and A.R.D. Fairburn to root it out, using surgical precision in the evaluation of its texts and the exposure of its nefarious social influences.¹⁸⁹ The products of mass culture were not only cheap and nasty, but to untrained minds, represented a dangerous temptation towards the twin evils of laziness and immorality. Mass production, wrote F.R. Leavis in 1942,

¹⁸⁷ Eric Lee Johnson, contribution to ‘Democracy and Culture’, various authors, *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.18.

¹⁸⁸ Bob Lowry, obituary of A.R.D. Fairburn, *Here and Now*, April 1957, quoted in Vanya Lowry, ‘Flamboyant Lunacy’, in Dinah Holman and Christine Cole Catley (eds.), *Fairburn and Friends*, North Shore City: Cape Catley Ltd., 2004, p.75.

¹⁸⁹ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1965, (first published 1932), p.210.

has turned out to involve standardization and levelling-down outside the realm of mere material goods. Those who in school are offered (perhaps) the beginnings of education in taste are exposed, out of school, to the competing exploitation of the cheapest emotional response; films, newspapers, publicity in all its forms, commercially-catered fiction—all offer satisfaction at the lowest level, and inculcate the choosing of the most immediate pleasures, got with the least effort.¹⁹⁰

Leavis's disdain for the products of mass culture was similar to that of Clement Greenberg's antipathy for kitsch. Kitsch, for Greenberg, was fundamentally inauthentic, a mechanised source of 'vicarious experience and faked sensations' which included 'popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.'¹⁹¹ Such popular culture, argued Greenberg, was assembled from bastardised versions of the historical tastes of the ruling classes. Today we might notice this 'constant seepage from top to bottom', as Greenberg termed it, in place mats printed with Impressionist paintings, or Mondrian-esque grids used for telco advertising, or Vivaldi ringtones for mobile phones, or faux-Georgian panelling on suburban garage doors.¹⁹² Greenberg viewed the traffic in culture as a one-way ride, a freight elevator proceeding from the penthouse straight down to the basement with its goods spoiling on the way. But the incorporation of mass culture into serious art has always produced, as Laura Kipnis notes, a sense of shock which throws into disarray the founding assumptions of the hierarchies of culture; hence Fairburn's denouncement of McCahon's reverse-cultural strategy as *illegitimate*.¹⁹³

In Greenberg's formulation, the development of kitsch as a cultural phenomenon was synchronous with that of the modernist avant-garde. Industrialised mass culture, as Thomas Crow points out, was 'prior and determining', and modernism—with its 'ceaseless alertness against the stereotyped and pre-processed', and its absolute requirement, as promoted by Greenberg, for its practitioners to observe truth to materials—was its effect. The industrial revolution and the development of universal literacy had been the midwives of kitsch: the

¹⁹⁰ F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson. *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1942, p.3.

¹⁹¹ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.11. Originally published in *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no.5, 1939.

¹⁹² Clement Greenberg, letter to Dwight Macdonald, February 1939, quoted in Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Art Czar: The Rise and Fall of Clement Greenberg*, Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2006, pp.52-3.

¹⁹³ Laura Kipnis, 'Repossessing Popular Culture', in Zoya Cocur and Simon Leung (eds.), *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p.375. Originally published in *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp.14-32, 296.

great new mass of semi-educated urban dwellers sought cultural diversion of an unchallenging nature, and commercial organisations leapt forward to provide it. With its knowing equation of sensationalism and sentimentality with public attention and ‘enormous profits’, kitsch, as Greenberg conceived it, exerted a constant negative pressure on the artist. It represented the ultimate compromise of artistic integrity and the loss of any cultural authenticity.

Crow describes Greenberg’s notion of the relationship between the artist and the kitsch products of mass culture as one of ‘relentless refusal’, but observes that in reality ‘avant-garde artists have habitually recognized a pressing need to incorporate the expressions of vernacular culture.’¹⁹⁴ It appeared entirely natural to many critics and commentators of the late 1940s that there should be two distinctly separate artistic registers, the low or commercial, and the high or fine, and that the definition of the one could be assured by its fundamental opposition to the other. Huyssen argues that this ‘Great Divide’ (discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between the high and low) is critical for an understanding of modernism and its aftermath: given that the genesis of modernism and cultural nationalism overlap almost exactly in New Zealand’s history, the nationalist impulse is inevitably coloured by such a distinction.¹⁹⁵ The project was not only to express an authentic New Zealand culture to the outside world but perhaps even more significantly, to express it within New Zealand: the official culture of the emergent nation would be that of the intellectuals rather than that of the working people. ‘We cannot,’ stated F.R. Leavis, and one might well imagine the sentiment echoed by Fairburn, ‘as we might in a healthy state of culture, leave the citizen to be formed unconsciously by his environment; if anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be saved, he must be trained to discriminate and to resist.’¹⁹⁶

The social implications of aesthetic and intellectual discrimination were the subject of much contention in New Zealand’s intellectual circles in 1947 and 1948, and formed a critical background to both the production and reception of McCahon’s mass-culture derived paintings. In May 1947 the *Listener* published an article by British playwright J.B. Priestley in which he vigorously denounced a new phenomenon he termed ‘cultural democracy.’

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, op. cit., p.viii.

¹⁹⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. op.cit., p.viii.

¹⁹⁶ F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson. *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1942, p.5.

Priestley condemned the increasingly prevalent new belief (which he saw as substantially gaining in traction in post-war society) that ‘the ordinary man or woman is the best judge of everything’, and which was manifest in the arts as ‘shoddy commercialism’ whereby ‘one man’s shilling is as good as another’s.’¹⁹⁷ The *Listener* subsequently ran a series of articles which featured many short essays by prominent New Zealand artists, academics and critics including Fairburn, and which in turn flooded the letters pages with intemperate responses. Most contributors deplored the low standard of public taste in New Zealand, sheeting home the blame to the capitalist forces of commercial culture. Many agreed that the domination of the media by lowbrow cultural values represented a threat to the health of society and to the intellectual pleasure and advancement of its members: the danger, noted Priestley, of ‘playing down to a half-witted level’ would be the exile of succeeding generations from ‘whole worlds of wonder and delight.’ It was for the good of the people that their preferences in popular entertainment should be over-ridden by the educated choices of a well-informed minority. D.S. Smith, Chancellor of Victoria University, illustrated Priestley’s thesis by describing his own problem with local radio and cinema programming:

having searched in vain at times for a programme to suit myself, and having found on the radio only vaudeville or the like, swing or the like, or certain kinds of talk, and on the films only unacceptable Hollywood, I have naturally thought that too much attention is paid to what is thought to be the preference of the majority.¹⁹⁸

Correspondent T.S Doyle of Whangarei agreed: ‘The air is polluted by plagiarists, pirates, crooners, jazz fiends, modernist atrocity-mongers and gutterbrows generally.’¹⁹⁹ Artist Eric Lee-Johnson put the blame for the ‘zero level of taste and the poor aesthetic judgment’ he considered plainly evident in New Zealand—and elsewhere among the English-speaking peoples—squarely at the feet of commercial radio programming and Hollywood movies: while it was ‘in their power to do so much good’, he considered that the American-inflected mass media had done more ‘towards confirming the greater proportion of the people in their mental laziness and bad taste.’²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ J.B. Priestley, ‘Cultural Democracy: Priestley Condemns it, and Starts an Argument’, *New Zealand Listener*, 9 May 1947, vol.16, no.411, p.6.

¹⁹⁸ D.S. Smith, untitled contribution to ‘Democracy and Culture’, *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.20.

¹⁹⁹ T.S.C. Doyle. ‘Correspondence: Gutter Brows’, *New Zealand Listener*, 19 March 1948, vol.18, no.456, p.5.

²⁰⁰ Eric Lee Johnson, contribution to ‘Democracy and Culture’, various authors, *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.18.

In the most substantial of the contributions to the *Listener's* series on 'Democracy and Culture', Fairburn identified 'powerful commercial trusts' behind the 'bad "popular" art of today', noting with utter contempt the anti-democratic origins of international big business and the complicit willingness of artists to debase aesthetic standards while in the employ of corporations.²⁰¹ 'There are thousands of artists,' he expostulated, '*who are nothing better than collaborators in an occupied country.*'²⁰² In Fairburn's uncompromisingly Greenbergian formation, the battle lines had been drawn. On the one front was mass culture; on the other was high art. A serious artist could not also work as a commercial artist, and to be either a producer or a consumer of popular art was ipso facto to declare oneself the enemy of the high culture.

There was little opposition to the general sentiments expressed by Priestley, Fairburn, and the subsequent contributors on the subject of cultural democracy: only Lee-Johnson, who in a later article about New Zealand culture's fetish for 'foreigners', may have thought better of his earlier remarks about the low-grade taste of the New Zealand public, noting archly that 'The complete historian of snobbishness should treat of intellectual and aesthetic snobbishness too. The intellectual and aesthetic snob despises his brother of lower level (or in some cases merely different) pursuits and preferences.'²⁰³ There was also letter-writer Rita Atkinson, who commented a few months later with something of an exasperated tone: 'New Zealand is said to be known for its lack of social snobbery and social caste but its intellectual snobbery is disgusting.'²⁰⁴

The answer to the cultural problem posed by the supposedly low level of public taste lay, for the Leavises as well as for New Zealand's cultural critics of the 1940s, in education.

Education was seen as critical to the health of modern society. Given that the folk traditions,

²⁰¹ Fairburn's antipathy towards commerce was of long-standing. In 1935 he wrote: 'The rule of Big Business either perverts the arts and turns them to its own low purposes or throws them out into the street.' A.R.D. Fairburn, correspondence, 25 Sept. 1935 (v.i, n.48), p.22, cited in Rachel Barrowman, *A Popular Vision: The Arts and the Left in New Zealand 1930-1950*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1991, p.46. Clement Greenberg noted, in a similar vein: 'Kitsch's enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself, and its members have not always resisted this temptation. Ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to it entirely. And then those puzzling borderline cases appear, such as the popular novelist, Simenon, in France, and Steinbeck in this country. The net result is always to the detriment of true culture in any case.' Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, op.cit, p.13.

²⁰² A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Democracy and Culture', *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.21-2. My emphasis.

²⁰³ Eric Lee-Johnson, 'Snobbishness is in Art, Too: The Fetish About Foreigners', *New Zealand Listener*, 27 June 1947, vol.17, no.418, p.10.

²⁰⁴ Rita Atkinson, 'Dividing Seas', Correspondence, *New Zealand Listener*, 24 October 1947, vol.17, no.435, p.19.

which had sustained the lives of working people for centuries, had been almost entirely subsumed by commercial culture, it was formal education which would now provide citizens with a means of self-expression and a gateway to higher thoughts. Education provided society with cultural continuity and offered a chance for its citizens to improve themselves by immersion in the Great Tradition of arts and letters. For the Leavises, the progression of an individual through levels of culture from low to high—propelled by education—was essentially evolutionary. Education provided a ladder with which one could extract oneself from the slough of commercialised bad taste, climbing ever higher towards the Arnoldian ‘sweetness and light’ emanating from the high culture. The serious application required of the individual would be rewarded by entry to the world of higher thought, which held its own special compensations. Howard Wadman, editor of two volumes of the *New Zealand Year Book of the Arts*, commented encouragingly in this vein:

When you have learned to swim or play tennis your former paddling or pat-ball seems tame. It is the same with the arts. Bing Crosby can’t give you the same quality of enjoyment that Beethoven will, when you have made the initial effort to understand. The picture on the greengrocer’s calendar may give you pleasure, but it cannot give you the kind of pleasure that Cézanne does, if you will let him.²⁰⁵

Most importantly, from education came the means of discrimination: the ability to distinguish between the relative merits of Cézanne’s paintings and the greengrocer’s calendar. ‘The possibilities of education’, asserted Queenie Leavis, ‘specifically directed against such appeals as those made by the journalist, the middleman, the bestseller, the cinema, and advertising ... ; some education of this kind is an essential part of the training of taste.’²⁰⁶

What remained unspoken was that the ability—or more accurately perhaps the *desire*—to distinguish between Cézanne and the greengrocer’s calendar also provided the student with a personal cultural capital, which set apart the individual from the masses. Critique of mass culture necessarily implied a critique of the masses: criticism of the way other people live. As the French sociologist Henri Léfèbvre pointed out in 1947, the critique of everyday life constitutes a long tradition in both philosophy and art, and has always involved a criticism of the daily lives of other social classes; it generally finds its expression in contempt for the role of productive labour.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Howard Wadman, ‘The Shape of Things in New Zealand’, op.cit, 1948, p.16.

²⁰⁶ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and The Reading Public*, op.cit., p.271.

²⁰⁷ Henri Léfèbvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol.1, transl. John Moore, London and New York: Verso, 1991, p. 29. (Orig. publ. as *Critique de la vie quotidienne I: Introduction*, Paris: Grasse, 1947.)

Whereas once the cultivation of good taste was the sole province of the aristocratic class, state-funded education provided a means for the intellectual and aesthetic advancement of all. Access to the high culture was potentially within everyone's grasp, no matter the humbleness of one's origins. But although the field was open at mid-century for the rise of the new 'meritocratic' class' identified by British sociologist Michael Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*—his satirical book of 1958 chronicling the seemingly natural rise to power of the best educated and most intelligent—the decline of the traditional aristocracy brought with it unexpected problems for the high culture. While the 'bad taste' and 'vulgarity' of modern commercial art and industrial design was of much concern to intellectuals in post-War New Zealand, the fact there was not a sufficient critical mass of patrons for the high culture to flourish here was also considered a particular problem. 'We lack the driving-force of an ideal conception of the natural aristocrat', complained Fairburn in 1957.²⁰⁸ ('What we need is a class of men whose minds are cultivated,' he had stated ten years earlier.²⁰⁹) On the other hand, outspoken modernist architect Vernon Brown saw no reason that patronage or even a general appreciation of the arts should have yet developed in New Zealand, given the nation's social origins and cultural egalitarianism: 'We are middle class and lower,' he stated baldly.²¹⁰

Both Fairburn and Brown suggested that the new aristocracy of taste that the future of New Zealand culture would require would be created by an ambitious state-directed regime of education in the arts. After all, suggested Oliver Duff in his *New Zealand Listener* editorial of 30 May 1947, 'Bad taste ... is often only ignorance of good taste.'²¹¹ In advance of T.S. Eliot's call for the reinstigation of a system of apprenticeships and guilds to increase the quality of and social value placed in skilled labour, Vernon Brown proposed the formation of an Industrial Society of Design in New Zealand, 'similar to the Royal Society of Arts', to raise the standards of public aesthetics currently 'decided by industrialists, or tradesmen from

²⁰⁸ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'The Culture Industry', *Landfall*, no. 39, September 1956, p.199.

²⁰⁹ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Democracy and Culture', *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.22.

²¹⁰ Vernon Brown, 'Corruption of Taste', Letters, *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.5. Brown's letter written in response to A.R.D. Fairburn's article on the 'corruption of public taste' in furniture design reveals the disdain of the professional aesthete for the commercial art world. 'Look at the sign-writing on the walls of any New Zealand city. Note the goods they advertise. We have no say in such matters. As an instance of bad taste with no justification, I offer the cover of the *Listener*. Our architecture in most cases is a matter of throwing together fag butts [sic] of design... Our standards are being rotted.'

²¹¹ [Oliver Duff], Editorial, *New Zealand Listener*, 30 May 1947, p.5. Duff was commenting on modernist architect and recent arrival Ernst Plischke's publication *Design and Living*.

whom clearly we can expect no other behaviour': the kind of men who are 'generally self-made and in most cases showing the thumbmarks.'²¹² Fairburn saw tertiary art schools as the potential conduit for the dissemination of high aesthetic standards throughout the wider community; it was critical, he considered, that their role be expanded into industrial design 'if tastes in such things as furniture and fabric design among the rest of the population [were not] to remain wretchedly vulgar.'²¹³ Bringing together fine art and design was also critical for the health of art, he believed, which had become too remote from daily life; like Herbert Read, whose influential *Philosophy of Modern Art* was published in 1952, Fairburn considered that the Industrial Revolution had cut off the artist from revitalisation of his craft by removing from his ambit the design of objects for daily use. Under Fairburn's scheme (which he admitted presented some problems), the primary responsibility for the aesthetics of commercial design in New Zealand would be removed from industry and given back to art.

The challenge, as Fairburn saw it, was to close the comprehension gap between art and the people through public education: rather than passively allow art to be dumbed down by commerce, a battle to bring up the standard of public taste should be waged by intellectuals. In the absence of a moneyed, cultivated class in New Zealand to promote high standards and safeguard traditions, he considered that it was the responsibility of the state in New Zealand not only to act as patron in the development of the high culture, but also to create and promote a new breed of scholar-connoisseur. This notion closely echoed F.R. Leavis's insistence on the importance to society of highly-trained, critically engaged academics within university English departments acting as agents for the handing down of cultural tradition through study of literature. It also gestured towards Matthew Arnold's 'children of light, or servants of the idea.'²¹⁴ Such individuals, suggested Fairburn, would 'act as intermediaries between the State, the artists and the people.'²¹⁵ But unlike the aristocrats of the past, the new intellectual elite (Fairburn's 'guardians of standards, anti-toxic agents') would not be born but would be made in the classrooms of the state. Trained to distinguish the 'genuine' from the 'meretricious, or moronic', their first duty would be to the traditions of art, and of

²¹² See T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1948. Vernon Brown, 'Corruption of Taste', Letters, *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.5.

²¹³ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Arts and Crafts in the Schools: A View of Aesthetic Education', *The Arts in New Zealand*, April-May 1945, vol.17, no.3, serial no. 67, p.9.

²¹⁴ See F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1942. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Social and Political Criticism*, London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1869, p.98.

²¹⁵ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Democracy and Culture', *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.22.

civilised society, which for Fairburn as for the Leavises were practically the same thing. The post-War New Zealand nation, as Fairburn envisaged it in the late 1940s, would be socially egalitarian but culturally elite. In New Zealand, cultural distinctions required—hypothetically, at least—no social qualification.

In the 1940s, New Zealand's social egalitarianism was perhaps most fundamentally defined by its system of free access to standardised public education. While the British education system offered a tripartite distribution of secondary school students into either grammar, secondary modern or technical schools depending on their performance in the eleven-plus exam (a system which greatly advantaged students from middle-class households, but which also resulted from time to time in the social advancement of very bright working-class students), New Zealand schools all taught from the same curriculum. The inference was that no one was better than anyone else; everyone had equal access to the same means of the transmission of culture. Writing in *Landfall* in 1949, historian Erik Olssen mounted a cultural critique of New Zealand's social egalitarianism partly based on his reading of T.S. Eliot's *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*.²¹⁶ In New Zealand, he commented, 'an education system adapted to a differentiation of cultural function in terms of [social] class is considered undemocratic'; yet, he stated, under Eliot's formulation, such a radically egalitarian society must necessarily display a low level of culture. It was the 'diversity and variety characteristic of an organic society' which expressed itself in a differentiation of cultural function (and hence allowed for the expressions of the high culture, as well as the 'genuine' folk art of the people), rather than the flattened, lowest-common cultural denominator of the 'equalitarian' regime which resulted in a 'wretchedly low and standardized form of popular culture'.²¹⁷ For New Zealanders, he remarked, the term *aristocracy* 'evokes a stock response of hostility, and so shocks our prejudices that we cannot take seriously the suggestion that the absence of these social classes may be attendant with serious disadvantages.'²¹⁸ Social egalitarianism presented a particular problem for the New Zealand artist, who was 'seriously handicapped by the lack of an élite capable of appraising what he has to say.'²¹⁹

²¹⁶ E.A. Olssen, 'The Conditions of Culture', op.cit., pp. 208-223.

²¹⁷ Ibid, p.216.

²¹⁸ Ibid, p. 212. Coming to much the same conclusion, Bill Pearson considered the New Zealand hostility to the upper classes as a complex psychological phenomenon: 'Being middle-class we fear and sneer at royalty and aristocracy, yet we hanker after them because an aristocrat's goodwill confers security on our self-esteem.' Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers', op.cit., p.205.

²¹⁹ E.A. Olssen, 'The Conditions of Culture', op.cit., p.215.

For Olssen, as for Eliot, the answer was not to force the expressions of the high culture on to ordinary people ('You should not expect a widespread interest in the conscious appraisal of the work, say, of J.M. Keynes, Picasso, Bartok, and ... the poetry of T.S. Eliot') but to give people a means of critical discrimination at whatever their level of cultural participation. He suggested that the reader of fiction should, for example, stop talking about 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' novels and instead discriminate between good and bad novels. Olssen's consideration of the exigencies of the cultural situation in New Zealand called for principles of connoisseurship to be applied at all levels of popular culture. It was the distinction between expressions of high quality and poor quality that was of value, rather than the high culture's reflex of disdain for 'lower' cultural forms. Cultural discrimination would not be a way to transcend the social class of one's birth, but would provide the means of living intelligently and meaningfully within it. The lack of a patron class in New Zealand meant that it would be the role of the state to create an effective demand for the work of local artists, and, by means of the universal education system, to transmit the nation's cultural heritage to the people and raise the general level of cultural awareness within society. Given that it was not commonly done at home, it was the state's job to teach its citizens about 'quality', educating people in the art of distinguishing 'sense from nonsense at elementary levels.'²²⁰ It was a fruitless and ultimately impossible task, commented Olssen, for an individual to set out to 'improve culture.'²²¹

But for many, including the cultural nationalists in New Zealand and the New Critics and their followers in Britain, the social and political upheavals of World War II marked the end of an old civilisation and the beginning of a new world, one in which 'ordinary' working people would seek to determine the conditions of public culture in a way which would have seemed unthinkable only a couple of generations before. The British educational reforms of 1944 had had theoretically removed social barriers (although not intellectual ones) to participation in the high culture; New Zealand's regime of equal educational opportunity allowed everyone to swim in the same stream of culture. The old systems of cultural domination and subordination were in decline. In Britain, the war had hastened the job of demolishing the social and political hegemony of the upper classes begun by the introduction of the Inheritance Tax in 1894, which gradually broke up the large estates held for hundreds

²²⁰ Ibid, p.216.

²²¹ Ibid, p.219. Olssen noted the greatness of the temptation to do so, however, adding that 'the passion to create a new civilisation is perhaps too chronic to be cured by good advice.'

of years by the landed gentry: in New Zealand, the war had provided an international context in which to see New Zealand as an independent nation with its own traditions and evolving identity, no longer a British outpost in the South Seas. There was a moment in the history of both nations, just after the war, when the new positions of cultural power and subordination had not yet congealed, and the field of public culture lay open and fluid. With their conflation of the high and common, the sacred and the profane, this was the critical moment at which McCahon's 'religious' works appeared, as documents of a society in violent motion.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the opening of the gates of the high culture to admit more people would result in an increased vigilance of its standards; anyone in principle might be able to come in, but you must be wearing a collar and tie to get past the doorman. If the criteria for membership were broadened, the behaviour of members would assume far greater significance. Fairburn's primary issue with McCahon was clearly one of good and bad taste, or at least of the standards of taste deemed appropriate to the world of fine arts; elsewhere in his review, he commented approvingly on the 'sureness of taste' displayed by Edith Wall in her painting of cineraria flowers. 'There is such a thing as a generalised good taste,' he had asserted in his call for a new system of aesthetic education in New Zealand in 1945, envisaging art schools teaching 'canons of design that apply throughout the whole of the arts.'²²² (In arguing like the Leavises for mastery of the rules of refined taste through higher education, he was at odds with T.S. Eliot, who suggested that taste is always developed through individual experience and is allied to personality and character: 'genuine taste is always imperfect taste.'²²³) Standards in art, Fairburn explained in his lengthy essay on cultural democracy, were difficult to define in exact terms, but were nonetheless objective, just as in 'doctoring and plumbing.' Standards could—and should—be measured against the organic and living traditions of culture, by qualified people. 'There *is* such a thing as intellectual authority,' he stated firmly.²²⁴

One of the most critical areas for the application of aesthetic standards lay, for Fairburn, it seemed, in the separation of fine art from mass culture, the latter of which was produced with the connivance of artists who worked 'in the full knowledge that they are debasing

²²² A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Arts and Crafts in the Schools: A View of Aesthetic Education', *The Arts in New Zealand*, April-May 1945, vol.17, no.3, serial no. 67, pp.9-10.

²²³ T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, London: Faber and Faber, 1933, p.35.

²²⁴ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Democracy and Culture', *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.22.

standards.’²²⁵ Both dealt in images and aesthetics; but the *moral* premise of commercial and fine art was fundamentally different. Fairburn wrote in many separate contexts between 1945 and 1950 about the essential irreconcilability of fine art and commercial art; McCahon’s work, which sought to conflate both, necessarily drew his critical attention. The two art worlds, the fine and the commercial, seemed to most critics of the era to be by nature opposed; and Fairburn would brook no challenge to this position. ‘There has been a tendency lately,’ he remarked, ‘for even well-informed people to discuss the best sort of commercial art (London Underground posters and such other things) as if it were on the same aesthetic level as the great paintings of the past and present. This is nonsense.’²²⁶

²²⁵ Ibid, p.22. Fairburn’s entire sentence reads: ‘It is the artists who produce nearly all the bad commercialised art—doing it deliberately, in the full knowledge that they are debasing standards, and excusing themselves on the ground that they “must live”. (Je ne vois pas la nécessité.)’

²²⁶ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Arts and Crafts in the Schools: A View of Aesthetic Education’, *The Arts in New Zealand*, April-May 1945, vol.17, no.3, serial no. 67, p.36. Interestingly, seven years after Fairburn referred disparagingly to London Underground posters, Bill Pearson’s portrait was painted by an artist who specialised in them—his landlady in London, Heather Perry, as he prepared the manuscript of his essay ‘Fretful Sleepers: A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour and its Implications for the Artist.’ Pearson’s biographer Paul Millar notes that Perry also painted pub signs, and twice used Pearson as her model. ‘His was the bird-splattered face adorning the ‘Hearts of Oak’ sign in Dock Street and the ‘Load of Hay’ on Haverstock Hill. Paul Millar, *No Fretful Sleeper: A Life of Bill Pearson*, Auckland University Press, 2010, p.vii.

IV: ‘The Awful Stuff’: Commercial Art and its Discontents

‘Signwriting has always been a hobby of mine.’
Colin McCahon, 1949²²⁷

In a frequently-quoted article about his influences, ‘Beginnings’, McCahon cited one of his most profound formative experiences having been that of watching a sign-writer paint on a shop window in Dunedin as a schoolboy of nine or ten years old.²²⁸ Significantly, it was the experience of watching a commercial artist at work that encouraged McCahon in his conviction to become a fine artist—and pointedly, at a moment in his life when he had achieved considerable critical success as a leading New Zealand painter, he wished this formative experience to be widely known. (He also acknowledged the role of his teacher at the Otago School of Art, the British post-impressionist artist Robert Nettleton Field (1899-1987) between 1937-9, and the impact of seeing an exhibition by Woollaston in an empty shop in Dunedin in 1936.) The article on his origins was written for *Landfall*, the journal that had published Fairburn’s harsh critique of his work two decades earlier. McCahon wrote:

Once when I was quite young...I had a few days of splendour. Two new shops had been built next door...the hairdresser had his window painted with HAIRDRESSER and TOBACCONIST. Painted in gold and black on a stippled red ground, the lettering large and bold with shadows, and a feeling of being projected right through the glass and across the pavement, I watched the work being done, and fell in love with signwriting. The grace of the lettering as it arched across the window in gleaming gold, suspended on its dull red field but leaping free from its own black shadow pointed to a new and magnificent world of painting. I watched from outside as the artist working inside slowly separated himself from me (and light from dark) to make his new creation.²²⁹

In the 1940s, the worlds of commercial art (sign-writing, print advertising, shop window displays, product illustration, and packaging design) and of high art (embodied by the paintings and sculpture produced by the more progressive members of provincial art

²²⁷ Colin McCahon, letter to Charles Brasch, 26 April 1949, quoted in Peter Simpson, *Answering Hark*, op.cit., p.44.

²²⁸ Christine McCarthy, ‘Professions of writing: McCahon’s word-paintings as commercial lettering’, *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, no.21, p.81. McCarthy has dated this memory to 1928 or 1929.

²²⁹ Colin McCahon, ‘Beginnings’, op.cit., p.361.

societies, and in particular by the artists associated with ‘The Group’ in Christchurch) were almost entirely separate. The distinction was primarily social, and invoked the unspoken Victorian distinction between ‘trade’ and ‘gentility’ which was still very much in operation in middle-class New Zealand society in the 1940s. Commercial art was the province of small business people; it was not discussed in the same breath as fine art; it was something only taken up by fine artists from time to time out of (regretful) financial necessity. Art proper was by contrast an aspirational activity, a social event removed from the vulgar trammels of commerce. Art was not expected to provide the artist with a living wage. ‘The New Zealand painters who support themselves entirely on the sale of their work without benefit of teaching or private income,’ noted Howard Wadman in 1947, ‘can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand.’²³⁰

Christchurch, where McCahon moved in 1948, was at once the most English of New Zealand’s major cities, concerned with social status and class distinctions, while also being the most progressive of its art centres in the 1930s and 1940s. While this dichotomy brought inevitable tensions for fine artists forced to earn a living by means additional to art-making, it is probable that Christchurch’s conflation of progressive art with social exclusivity ensured a particularly harsh climate for the reception of McCahon’s borrowings from the commercial art world. McCahon’s conflation of the high and the low not only represented, to use Thomas Crow’s term, the ‘duplication of real social antagonisms’, but also engendered antagonistic responses, as we have seen, from elements of both the high culture and the wider population.²³¹

McCahon appeared to be cognisant of issues of power and social status in the visual arts from a young age. From visiting the galleries in his hometown of Dunedin he had become aware that New Zealand’s high culture was not a unified body, and that instead there were various different art worlds determined by degrees of social status, a series of small separate social circles with little overlap between them. While the social gulf between the work of the commercial artists and the painters from The Group was obvious, McCahon detected subtle distinctions between various branches of the ‘elite’ art world. Status considerations arose out of whether art was made in New Zealand or was international, as well as from its date of

²³⁰ Howard Wadman, ‘The Artist and His Dinner Pail’, *New Zealand Listener*, 9 May 1947, vol.16, no.411, p.10.

²³¹ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, op.cit, p.11.

production. The Dunedin Art Gallery, he wrote, which exhibited work ‘from Overseas, or Old’, ‘had a special smell and a more sacred feeling than the Art Society could ever achieve.’ He questioned, ‘Was this because the Art Society was “us” and this was “them”?’²³² The gulfs between the various art worlds—geographic, cultural, social—seemed vast. When McCahon’s *Harbour Cone from Peggy’s Hill* (1939) was turned down by the organising committee of the Otago Art Society’s annual exhibition, it represented a rejection by his own, a milieu that he’d already determined was less ‘special’ and ‘sacred’ than others on offer.²³³

While the art society’s rejection of his work was the first among the many which were to rankle for the rest of McCahon’s life, it may be that he was also fortunate, to use Eliot’s phrase, to meet ‘the right enemy at the right time.’²³⁴ When the second-rate won’t have you, there’s nothing else to be done but to invent new terms for the first rate. The starting point for ‘a tradition of McCahon’s own making’, as Wystan Curnow described it, lay not in the dull academicism of the local art society, but in the lively visual expressions of everyday New Zealand—its hand-painted signage, its breakfast cereal boxes, its comic books—as well as in the works of the European quattrocento painters reproduced in the Phaidon books which were imported into New Zealand from the 1940s.²³⁵ Both sources represented a kind of aesthetic primitivism (everyday vulgarities; medieval awkwardness) which could be conscripted to describe the brutalities of daily life, in a rough and direct manner of address that suggested ‘authentic’ experience.²³⁶ The tradition of visual culture with which McCahon would later identify his formative years was one of working people. While the name of McCahon’s first art ‘teacher’—the anonymous painter of the Hairdresser and Tobacconist sign—has gone unrecorded, his second tutor was an artist who perhaps more than any other straddled the divide between commercial art in New Zealand and the local fine art world.

²³² Colin McCahon. ‘Beginnings’, 1966, op. cit., p.362. He finally concluded that the difference might well simply rest in the disinfectants used by the respective caretakers: ‘Perhaps the Art Gallery cleaners used a brand also used in the city’s Presbyterian churches.’

²³³ The Art Society finally relented and hung McCahon’s work in the exhibition after several younger artists, including McCahon’s future wife Anne Hamblett and his close friend Rodney Kennedy, threatened to withdraw their works in protest.

²³⁴ T.S Eliot, *Notes Towards The Definition of Culture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1948, p.59.

²³⁵ Wystan Curnow, *McCahon’s ‘Necessary Protection’*, New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1977, p.4.

²³⁶ Fairburn, of course, concerned to uphold aesthetic standards, saw commercial art as the betrayer of the promise of the high culture, and conceived of its expressions, however rough and ready, as fundamentally inauthentic.

Russell Clark (1905-66), an artistic polymath who subsequently became an influential lecturer in painting at Canterbury College School of Art, was employed as a commercial artist at John McIndoe's publishing firm in Dunedin in the late 1920s, having previously worked for the prominent Jewell-Skinner Advertising Agency in Christchurch as an illustrator and letterer. Clark ran Saturday morning art classes from his studio at the Dunedin publishing house, which McCahon attended as a schoolboy for three years. While his own painting inclined towards the landscape-based neo-romanticism of contemporary British artists Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland, Clark's teaching was academic and precise, training his students in close observation of the phenomenological world. A typical exercise was Clark's arrangement of a still life comprising several piled-up boxes of white chalk; he encouraged his students to record even the fingerprints in the chalk dust. When McCahon recalled Clark's teaching in later years, however, it was neither the classes nor Clark's own painting that he described, but the commercial jobs which he saw Clark working on before and after his teaching sessions. McCahon recounted his adolescent interest in drawing banana leaves, gained 'through watching Russell Clark draw them for some job', which he diligently practised until 'I too could do them most expertly.'²³⁷ On another occasion, he spent some time watching Clark draft a new design for a Kornies cereal packet.²³⁸

Commercial art is usually experienced in its end form as a product, as something mass-produced. It is anonymous rather than authored, designed to be copied. Its success lies in its reproducibility. Thousands of identical cereal boxes are printed and filled with identical cereal; the same comic strip is read at each breakfast table; even the lettering on a hand-painted sign is directly reproduced from an unchanging library of fonts. McCahon, however, had the relatively unusual experience of seeing commercial art in the process of being designed and made, produced by the hand rather than by the machine. He had seen the designer's original artwork—the pre-printed camera-ready version of the printed materials of mass-production—revealed as an authored conception. He had watched Russell Clark produce different versions of a design, saw him calculate different compositional choices and make mistakes in his drafting; and had watched as the signwriter with his quiver of brushes and mahl sticks slowly built up golden letters and drop shadows. Commercial art in its ordinary hand-drawn state was not so much slick and glossy as a mass of erasures and

²³⁷ Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', op. cit., 1966, p.360. McCahon also produced a number of sketches of Joan Crawford at the time, working from photographs in popular magazines.

²³⁸ Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*. Auckland: Reed Publishing, 1984, p. 8, from an interview with Colin McCahon by G.H. Brown, 1979, tape 1, p.11.

revisions. At an impressionable age, McCahon experienced commercial design under the conditions of art. Much of his work of the late 1940s and early 1950s was concerned with the reconciliation or collapsing together of the two artistic registers, the high and the popular, the elite and the mass, the fine and the commercial, entities which at that time were generally considered incompatible: but McCahon knew from the hours he'd spent watching Russell Clark at work that they were not.

Russell Clark was a graduate of the Canterbury College School of Art; he has entered the historical account as a fine artist who almost incidentally earned his living doing commercial work. Many of New Zealand's other prominent mid-century commercial artists were trained at the Wellington Technical Institute, although some, such as stamp and poster designer Leonard Mitchell (1901-71) who took a US course in cartooning and caricature, were graduates of international correspondence courses.²³⁹ McCahon had originally studied commercial art as part of the broadly based curriculum of the art course at the King Edward Technical College in Dunedin, where he had enrolled after leaving school in 1937: subjects included commercial lettering, poster and pattern design, modelling, block printing and ticket writing, as well as still life and landscape painting. As a technical college, Otago's School of Art was more vocationally inclined than the more academic 'fine' art schools of Canterbury College and Auckland University College. (Ironically, Christine McCarthy points out that it was commercial lettering and ticket writing—the two disciplines which might seem closest in practice to his later 'written' paintings—in which McCahon achieved his lowest marks.²⁴⁰) As an adolescent, McCahon commented that following his encounter with the Dunedin signwriter he had personally done 'a lot of signwriting. Our house was in white roughcast but the doors to the various backyard 'offices' were of wood and offered surfaces well suited to poster painting.'²⁴¹

Although the Canterbury College School of Art taught sign-writing, the subject was the sole provision of the 'trade' students who made up 75% of the student body until the school was reorganized as a specifically 'fine arts' institution immediately after the Second World War.

²³⁹ Hamish Thompson, *Cover Up: The Art of the Book Cover in New Zealand*, Auckland: Random House, 2007, p.30.

²⁴⁰ Christine McCarthy, 'Professions of writing: McCahon's word-paintings as commercial lettering', *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, op.cit, p.81.

²⁴¹ Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', op.cit., p.361. There is perhaps an ironic resonance in Fairburn's critique of McCahon painting as if 'for the walls of some celestial lavatory', given that McCahon had spent some time fifteen years earlier teaching himself the rudiments of painting and signwriting on his own outhouse door.

In a two-tier system with no crossover between the commercially-destined students and the fine arts students, the trade courses also offered practical subjects such as building construction and carpentry; by contrast the art students could learn lettering, an entirely separate discipline, as part of the design component of their fine arts courses. Based on medieval illumination and calligraphy, Canterbury's art lettering course (as well as its art needlework and drawing from botanical forms) was a hangover from the Arts and Crafts practices of the South Kensington (Royal College of Art) system under which the school had been established in 1882, which sought to revive the handmade and to integrate art-led design into everyday life and industry as a factor for social good. It was dropped from the syllabus in 1946.

The distinction between commercial art forms and the kind of design projects initiated by artists trained under the South Kensington system was largely one of audience, or perhaps of market. Stage design, book cover designs and book illustrations for small print runs, and hand-crafted costume jewellery—all of which McCahon produced during the 1940s and 1950s—were applied art forms intended for a small, elite, high-cultural audience, the kind of people who, then as now, went to exhibition openings and read poetry and art criticism. Packaging design, newspaper cartooning and signwriting, on the other hand, were commercial tools for mass communication and mass marketing, produced to a predetermined formula by jobbing artists and tradespeople. The South Kensington system carried with it a definite suggestion of the moral superiority of the high-minded handmade object over the soulless manufactured goods of mass production: some items were deliberately left slightly unfinished in order to point up the beauty of the craft and the hand of the artist.

While it was not uncommon for fine artists in New Zealand to turn their hands to design, or to what then were termed the 'applied arts'—Fairburn, for example, was hand-printing fabric designs based on Māori rock drawings at the time he delivered his lavatorial salvo to McCahon—there were only a small handful of prominent artists of the high culture at mid-century in New Zealand who had also earned a living as commercial artists.²⁴² As well as Russell Clark, these included McCahon's then Christchurch-based peers Rita Angus (1908-

²⁴² Unlike McCahon during the same period, A.R.D. Fairburn was able to sustain a living in the arts: he spent the war manpowered as a scriptwriter for the New Zealand Broadcasting Company, resigning in 1947 to design fabric, and continuing to work as an editor, critic and columnist for various journals—publishing on matters as diverse as poetry, fine arts, and composting. After tutoring in English at the University of Auckland, in 1950 Fairburn was appointed as a lecturer in art history at the Elam School of Fine Arts. In 1964, McCahon was appointed to the School as Senior Lecturer in Painting.

70) and Juliet Peter (1915-2010), both of whom kept their commercial art activities by choice very distinct from their fine art practice. Angus, in particular—who with Toss Woollaston, Gordon Walters and McCahon might be considered among the most progressive of the mid-century New Zealand artists—viewed her private commercial projects of the late 1930s and early 1940s with considerable disdain.

Her example is instructive. After studying painting at the Canterbury College School of Art between 1927 and 1933, Rita Angus began working as a freelance illustrator for the *Press Junior*, the children's pages of the Christchurch daily newspaper the *Press*, in order to support herself following her separation and subsequent divorce from her husband Alfred Cook in 1934. Commercial art was the end of last resort for Angus: working from a small studio in Chancery Lane, she commented that she needed suddenly to learn to be a commercial artist 'without home, hostel or marriage to protect me.'²⁴³ Jean Stevenson, the children's newspaper editor, was a close friend of Angus, and commissioned at least one drawing a week from her between 1934 and 1937. Angus contributed comic strips, illustrations to accompany stories, special Christmas drawings, and step-by-step pictorial instructions showing children how to draw for themselves.²⁴⁴ She drew toys, animals, Māori warriors, aeroplanes, and heroes of children's adventure stories. Her close friend the artist Leo Bensemann—who shared a house with her in 1938—commented that at first 'her children's drawings were terrible, [and] she hated doing them': however, they provided a means of earning an income which she could fit around her art practice.²⁴⁵ Late in 1937 Angus was employed as a commercial artist for Ballantynes' department store in Christchurch, producing fashion illustrations.²⁴⁶ However, she found this work even less conducive to her fine art practice, and left Ballantynes' after only a few months in April

²⁴³ Rita Angus, letter to Douglas Lilburn, 10 May 1943, ATL MS-Papers-7623-053. Quoted in Jill Trevelyan, 'Chronology', in William McAloon and Jill Trevelyan (eds.), *Rita Angus: Life and Vision*, Wellington: Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, 2008, p.215.

²⁴⁴ Donald Bassett, 'Educating Rita: The Children's Illustrations of Rita Angus', *Journal of New Zealand Art History*, vol.26, 2005, pp. 15-25.

²⁴⁵ Conversation between Leo Bensemann and Janet Paul (1980), quoted in Janet Paul, 'Biographical Essay', in Janet Paul et al, *Rita Angus*. Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1982, p.18.

²⁴⁶ Rita Angus also designed toys for a Wellington-based pacifist wood-working firm in 1939 and 1942, and frequently designed and executed embroideries to decorate her own clothing and soft furnishings; although later in life she vehemently denied ever having done embroidery, perhaps concerned by the potential impact on her public perception as a serious artist by its connotation as a women's craft activity.

1938: her friend Douglas Lilburn recalled that she stated that the work had made her feel ill as it prevented her from painting.²⁴⁷

Although the critical significance of Angus's fine art practice was recognized publicly by inclusion of two paintings in the 1939-40 Centennial exhibition, which toured nationally, she was not able to earn a living by painting alone. She lived frugally and depended for many years on the discreet support of family and friends. Roger Duff, then the ethnologist at Canterbury Museum and subsequently its director, commissioned Angus to produce two mural paintings for the Museum in 1941, but the work was poorly paid: she received £5 for a large-scale painted wall-map of Polynesian migration.²⁴⁸ Angus confided to Leo Bensemann that she 'hated' her commercial art activities, undertaking them only as 'bread and butter' work at times of financial hardship in her life. At the same time, however, she viewed the mid/late 1930s as 'a very active and creative period' in her life as an artist, and continued to exhibit her paintings with The Group throughout the decade.²⁴⁹ By the time McCahon met Angus in Christchurch during the late 1940s, she had abandoned her commercial art work, and declined to speak of it to interviewers in later years.

By contrast, McCahon never worked as a commercial artist, though throughout his career he collaborated with friends and colleagues on applied arts projects. Apart from a job in 1941 painting landscape backdrops for two natural history dioramas at Otago Museum and some time on the line in a soap factory, he supported himself (and from 1942, his wife Anne Hamblett and young family) during the 1940s by working as a manual labourer, following seasonal agricultural work around the South Island and painting and drawing in his spare time. He designed several sets for avant-garde theatre productions between the late 1930s and the 1970s, often designing their programmes. He also produced signage and posters for some of his own exhibitions. His design jobs were usually unpaid or lowly-paid: his primary motivations for design work were artistic and social rather than financial. James K. Baxter noted that in Christchurch in 1948 McCahon was making a livelihood by helping to produce

²⁴⁷ Douglas Lilburn, unpublished memoir of Rita Angus, ATL MS-Papers-2483-104. Quoted in Jill Trevelyan, 'Chronology', in William McAloon and Jill Trevelyan (eds.), *Rita Angus: Life and Vision*, op.cit, p.215.

²⁴⁸ Letter, Roger Duff to Rita Angus, 14 August 1969, quoted in Janet Paul, 'Biographical Essay', in Janet Paul et al, *Rita Angus*. Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1982, p.21.

²⁴⁹ Rita Angus, draft letter to Gordon H. Brown, 15 April 1968, Alexander Turnbull Library MS-P-1399: 1/4, cited in Jill Trevelyan, 'Live to Paint and Paint to Live', in Jill Trevelyan and Vita Cochran, *Rita Angus: Live to Paint and Paint to Live*, Auckland: Godwit/Random House, in association with City Gallery Wellington, and the Hocken Library, Dunedin, 2001, p.9.

miniatures and jewellery, and that he had previously ‘worked as a builder, also in innumerable labouring jobs, the most reputable being that of ladies’ lavatory attendant and swan-feeder in Wellington.’²⁵⁰ Trained in commercial art, McCahon never worked in the field, but became the first artist in New Zealand to incorporate the conventions of commercial art in his fine art practice, as well as the first artist to incorporate reworked versions of readymade images. (As Thomas Crow notes, advanced artists commonly admit to their creative endeavour a multitude of anonymous collaborators.’²⁵¹) McCahon commented later that he supposed his ‘present glad acceptance of pop art’ was in some way related to his close observation of the work of the unnamed Dunedin signwriter.²⁵²

While the signwriter had revealed the transformative properties of painting and the visual possibilities of words, and Russell Clark had provided a model for slipping back and forth between artistic registers, there were no New Zealand precedents for McCahon’s insertion of commercial culture into high art in the late 1940s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the closest forerunners were earlier works by McCahon himself. Painted the year he began at art school in Dunedin, the small watercolour *Still Life with Saxa Salt* (1937) is probably the first occasion on which McCahon used text in a painting, by including a hastily scrawled rendition of the lettering of the salt packet amid a casual arrangement of table-top objects. While he made no attempt to reproduce the packaging’s formal typography, his inclusion of the brand name of the product places the work within an international modernist tradition of painted interpretations of printed products beginning with the labels of Manet’s bottles behind the *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) and culminating in Andy Warhol’s soup cans, Coke bottles and Brillo boxes (1962-8), by way of Picasso and Braque’s synthetic cubist collages (c.1912-19) and American proto-Pop artist Stuart Davis’s spark-plug and cigarette packet paintings from the 1940s and 1950s, each of which served to connect the work of art to the contemporaneous present of its production. McCahon was only eighteen when he painted *Still Life with Saxa Salt*. As his first experiment with admitting the world of commerce and mass production into a work of art, it can be seen as an early herald of his subsequent interest in the visual language of comics and product packaging during the late 1940s and of commercial roadside signage during the 1960s. It might also be regarded as the first tentative

²⁵⁰ Natalie Poland notes that McCahon’s jewellery-making venture, in collaboration with his friend Doris Lusk’s husband Dermot Holland, was ‘a financial disaster.’ Natalie Poland, *Fine Folk: Design work by Colin McCahon*. Dunedin: Hocken Library, University of Otago, 2008, p.12, f.n.19.

²⁵¹ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, op. cit, p.viii.

²⁵² Colin McCahon. ‘Beginnings’, op.cit., p.361.

challenge to the aesthetic orthodoxies of the modernist high culture in New Zealand; the beginnings of McCahon's subsequent strategic move, as Andreas Huyssen describes the 19th and 20th century European and American equivalents, to destabilise the high/low opposition from within.²⁵³

Colin McCahon, Still Life with Saxa Salt, 1937, watercolour on paper, 231mm x 283mm

In 1945 McCahon returned to the treatment of a domestic vernacular object with *The Lamp in My Studio* (1945), a Sidney Nolan-esque depiction of a light bulb illuminating an inky interior darkness, in which the form is reduced, as Tony Green characterised McCahon's subsequent landscapes and figures, to an elementary painted sign.²⁵⁴ In response to his first meeting with the poet James K. Baxter in Dunedin in 1946, McCahon completed *A Candle in a Dark Room* in January 1947.²⁵⁵ This study of a plain factory-made brownware candlestick incorporated a decorative treatment of the work's title in juxtaposition to the image, in the manner of a hand-painted poster. 'It came suddenly out of the old tradition of my work & has very definitely altered the new,' McCahon wrote to his friend Rodney Kennedy.²⁵⁶ Oil lamps and candlesticks were everyday household items in New Zealand baches and huts and modest

²⁵³ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, op.cit., 1986, p.vii.

²⁵⁴ Tony Green, 'McCahon and the Modern', in G.H. Brown, A. Johnson, et al. *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 1988, p.27.

²⁵⁵ See Peter Simpson's investigation into the misdating of this work, in Peter Simpson, 'McCahon in 1947-48: A New Date, a "Lost" Exhibition & Some Letters', *Art New Zealand*, no.100, Spring 2001, p.88-93, 130-1.

²⁵⁶ Colin McCahon, letter to Rodney Kennedy, 26 January 1947, quoted in Peter Simpson, 'McCahon's *A Candle in a Dark Room*: A Postscript', *Art New Zealand*, no.103, Winter 2002, p.82.

rural houses not yet hooked up to the national grid in the 1940s: *A Candle in a Dark Room* and *The Lamp in My Studio* represent McCahon's tentative first explorations of the metaphorical possibilities of the vernacular object. The 'light' of the works might represent faith, or hope, or enlightenment, manifest in the form of a mass-produced common object, and as such, symbolically present in the contemporary world: its inclusion bears a similar iconographical purpose to the lamps included in works by pre-Renaissance Italian painters. Over the next three or four years McCahon included depictions of oil lamps in landscape paintings and drawings, still life studies and religious works, including *Crucifixion with Lamp* (1947), *Christ as a Lamp* (c.1948), *Virgin and Child as Lamp* (1950), and *The King of the Jews* (1947), in which the lamp—wilfully taken for a toilet bowl by the anonymous critic in Dunedin—takes on the guise of a chalice filled with blood.

The 'cartoon primitivist' drawing style which McCahon adopted in these paintings—significant form reduced to its simplest expression, garishly coloured, outlined with thick black strokes—also appeared in the designs he made for book covers during the 1950s and 1960s. The first of these was a lithograph for the cover of John Caselberg's privately published *7 Poems* (1952), printed at Griffin Press which had opened the previous year in Christchurch as a boutique 'artistic printery.' The design featured a female figure very like those which populated his religious works of a couple of years earlier.²⁵⁷ The book's title was painted in the same fat and confident black line, each letterform traced with a rough scratch mark like a child overwriting letters or a sign idly graffitied with a nail.

In 1948 McCahon was employed for a short time as an assistant to Leo Bensemann (1912-86), a partner in the Caxton Press who had initially worked in advertising. He was also a distinctive—and largely self-taught—artist who exhibited for many years with The Group.²⁵⁸ As Caxton's typographer, Bensemann produced many cover designs for the press's literary list, including Frank Sargeson's autobiographical novel *When The Wind Blows* (1945), M.H. Holcroft's essay on New Zealand culture *Encircling Seas* (1946), A.R.D. Fairburn's poems *Strange Rendezvous* (1952) and James K. Baxter's poetry book *The Fallen House* (1953). All of these covers featured typography which in some way sought to interpret the book's theme

²⁵⁷ The publication was subsequently seized by the police from several points of distribution on grounds of 'indecentcy.' See Marja Bloem and Martin Browne, *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith*, Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing / Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002, p.177.

²⁵⁸ Neil Roberts, *A Concise History of Art in Canterbury*, Christchurch: Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 2000, p.63.

or title: the letters of *When The Wind Blows* are pushed to the right and leaning over, above a horizon described by a single red line; the letters of *The Fallen House*'s title are individually hand-placed without a baseline, to look as if they have literally tumbled down the page. There is a boldness to Bensemann's cover designs and a sensitivity to the connotative aspects of typography that is rare for the time: a quality which may be related to McCahon's black and white text paintings of the 1970s and 1980s. While McCahon's works were frequently criticised for looking like posters (by which his detractors meant handwritten placards rather than commercial designs), there are moments, especially in the Elias paintings of the late 1950s and the prophet paintings of the mid-1970s, in which they far more closely resemble book covers.

Colin McCahon, cover design for John Caselberg's *7 Poems*, Christchurch: Griffin Press, 1952.

After leaving Christchurch for Auckland in 1953, McCahon's design projects grew fewer, though he produced further book covers for friends, several of which contained elements of the visual style of popular culture that had appeared in his works of the late 1940s. In 1959 McCahon provided the cover illustration for E.H. McCormick's *The Inland Eye: A Sketch in*

Visual Autobiography.²⁵⁹ A brushy black outlined oval surrounded the book's printed title, hovering over a simple hill form at the lower right reminiscent of the comic strip's narrative block, or the 'corner cut-offs' taken from newspaper advertising and product design that McCahon had borrowed for works such as *The Angel of the Annunciation* (1947). McCahon's cover for Bill Pearson's gritty realist novel *Coal Flat* (1963) featured handwritten lettering reversed out on a red background, above a landscape of bush-clad hills. While the author's name is written in McCahon's characteristic block capitals, the title is painted in a beautifully crude approximation of a serified font, the kerning haphazard and the letters knocking into one another. It is a deliberately hand-done pastiche of commercial design, with all the polish and slickness and regularity of photomechanical typography removed: a claiming of words for the hand of the artist while simultaneously nodding towards the conventions of commercial art.

²⁵⁹ Published by the Auckland Art Gallery Associates, 1959.

Colin McCahon, design for cover of *Coal Flat* by Bill Pearson, 1963

Colin McCahon, *The Angel of the Annunciation*, 1947, oil on cardboard, 647mm x 520mm, Collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

V: 'Deliberately Primitive': Primitivism, Authenticity and the Everyday

Are we forever doomed to live with the second-hand and the third rate?'

E. H. McCormick, 1946²⁶⁰

The 'primitivisms' of McCahon's paintings of the late 1940s were various. Most distinctive, perhaps, was his purposeful primitivism of style: the expressive distortions of his long-necked, flat-faced figures against the thick plain expanses of ground; the crude black outlines that McCahon derived from Rouault; the bright, garish colours that McCahon mixed up himself from raw pigments and linseed oil.²⁶¹ Then there were the references, in composition and subject, to the so-called Italian primitives, the pre-Renaissance artists like Sassetta whose work McCahon had studied in reproduction and re-staged in the New Zealand landscape.²⁶² (And in which, arguably, he went one step further: in his examination of McCahon's *Entombment, After Titian* (1947), Laurence Simmons has pointed out the tension in titling a painting 'after' yet producing it in a style which suggests 'before', surmising that McCahon's intention was for the painting to 'appear primitive and thus place itself at the beginning of the tradition'.²⁶³) But most of all, a more primitive or less refined form of culture—if not the alarming foul-breathed presence of the Barbarian other itself—was summoned up by the mass culture elements in McCahon's work: the references to the commercialised culture of advertising and product packaging and comic strips.

²⁶⁰ E.H. McCormick, 'Grounds for Mild Assurance', in 1946: *Second Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand*, ed. Howard Wadman, Wellington: H.H. Tombs, 1946, p.11.

²⁶¹ McCahon commonly mixed his own paints during this period. War-time restrictions meant that New Zealand's limited supply of artists' materials was allocated to individual artists by the art societies; if an artist was out of step with the conservative arts hierarchy, as McCahon and his friend Toss Woollaston were, it could prove very difficult to get paint. Discussed by Gordon H. Brown in 'McCahon in his Studio', *Towards a Promised Land: On the life and art of Colin McCahon*, Auckland University Press, 2010, p.56.

²⁶² Gordon H. Brown notes that McCahon bought a copy of John Pope Hennessy's *Sienese Quattrocento Painting* in 1947.

Writing in 1958, Peter Tomory recognised the relationship between McCahon's borrowings from religious paintings from the western tradition and American regionalist Grant Wood, who 'painted his "American Gothic" in the thirties after seeing fifteenth-century German painting on a visit to Germany', and Stanley Spencer, who 'at the same time was influenced by the Italian primitives.' Tomory added 'this selection of unsophisticated influence would come naturally to the painter concerned with an ex-colonial regionalism'. Tomory, Peter. 'Art', in *The Pattern of New Zealand Culture*, ed. A.L. McLeod, Melbourne: Oxford University Press and Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1968, p.182.

²⁶³ Laurence Simmons, 'after Titian: Intertextuality and Deconstruction in an Early Painting by Colin McCahon', *Interstices*, no.1, 1991, p.112.

In his consideration of the role of primitivism in shaping nationalist art discourse in New Zealand, Francis Pound indicates that what the various kinds of ‘primitive’ art drawn on by mid-century modernist artists had in common was their difference from academic art. ‘They function as the “primitive” always does in primitivist discourse, as a counter to the academic ... Thus, they might show Nationalist artists how to escape Western sophistication and make a new kind of art, an art properly of and for a country of the rough and raw.’²⁶⁴ In the 1940s, the roughness of mass culture was an effective counter to academic orthodoxy in developing a new national art: but its rawness—its particular kind of ‘primitivism’—was of the wrong sort.

When Fairburn called for ‘genuinely naive painters, to shock the schools and to help bring *spirit* into painting’, he presumably had in mind an outsider artist struggling to render the purity of his original vision, a ‘primitive’ unsullied by contact with either art history or art schools: a contemporary ancestor figure for New Zealand art, the equivalent, perhaps, of the painters of the early Christian catacombs in Rome.²⁶⁵ Such a figure would provide the origin of a new and authentic national tradition of fine arts. Fairburn had largely dismissed the art history of New Zealand to this point: the public collections were full of second-rate European works palmed off on the colonials by unscrupulous London art dealers; the walls of New Zealand’s contemporary art galleries were ‘thick with banalities’ which went unrecognised as such; the schools of art were interested only in technique. With his inevitable crudities, the indigenous naive painter envisaged by Fairburn would blast fresh air into the stuffy galleries of feeble and derivative work from the 1930s and early 1940s, and provide a starting point for the development of aesthetic refinement and the hard-to-define, know-it-when-I-see-it quality that Fairburn termed ‘sureness of taste’ in the visual arts. But whereas Fairburn was hoping for immaculate pre-modern naivety, in McCahon’s work he perceived implacable modern barbarism.

Yet during the late 1940s there was much shared ground between the two men. Like many of their peers, both Fairburn and McCahon were significantly motivated by a search for cultural authenticity: the means to express, in paint or in words, the actual lived experience of contemporary New Zealanders. At the moment of formal separation from the motherland, the

²⁶⁴ Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand*, op.cit., p.308. He includes Maori rock art and other forms of Maori image-making in his discussion, the function of which was to colour the modernisms with ‘a particularity of place’. p.310.

²⁶⁵ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Some Reflections on New Zealand Painting’, op.cit., p.55.

representation of the everyday life of the ex-colony assumed a critical significance for its artists and writers. Local authenticity was the goal. For Fairburn and McCahon, as for the other members of the loosely-associated ‘cultural nationalist’ generation, the land was the originary source of the nation’s authenticity, and the particular pressures it exerted on its inhabitants—like a range of craggy hills formed by the force of giant geological plates in collision—was determinate of the character of its people and their society. At times, they seemed to be feeling toward the same thing. Fairburn’s poem ‘Europe’, anthologised in the *1946 Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand*, reads like a companion piece to McCahon’s paintings which bring the war to the Nelson hills, especially *Valley of Dry Bones*:

And now spring comes to the starved and blackened land
Where the tailless abominable angel has spent his passion ...
in the twentieth century of the Christian era
the news-hawk camera man, no Botticelli,
walks on this stricken earth with Primavera,
and Europe cries from the heart of her hungry belly.
[....]
Honour is lost and hope is like a bubble...²⁶⁶

In both literature and the visual arts, Fairburn hoped for ‘a body of work that has a definite character deriving from the life of this country.’²⁶⁷ McCahon identified New Zealand’s particular *deus loci* (‘an angel in this land ... I saw something logical, orderly and beautiful belonging to the land and not yet to its people’) in his memories of the Otago landscapes of his youth.²⁶⁸ Their point of difference was essentially a turf dispute: the marking of the boundaries of the local field of culture, of what would constitute ‘authentic’ expression.

Taking their evidence largely from their readings of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and John Cowper Powys, academics F.R. and Q.D. Leavis—both of whom grew up in cities—located cultural authenticity in pre-modern rural experience. They described a simpler, better, more primitive time before the blaring factory hooters of the Industrial Revolution had commanded people to leave their rural hamlets for the squalor and false promises of the big cities, when agricultural workers lived in harmony with the land and with one another, taking their culture from the King James Bible and from centuries-old folk traditions. ‘Folk-songs, folk-dances,

²⁶⁶ Fairburn dedicated the poem to George Bernanos (1888-1948), the French anti-democratic theorist. Bernanos’s notion that ‘Civilization exists precisely so that there may be no masses but rather men alert enough never to constitute masses’ is likely to have appealed to Fairburn.

²⁶⁷ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘Some Reflections on New Zealand Painting’, *Landfall*, vol.1, no.1, March 1947, pp.49-50.

²⁶⁸ Colin McCahon, ‘Beginnings’, op.cit., p.364.

Cotswold Cottage and handicraft products are signs and expressions of something more,’ wrote F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson in 1942, lamenting the loss of the ‘organic community’ jettisoned in the rush to the cultural no-man’s-land of suburbia. Mass print culture, universal literacy and broadcast entertainment had sounded the death knell for these ‘relics of the old order.’ A cultural homogenisation was in progress, in which distinctive local traditions were being increasingly abandoned. While folk traditions remained in some particularly isolated communities in 1942, they were in grave danger: ‘the motor-coach, wireless, cinema and education are rapidly destroying them—they will hardly last another decade.’²⁶⁹ The Leavises’ championship of pre-modern culture was, above all, a critique of the effects of modern technology on culture.

The dominant emotional tone of both Leavises’ writings hovers, like Fairburn’s, between a profound irritation at the mindless credulity of the masses, and indignation and exasperation at the cultural betrayals of commerce. But unlike Fairburn, whose muscular writings were an exhortation to local invention, there is a wistful nostalgia for past glories running throughout the Leavises’ essays: a sense of being too late, of having run out of time, of fighting a losing battle against the rise of mass culture in Britain. For the Leavises, the Barbarians had already invaded. But in Fairburn’s formulation, it was not yet too late: the result of the cultural struggle taking place in the ‘invention of New Zealand’ after the war was not yet decided. It could go either way.

When McCahon’s artist colleague Rita Angus wrote in 1946 that she was ‘colonial, six generations, and for me New Zealand is in essence medieval’, she was presumably referring to the relatively short duration of New Zealand’s European cultural history as well as to the comparative longevity of her family’s place within it.²⁷⁰ In the late 1940s, thirty years before the Māori Renaissance informed a more critical view of its history, New Zealand felt like a young country to its Pākehā artists and writers; and with its youth came a consequent insecurity as well as an uneasy self-consciousness about its identity. Hinged between the desire for authenticity and the need for invention, the cultural nationalist phenomenon of the 1930s and 1940s might be interpreted as a response to this insecurity of identity.²⁷¹ Its social

²⁶⁹ F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson. *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*, op.cit., p.2.

²⁷⁰ Rita Angus, ‘Rita Angus’, *Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand*, no.3, 1947, p.68.

²⁷¹ Francis Pound points out that in speaking of the invention of New Zealand, what Allen Curnow and McCahon were referring to was a (high) culture rather than a country; New Zealand existed before painters and

effects were described in detail by essayist Bill Pearson, who considered that New Zealanders suffered from a 'paralysing selfconsciousness' and therefore tended to hide behind readymade social formulations and the 'protective camouflage' of popular culture. Shying away from the display of any emotion, New Zealanders would commonly speak to one another in the most banal and formulaic of ways, putting on stock accents and adding invisible quote marks around any slang terms. New Zealanders lived in fear of being criticised. He wrote:

The search for common pegs on which to hang social intercourse takes strange forms among youths. Imported comic recordings become shapers of popular culture, of an influence unknown in the country they come from: think of the phrases and jokes that become social passwords—from Sandy Powell, George Formby, Harry Tate, Danny Kaye, the peculiar call of *The Woodpecker Song*. ... There was the rash of 'gopher-birds' that erupted all over our railway stations in 1946, the questions of Chad, the trail of Kilroy: all these fictions came from communities of men suddenly thrown together without any special social tradition outside King's Regulations or their American equivalent—Chad from the R.A.F., Kilroy from the U.S. army, the 'gopher-bird' from our army. ... all this conversational small-change is seized to fill a need in New Zealand—the need for a common experience to talk from, and the need for conventions to account for and place emotions unrecognised in the threadbare constitution of social behaviour.²⁷²

Pearson described imported mass culture as a 'readymade and fake social binder' which allowed New Zealanders to communicate with one another without having to face the invention of a truly local social idiom. Mass culture was a crutch, effectively enabling New Zealanders to stumble along without social authenticity. And though he expressed the 'need for an art to expose ourselves to ourselves, explain ourselves to ourselves, see ourselves in a perspective of place and time,' Pearson commented that were such an art to exist, New Zealanders would shy away from it as they were fundamentally afraid to recognize themselves. The New Zealand society of the 1940s and early 1950s that Pearson describes is one of self-conscious quotation, where life was experienced at second-hand: a place without tradition or history of its own.

I suggest that McCahon's own second-hand experience of culture was essential to his forging of a new New Zealand art-historical tradition. Though geographical isolation was an essential

poets came to it. He also notes that 'nationalist thought constantly oscillates ... between invention and discovery.' Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand*, op. cit, p.xix.

²⁷² Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers: a sketch of New Zealand behaviour and its implications for the artist', op.cit., p.211.

trope for the cultural nationalists, New Zealand has never been culturally isolated from the world: its settler culture had always involved an idiosyncratic bricolage of quotations from other cultures. Living in a place and at a time when all the significant events of history seemed to have already happened somewhere else to other people, McCahon's use of visual quotation expressed an everyday condition of New Zealand culture. 'Authentic' New Zealand culture, for McCahon, included the 'awful stuff' rather than existing somewhere above and beyond it.²⁷³

It is significant, then that the Cubism which influenced McCahon's early work was informed as much by his knowledge of soft furnishings as by his study of Cézanne (through the tutelage of the older artist Toss Woollaston). He writes of having 'discovered Cubism' ('a revelation') while out for a Sunday visit as an adolescent with his family. ('It was a dull, uninteresting afternoon. We were looking through copies of the *Illustrated London News*. The Cubists were being exhibited in London, were news, and so were illustrated. I at once became a Cubist...') At the same time, he recognized that the Cubist 'world was one I felt I already knew and was at home in': literally at home, in fact, among the 'lampshades, curtains, linoleums, [and] decorations in cast plaster' designed in a Cubist style which were fashionable among the cognoscenti. Much as he had first experienced painting as commercial art while watching the 'Hairdresser and Tobacconist' signwriter work a few years earlier, with this subsequent anecdote McCahon portrays himself initially encountering avant-garde art in its debased, third-generation iteration as commercial products designed for home furnishing. (And as being quite comfortable among it—there was no personal rejection involved; the purpose of the story was not to draw attention to his own refined taste, but as a New Zealander, to reveal the form in which modern art made itself known to him.) McCahon's revelation, which came in the form of the reproductions he saw that afternoon while flicking through the *Illustrated London News*, was that there was actually an originary Cubist art behind the 'watered-down translations provided by architects, designers, and advertising agencies' with which he was already familiar.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Writing in 1941, Caxton novelist and poet G.R. Gilbert's poem 'To the Outsider' gives an insight into the kind of 'awful stuff' everyday New Zealand culture might contain, beyond McCahon's description of the productions of the W.D.F.V. Addressed to an imaginary tourist ('Do you know of others in New Zealand than the scenic drives, the lakes and the boiling mud?'), Gilbert suggests the 'real' New Zealand might be found in 'The faces of those who watch sports of listen to wrestling over the radios./ The thousands of pulp magazines in our national literature,/ The stories of spies and cowboys and kisses and true murder mysteries.' In *Book*, no.2, Christchurch: The Caxton Press, May 1941 (unpaginated).

²⁷⁴ Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', op.cit., p.361.

McCahon did not cast moral or even aesthetic aspersions on the ‘second order of art’—to use Gilbert Seldes’s term—that he describes in his reminiscences of his early encounters with the visual world.²⁷⁵ On the contrary: in telling the story of how he became an artist, he privileges those encounters with everyday visual culture ahead of his experiences with the world of high art, which come later, and which in some way are impacted upon and shaped by his earlier memories. In McCahon’s personal account, the mass cultural form is primary, the high cultural form secondary. The popular is not only a gateway to the high, but is inextricably linked to it.

Yet for the high modernist wedded to a notion of truth to materials, even the idea of a Cubist lampshade would be ludicrous, not to say a crime against good taste. A Cubist lampshade might be seen to epitomise Clement Greenberg’s description of the downward trajectory of taste, whereby avant-garde cultural forms are, after a period of time, picked over by commercial interests for the extraction of ‘devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes’ in order to be ‘watered down and served up as kitsch.’²⁷⁶ But what if—as in McCahon’s experience—the kitsch were to be encountered first, before the avant-garde work that had inspired it was ever sighted? If the frame of reference for the original were the debased copy, rather than the other way around? If that were the specific conditions of the (distant, provincial) culture in which the artist worked? Rather than reversing a downhill slide, such a viewer might regard the transactions of an image between high and low cultural registers (or the ‘preferred’ and the ‘residual’ forms of culture, to use Raymond Williams’s terms), as

²⁷⁵ A modernist cultural critic and the New York correspondent for T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion* magazine, Gilbert Seldes was one of the first intellectuals to frame the debate about the critical merits of popular culture. His book *The Seven Lively Arts* was the first to suggest that modern popular cultural forms such as vaudeville, the movies, and jazz deserved serious attention from cultural critics. He coined the phrase the ‘second order of art’ when writing about comic strips. ‘Krazy Kat, the daily comic strip of George Herriman is, to me, the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day. With those who hold that a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not traffic. The qualities of Krazy Kat are irony and fantasy—exactly the same, it would appear, as distinguish *The Revolt of the Angels*; it is wholly beside the point to indicate a preference for the work of Anatole France, which is in the great line, in the major arts. It happens that in America irony and fantasy are practised in the major arts by only one or two men, producing high-class trash; and Mr Herriman, working in a despised medium, without an atom of pretentiousness, is day after day producing something essentially fine. It is the result of a naive sensibility rather like that of the *douanier* Rousseau; it does not lack intelligence, because it is a thought-out, a constructed piece of work. In the second order of the world’s art it is superbly first rate—and a delight!’ Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924, p.231.

²⁷⁶ Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’, in John O’Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, op.cit., p.12.

cyclical rather than oppositional.²⁷⁷ Instead of the relationship of ‘relentless refusal’ between the avant-garde and mass culture which Greenberg described, it might be intuited that the source for much avant-garde work, including Cubism, was the popular sphere of culture to which the subsequent kitsch version of the avant-garde would later return.

Thomas Crow points out that the modernist notion of truth to media was—and is—largely a protection against ‘the reproduction and rationalization that would process art’s usable bits for the marketplace.’²⁷⁸ But given that art’s ‘usable bits’ were daily being fed into the commercial mincing machine, such protection was of a purely theoretical nature, a test of social and cultural refinement serving to distance the elite from everyone else.

Connoisseurship of legitimated modernist works of art (and a related disapproval of the kitsch and the popular) also afforded a discreet badge of membership, enabling fellow members of the high culture to recognise one another. As Greenberg noted, before the introduction of universal literacy only cultivated people had been able to read books and to enjoy the cultural comforts of leisure. But now that almost everyone could read and write, literacy was no longer a mark of cultivation but had become merely ‘a minor skill like driving a car, and it no longer served to distinguish an individual’s cultural inclinations, since it was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes.’²⁷⁹ Some other means of distinction was needed, to separate the elite from the hoi polloi in an age of mass print culture. It was arguably found in high modernism’s insistence on the improving nature of the ‘difficult’ work of art experienced in the original.

The essential problem for the New Zealander, however, was the lack of particularly significant works of art in the public collections, either by overseas artists or local ones. The works of art that had resonance in New Zealand culture of the 1930s and 1940s were almost all on display elsewhere, six weeks and hundreds of pounds away by boat in galleries and collections in London and Europe and the USA. While New Zealand art history has tended to focus on the stories of the artists who travelled overseas in these years to encounter

²⁷⁷ See Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’ (1980), in *Culture and Materialism*. London: Verso, 2005, pp.31-49.

²⁷⁸ Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, op.cit., p.7.

²⁷⁹ There is perhaps an unintended irony even in Greenberg’s choice of ‘driving a car’ as an analogy for a relatively plebeian skill, as reading had now become, given how comparatively few of the urban poor—and particularly poor urban women—could drive, let alone own a car, at his time of writing in 1939. Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’, in John O’Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, op.cit, p.12.

international art at first hand, many New Zealand artists (including McCahon, who was 32 when he first left the country in 1951 to visit Melbourne, sponsored anonymously by Charles Brasch) did not travel. Important works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction were experienced by these artists, as by other New Zealanders, primarily as images reproduced in books or magazines. At this end of the world, the copy was almost always encountered before the original.

While this art-historical phenomenon has been regarded—in New Zealand, at least—as a particularly New Zealand one, encountering notable works of art initially in reproduction is, of course, the characteristic experience of most people, apart from those happy few with the money and inclination to travel regularly to the art museums of the world. Although museums are conceived as places of public enlightenment, in reality significant barriers to experiencing original objects and works of art are erected both by geography and by social conditioning. Museums have been affected, however, by the rise of mass culture. Whereas once it was possible for aesthetes to commune in relative peace with the world's great works of art, now visitors from all walks of life vie for a brief spot in front of popular paintings, elbows akimbo, jostling for position ten deep amid a lightning storm of personal souvenir photographs. And from the first years of the 20th century, reproductions of works of art have circulated as commodities in the world's markets. Refiguring art's 'usable bits' as both image and as touristic experience, mass culture has steadily colonised the productions of the high culture. Unsurprisingly, invasion of the art gallery by the masses has sat uneasily with the high culture almost from the beginning. In his influential essay about the fate of the work of art in the era of mass culture, Walter Benjamin concluded in 1936 that the ubiquity of photomechanical reproduction was changing the way that works of art were regarded: experienced in reproduction, they were becoming detached from their own histories, from the sequence of events and sites and gazes which had made them culturally significant. The proliferation of the image was destabilising the power of the original; yet critically he stated that 'the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.' The *authority* of the work of art, for Benjamin, was being diminished by its translation into mass culture. Its aura was literally withering.²⁸⁰ Weakened by generations of copies and the gaze of thousands of ill-educated eyes, it was almost as if the original work of art were being worn out by mass culture. The many, as ever, were spoiling the refined pleasures of the few.

²⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1992, pp.211-44.

In working from reproductions of paintings by Titian and Sassetta—a practical necessity when living in a country with only a tiny handful of very minor European Renaissance works in public collections—in 1947 and 1948 McCahon was also, perhaps, pointing to the way in which art was received in New Zealand. If the presence of the original were fundamental to the concept of authenticity, then the New Zealand situation could only ever be inauthentic in relation to Europe, or even America; or, in another way of thinking, its copies and second-hand accounts and third-generation versions were the specific condition of the nation's cultural identity; the source of its 'authenticity'. It was one of McCahon's particular achievements to allude to—more than four decades before post-modernism's interest in analysing the hidden codes of art production—the politics of art's reception in New Zealand.

In a letter to Rodney Kennedy in March 1946, McCahon first indicates that he was contemplating using religious subject matter in his painting. A chance encounter with an electrical linesman in Mapua, Nelson, early that year, had provided McCahon with the visual inspiration to set Biblical scenes in the New Zealand landscape. Looking up, McCahon had seen the workman mounting a ladder to string electrical wire between three power-poles. With his mind full of reproductions of religious images from the Italian Renaissance, McCahon immediately saw the unmistakable resemblance of the scene to artistic representations of the deposition from the cross at Calvary. The electrical linesman provided the perfect contemporary visual analogy to images of the New Testament figures of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus preparing to take the dead Christ down from the cross for burial. 'The nearest thing to a Crucifixion group I am likely to see in this country,' he commented.²⁸¹ Working from his own copy of 'the Phaidon book on Titian', McCahon produced at least five versions of Titian's *The Entombment* (1559) between July 1946 in Dunedin and May 1947 in Nelson, one of which reveals a recognizably New Zealand landscape, complete with a lone kauri tree and folded hills, and another of which, painted on cheesecloth and prominently featuring the linesman, he dedicated to Kennedy.

The experience revealed to McCahon the power of a multivalent symbol—an image which could be at once modern and premodern, familiar and foreign. It enabled him to re-imagine both the Christian story and the great themes of Renaissance art in a contemporary New

²⁸¹ Colin McCahon, quoted in L.H. Bieringa, *McCahon: 'Religious Works 1946-1952'*, Palmerston North: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1975, p.6.

Zealand setting: to relate, as Charles Brasch noted in 1950, ‘the experience behind such paintings to our own lives.’²⁸² The first of the religious works, *I Paul to you at Ngatimote* (1946), portrayed the apostle in the farming landscape near Motueka where McCahon was then working: the aeroplane circling in the sky and the barbed wire fences behind him may be read equally as emblems of war or as icons of rural New Zealand, or—and perhaps this was McCahon’s real breakthrough—as both at once.

Colin McCahon, *Linesman Climbing Power Pole*, [study for ‘Rodney Kennedy’s Crucifixion’], 1947, crayon on paper, 415mm x 265mm

Completed in April 1947, *The Angel of the Annunciation* was the first of McCahon’s works to conflate Christian symbolism, the contemporary New Zealand landscape, and the aesthetics of mass culture. The title of the work is boldly integrated into the composition, in the manner of corner cut-offs in advertising layouts, or perhaps a narratory block from comic strips. Wearing a blue knee-length dress, the angel, a stocky, ungainly figure, hovers over the golden hills of the Nelson landscape: the Tahunanui Golf Club building appears to the right. *The Angel of the Annunciation* was painted in McCahon’s studio—the first room of his own he had had to work in for many years—at the house he shared with his wife and their young

²⁸² Charles Brasch, ‘A Note on the Work of Colin McCahon’, *Landfall*, vol.4, no.4, December 1950, p.338.

family in Muritai Street, Tahunanui, a suburb of Nelson. Perhaps even more so than the slightly later religious paintings featuring speech-bubbles, it was a deeply personal work. While the painting depicts a familiar theme of Christian art, the angel's annunciation to the Virgin Mary of the impending birth of Jesus, unusually McCahon has depicted her with a red dress, which in Renaissance iconography is traditionally the attribute of the Virgin's mother, Anne. The angel in a red dress features in several of McCahon's religious works, notably in *Christ Taken From the Cross* (1947) where she wears a modern short-sleeved knee-length dress and in which her stomach is distended: the figure is presumably a reference to his wife, the painter Anne Hamblett. Another recognisable identity is the family's neighbour, Marjorie Naylor, whom McCahon painted as the Virgin Mary.

The 'primitivist' painting technique which McCahon developed over this period—'my offensive straight lines of black', a mode of representation he had elaborated from his drawing practice by way of an admiration for Georges Rouault and Paul Gauguin—was deliberately symbolic for the job at hand: the depiction of the emotional and spiritual malaise of New Zealand immediately after the war.²⁸³ Acknowledging that no other New Zealand painter had hitherto attempted to use either the landscape or the human figure for symbolic purposes, Brasch considered that distortion of form was an 'essential means of expression for McCahon' in his creation of a 'bare, powerful, uncompromising' vision of contemporary life. 'His Crucifixions do not say, "Here is Christ crucified",' he wrote; 'They say, rather, "This is what human life is like, this is what is happening to men, here, today"'.²⁸⁴ McCahon's work revealed the 'crudity and horror' of human suffering and anguish: his images 'show it taking place here, among our New Zealand hills, as though to suggest that an extreme of suffering cannot but be part of our experience too.'²⁸⁵ Instead of representing the 'newness' of the New Zealand landscape to Pākehā, McCahon attempted to portray it as a place capable of anchoring an ancient symbolism—'a land of titanic dimensions in which you can almost hear the giant voices of the Prophets': the heraldic backdrop for the local variant of a humanist art tradition 'as old as religion itself,' yet of renewed significance in the modern post-war

²⁸³ 'Offensive straight lines' appears in Colin McCahon, letter to Rodney Kennedy, 26 January 1947, quoted in Peter Simpson, 'McCahon's *A Candle in a Dark Room*: A Postscript', op.cit., p.82. McCahon discussed his admiration for Rouault in Colin McCahon, 'All the paintings, drawings and prints by Colin McCahon in the Gallery's Collection', *Auckland Art Gallery Quarterly*, no.44, 1969, p.4.

²⁸⁴ Charles Brasch, 'A Note on the Work of Colin McCahon', op.cit., p.338.

²⁸⁵ C[h]arles B[r]asch, *An Exhibition of Paintings from July 1947 to September 1948 by Colin McCahon at Dunedin Public Library Lecture Hall*, Dunedin, 1948, n.p.

world.²⁸⁶ McCahon's biographer Gordon H. Brown noted that he thought of the world's conflict primarily as a spiritual struggle: 'One person with real faith could stop the war...' McCahon wrote.²⁸⁷

At nearly 12 000 dead, the fatalities sustained by New Zealand during World War II represented the highest per capita death rate in the Commonwealth. While New Zealand's sovereignty remained intact, and the much-anticipated naval invasion by the Japanese did not eventuate, New Zealanders were profoundly affected by the war they had fought in theatres of battle thousands of miles away.²⁸⁸ New Zealanders did not need to be told that the Angel of Death had passed over the land,' wrote historian Michael King of war's aftermath. 'They had heard the beating of its wings.'²⁸⁹ Writing to Allen Curnow in September 1945, a fortnight after the formal surrender of Japan, Fairburn described the general feeling of 'post-war exhaustion' in New Zealand, adding 'I have the feeling often nowadays that our civilisation is running out of the plug-hole with an ugly sucking sound, and that we (I mean all of us) are losing our grip on *meaning*.'²⁹⁰ McCahon painted his Biblical works in the years immediately following the war, as detailed reportage about the horrors of the concentration camps in Europe and Asia and of the atomic detonations in Japan was beginning to filter through. His vision of the land as both a bone yard and a place of torment in which angels appeared in human form was arguably as much a contemporary response to the war as it was a reworking of the conventions of Italian religious painting. (After all, the painters of the Italian Renaissance had likewise set the Christian story in their own contemporary landscape to make the stories relevant to churchgoers, their viewing public.) McCahon's supposed 'poor taste' was above all a liberating force, enabling him not only to set the Bible in the Nelson landscape but also to symbolically restage the war there.

²⁸⁶ E.C. Simpson. 'McCahon's Raw Paintings Show Audacious, Original Vision', op.cit.

²⁸⁷ Colin McCahon, quoted in Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, op.cit., p.30.

²⁸⁸ At 9.30pm on 3 September 1939 New Zealand entered World War II by declaring war on Germany, which had invaded Poland two days earlier. Although publicly announced on 4 September, New Zealand's declaration was backdated to the previous day in order to be synchronous with Britain's. 'It is with gratitude in the past, and with confidence in the future, that we range ourselves without fear beside Britain. Where she goes, we go! Where she stands, we stand! We are only a small and young nation, but we march with a union of hearts and souls to a common destiny,' proclaimed New Zealand's Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage. The first New Zealand soldiers left for Europe on 5 January 1940: by the time of the Allied victory over Japan in August 1945, more than 200 000 New Zealand men and women had been conscripted and mobilized overseas.

²⁸⁹ Michael King, *Being Pakeha Now: Reflections and Recollections of a White Native*. Auckland: Penguin Books, 1999, p.24.

²⁹⁰ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to Allen Curnow, 17 September 1945, *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, op.cit., p.139.

In November 1947, a month after finishing *Crucifixion According to St Mark*, McCahon painted *The Valley of Dry Bones*. It is a recognizably New Zealand landscape—stark hills covered in browned-off grass, a bright blue sky, a long white cigar-shaped cloud at the horizon—which McCahon pictured as a vast empty cemetery. Disarticulated human bones lie in a deep gully between two hills, like an offal pit on a New Zealand farm. Here the words of God to the scattered Israelites (‘Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these Slain, that they may live’) float over the land, placed by McCahon into a speech-bubble emanating from the mouth of a worried-looking pale-faced man with bloodshot eyes—a character not unlike the artist himself, who also slipped a self-portrait profile into the extreme right edge of *Crucifixion According to St Mark*. These paintings—which located suffering and death in the local landscape—were *personal*, the self-portraits seemed to suggest. The painter depicted himself as a witness to a real-life crime scene unfolding before him. The everyday post-war world, as depicted by McCahon in 1947 and 1948, was fundamentally a primitive and barbaric place, in which the past and the present, art and experience, the high-cultural and the lowbrow, were summoned into uneasy coexistence amid familiar local landscapes.

Bob Gormack, Cover of *Bookie*, a satirical publication that targeted the high seriousness of the Caxton Press. *Bookie*, Christchurch: The Nag's Head Press, No.1, March 1948.

PART TWO: AFTER McCAHON: THE DIALECTIC OF CULTURE IN A SMALL PROVINCE

VI: Introduction: The Remedial Project

In so small a community as this the writer is naturally more cramped than he would be in a larger society. His position is rather like that of a person who lives in a small garden suburb without the possession of a hedge, so that many people know what he is doing. Criticism is apt to be resented, and attacks on institutions and personages may raise storms from which it is not easy to find shelter.¹

Alan Mulgan, *Literature and Authorship in New Zealand*, 1943

While the first section of this thesis has explored the social and cultural implications of the ‘Celestial Lavatory’ incident in the late 1940s, this central section is concerned with the dialogue between the high culture and the common culture as it relates to art practice in the years after McCahon produced his popular-culture inflected paintings; and particularly with McCahon’s ongoing role within that dialogue. Ideas have different periods of gestation; and as the debate around cultural democracy waned, McCahon left Christchurch for Auckland in May 1953, where he moved to a new job at the Auckland Art Gallery and on to a new secular series of works concerned with the formal structures of the landscape, as well as the ‘structures of feeling’—to paraphrase Raymond Williams—that he located in them.² The distinctive combination of an aesthetic derived from modern mass culture with the religious quattrocento painting that he had pursued after the end of World War II had been a temporary strategy, a means of communicating the barbarities of local experience from which he departed when other forms of expression grew more compelling. While he returned to explorations of religious faith and doubts later, and to forms and aesthetics drawn from the

¹ Alan Mulgan, *Literature and Authorship in New Zealand*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1943, p.51.

² McCahon’s move to Auckland was part of a general cultural exodus north which signalled the decline of the city’s years as New Zealand’s artistic and literary capital. Peter Simpson comments that his move was occasioned by the conviction that his career had stalled in Christchurch, and a feeling that ‘his painting itself had lost momentum and that he needed to find a new direction.’ Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon: The Titirangi Years, 1953-1959*, Auckland University Press, 2007, p.3.

common culture like noughts and crosses and amateur hand-painted signage, references to mass culture only appeared very occasionally thereafter in his oeuvre.³

Although the degree to which the critique of the earlier works was a factor in his decision to depart from this mode of painting is unknown, it is apparent that McCahon felt at various times through his career the great weight of the 'culture pressing down on him'.⁴ He was both strongly championed and fiercely criticised, and, as Robert Leonard notes, felt an unusually great pressure to paint *for* a frequently uncomprehending public. At the same time, he was increasingly championed by the high culture, becoming *the* dominant figure in New Zealand art from the late 1960s onwards: an artistic identity shaped, as Richard Lummis has argued, both by the lack of a supportive high cultural infrastructure and by McCahon's experiences as an artist and gallery worker in New Zealand.⁵ The high and the common cultures were both as much sources of pressure on the artist as resources of strength. As much, perhaps, as Fairburn's career 'uniquely reflected', in Wystan Curnow's words, the realities of the failures of local high culture⁶, it may be that McCahon's reflected the inherent antagonisms of broader New Zealand culture. But while he was subject to them, they were also his subject.

Local antagonism between the high and the common continued long after McCahon abandoned his combinatorial paintings in the early 1950s. This section examines some of the ways this ongoing antagonism was represented locally between the 1950s and the 1970s, firstly in the moral panic around the 'comic wars' of the 1950s, and secondly in the writings

³ By the late 1960s he had developed the characteristic monochromatic text and number-based works which recall the aesthetic of hand-painted signs of farm gates or roadside fruit stalls, and which carry religious or poetic texts. While the aesthetic of these works belongs to the vernacular or 'folkish' rather than the mass-produced end of popular culture, they are, first and foremost, *painted signs* in the way of the anonymous signwriter of McCahon's 'Hairdresser and Tobacconist' memory of forty years earlier, involving the direct transmission of textual information through the medium of a painted surface.

He continued to design for the theatre, to make posters for exhibitions including the large-scale 'Object and Image' sign for the Auckland City Art Gallery's exhibition in 1954 which he curated, and to decorate objects including a set of table-tops for the art gallery's café in 1962. McCahon's ongoing interest in popular music was occasionally reflected in the titles and inscriptions of his later works: there is a series of works on paper painted between 1967-75 (and a wet bar painted for his friend the writer Maurice Shadbolt) inscribed 'Buttercup Fields Forever', McCahon's variant on The Beatles's 'Strawberry Fields Forever', released in 1967; and one of the 'Scared' series of 1976, *Open Door*, features the text 'The door is / always open | the / lights [sic] on in the hall', taken from a Waylon Jennings song recorded the previous year.

⁴ Robert Leonard, *Nostalgia for Intimacy*, Gordon H. Brown Lecture no.10, Victoria University of Wellington, 2012, p.13. Leonard goes to add: 'If the culture pressed upon McCahon, he also pressed upon it. ... He could seem to occupy almost any position, depending on which aspect of his complex oeuvre you cared to emphasise.' p.14.

⁵ Richard Lummis, 'Modelling the New Zealand Artist: Rita Angus and Colin McCahon', op.cit., p.ii.

⁶ Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', op.cit., p.161.

of cultural commentators. Comparing the New Zealand experience with the Australian situation, it goes on to chart the softening of hostilities between the high and the popular in the 1980s, led by a new generation of local intellectuals with an open interest in contemporary American culture and a concern for the agency of individuals in working with mass culture. A final chapter explores the complex afterlife of McCahon's work following his death in 1987. At a time when the high and the popular were no longer generally considered to be in natural opposition, McCahon's work took on a critical new role as cultural legacy for both. While his practice represented 'high modernism' to a younger generation of critics and artists, his characteristic motifs and gestures were at precisely the same time appropriated by the common culture as an aesthetic signifier of 'authentic New Zealand-ness'. I argue that McCahon's project involved conversion of the visual experience of everyday life in New Zealand into the register of high art: the local vernacular (variously mass, popular, or common) translated into an international language. McCahon's work has thus enabled New Zealanders to see the world as part of local culture and local culture as part of the world. It has been, then—and continues to be—a critical source of visual identity in a nation with a comparatively recent settler culture.

New Zealand high culture has long been viewed by its critics as a remedial project. It has been characterised variously as 'thin', 'recent', 'shallow', 'provincial', 'imitative', 'undistinguished',⁷ and 'not very rich'.⁸ Wystan Curnow, in fact, argued that its failings were, as those of a small society lacking in history, both 'largely necessary' and actually 'irremediable'.⁹ Prior to World War II, New Zealand high culture was riven by amateurism and cronyism and was a source of great frustration to a younger generation of writers and artists; after the war, as New Zealand's high cultural infrastructure was established under the cultural nationalist imperative, it was stricken by arguments over the deleterious effects of state funding and later by antagonisms over the instrumentalisation of art in the furtherance of national identity. New Zealand artists were forced to choose between leaving the country to pursue a high-cultural career (like Len Lye), or staying at home and battling public incomprehension (like Colin McCahon). Limited local arts patronage militated against cultural specialisation: members of the New Zealand high culture were required to be

⁷ J.O.C. Phillips, 'Musings in Maoriland—or Was There a *Bulletin* School in New Zealand?', *Historical Studies*, vol. 20 no. 81, October 1983, p. 527.

⁸ Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', op.cit., p.156. ('Thin', 'recent', and 'shallow' are also Curnow's descriptions.)

⁹ Ibid, p.159.

versatile ‘cultural odd-job men’ who could slip back and forth between production, criticism, and teaching.¹⁰ An artist or an intellectual working at a level of ‘intellectual and imaginative excellence’ was alienated from broader New Zealand culture either by geographical distance or by public hostility.¹¹ It is only comparatively recently that the situation has begun to change. There was (and arguably still is) much to be remedied about the position of high culture in New Zealand society.

The cultural and social history of comic strips in New Zealand throws into sharp relief the antagonism between the high and the common cultures in New Zealand in the 1950s, explored in the opening chapter of this section. Sales of imported comics had boomed in New Zealand following the arrival of hundreds of thousands of American marines in 1942, stationed in the North Island on leave from the Pacific theatre of war. The experience of the ‘American invasion’, as commentators wryly termed it, was to create a residual anti-Americanism in New Zealand culture that lasted long after the war was over, and which was amplified by the disdain of intellectuals for popular culture—the products of the American culture industry. When the moral panic over comics ensued in Commonwealth countries—and in America itself—in the early 1950s, comics were cited by New Zealand authorities as relevant background to a number of high-profile youth crimes. Comics were generally perceived by members of New Zealand’s high culture as an inferior (and morally-suspect) form of literature. A handful of public intellectuals including McCahon held different opinions; their views are accounted for in this chapter.

Comic strips can be regarded—and figure here—as something of a bellwether in the shift in high-cultural attitude towards mass culture, which underwent a profound change in the 1980s. Having been incorporated into works by New Zealand visual artists in the late 1960s and 1970s, comic strips and cartoon characters began to appear on covers of books of prose and poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. For a generation who had grown up after the war, and who chafed against New Zealand’s import restrictions, American popular culture could be as much a liberating force as a repressive one. The inclusion of comics in works of art and literature was a means of signalling difference between their works and those of the previous generation. In this context, comic strips featuring American superheroes represented both a

¹⁰ ‘I stand at the end of a line of quite distinguished cultural odd-job men. A.R.D. Fairburn, Charles Brasch, M.K. Joseph, among others...’ Wystan Curnow, ‘Doing Art Criticism in New Zealand, *op.cit.*, p.9.

¹¹ Wystan Curnow, ‘High Culture in a Small Province’, *op.cit.*, p.155.

disruption to the old high/low cultural division as well as an inclination towards the international, in opposition to the now-calcified cultural nationalist imperative. These inclusions signalled not only that the boundaries of the high culture had been enlarged, but new confidence in dealing with matters of culture.

However, while the history of changing attitudes towards the comic strip demonstrates the high culture's increasing interest in interrogating and incorporating the forms and languages of *mass* culture in the latter half of the 20th century, it also serves to distinguish the continued problem of the pressure exerted by the common culture. 'Any discussion of New Zealand's high culture,' wrote Wystan Curnow in 1973, 'will have to dwell on failures, inadequacies and possibilities rather than on achievements.'¹² For Curnow, as for a number of critics, the reason for the 'failure' of New Zealand high culture has been its inability to separate itself from the common culture. There is not the sufficient distance within New Zealand's small and comparatively egalitarian society that permits the 'psychic insulation' necessary for the production of cultural problem-generation at a high level. Robert Leonard described this factor in New Zealand high culture as an 'intimacy' problem; the product of 'an intense, inwardly focused scene in which the proximity of competing claims was specially keenly felt.'¹³ (This proximity would apply, perhaps, to both the competing claims of the high culture and to the claims of the common culture upon the high.)

In his 'Fretful Sleepers: a sketch of New Zealand behaviour and its implications for the artist', Bill Pearson noted that the inability to escape from the scornful New Zealand public brought about a form of self-censorship among New Zealand intellectuals, who consciously moderated their discourse in response. And in his 'A short history of "the New Zealand intellectual"', Roger Horrocks described the anti-intellectualism of the common culture as a consistently repressive force on the development of the high culture in New Zealand in the second half of the 20th century.¹⁴ The second chapter of this section examines in detail the pressures exerted by the common culture on the high, as articulated firstly by Fairburn in his accounts of local Philistinism from the late 1940s and early 1950s, and subsequently by Pearson (1953), Curnow (1973 and 1998), and Horrocks (2007). It also examines a critique of

¹² Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', op.cit., p.156.

¹³ Robert Leonard, *Nostalgia for Intimacy*, op.cit., p.9.

¹⁴ Roger Horrocks, 'A Short History of "the New Zealand Intellectual"', in *Speaking Truth to Power: Public Intellectuals Rethink New Zealand*, ed. Laurence Simmons, Auckland University Press, 2007.

this viewpoint in the satirical anti-establishment publications of Bob Gormack from the late 1940s.¹⁵

By the late 1980s new public spaces for intellectual discourse were being developed within the New Zealand art world by artists, curators and critics, congruent with the rise of interest in postmodernist theory and a shift in approach towards the common culture. One of the most significant of these projects was 'after McCahon', an exhibition curated by Christina Barton for the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1989 which is discussed in this section's final chapter. 'After McCahon' explored McCahon's legacy for contemporary art practice from within a distinctively new frame of problem-generation. Under a postmodern condition of culture, the artists represented in the exhibition were concerned with the contextualisation of the art object rather than the search for essence that had occupied an earlier generation. The condition of 'afterness' in 'after McCahon' appeared less as an act of homage and more about the possibilities of making art in the new spaces for discourse which were emerging. At the same time, beyond the walls of the studio and the gallery, McCahon's work was passing beyond 'art's hands', to paraphrase Wystan Curnow¹⁶; to an afterlife in the common culture as a signifier of New Zealandness and local 'authenticity'. Thus while this section tracks the high/low debate which followed McCahon's early work to a point in the 1980s at which the old antagonism no longer held the same urgency, it also maps the beginning of new debates and tensions around McCahon's work which arose at this precise moment in both the high and the common cultures.

¹⁵ While Gormack trained his satirical gaze on the high culture of the Caxtonians, it should be noted that under the pseudonym of 'Whim Wham', Allen Curnow contributed popular political and social satire in verse form to the Christchurch *Press* and Auckland's *New Zealand Herald*, between 1937-1988; his 'high' and 'common' streams of poetry thus developed in parallel.

¹⁶ Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture Now! A Manifesto (for Hesketh Henry)', lecture notes, New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre, 1998, <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/misc/wystan.asp>.

Colin McCahon, *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury*, 1950, oil on canvas, 885mm x 1165mm, Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki

VII: The American Invasion and the ‘Comics Menace’

‘American conditions are the conditions of modern life now.’
F.R. Leavis, 1943.¹⁷

The negative critique of McCahon’s work from the late 1940s derived in some way from the notion that its cultural reference points were not only lowbrow, but were also *American*. His use of comic-book graphics in works such as the *Valley of Dry Bones* (1947) (a dominant

¹⁷ F.R. Leavis, from ‘Education and the University’ (1943), quoted in F.R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1972, p.201.

speech bubble), *The Promised Land* (1950) (cells let into a larger picture), and *Seven Days in Nelson and Canterbury* (1950) (six frames with a different horizon line in each) was set against the background of increasing social disapproval of comics. In particular, in the early 1950s American horror and crime comics were increasingly being regarded as negative influences on young people: at the very least major contributors to a decline in literacy and possibly even ‘veritable primers for the teaching of juvenile delinquency.’¹⁸

At a time when most older New Zealanders still thought of themselves as British, and referred to England as ‘Home’, the influence of US culture appeared to be something to be guarded against as the colony moved towards the semi-autonomous status of a dominion. While the New Zealand government actively promoted contemporary British culture through the purchase of British programmes for its non-commercial YA radio network and by lowering the import duty differential payable on British films, the country’s more progressive artists and writers simultaneously struggled to articulate a local vision of culture. ‘We ... look to an England we have never known as centre of our mainly synthetic “culture”’, wrote James K. Baxter in 1946, ‘while our real lives are rooted in these islands’¹⁹ The prospect of American cultural imperialism represented a threat to both the nationalist writers and artists who aimed to locate ‘a home for the imagination’ in New Zealand, as well as to the state arm of culture still bent at mid-century on what historian James Belich has described as a British cultural recolonisation project—the desire of New Zealanders to be seen as ‘Better Britons’.²⁰ New Zealand’s anti-Americanism, noted Belich, was often manifest as a symptom of its ‘Better Britonism.’ So too was the proposition that New Zealand was essentially a classless society.

American popular culture had first entered New Zealand eighty years earlier with the itinerant gold miners of the 1860s. This colourful transnational assembly of working men and women brought with them from the gold rushes in Australia and California a distinctive goldfields culture—‘a motley assemblage of circus, theatre, opera, vaudeville, novels, folklore and ballads’—which interwove readily with the Irish-colonial verse ballads and tall

¹⁸ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, New York and Toronto: Rinehart and Co., 1953, p.29.

¹⁹ James K. Baxter. ‘Poetry in New Zealand’, in *1946: Second Yearbook of the Arts in New Zealand*, ed. Howard Wadman, Wellington: H.H. Tombs, 1946, pp.111.

²⁰ A ‘home for the imagination’ is J. G. A. Pocock’s phrase, in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands—Essays in British History*, Cambridge University Press, op.cit., p.10. For ‘Better Britonism’, see James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders, from the 1880s to the Year 2000*. Auckland: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2001.

yarns of the early European sealers and whalers in New Zealand to create aspects of a working-class Pākehā performative culture, remnants of which arguably still exist.²¹ Only four years after the first commercial screenings of life-size silent films in the US in 1896, films were being used as regular items on the bills of New Zealand vaudeville.²² The first movie theatres opened in New Zealand only a few years later. During the first half of the 20th century, New Zealand imported American popular culture in the form of cars and music, cinema and radio serials, cheap novels and comics. Chain stores based on American models opened, and in 1936, Mickey Mouse's eighth birthday was celebrated at a Wellington cinema.²³ The influence of Hollywood was particularly widespread: in his prize-winning essay on the nature of contemporary New Zealand culture, Monte Holcroft noted in 1940 that New Zealanders 'spend a great deal of time at the cinema, and have been influenced by the visual and aural impressions of American civilisation.'²⁴ On average every New Zealander in 1943-4 went to the movies once a fortnight; and there was one movie theatre seat for every six persons, a much greater capacity than Britain or the USA.²⁵ From almost the earliest days of New Zealand's European settlement, American culture was associated with the lowbrow and the commercial. In the 1940s, high culture in New Zealand was British in orientation, with its champions rejecting New Zealand's own 'robust but vulgar colonial inheritance' in addition to pushing for legislation against undue influence by the products of American popular culture.²⁶ New Zealand continued culturally to be a British colony long after legally it had ceased to be one.

Perhaps the most significant cause of the widespread anti-American feeling he detected in New Zealand, suggested visiting US academic Daniel F. Ausubel in 1959, was the mass

²¹ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, op.cit., p.329. I would suggest that remnant of Pākehā performative culture can be seen in familiar New Zealand tropes such as rugby players dancing in tutus, long poems in rhyming couplets written by family members for 21st birthdays, sight gags on cards carried in a wallet, shaggy dog stories, practical jokes, and so on.

²² Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly: Films and People in New Zealand*, Hamilton: Paul's Book Arcade, 1945, p.10.

²³ Geoff Leland, *A Foreign Egg in Our Nest? American Popular Culture in New Zealand*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1988, p.17.

²⁴ M.H. Holcroft, *The Deepening Stream: Cultural Influences in New Zealand*. Christchurch: The Caxton Press, 1940, p.14.

²⁵ Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly*, op.cit., p.6. Mirams noted that 'some class-distinction was at first attached to "going to the pictures": the best people pretended to regard it as a socially inferior pastime, like reading Penny Dreadful, and to place those who indulged in it in the same category as those who took baths only on Saturday nights. This phase fairly soon passed, however.' p.10.

²⁶ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, op.cit., p.338.

contact between American soldiers and New Zealand citizens between 1942 and 1946.²⁷ The ‘American invasion’ of New Zealand, as it was ironically termed, had begun on 14 June 1942 with the arrival of the US troopship *Wakefield* in Wellington Harbour. The USA had entered the World War II in early December 1941, following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour and the German declaration of war four days later. As Japanese spotter planes circled the skies over Auckland and Wellington, immediate measures were put in place by the US to formalize the worldwide system of American supply and logistics to strengthen the Allied efforts in the Pacific and Europe. The North Island of New Zealand effectively became a major American base. Infrastructure was rapidly built to accommodate the visiting troops: new roads, barracks, mess halls, PX stores, stockades, hospitals, docks and landing strips suddenly appeared in a network of camps in and around Auckland and Wellington. Over the next two years more than 150 000 American troops were stationed in New Zealand. At any one time US servicemen swelled the national population by 50 000, as soldiers came and went on training and furlough from the counter-offensive in the Pacific.

The American presence in New Zealand during the latter years of World War II had a significant impact on the New Zealand way of life. It represented the biggest influx of foreigners since European settlement in the 1840s, and exposed New Zealanders to cultural difference on a grand scale. Better paid than New Zealand soldiers, the American troops provided an immediate fillip to local economies. Milk-bars, grill-rooms, drycleaners, florists, indoor sports venues, paua-shell souvenir sellers, junk jewellers, coffee vendors, sly-groggers and shoe-shiners rapidly sprang up around the camps to cater to American tastes. Newsagents dramatically expanded their orders for American magazines and comics. The populist state-run ZB radio network expanded its programming of American serials. Cinemas re-opened for soldiers on active duty who might be accompanied by ‘one civilian guest’ in the evenings and on Sundays outside church hours.²⁸ (As film historian Gordon Mirams noted wryly in 1945, the US Marines ‘took themselves and our girls to the pictures very frequently.’²⁹) Service Clubs hosted dances for American troops with young New Zealand women, while dance-bands quickly learned popular American tunes; buttered popcorn, previously seen only at fairs, became commonplace and made up for the disappearance of other sweets.

²⁷ David P. Ausubel, *The Fern and the Tiki—An American View of New Zealand: National Character, Social Attitudes, and Race Relations*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1960, p.74.

²⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 14 May and 26 May 1942, pp.6, 2, quoted in Nancy M. Taylor, *The Home Front*, vol.1, from the series *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War*, Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1986.

²⁹ Gordon Mirams, *Speaking Candidly*, op.cit., p.7.

As well as the immediate rise of a black market in consumer goods, a darker side of popular culture also entered New Zealand with the US troops. The first wave of US marines who landed in Wellington had come directly from the Panama Canal Zone, where 'jive' marijuana was commonly smoked. As any public indiscretions committed by US servicemen were suppressed by the wartime censorship arrangements which had been agreed to by New Zealand and US authorities, and were dealt quietly with back on base by the US military police, it took more than 25 years for the GIs' taste for marijuana to be placed on public record, recorded in the first official enquiry into drug abuse in New Zealand. Fuelled by 'juarez', 'jump whisky' and 'shellshock'—a popular mixture of 1/3 port and 2/3 stout—rest and fairly strenuous recreation was a priority for the American troops on leave. Life on the 'GI Jive' in New Zealand became 'a binge, a big weekend, the Christmas holidays, the night after the football game, the colossal bender, the Saturday night seven days a week.'³⁰

While the government encouraged New Zealand families to welcome the visiting servicemen into their homes, inevitable tensions arose when New Zealand troops home on leave saw the familiarity the American troops enjoyed with the locals. Resentment rapidly developed. As the rueful grumble went, the American soldiers were 'over paid, over-sexed, and over here.' There was a certain amount of what Ausubel termed 'disgraceful conduct' by the American troops, still a matter of 'bitter reproach' by New Zealanders during his visit 15 years later.³¹ Young New Zealand women, left at home without boyfriends and husbands following the military drafts, were attracted to the US servicemen's courtesies, superior personal hygiene and the exotic goods such as nylon stockings, chocolates and ice-creams available to the GIs through the American PX stores. Almost 1400 young New Zealand women left the country for America as war brides after 1946. Although subject to wartime restrictions on reporting, skirmishes between New Zealanders and US servicemen over women, money, and racial issues were fairly common. The largest of these brawls was the so-called Battle of Manners Street, a full-scale riot between up to a thousand US and New Zealand troops which blew up outside the Allied Services Club in central Wellington on 3 April 1943, lasting more than four hours and resulting in dozens of injuries and several arrests before it was suppressed by the Military Police.

³⁰ Redmer Yska, *New Zealand Green: The Story of Marijuana in New Zealand*, Auckland: David Bateman, 1990, p.38.

³¹ David P. Ausubel, *op.cit.*, p.74.

When Colin McCahon arrived in Wellington after the Easter break in 1943, a matter of days after the Manners Street riot, tensions were still running high. Large crowds formed around men in the street who challenged passing American servicemen to fight. There were many incidents, some but not all of which were reported in the newspapers. Arrests followed a disturbance at a boxing match at the Basin Reserve a couple of weeks later on 26 April, the cause of which was attributed by the police to ‘jealousy’. A serious clash took place outside the Mayfair Cabaret in Cuba Street in mid-May, while a large rolling brawl between Māori civilians and US Marines broke out up the coast at Otaki in October.³² Violence was in the air. A war was being fought at home, as well as overseas. Although difficult to corroborate, Gordon H. Brown recounts an incident described to him by McCahon in which McCahon ‘witnessed at close quarters an escaping Negro [sic] detainee deliberately shot down by the Military Police’, a recollection that made a profound impression upon him.³³

McCahon spent six months in Wellington, labouring in the Botanic Gardens next to the American military camp in Central Park. (James K. Baxter’s remark about McCahon’s erstwhile employment as a ‘ladies lavatory attendant’ and ‘swan feeder’ probably refers to this time.) Ineligible for active service on account of a heart condition brought about by a childhood bout of rheumatic fever, he had previously carried out war work in Dunedin and the Nelson district, where he was employed as an agricultural labourer on farms, orchards and tobacco fields.³⁴ He painted at night and in the weekends, beginning to experiment with new modernist forms inspired by study of Cézanne and conversation with Toss Woollaston. Two small sketchbook views of the Carter Observatory building in Wellington’s Botanic Gardens done in pencil and brushy watercolour, which reveal the stylistic influence of Toss Woollaston, date from this period.

It is probable that the time he spent in Wellington in 1943 fuelled McCahon’s passion for comics: he arrived in the capital city at the time an expanded range of titles had suddenly come into broad circulation. The arrival of the American troops greatly stimulated New Zealand’s demand for pulp magazines, which had been kept in check since the mid-1930s by a mixture of ad-hoc import licensing restrictions and informal censorship agreements

³² *Evening Post*, 27 April 1943, p.3, quoted in Nancy M. Taylor, *The Home Front*, vol.1, op.cit., p.6.

³³ Gordon H. Brown, *Colin McCahon: Artist*, Wellington: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1984, p.30.

³⁴ Agnes Wood, *Colin McCahon: The Man and the Teacher*. Auckland: David Ling Publications, 1997, p.55.

between the Minister of Customs and importers. With these behind-the-scenes measures limiting importation of the more extreme titles, on a pro-rata basis fewer horror and true crime pulps were sold in New Zealand than in Britain and the United States.³⁵ The local public taste began to change and expand, however, with the arrival of the US troops, for whom comics of all kinds were a regular part of everyday life. In 1941, 7-10 million comics were sold each month in the USA, grossing six times more than traditional children's books.³⁶ By the mid-1940s, comic strips were read 'with regularity by well over half of [America's] adults and two-thirds of the children over six, a public of approximately sixty-five million people.'³⁷ Comic sales in New Zealand exploded during the second half of the war. Answering trenchant public criticism of comic distributors in the midst of the moral panic against pulp fiction in the early 1950s, H.B.K. Hislop, an Auckland publisher, commented that it was not until 1942 that New Zealand booksellers were suddenly 'besieged by men asking for "cahmics".'³⁸ Although subject to waves of increasingly intense public indignation and opprobrium, sales of comics and other American pulp fiction in New Zealand continued to increase dramatically in the years following World War II, long after the US troops had returned home.³⁹

McCahon's interest in comics has been documented by his biographer, the art historian Gordon H. Brown, who noted that he saw McCahon 'studying' American comic-books on various occasions, and recalled a discussion between McCahon and his son William concerning the pictorial and graphic design of a Scrooge McDuck comic.⁴⁰ The first of his works to reveal the graphic influence of comic-books was the *Crucifixion According to St Mark*, an oil painting completed in October 1947 in Nelson. One of the largest works McCahon had attempted to that date, his version of the *Crucifixion* staged Christ's death among the folded blue-shadowed hills of the South Island. The significant action of the painting is narrated in three large white cartoonish speech-bubbles containing text from the King James Bible. 'ELOI ELOI LAMA SABACHTHANI?' ('My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?') cries out the crucified Jesus from the cross. While a figure offers up a

³⁵ Margaret Dalziel, 'Comics in New Zealand', *Landfall*, March 1955, p.44.

³⁶ David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scene and How it Changed America*, p.x.

³⁷ W.J. Scott, *Reading, Film and Radio Tastes of High School Boys and Girls*. Wellington: NZCER, 1947.

³⁸ *Manawatu Daily Times*, 13 August 1952, p.7, quoted in Roger Openshaw and Roy Shuker. 'A "Cahmics" Crisis Down Under: Comics and youth in early post-World War Two New Zealand', *British Review of New Zealand Studies*, no.4, November 1991, p.50.

³⁹ Margaret Dalziel, 'Comics in New Zealand', op.cit, p.44.

⁴⁰ Gordon H. Brown, 'The Autobiographical Factor', in Gordon H. Brown. and Alexa Johnston (eds.), *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys*, Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 1988, p.26, fn.3.

vinegar-soaked sponge on a stick, an onlooker cautions ‘LET ALONE; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down.’ Finally, from outside the picture frame, a disembodied voice announces in a bubble: ‘This is JESUS The KING of the JEWS.’⁴¹ The painting is brutal in its collision of registers. Its high art tropes—the seriousness of the religious subject; the New Zealand landscape setting; the borrowing from Titian in the arrangement of Christ on the cross—combine with one another to render the boldly-painted comic-book speech bubbles even more incongruous. But McCahon not only included them but also made them the dominant notes of the composition. Their purpose, it appears, was not only to narrate the religious mysteries depicted in the painting but also to signal a certain mode of address. In 1947 perhaps even more than today, comic book speech bubbles stood for the contemporary speech of the streets, of children, of ordinary people who turned for their culture to the funny pages and to pulp fiction. And following World War II, comic books had increasingly become shorthand for popular American culture.

‘The first mission of the funny pages,’ writes David Hadju in his comprehensive account of the social history of comics in America, ‘was to convoke the lower classes.’⁴² Hadju describes the birth of comic strips at the beginning of the 20th century as the result of an experiment by New York publisher Joseph Pulitzer—an attempt to increase sales of newspapers to immigrants and to a semi-literate public. The experiment was successful, and Pulitzer’s innovation was quickly copied by (and syndicated to) other newspaper publishers. But though they were the product of big business, Hadju contends that the funny pages were owned—culturally at least—by the working people.⁴³ Written and drawn by ‘outsiders’ hired in for the purpose, they offered their readership, argues Hadju, an intimate and parodic look at itself. Immensely popular strips such as the Katzenjammer Kids reflected the earthiness, the scepticism towards authority and the delight in freedom that were important aspects of

⁴¹ Comic-book artists capitalize certain words in order to imply a raised voice or to express particular narrative significance: in the *Crucifixion According to St Mark* McCahon was invoking both conventions. Although strategic capitalization of painted words is a cartooning device that he would resurrect to particular effect in his austere black and white Biblical text paintings from the 1970s and 1980s, *Crucifixion According to St Mark* represents the only example of McCahon’s experimentation with the technique among his pulp-culture influenced works of the late 1940s which restaged religious tableaux in the local landscape.

⁴² David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scene and How it Changed America*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008, p.9.

⁴³ A Marxist analysis of the culture industry of the comic strip would describe this argument as ‘false consciousness’—the misleading attribution of agency on the part of the working class consumers of comics; Hadju, however, who has interviewed many comic collectors, readers and artists, makes a persuasive case for cartooning to be considered primarily as a working-class art form.

working-class immigrant culture in New York; and many other places too, including New Zealand.⁴⁴

Hard on the heels of the birth of the comic strip came an attendant social critique, the terms of which remained largely unchanged fifty years later at the height of the widespread ‘comics panic’, and which go some way to explaining the difficulty New Zealand intellectuals had with the speech bubbles in McCahon’s paintings of the late 1940s. Writing in 1906 for the Boston-based literary and cultural magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*, poet and anthologist Ralph Bergengren argued that comics were unsophisticated in the extreme, an excuse for a ‘pandemonium of undisguised coarseness and brutality.’⁴⁵ Their humour was repetitive and unfunny, involving endless parades of people slipping on banana skins or sitting down on tacks or smashing eggs or whacking one other over the head with planks. They were not so much peopled by characters as by shallow ‘types.’⁴⁶ Not only was the humour mechanical and mindless, but machines dictated the rapid speed of delivery required of the comics’ authors. ‘Doubtless they are often ashamed of their product; but the demand of the hour is imperative. The presses are waiting.’ The funny pages represented nothing more than a cynical commercial response to the lowest-level public demand, a product, suggested Bergengren, ‘prepared and printed for the extremely dull’:

Somebody is always hitting somebody else with a club; somebody is always falling downstairs, or out of a balloon, or over a cliff, or into a river, a barrel of paint, a bucket of eggs, a convenient cistern, or a tub of hot water. The comic cartoonists have already exhausted every available substance into which one can fall, and are compelled to fall themselves into a veritable ocean of vain repetition. They have exhausted everything by which one can be blown up. They have exhausted everything by which one can be knocked down or run over.

Although Bergengren also mounted a critique of the abbreviated visual language of the strips, he ended by distinguishing the medium from the message, suggesting that there were in fact

⁴⁴ David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, op.cit, p.11.

⁴⁵ Ralph Bergengren, ‘The Humor of the Colored Supplement’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 98 no. 2, August 1906, pp.269-273.

⁴⁶ ‘A confusing medley [sic] of impossible countrymen, mules, goats, German-Americans and their irreverent progeny, specialized children with a genius for annoying their elders, white-whiskered elders with a genius for playing practical jokes on their grandchildren, policemen, Chinamen, Irishmen, negroes, inhuman conceptions of the genus tramp, boy inventors whose inventions invariably end in causing somebody to be mirthfully splattered with paint or joyously torn to pieces by machinery, bright boys with a talent for deceit, laziness, or cruelty, and even the beasts of the jungle dehumanized to the point of practical joking,’ wrote Bergengren, who, like many critics of comic books, appeared to take considerable delight in compiling long and colourful lists of their inequities. Ralph Bergengren, ‘The Humor of the Colored Supplement’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 98 no. 2, August 1906, pp.270-1.

one or two strips of great merit, whose frames opened the door to the ‘world of childish fantasy’, far from the ‘the clamor of hooting mobs, the laughter of imbeciles, and the crash of explosives.’ There should be no reason, argued Bergengren, that children should not have their innocent amusement on a Sunday morning: the problem, he implied, was that many strips were either unsuitable for children or were not aimed at them at all. The responsibility lay with the editor, as a guardian of public cultural standards. Education, he suggested somewhat sarcastically, might offer a cure: ‘the average editor of the weekly comic supplement should be given a course in art, literature, common sense, and Christianity.’⁴⁷

Colin McCahon, *Crucifixion According to St. Mark*, 1947, oil on canvas, 800mm x 1095mm, Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery

It may be argued that the literary and cultural establishment’s trenchant critique of comics is another aspect of what John Carey has described as the intellectuals’ contempt for the masses: a disdain most clearly manifest in the various ‘difficulties’ for ready comprehension presented by modernist literature—and arguably art—which Carey positions as an anti-

⁴⁷ Ralph Bergengren, ‘The Humor of the Colored Supplement’, op.cit, p.273.

egalitarian gate-keeping device aimed at keeping the common people out of the high culture.⁴⁸ While the high culture policed its borders by making its expressions too difficult to understand without higher education, mass culture prevented potential defectors from leaving by rendering its expressions seductively easy to assimilate. (Queenie Leavis singled out Popular Book Clubs for particular derision, as ‘instruments not for improving taste but for standardising it at the middle brow level, thus preventing the natural progression of taste.’⁴⁹) Comic strips were therefore seen as a deliberately dumbed-down and inferior version of literature, rather than as an independent cultural form: their ultimate purpose was to entrap their readers at a base level of literacy in order that those readers continue to purchase more of the product. Their primary detractor, the American paediatric psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, whose book *Seduction of the Innocent* became an international best-seller in 1953 and was available in New Zealand, identified ‘comic book addicts’ among his young clients: ‘the comic book syndrome is a form of mental illness,’ he declared, authoritatively. Comic books threatened both moral standards and literary ones, he suggested, representing ‘a debasement of the old institution of printing, the corruption of the art of drawing and almost an abolition of literary writing.’⁵⁰ For Wertham, the problem of low-grade literacy within society could be directly attributed to the creeping influence of comic book style on regular publications. In short, on literary, moral, and mental health grounds, comics constituted a menace to civilised society.

Deliberate barriers to cultural and personal improvement, argued Queenie Leavis, whose disdain for popular literary tastes was palpable, were part of the machinery of mass culture, which actively formed and accentuated social stratification to its own ultimate financial benefit. ‘The newspaper, the cinema, and so on ... do in fact harden their public, not render it adaptable, conserve popular prejudice, not correct it, above all, induce attitudes which they may popularly exploit.’⁵¹ She warned that too great an exposure to the meretricious forms of popular culture would result in impatience with the less sensational unfoldings of the products of the high culture. (‘A taste formed on mannered prose at the journalist’s level is certain to find the classics of the language and the best contemporary literature insipid and dull.’⁵²) American-inflected popular culture was not only the result of the need of big

⁴⁸ See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, op.cit., 1992.

⁴⁹ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1932, p.229.

⁵⁰ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, op.cit., p.381.

⁵¹ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, op.cit., pp.228-9.

⁵² Ibid, p.228.

business to distract and pacify the working class in order to maximise profits, but, taken in excessive doses, could be harmful to one's intellectual and moral well-being. And nowhere was this view more firmly articulated than in the great moral panic against comics, which swept through England, Australia, Canada, America and New Zealand in the early 1950s.

The antipathy of New Zealand intellectuals towards the American 'comics menace'—which had informed a degree of the critical commentary circulating around McCahon's works of 1947 and 1948—had initially been kindled during the mid-1930s with the first importation of comic books. While the exigencies of World War II had suppressed the debate during the first half of the 1940s, the flame of public antagonism had flickered into life again in the late 1940s. By 1954, it had exploded into full-blown public outrage. Comics became the scapegoat for the new social problems of youth which were reported in the newspapers in salacious detail. Fredric Wertham's published opinions lent great weight to the opposition.⁵³ They formed the basis for the hearings of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954, which investigated the deleterious effects of comic books on youth behaviour. In speaking out against comics, Wertham wrote in *Time* magazine in 1948, 'we are getting to the roots of one of the contributing causes of juvenile delinquency. ... You cannot understand present-day juvenile delinquency if you do not take into account the pathogenic and pathoplastic influence of the comic books. In plainer language: comic books not only inspire evil but suggest a form for the evil to take.'⁵⁴

The form that comic book-induced 'evil' took in New Zealand was essentially different from the moral degradation that Wertham observed in New York City: New Zealand's delinquencies were predominantly sexual, rather than violent, in nature. After the war, local publishers had commonly circumvented import licensing restrictions by importing the American printing plates and printing the comics in New Zealand. Many of the American layouts contained advertising for sexual products, including lurid adverts for sexual technique manuals, and ones for contraceptives that focused in grim detail on the dangers of venereal disease. These advertisements were a major cause of objection towards comics by upholders

⁵³ A recently published paper by Carol L. Tilley details her research into the Wertham archives held at the Library of Congress. Closely comparing Wertham's case notes to corresponding passages in *Seduction of the Innocent*, Tilley provides specific examples in which Wertham 'manipulated, overstated, compromised, and fabricated evidence—especially that evidence he attributed to personal clinical research with young people—for rhetorical gain'. See Carol L. Tilley, 'Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics', *Information and Technology*, vol. 47, no.4, Nov-Dec 2012, pp.383-413.

⁵⁴ Fredric Wertham, 'Puddles of Blood', *Time*, 29 March 1948.

of community standards: '30 000 copies of magazine filth pollute New Zealand', bellowed a *Truth* headline in 1933.⁵⁵

While New Zealand never imported the lurid crime comics which had caused such disquiet in America—and which were the primary target of Wertham's attention—in any great numbers, by the early 1950s there was a general awareness among intellectuals and community leaders of the international debates around the comics menace. The supposed effects on children were of particular concern. (Other mass media presented similar problems: a Superman radio serial was withdrawn from further broadcast after an incident of wilful damage to several Māori portraits by Gottfried Lindauer at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1953; seven were stabbed through the eyes and mouth and one was slashed. A character in the radio programme had been ordered to damage pictures in 'a local art gallery of non-white people.' The issue was discussed at some length in Parliament.) Public criticism of comics via letters to the editor and complaints to authorities rose sharply following the transfer of the power to grant import licenses to the newly formed Board of Trade in 1950, which precipitated a flood of new American comic titles entering New Zealand. Further censorship measures were considered carefully, but dismissed: officials considered that the primary problem with comics was one of low moral tone rather than of direct inducement to criminal activity. But it was the conflation of comic books with juvenile delinquency of a sexual nature in 1954 that brought matters to a head.

Two of the most sensational national news stories of 1954 involved the role of popular culture in the delinquency of adolescents. In August of that year Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme were convicted of the murder of Parker's mother in the hills above Christchurch. Reportage of the trial detailed lurid aspects of the fantasy world the two girls had constructed around themselves, including their shared dream of going to Hollywood to direct the film version of the best-selling novels they would write; and hinted darkly at a sexual connection between the two. The evidence gripped the country in horrified fascination. When just a month later Hutt College secondary students became embroiled in a heated public scandal when they were discovered to be having sex after school in darkened movie theatres and on the banks of the Hutt River, it appeared as if the country were on a rapid downward slide to

⁵⁵ Roger Openshaw and Roy Shuker, A "Cahmics" Crisis Down Under: Comics and youth in early post-World War Two New Zealand', *British Review of New Zealand Studies*, no.4, November 1991, p.50.

outright moral depravity. In total 59 adolescent ‘bodgies’ and ‘widgies’, whose common meeting place was the Hutt Valley’s Elbe Milk Bar, were implicated in the teen sex scandal.

Colin McCahon, *The Valley of Dry Bones*, 1947, oil on canvas, 890mm x 870mm, Collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

In response to public concern, the government commissioned an inquiry into the ‘moral delinquency’ of children and teenagers, known as the Mazengarb Report, after its chair, the Wellington lawyer Dr O.C. Mazengarb. The committee found that causes of the decline in moral standards among young people were various, and included lack of supervision in the home due to the new phenomenon of working mothers; inflated wages paid to teenagers; a decline in church attendance; and the deleterious influence of American popular culture. In particular, the committee cited the harmful effects on impressionable minds of ‘objectionable publications’ (‘crime stories, tales of “intimate exciting romance”, and so-called “comics”’), popular films (including the publication of ‘Grossly Extravagant Posters and Newspaper

Advertisements in which sex and sadism are often featured'), broadcasting ('serials and suggestive love songs'), press advertising, and television (which was yet to be introduced to New Zealand, but the committee recommended that international research into its harmful effects be considered without delay). It was primarily the sexual content of the popular material that was believed to present the greatest danger. The report, which was distributed free of charge to every family in New Zealand currently receiving the Family Benefit payment, recommended that Parliament take immediate steps to legislate against all such noxious 'visual and auditory influences.'

Supporters of comics among New Zealand's intellectual circles were few. Novelist Bill Pearson felt that they represented a grave danger to society. His only novel, *Coal Flat*, featured several scenes exploring the social and emotional harm that comics caused in impressionable children.⁵⁶ 'If we ban the comics we are reducing the chances of war and preventing the further perversion of the world's children,' Pearson argued in a letter published in *Landfall* in 1955.⁵⁷ A.R.D. Fairburn agreed, suggesting that the harmful effects of comics on children were akin to the government dispensing free methylated spirits rather than free milk in schools.⁵⁸ One of the very few dissenting voices in the comics war was Margaret Dalziel, later Professor of English at Otago University, who wrote a considered piece for *Landfall* in 1955 which challenged—within the New Zealand context—many of the assumptions made by the authors of the Mazengarb Report and by Fredric Wertham.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ A characteristic passage features lurid descriptions of the comic's violent and exaggerated imagery. 'Peter Herlihy brought some luridly coloured comics to school. They were published in Australia, but the spelling of the words in the balloons suggested they might have been drawn in America. Rogers asked Peter if he could borrow them because he wanted to know what Peter was reading. Not that he could read the words; he stared at the pictures and built his own interpretation out of them. Rogers was horrified when he studied them. There were close-ups of a rope tightening round the neck of a hanging man, of the neck of a criminal being strangled; in every second panel a button-nosed man with a small head and unnaturally thick neck (reminding one of the extinct saurians with their thick necks and peanut-sized brains) was brandishing a gun or launching out with a fist like a ham. There was a story of a jungle girl, a ferocious young woman with a Hollywood hair-do, who wore a leopard-skin and swung from tree to tree, and owned a troop of pygmy slaves around whom periodically she capriciously wrapped a long whip.

'Why do you read these?' he said to Peter.

'Cause they're good. They're exciting.'

'If you'd learn to read properly you could read better books.'

Bill Pearson, *Coal Flat*, Auckland: Paul's Book Arcade, 1963. Although published in 1963, *Coal Flat* was written in London during the early 1950s at the same time he wrote his essay on the New Zealand character, 'Fretful Sleepers'; and it was set in 1947, at the same time that McCahon was painting his speech bubble paintings.

⁵⁷ Bill Pearson, 'Correspondence', *Landfall*, March, 1955, p.97.

⁵⁸ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Is the Penny Dreadful a Menace?', ZB Citizen's Forum, Radio New Zealand, c.1954. Other speakers included John A. Lee and Miss M. Peat from the Children's section of the [Auckland] Public Library.

⁵⁹ Margaret Dalziel, 'Comics in New Zealand', *Landfall*, March 1955, pp.41-70.

While acknowledging the ubiquity of comics in the lives of New Zealand children, Dalziel found that—against popular belief—no horror comics were stocked by any of the 50 bookshops she visited in Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin in 1954.⁶⁰ She also cited the evidence of a questionnaire sent to a number of intermediate schools throughout New Zealand, which elicited a response from 1638 children concerning their reading tastes. Responses were correlated against the child's reported IQ scores and their father's occupation; a preference for books over comics was linked to reported higher intelligence, but not, to her surprise, to higher socio-economic status. Dalziel found that although most children who took part in the survey preferred to read books, Walt Disney comics constituted the most popular comic book reading material among New Zealand children. She commented dryly that 'the New Zealand child of intermediate school age, if he reads comics at all, prefers as a rule those that are least likely to deprave him.'⁶¹ She concluded that the survey confirmed 'what most thoughtful people believe, that evidence of the direct influence of literature on behaviour is very scanty and uncertain', and suggested that it was the job of modern school teachers to lead children from an initial observed interest in comics towards more serious literature. But public opinion had set hard. The comics menace, initially perceived by intellectuals as a threat to literary standards and the furtherance of a civilised society—an inferior form of populist American literature that undermined the high cultural British tradition—was by the mid-1950s generally believed to be a causal factor in youth crime and depravity. Comic books created a culture of illiteracy; an imaginary confluence of barbaric readers who had, as Wystan Curnow later put it, 'escaped the custody of language.'⁶² The public demonization of American popular culture in New Zealand had reached its zenith.

The next generation saw things differently. Wystan Curnow identified the shift in New Zealand high-cultural attitudes to comics in 'Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles', an

⁶⁰ When Wystan Curnow asked Bill Pearson which comics he had been thinking of when he wrote *Coal Flat*, he said that he had the American comics in mind that he'd seen in London. 'The description of the COAL FLAT comics as "luridly coloured" bears him out, since the Australian reprints which came here were not in fact coloured but black and white. So it is extremely unlikely that "sadistic sex comics" or anything like them were being peddled to primary school children by local stationers in small town New Zealand in 1947. They are a figment of Pearson's imagination we might say, and a reflection of his brand of liberal moralism.' Wystan Curnow, 'Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles', *And*, no.4, October 1985., pp.136-7.

⁶¹ Margaret Dalziel, *op.cit*, p.65.

⁶² Wystan Curnow, 'Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles', *And*, no.4, October 1985., p.141.

important article published in *And*, the ‘four-issue avant-garde magazine ... which brought pesky ‘theory’ to New Zealand and its literature and created some genuine consternation.’⁶³ Writing ‘on comics’ behalf’, and about contemporary painting and fiction ‘which seems somehow lost in its admiration for them’, Curnow observed that ‘when we were young, in the 1940s and 1950s popular culture ... was in a different relation to high culture ... than it is today.’⁶⁴

He was speaking to and on behalf of his generation, the war babies and early Baby Boomers, for whom there had been a distinct thawing of the hostilities between the high and the mass that had existed at mid-century. There had also been a reorientation away from high-modernist British criticism towards progressive American thought. This was a trend that had begun, arguably, with McCahon’s three-month study tour of American galleries in 1958 and the consequent shift in direction of his work; an event which Peter Simpson has argued represented a shock that ‘registered on the cultural seismograph of the nation.’⁶⁵ It signified the beginning of a cultural reorientation for New Zealand artists working at the highest levels of culture away from London and towards America. (This reorientation necessarily reflected the shift in the balance of global power and wealth from Britain to the US in the years after World War II.) Wystan Curnow, who had studied at postgraduate level in America in the early 1960s, commented to Roger Horrocks that ‘Oxbridge felt like finishing school to me. In America it seemed like avant-garde culture and the best of popular culture fed off each other and put the squeeze on the uncivilised middle.’⁶⁶ Curnow and his associates at the University of Auckland operated with first-hand knowledge of developments in contemporary American criticism and arts. American culture was no longer something for intellectuals to guard against, but instead to be in conversation with. (Bill Pearson suggested that New Zealanders had in fact regarded popular American culture in a positive light as early as 1960. ‘It is not

⁶³ Wystan Curnow, ‘Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles’, *And*, no.4, October 1985, pp.128-46. Curnow’s description of *And* featured in Wystan Curnow, ‘The Something Startled Rise of Birds: A Tribute to Leigh Davis, 1955-2009’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, Spring 2009, p.17. Leigh Davis and Alex Calder were the founders of *And*.

⁶⁴ Wystan Curnow, ‘Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles’, op.cit., p.126.

⁶⁵ Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon The Titirangi Years*, op.cit., p.72. See Tony Green, ‘McCahon’s Visit to the United States: A Reading of Letters and Lecture Notes’, *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, vol. 3, 1975, pp.19-42.

⁶⁶ ‘Interview: Roger Horrocks and friends talk to Wystan Curnow’, *Landfall*, no.177, vol.45, March 1991, p.11. Curnow commented that his concept of American literature as the first ‘post-colonial’ literature in English had been a factor in his choice to study there.

generally true,' he wrote, 'that pakeha New Zealanders think that American culture and public tastes are inferior.'⁶⁷)

The new comic-inflected high-cultural works identified by Curnow—among them paintings by Dick Frizzell, and texts by C.K. Stead and Ian Wedde—were produced by a generation of people who had grown up after the war and who had experienced the counter-culture movement of the late 1960s. They had an entirely different relationship to American culture than the generation before them; rather than signifying a decline in civilised standards and the advance of the mechanised horrors of mass production, their 'symbolic America' was a land of the liberated subject, the location of *Easy Rider* and Haight Ashbury and Bob Dylan and *On the Road*, of Black American rhythms and John Coltrane and Jackson Pollock and Wallace Stevens and Frank O'Hara and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. Many New Zealanders born after the War had grown up thinking of contemporary American popular culture as attractive and slightly exotic, due to New Zealand's import restrictions on the one hand and its persistent high cultural preference for Britain and the Commonwealth on the other.⁶⁸ This was a generation dissatisfied with the conventionality of the common culture and resentful of the social restrictions of what Chris Wheeler, editor of the infamous Wellington-based underground magazine *Cock*, described as 'old, grey, warmongering, RSA, Keith Holyoake New Zealand.'⁶⁹ And one of the ways in which they signalled their cultural and philosophical difference was by the incorporation of the representations of popular culture, including comics, in their arts and letters.

Following McCahon's experiments of the late 1940s, comics had reappeared in New Zealand art in the early 1970s. Philip Clairmont's *Self Portrait* (1972) and *Study for Mururoa on my mind* (1973) both incorporate cells from comic strips pasted directly on to the painted image. Jim and Mary Barr have pointed out that Clairmont's incorporation of Disney comics into his

⁶⁷ Bill Pearson, 'An American Looks at New Zealand', in *Fretful Sleepers and Other Essays*, Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974. (Originally published in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, December 1960, as a review of David P. Ausubel's *The Fern and the Tiki*, 1960.)

⁶⁸ Bill Manhire describes reading American poetry in New Zealand as engendering a 'mild defiance, a private excitement'. He notes that 'American poetry was hard to come by, too. You might have to send away for it, just like a Phantom ring.' See Bill Manhire, 'Breaking the Line: A View of American and New Zealand Poetry', *Islands*, no.38, December 1987, pp.142-54.

⁶⁹ Chris Wheeler, quoted in Toby Boraman, *Rabble Rousers and Merry Pranksters: A History of Anarchism in Aotearoa/New Zealand from the mid 1950s to the early 1980s*. Christchurch and Wellington: Katipo Books and Irrecuperable Press, 2007, p.33.

self portraits would have been read, by fellow hippies and freaks⁷⁰ in the early 1970s as deeply ironic.⁷¹ Disney comics were regarded by young, politically-aware people as the publications of the capitalist establishment, pre-packaged popular culture that reinforced the dominant values of society, which the counterculture of the late 1960s sought to overthrow. In the local (and US-produced) underground comix which circulated around Clairmont and his artist friends, characters like Donald Duck or Captain America or Superman were commonly subverted and reworked to 'infamous ends'. While the birth of underground comix is generally identified with San Francisco artist Robert Crumb's self-publication of the first of his *Zap Comix* in Spring 1968, the ground-level impetus for the movement had begun a few years earlier in the pages of university and college magazines. New Zealand musician and comic artist Chris Knox commented that the underground comix were drawn by individuals who wanted to get back to the old single artist/writer form of the early days of the comic strip; by artists who demanded complete artistic freedom and no censorship in their work.⁷² Characterised by absurdist humour, graphic portrayals of drug-taking, sex and violence, and frequently unremitting sexism, the underground comix were conceived as the antithesis of mainstream comic books and strips, and were designed to strike a blow at the values of the establishment while being addressed to the countercultural readership. While comic historians Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs, writing in 1972, suggested that the designation 'underground' was essentially misleading, as the comix were not produced under 'genuine' conditions of oppression,⁷³ revolution was in the air as the counterculture figured itself to be marginalised by and at war with the repressive nature of mainstream society. The underground publications both challenged that repression and were, at times, subject to it. Several publications featuring explicit instructions for drug taking and urban terrorism were banned at around this time by the Indecent Publications Tribunal, the forerunner to New Zealand's Office of Film and Literature Classification. In the culture wars of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the publications of the 'underground' were an important site of resistance and transgression.

⁷⁰ In writing about Clairmont, Martin Edmond was careful to identify him as a freak, rather than a hippy, a cultural distinction insisted upon by musician Frank Zappa. "Hippies were tribal, conformist, idealistic, quietist, frequently rural; freaks were individualistic, politically active, city-based, confrontational. Freaks would walk on the wild side in the cause of transformation of self and society." Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont*. Auckland University Press, 1999, p.124.

⁷¹ Jim Barr and Mary Barr. *Philip Clairmont*. Wanganui: Sarjeant Art Gallery, 1987, p.26.

⁷² Chris Knox, 'Out of the Underground', *New Zealand Listener*, 8 April 1989, p.32.

⁷³ Reinhold Reitberger and Wolfgang Fuchs. *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*. London: Studio Vista, 1972, p. 219.

A decade later, low-tech high-cultural critical publications like *And* added another layer of complexity to the history of such countercultural productions, using mass culture to signal a point of difference from orthodox academia. Leonard Wilcox described *And* (and another postmodernist journal, *Splash*) as ‘self-consciously kitsch ... articles are interspersed with cartoons and comic strip images, and covers feature images from grade B Hollywood westerns of the thirties and forties,’ noting that theirs was an American version of postmodernism.⁷⁴ ‘Mass-produced on the University of Auckland English Department’s photocopy machine’, *And* had a circulation of about 100. It aimed to convoke its readership of younger and more progressive scholars into a form of community, in order to question orthodoxies of mainstream modernist criticism in New Zealand. (In the New Zealand art-historical tradition, this was manifest in the belief that the land was the basis of the national tradition; and that the task of landscape artists was to capture the ‘real’ New Zealand and hence the identity of the place.⁷⁵) *And* was concerned with injecting a new critical rigour into local cultural scholarship. Effectively, *And* trained a postmodernist lens on New Zealand culture, part of a groundswell of new theoretical enquiry into the old nationalist givens that, in Tina Barton’s account of postmodernist discourse in New Zealand, sought to ‘self-consciously negotiate that border territory between representation and reality.’ In local postmodernist practice, she stated, ‘an authentic identity is neither sought nor contested. Instead “identities” are examined and disrupted, unsettling any easy reading of culture, foregrounding the ways in which visual and written representations have contributed to a construction of identity.’⁷⁶ In the new postmodernist mode of thought, popular culture as much as high culture would produce representations that admitted scholarly enquiry by artists and by critics.

In ‘Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles’, as part of a broader project with Roger Horrocks Curnow laid the ground for a local history of response to comics by artists and writers, beginning in the early 1950s with Bill Pearson and the comics menace. He observes that although some critics in the 1960s affected to see McCahon’s late 1940s paintings as an early rogue form of Pop art, the essential difference lay in the fact that while Warhol and Lichtenstein assumed the style of comic book *artists*, McCahon’s usage was that of a *reader*,

⁷⁴ Leonard Wilcox, ‘Postmodernism or Anti-modernism?’, *Landfall*, September 1985, p.349.

⁷⁵ These tropes of New Zealand art history were effectively refuted by Francis Pound in his revisionist history of the New Zealand landscape, *Frames on the Land*, Auckland: Collins, 1983.

⁷⁶ Christina Barton. ‘Framing the Real: Postmodern discourses in recent New Zealand art’, in *Headlands*, op. cit., p.179.

unconcerned with the critical issue of reproduction.⁷⁷ While Pop artists explored the aesthetics which arose from comic books' mass reproduction—flatness, surface, Ben-Day screen dots—McCahon was concerned with the potential of communication using their significant forms, including speech bubbles and internal cells let into larger images. Curnow considers that comics function in McCahon's work as 'a form of "cultural innocence"',⁷⁸; a notion which might therefore, be tied to the trope of 'authenticity' at mid-century.

Curnow also noted that in his biography of McCahon published the previous year, Gordon H. Brown seemed largely to avoid the question of comics in his discussion of McCahon's religious works of the 1940s, mentioning them only briefly with other visual precedents for the works including Fra Angelico and the Sienese 'primitives', and thus according 'art historical respectability to features of the works which disturbed many on their first showing in Christchurch in late 1947.' Questioning whether the paintings actually 'want that sort of defence', Curnow comments that while 'the works are certainly about, or after other art ... they're as much about low as about high.' He also observes that Fairburn's 'celestial lavatory' critique did at least register the *vulgarity* of the work; 'a vulgarity which for some bordered on the blasphemous'.⁷⁹ Curnow's comments underline the shift in the position of popular culture by the mid-1980s: the mixing of separate regimes of imagery is no longer automatically considered vulgar; or if it is registered as vulgar, this is not automatically pejorative and suggests, instead, something to be explored rather than silenced or passed over.

Curnow suggested that what the new works of the early 1980s that referenced comics had in common was a dislike of *high seriousness*, which was particularly manifest in an opening up towards popular culture. In the writings of Stead and Wedde, argued Curnow, and in Frizzell's paintings, signs of popular culture—particularly comics—functioned as a form of 'counter-culture moralism' which privileged 'voice before style.' In particular, Wedde's use of a casual, 'natural' voice represents a deliberate rejection of style. Wedde's is a formulation in which Curnow notes style is suggestive of 'co-option, selling out.'⁸⁰ In his introduction to the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, published earlier that year, Wedde had discussed a shift that he had observed in the flow of language in poetry of the 1960s and 1970s from the

⁷⁷ Wystan Curnow, 'Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles', op.cit., p.141.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.141.

⁷⁹ Wystan Curnow, ibid, p.140.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.129-30.

hieratic to the demotic, whereby the demotic is ‘language with a spoken base, adaptable and more exploratory codes, and a “lower” and more inclusive social threshold’, and ‘the “hieratic” describes language that is received, self-referential, encoded *elect*, with a “high” social threshold emphasising cultural and historical continuity.’⁸¹ Wedde’s use of—and advocacy for—the demotic thus offers a challenge to the hieratic voice of the high, and Curnow is clearly conscious of the political implications of Wedde’s everyday mode of address. ‘There’s the suggestion that language (is it lethal?) acts like a member of the oppressor class when it puts on the style,’ he observes.

The traces of common and popular culture in the works—Curnow remarks on the presence of Batman, Bob Dylan, trailer sailors, and Mt Crawford prison, in just one poem by Wedde, ‘Tales of Gotham City’—are signs of the everyday; the presumed intent of the works is to draw upon, and arguably to represent, contemporary lived experience. Curnow’s inference is that such works are fundamentally *representational*: he stakes out his position by stating that ‘I am writing in resistance to a realist art’. When Curnow concludes that the deliberate superficiality of such works was, in fact, ‘a standard sort of cover-up for depth’⁸², his words recall Bill Pearson’s observations on the way that young New Zealanders of the 1940s and 1950s adopted popular catch-phrases out of a ‘craving for protective camouflage.’⁸³ The similarity between the two contexts is instructive. Whereas Pearson’s self-mocking quoters used superficial everyday language to disguise their fear of emotional depth, Curnow considers that the writers and artists with whom he is concerned use the shallow as camouflage for the fact that they are actually concerned with the deep. Their quotation of popular culture is a feint, a distraction. He proposes that fellow critics including Alistair Paterson, Michael Morrissey and Francis Pound ‘have moved a number of New Zealand painters and writers into “advanced” positions for which they do not, in my opinion, qualify.’ He states that the work under consideration ‘differs clearly from postmodernism,’ and detects in it instead the presence of a ‘kind of laid back modernism’, which, although different from the earlier ‘expressive realism’ of Bill Pearson and the ‘apocalyptic modernism’ of McCahon, yet nevertheless remained committed ‘to the myths of depth and the self.’⁸⁴ It is the quality of representation that he detects in the work—their use of popular culture as a report on

⁸¹ Ian Wedde, ‘Introduction’, in Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen (eds.), *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, Auckland: Penguin Books, 1985, p.25. Wedde borrowed from Northrop Frye’s descriptions, set out in *The Well Tempered Critic*, Indiana University Press, 1963.

⁸² Wystan Curnow, ‘Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles’, op.cit., p.147.

⁸³ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.213.

⁸⁴ Wystan Curnow, ‘Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles’, op.cit., p.126.

experience, as a mark of personal ‘authenticity’—which essentially marks their work as part of the Romantic tradition and prevents it from being postmodern.

Is there the faintest echo of Fairburn-on-McCahon in Curnow’s critical dismissal of the three artists and writers from the avant-garde role which other critics had marked out for them?⁸⁵ Perhaps; though Wedde had arguably done much the same in his ‘Introduction’ when he wrote about the ‘atrophy’ of the ‘will-to-language’ in contemporary poetry, and certain ‘derivative’ developments out of American modernism.⁸⁶ Their historical differences are more instructive. While Fairburn’s writings suggest the role of the high-modernist critic as that of a cultural gate-keeper, concerned primarily with the defence of the high culture from philistine incursions and the policing of internal standards—hard at work mucking out the Augean stables of culture, as Morse Peckham had it—Curnow and Wedde, along with other contemporary critics, might be regarded more as boundary-riders, marking out the edges of critical territory, pushing into uncharted areas, expertly dividing cultural stock into typologies.⁸⁷

It should be evident that no critic has sole power to command the culture. Even more so than in the late 1940s, the territorial boundaries of high-cultural enquiry marked out by the new cultural critics of the 1980s were not fixed or generally agreed upon, and were instead essentially porous and provisional, in a constant process of being drawn and redrawn, of categorised and contested. While, by the mid-1980s, popular culture and American orientation were largely uncontested elements within poetry and visual art, the high-cultural territory itself was under almost constant contestation, by holders (and opponents) of a diverse range of theoretical-critical positions. There was a tendency to see oppositional critical perspectives as prescriptive, and to react accordingly. ‘No doubt the custard pies will keep flying’, wrote Bill Manhire in 1974, when reviewing Curnow’s *Essays on New Zealand Literature*: they were lobbed back and forth at a steady rate over the next decade.⁸⁸ Amid the

⁸⁵ Curnow commented that instead they represented ‘one of the more lively aspects of the mainstream New Zealand literature and art.’ Ibid, p.126.

⁸⁶ Ian Wedde, ‘Introduction’, in Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen (eds.), *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, op.cit., p.25.

⁸⁷ Morse Peckham, *Man’s Rage for Chaos*, op. cit., p.312.

⁸⁸ See Roger Horrocks, ‘No Theory Permitted On These Premises’, *And*, no.2, 1984, pp.134-6, for a lively account of the ‘custard pies’ thrown by various critics over the introduction of ‘theory’ to New Zealand literature. Manhire’s quotation comes from ‘High Culture in a Recent Anthology’, *Islands*, 1974, vol.3, no.2, pp.227-8.

new positions and referents of this critical contestation, the old tension between 'elitism' and the 'everyday', reframed in the arguments over poetry in the 1980s as the 'hieratic' and 'demotic', continued to simmer.

VIII: Dwelling on Failure: ‘The Provincial and the Vulgar’

Elitism in art and philistinism are the twins of taste in the industrial society; they depend on each other like Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Bernard Smith⁸⁹

The sense that something is *missing* in New Zealand culture—that cultural life in New Zealand is characterised by an essential *lack*, or *loss*, whether it be the problem of access to original works of art from the western canon, or by the proper development of robust criticism, or the establishment of a community of poets, or an adequate buffer between art and life, or private patronage on a scale which enables higher thought, or by the culture’s inability to recognise and articulate itself, or simply by the absence of sufficient history within which to establish cultural traditions—has been a constant refrain of this country’s high cultural critics.

A.R.D. Fairburn was horribly conscious of it. Much of his criticism of the 1930s and 1940s was concerned with the structures that would be necessary to create a vigorous and rigorously high-minded cultural life where there was as yet none of substance. In 1973, when Wystan Curnow evaluated the effect of the rapid creation of New Zealand’s high culture after the war—the cultural establishment built by Fairburn’s generation, including Wystan Curnow’s father, the poet Allen Curnow—he characterised it by its thinness; its requirement for versatility rather than specialisation; its lack of depth. What was missing was an ‘aesthetic attitude’, a strategy that explicitly declared a commitment to innovation and to the furtherance of the high culture.⁹⁰ Reviewing Curnow’s ‘High Culture in a Small Province’ the following year, Bill Manhire noted that Curnow examined ‘New Zealand society *in the light of its failure to develop or sustain a cultural elite*.’⁹¹ The versatility and amateurism demanded by broader New Zealand society were, in Curnow’s view, among the chief

⁸⁹ Bernard Smith, ‘Notes on Elitism and the Arts’ (1975), in *Death of the Artist as Hero: Essays in History and Culture*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988.

⁹⁰ Wystan Curnow, ‘High Culture in a Small Province’, in Wystan Curnow (ed.), *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, Auckland: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973, p.170.

⁹¹ Bill Manhire, ‘High Culture in a Recent Anthology’, op.cit., pp.227. My emphasis.

inhibiting factors on the development of the nation's high culture. Judged by external standards, New Zealand high culture was a failure.

At mid-century, the idea of absence permeated New Zealand vanguard literature, vesting narratives of inarticulateness and absence in the landscape. The land is 'silent', the plains are 'nameless', the cities 'cry for meaning'⁹²; the land is 'a lump without leaven, a body that has no nerves'⁹³; the nation is 'a land of settlers with never a soul at home'⁹⁴, whose political leaders 'Vogel and Seddon [howl] empire from an empty coast'.⁹⁵ Similarly, in the visual arts of the same period the land is portrayed as an empty place; increasingly marked by signs of modernity such as power poles and railway tracks, but largely absent of people and of history. Until McCahon painted himself and his biblical groups in the Nelson landscape in the late 1940s, the unidentified man in the suit sitting on the railway platform in Rita Angus's *Cass* (1936) was one of the very few figures to appear in a 20th-century New Zealand landscape painting. There are few paintings of cities, and fewer still of crowds and urban life; Evelyn Page's *Christchurch Gothic* (1945) is a rare exception. Absence was one of the fundamental conditions, and problems, of New Zealand culture. But it implied a temporary state; at some future point of history, undefined, the emptiness of the New Zealand landscape would be filled with the cultural histories and local traditions of its settlers. (As Allen Curnow wrote in 1943, 'Not I, some child born in a marvellous year, / will learn the trick of standing upright here.'⁹⁶) History would provide a remedy for the failures of the emergent culture; and that there was a problem in need of remedial solution became one of the orthodoxies of the high culture. Writing as 'James Flaxbush', wrestling with the problem of whether or not to leave New Zealand for more congenial conditions overseas, Christchurch writer Bob Gormack satirised the high-cultural trope of New Zealand emptiness in 1948:

Reading the Caxton Press poets has taught me this much: that here, in New Zealand, I can never hope to express myself to my entire satisfaction. There is nothing here, or at least, not enough—not enough of the deep, essential things. Here, there is only a lack and an emptiness, a ghastly human barrenness that seems to oppress me more and more every day.⁹⁷

⁹² Charles Brasch, 'The Silent Land', 1945.

⁹³ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'I'm Older Than You, Please Listen', 1941.

⁹⁴ Allen Curnow, 'House and Land', 1941.

⁹⁵ Allen Curnow, 'The Unhistoric Story', 1941.

⁹⁶ Allen Curnow, 'The Skeleton of the Giant Moa at Canterbury Museum' (1943), in Vincent O'Sullivan (ed.), *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry*. Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1979..

⁹⁷ R.S. Gormack (as 'James Flatbush'), 'Specimen Days in New Zealand', Bookie, Christchurch: The Nag's Head Press, no.1, 1948, p.60.

Gormack was a craftsman printer whose Raven Press was, in many ways, the poor relation of the Caxton Press: while the Caxtonians produced an edition of Milton's *Areopagitica* in opposition to war-time censorship, Gormack was printing illegal anti-conscription pamphlets for the No More War movement.⁹⁸ Although the Raven Press made its income largely from printing graph papers (not betting slips, as was later suggested), it also published facsimiles of historical documents, literary works by well-known Christchurch writers, and a series of richly eccentric titles including art critic John Summers's novellas written entirely in Lowland Scots dialect, and obscurities such as *Pioneers in protest: No gains without drains, being letters, mainly of complaint, culled from the archives of the Christchurch City Council*. Before he sold the Raven Press in 1948, Gormack published three volumes of his own satirical fiction. The first, entitled *Bookie: A New Miscellany*, was a deliberate play on the Caxton Press's occasional literary miscellany, *Book*, to which Fairburn was a frequent contributor. It purported to contain extracts from the unpublished journals of a promising young writer who suffered from 'mal de New Zealand', but was in fact an elaborate and thinly disguised satire on the affectations and enthusiasms of the Caxton poets and other cultural nationalists.⁹⁹ 'The Caxtonians,' Gormack later wrote, 'though deservedly in receipt of all the publishing kudos going at the time, had, at least in the view of an outsider, become a little schoolish, monopolistic, and even intellectually overbearing, i.e. disparaging of the nation's rugby, racing and beer image'.¹⁰⁰

Directed at what Gormack perceived to be the 'cultural hegemony of the Caxton Press', *Bookie* drew on the lowbrow culture of the racetrack (albeit, as Noel Waite has pointed out, a culture with insiders and outsiders just like the milieu of art and literature) as an antithesis to the elitism of the high culture.¹⁰¹ Much as rugby might figure to today's aesthetes, the racetrack epitomised a kind of boorish, commercialised, lowest-common social denominator for the cultural nationalist generation, and frequently figured as a symbol of the lowbrow in

⁹⁸ See Noel Waite's penetrating essay on the publications of Bob Gormack, 'The Byron of Burnside and the Nag's Head Press', in *A Book in the Hand: Essays on the History of the Book in New Zealand*, eds. Penny Griffith, Peter Hughes and Alan Loney. Auckland University Press, 2000, pp.188-200.

⁹⁹ The Caxton Press's concern for typographical quality and printing standards, for example, were gently mocked by Gormack in such passages as this supposed 'Printer's Note' from *Bookie*: 'As I worked on this job I could not help thinking, with some pride, of the humble contribution I was making to New Zealand literature. Such things are worth-while! I am a representative of the working class and I can say so without, I hope, any trace of sentimentality. There can be no comparison between doing work of this kind and ordinary, commercial printing jobs. Work of this nature makes one feel an individual, a craftsman. One becomes conscious of one's soul.' [R.S. Gormack], *Bookie: A New Miscellany*. Christchurch: Nag's Head Press, 1948, p.48.

¹⁰⁰ R.S. Gormack, *The Nag's Head Press: An outline history and descriptive checklist of publications to June 1992*, Christchurch: Nag's Head Press, 1992, p.23.

¹⁰¹ Noel Waite, *op.cit.*, p.189.

their writings. Historian E.A. Olssen's description of the state of religious expression in contemporary New Zealand society as one in which 'Derby Day and the dog track play their parts' has already been mentioned; and likewise Bill Pearson communicated his view of comic books as a low and primitive form of literature by describing them as read by 'children and jockeys'.¹⁰² In discussing the spiritual and emotional shortcomings of New Zealand society, Pearson described the sensation of *stalling* he felt in public bars on a Saturday afternoon, coming upon 'a huddle of urgent men proofing the void with the saga of Highland Prince, greasing the unknown with a bookie's pencil.'¹⁰³ Although many cultural pursuits were abandoned during the war years, race meetings continued. British novelist Anna Kavan complained that during the two years she spent in New Zealand in the early 1940s high culture was conspicuous by its absence; there was nothing at all to do during the weekend, except go to the pub or the cinema, or if a meeting was on, to the races.¹⁰⁴ In Gormack's good-humoured yet mercilessly well-aimed satire, the racetrack is a metaphorical circuit of tension between the intellectuals and everyone else; part of the 'authentic' national culture of everyday life—along with the signwriting and the football and the advertising—that McCahon identified in his letter to John Caselberg in 1951.

Arguably, the drive to establish a critical tradition of representation of New Zealand culture—the 'invention' of New Zealand, as Allen Curnow referred to it in 1945¹⁰⁵—was as much a pragmatic response to the need to retain artists and writers in New Zealand as it was a symbolic project to fill the void of the unwritten landscape.¹⁰⁶ The symbolic emptiness of the land was a symptomatology of the high culture's lack of visibility and affect. Before World War II, many of New Zealand's major writers and intellectuals and artists had gone overseas,

¹⁰² E. A. Olssen, 'On the Conditions of Culture', op.cit., p.209. Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers', op.cit., p.225.

¹⁰³ Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers', op.cit., p.227.

¹⁰⁴ Kavan wrote; 'Everything's shut ... No music, no theatres, no pictures except an occasional exhibition of local talent, no magazines of what's termed cultural interest.' Anna Kavan, 'New Zealand: Answer to an Inquiry' (1943), in Jennifer Sturm (ed.) *Anna Kavan's New Zealand: A Pacific interlude in a turbulent life*. Auckland: Vintage, 2009, p.256.

¹⁰⁵ Allen Curnow, in 'A Dialogue by Way of Introduction: Speakers Allen Curnow and Ngaio Marsh', op.cit., p.2. The full quotation is: 'Strictly speaking, New Zealand doesn't exist yet, though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and on some canvases. It remains to be created—should I say invented—by writers, musicians, artists, architects, publishers; even a politician might help...'

¹⁰⁶ As Stuart McKenzie and Robert Leonard note, the contention that the land was silent—and the implication that the cultural nationalists would be its first speakers—was particularly surprising when one considered that firstly, 'New Zealand was still buzzing from the 1940s Centennial celebrations', and secondly that it had been 'populated by an indigenous people with a language and culture peculiar to this place for a thousand years before the arrival of the Pakeha. For Maori, this was not a silent land.' Robert Leonard and Stuart McKenzie. 'Pathetic Projections: Wilfulness in the Wilderness, *Antic*, no.5, June 1989, p.37, note.2. Allen Curnow's inclusion of traditional Māori poetry (in translation) in his *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960) sought to address this omission.

most never to return. There was nothing much for them here—no audience of substance, no informed criticism, no real market for their works—and so they left. (As Bob Gormack writing as ‘James Flatbush’ bemoaned: ‘Here, if a creative act occurs, there is no one to notice it—that is the bitter truth.’¹⁰⁷) Anna Kavan, visiting during the war years, described the stultifying quietness of New Zealand towns and cities:

There’s a sort of provincial Sunday afternoon feel in the air. The air still, and full of the Sunday smell of roast mutton. The streets empty. The anti-alcohol slogans of the wowsers outside the churches. The bungalows full of the scent of roast meat and the hushed drone of music from radios. Yesterday’s papers flap in the gutters like hooked flounders.¹⁰⁸

The development of the apparatus of the high culture after World War II—the founding of the literary journals, the national orchestra, the state literary fund, the expansion of the National Film Unit, the establishment of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, the first opera company and the national ballet in the early 1950s, and the dissolution of the federal structure of New Zealand universities in 1961 which subsequently allowed the metropolitan universities to confer their own degrees—was a direct result of the cultural nationalist generation’s desire to raise the standards of intellectual life and professionalise culture in New Zealand. The structures they built were based on those of British high culture; the intent was to create the necessary conditions for the production of imaginative excellence in New Zealand. (One of those necessary conditions was the reduction in power wielded by the amateur gatekeepers of culture—the older generation of ‘bookmen’—who had held sway over New Zealand culture during the 1930s.) The need to develop the audience for high culture was perceived from the start. Through articles in the *Listener* and other mass-circulation magazines, Fairburn and other cultural critics attempted to engage in a dialogue with the reading public in regards to the role of the high culture in broader society. Fairburn clearly regarded the development of the high culture—both high cultural infrastructure and artistic production—as a self-improvement project for the nation as a whole. The establishment of high culture in New Zealand is thus almost exactly synchronous with the symbolic ‘invention’ of New Zealand culture by the mid-century writers and artists. They are two aspects of a critical project to raise the moral and intellectual tone of the nation, as well as to articulate its ‘authentic’ culture.

¹⁰⁷ R.S. Gormack (‘James Flatbush’), ‘Specimen Days in New Zealand’, op.cit., p.60.

¹⁰⁸ Anna Kavan, ‘New Zealand: Answer to an Inquiry’, op.cit., p.255.

While the identification of a common enemy in the ‘Philistines’ of the common culture had served in part to convoke the high culture in the late 1940s, by 1956 Fairburn indicated that the threat posed by the ‘infidels’—his term—might have receded. ‘Some of our number,’ he wrote in his long essay on the state of the arts in New Zealand, ‘The Culture Industry’, with a recent newspaper report in front of him showing greatly increased public participation in the arts, ‘see evidence of a change of heart, of an increasing [public] concern about aesthetics.’¹⁰⁹ Fairburn himself appeared not entirely convinced, cautioning that better educational strategies still needed to be put in place, beginning with design and working up to the fine arts when a sufficient foundation of education in taste had been laid down. But by that point his main focus had shifted away from the perils of cultural democracy and towards the ‘dangerous development’ of New Zealand’s state patronage of the arts. (‘Certainly any artist who gives positive encouragement to State expenditure on the arts—especially to certain forms of it—is asking for a collar and chain. For State subsidies mean some measure of State control sooner or later, however much disguised it may be,’ he warned.¹¹⁰) Whereas ten years earlier he had expostulated against the ‘treachery’ of artists working for big business, Fairburn now drew attention to a new form of ‘*le trahison des clercs*—the willingness of so many artists, writers and intellectuals to allow themselves to be sealed off in a sort of “aesthetic world” from the general processes of society, and to become a charge on the State.’¹¹¹ It was the concern about being ‘too high’ for New Zealand culture, again; but this time the problem was with the younger generation, those likely to benefit the most from the state’s cultural largesse, which Fairburn regarded as an invidious form of cultural welfarism: ‘Among the younger writers the soup-kitchen mentality is strongly in evidence.’¹¹² The only form of income that did not involve political or aesthetic compromise for the artist, in Fairburn’s argument, was private patronage.

Twenty-five years after publishing his critical analysis of the structural problems besetting vanguard culture in New Zealand, ‘High Culture in a Small Province’, Wystan Curnow revisited the topic as the century drew to a close and produced a new ‘manifesto’, ‘High

¹⁰⁹ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘The Culture Industry’, *Landfall*, no. 39, September 1956, p.204.

¹¹⁰ A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘The Culture Industry’, *op.cit.*, p.206.

¹¹¹ *La Trahison des Clercs* was a short and notorious book published in 1927 by French philosopher Julien Benda, who argued that European intellectuals had lost the ability to reason effectively about daily life. The title of its English translation is *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals*.

¹¹² A.R.D. Fairburn, ‘The Culture Industry’, *op.cit.*, p.207.

Culture Now', which evaluated the impact on the arts of an increase in patronage.¹¹³

Although society had changed markedly over the intervening years, and art had from time-to-time generated 'the new forms of thought and feeling' which were the basis for its social value and its relationship to culture and to power, in Curnow's view the state of New Zealand's high culture at the end of the 1990s was still relatively inadequate. Although the intellectual advances of the 1980s had been significant, Curnow considered that the 1990s had frequently failed to live up to their promise. The burgeoning middlebrow culture of audience and market development and the building boom in public art institutions had consumed much of the energy and resource that might otherwise have gone in to developing the richness and complexity of the high culture. And the high culture's ability to constructively critique the middlebrow was increasingly confounded by the defensiveness of its public institutions, who regarded criticism as an attack, which might compromise both public popularity and reputation with their funders. The sheer difficulty of working as an art specialist at a high level in a small provincial country, according to Curnow, had not abated by the late 1990s. As culture had become increasingly democratised due to the rapid growth of interested (yet not necessarily well-informed) audiences, the earlier pressure on artists brought about by public incomprehension of the vanguard work of art (which had been so hurtful to McCahon) had been replaced by public pressure to *explain* it; and by an increasing—and related—requirement on the part of middlebrow cultural gate-keepers for the instrumentality of the work of art in a public context.¹¹⁴

As Curnow noted in his first incarnation of the 'High Culture' essay in 1973, the 'middle men' of culture—the people in universities and art galleries whose work has to do with the sustaining of respect for traditions of culture and who train others to play a consumer's role—are the 'high culture's public relations officers.' Their role, in his opinion, should be to *increase* the gap between the artist or scholar and the public, in order to provide the psychic

¹¹³Wystan Curnow. 'High Culture Now! A Manifesto (for Hesketh Henry)', lecture notes, New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre, 1998, <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/misc/wystan.asp>. Quotes by Curnow which appear subsequently in this chapter are taken from this source unless otherwise referenced.

¹¹⁴ Artists in the 1990s developed various strategies to combat problems brought about by the increasing proximity between the high culture and the middlebrow. Several equated a degree of geographic isolation with the 'psychic insulation' that Curnow identified as a necessary factor in the production of high culture, and moved to comparatively remote parts of provincial New Zealand—Lyttelton, Port Chalmers, Palmerston North—away from daily immersion in the middlebrow art discourse of big cities. While some artists developed aesthetic strategies which resisted the ascription of 'meaning' to their work, others refused to speak publicly about their work, or to provide media comment about it. The refusal of the art collective et al to speak publicly when they represented New Zealand at the Venice Biennale in 2005 caused great consternation at the highest governmental levels, and a requirement for a 'media-friendly' artist was inserted into the brief for the next iteration, though it was subsequently removed.

insulation necessary for the production of important work; rather than, as is often supposed, working to reduce the gap between art and life.¹¹⁵ Curnow's 'middlemen' echoed Fairburn's earlier notion of cultural intermediaries, critics who would act in the service of the high culture, operating between 'the State, the artists and the people.'¹¹⁶ In his commentary on Curnow's essay, Robert Leonard suggests that the role of such mediators in a pyramidal framework is to 'broker' art to the public by generating a climate of legitimacy for it, so that it can be accepted and valued even if not actively understood.¹¹⁷

Curnow's point of view presupposes that artists and intellectuals produce their best work at arm's length from society, separated from it rather than immersed within it; he quotes literary critic Morse Peckham who argues that such insulation is necessary for practitioners at the highest cultural level in order for their problem-exposure to be tolerable. This is something Peckham discusses more fully in *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behaviour and The Arts* (1966), in which he argues for a definition of art as an 'adaptational mechanism ... rehearsal for those real situations in which it is vital for our survival to endure cognitive tension ... art is the reinforcement of the capacity to endure disorientation so that a real and significant problem may emerge.'¹¹⁸ Artistic experience involves perceptual disorder: the ability to see the world differently, to combine different registers of experience and behaviour. In 1973 Curnow expressed consternation at the 'close quarters' at which New Zealand artists and intellectuals habitually work; 'for their vision and against their society'.¹¹⁹ (The implication here, for McCahon, is that working at the highest level of culture in the close quarters of New Zealand, an extreme pressure was exerted by the perceptual disorder required for problem generation.) While the specific problems that the high culture experienced in relation to the common culture had changed by the 1990s, the fact of an inherent difficulty in the relationship had not: the 'psychic insulation' gap was no wider and the culture still exerted a drag on its highest expressions.

Concern for the place of art and higher thought within society is arguably particularly acute in ex-British colonies like New Zealand and Australia, suffering from the double blow of Anglo-Saxon anti-intellectualism combined with the hangover of a colonial culture of

¹¹⁵ Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', op.cit., pp.157-8.

¹¹⁶ A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Democracy and Culture', *New Zealand Listener*, 23 May 1947, p.22.

¹¹⁷ Robert Leonard, *Nostalgia for Intimacy*, op.cit., p.11.

¹¹⁸ Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behaviour and The Arts*, op. cit, p.314.

¹¹⁹ Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', op.cit., p.169.

practical capability. What is missing in young provinces is a local intellectual tradition within which one's experiences can be processed. Anxiety over the putative inauthenticity of one's everyday cultural experience in the provinces is a direct result of cultural tradition being imported from outside, and applies as much—if not more so—to the high culture as it does to the everyday experience of life in the common culture. In the epistemological programme of mid-century cultural nationalism in New Zealand, as Wystan Curnow describes it—commenting on Allen Curnow's much-quoted insistence that 'reality must be local and special at the point where we pick up the traces'—expression of local authenticity was regarded as the means by which the provinces would enter into the Romantic tradition of high art as self-knowledge, something which postmodernist thought of the mid-1980s sought to move beyond.¹²⁰ In knowing the local, New Zealanders would know themselves. But how would local authenticity be determined? Whose everyday experience would be selected to represent it? In New Zealand, anxiety over inauthenticity—of speaking in a voice that does not belong in the everyday life of the culture—has been most stridently manifest in the high culture's historical disdain for American popular culture, but arguably it has been also a factor in the wider culture's mistrust of the cultivated voice of the intellectual.¹²¹ The determination of cultural authenticity is fundamentally concerned with a struggle for the representation of different versions of the everyday.

The shadow-side of the high culture in New Zealand has long been the anti-intellectualism of the common culture. As Roger Horrocks acutely observes, a study of the history of New Zealand anti-intellectualism is a requirement for understanding of the nature of the New Zealand intellectual.¹²² A wary defensiveness—a holding of one's ground—against the incursive philistinism of the common culture has been a constitutive part of that identity. As the enemy of the high culture, the philistines—a vast, smug, crude, materialistic horde—

¹²⁰ Wystan Curnow, *ibid.*, p.168.

¹²¹ In his history of the New Zealand intellectual, Roger Horrocks compares Pearson's sneering New Zealand eavesdropper with his own experience at cafes in New York or Berlin where, by contrast, he perceived that people overhearing an esoteric conversation at the next table would be 'curious' and 'impressed.' While one might argue that these are entirely different social situations—and that they take place fifty years apart—the anti-intellectual force in the culture described by Pearson and recognised by Horrocks provided a powerful symbol of antagonism for the high culture as it developed after 1945, a corollary to the notion of the ineffectual egg-headed intellectual in the wider New Zealand culture.

The anti-intellectual advocate of common sense and direct action over *too much thinking* is a cultural stance (and a stock character) that continues to be manifest from time to time by populist broadcasters and columnists, as well as being invoked by New Zealand intellectuals in discussion of the difficulties of pursuing an intellectual life in New Zealand. See Roger Horrocks, 'A Short History of "the New Zealand Intellectual"', *op.cit.*, p.31.

¹²² Roger Horrocks, *ibid.*, p.26.

make irregular appearances in Fairburn's cultural criticism and correspondence from the late 1920s onwards. Occasionally a particular individual is identified—Fairburn described Leslie Munro, the editor of the *New Zealand Herald* from 1942-51, for example, as a 'militant philistine'—but more often the quality of philistinism referred to by Fairburn is generalised and abstract, a vague and unspecified threat which must be guarded against.¹²³ In 1948 Fairburn counselled British arts patron Lucy Wertheim that the Philistines may seek to place a spanner in the works of her gift of modern paintings to Auckland, and suggested she gave him power to act on her behalf in such circumstances. ('We're not completely barbarous ... There is a small band of quite sophisticated people who'll always take up the cudgels when necessary, in any public controversy,' he reassured her.¹²⁴)

Feeling beleaguered is a local high-cultural state of mind (to this end, Bruce Jesson titled his foreword to a book about cultural politics and New Zealand academia 'The Role of the Intellectual is to Defend the Role of the Intellectual').¹²⁵ While anti-intellectualism is also an aspect of the common cultures of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA, Horrocks identifies specific cultural conditions which have particularly reinforced anti-intellectualism in New Zealand society. Horrocks's eight factors conducive to the prevalence of New Zealand's anti-intellectualism include: this country's small population, its geographic isolation, the traditional exodus of many of the most talented members of each generation to take up more profitable opportunities elsewhere, New Zealand's ruralism, the stereotypes of physical capability left over from its pioneer culture, the persistence of colonial attitudes including the cultural cringe and the suppression of Māori forms of intellectual activity, an ingrained Puritanism which resists new ideas and favours censorship, and the traditional strain of everyman egalitarianism which links intellectual activity with social 'elitism.'¹²⁶ The negative multiplier effect of these factors in combination with one another has produced a cultural climate hostile to intellectual activity, personified by the 'scornful listener' described by Pearson; the sneering everyman who sits behind you on the bus, snorting

¹²³ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to Philip Smithells, 5 February 1948, *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, op.cit., p.180. 'I ... had a pop at him in the last "Compost Magazine"', noted Fairburn.

¹²⁴ A.R.D. Fairburn, letter to Lucy Wertheim, 12 March 1948, in *The Letters of A.R.D. Fairburn*, op.cit., p.181.

¹²⁵ Bruce Jesson, 'Foreword: The Role of the Intellectual is to Defend the Role of the Intellectual', in Michael Peters (ed.), *Cultural Politics and the University in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1997, pp.9-14.

¹²⁶ Roger Horrocks, 'A Short History of "the New Zealand Intellectual"', op.cit., pp.34-6.

contemptuously at your pretentious drivels; or—as Horrocks ruefully and possibly quite tellingly noted—sits commentating adversely on intellectual discourse ‘in our own heads.’¹²⁷

Pearson put the aporia at the heart of local culture (and the cause of the alienation between intellectuals and everyone else) down to the lack of trust ordinary New Zealanders placed in the veracity of their personal feelings. He suggested that New Zealanders masked discussion of their experience with fatuous quotations from popular culture (‘a protective camouflage’) in order that they not be shown up as earnest or soft or egg-headed or out of step with the bludgeoning conventions of a ‘norm-ridden society.’¹²⁸ To Pearson the national interest in popular culture was symptomatic of New Zealand’s underlying anti-intellectualism, but this lack of originality hid a deep underlying fear of local authenticity. Without an authentic common experience to draw upon and refer to, argued Pearson, there could be no richness in the culture, ‘no confidence any of us can fertilize our creations with.’ The lack of assurance in the expression of everyday experience which for Pearson characterised and limited New Zealand society had equal effect on its artists; it was difficult to *be* profound when the culture of everyday life was shallow, inauthentic, and crippled by self-consciousness, and it was even more socially problematic to be seen to be *trying to be* profound.¹²⁹

Pearson’s disenchantment with the common culture of New Zealand during the early 1950s was complicated by his conviction that ‘the only solution to the so-often-talked about plight of the New Zealand artist’ was to make work about everyday New Zealand experience.¹³⁰ ‘Beneath the life of the community,’ he wrote, ‘we sense the sour, dumb struggling drive, we sense (like Colin McCahon) a strength in that drive the stronger for its being so innocently pent. ... The drive could be harnessed to an austere tragedy of the Greek pattern.’ [p.211] He hastened to add that he was not advocating a ‘rush to the proletariat’: ‘the self-conscious patronizing discovery of the worker of some documentary writers of the thirties, talking down to him and writing him up, slumming on the wharves and in factories and shearing-

¹²⁷ Pearson’s identification of the ‘man on the bus’ as the personification of the scornful everyman recalls the equally subjective notion of the ‘man on the Clapham omnibus’, a legal test of reasonableness applied by the British courts from the 1930s to determine negligence. The man on the Clapham omnibus is an imaginary figure, conventional but open-minded, lightly educated but not a specialist, against whose imaginary conduct the defendant’s actions can be considered. He represents common sense—the characteristic that Roger Horrocks argues is most used in New Zealand to undermine the discourses of the high culture.

¹²⁸ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.213.

¹²⁹ ‘An old man working on a gold dredge, who had lived in this part of the Grey Valley all his life, pointed out to me an unusual colour effect of sun on bush on the hills,’ wrote Pearson. ‘The foreman overheard him: “Garn! What’s wrong with you.”’ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.214.

¹³⁰ Bill Pearson, ‘Fretful Sleepers’, op.cit., p.228.

shed.’ He suggested instead a kind of anthropological approach, the artist or writer as a participant-observer ‘living not only among but as one of the people and feeling your way into their problems.’ [p.229] (This does suggest, of course, that he saw intellectuals and ‘the people’ as being distinct from one another.) The development of New Zealand culture depended not only on the indigenisation of international ideas but on the circulation of New Zealand art in the world; and the source material for the national high culture was to be found in the stuff of everyday life. ‘The solution is for us to look to the here and now, to concentrate ... on the provincial and vulgar, and develop them to the point where they mean something to people outside New Zealand, to make a meaning out of the drives and behaviour of the common people.’ [p.229]

To a great extent the fear that something is missing from one’s culture is the curse of provincialism; common to all provincial cultures is the gnawing inescapable unease of being positioned outside the mainstream, a backwater in the tides of history. This unease shapes both provincial art and criticism. (Life in the provinces, as poet Derek Walcott wrote of his native St. Lucia, is characterised by the belief that ‘the great events of the world would happen elsewhere.’¹³¹) When Wystan Curnow observed that ‘the best art will always come in the mail from elsewhere’, it was less, perhaps, a dismissal of the efforts of local artists than an acknowledgment that standards of judgment for their work would be formulated thousands of miles away.¹³² As Terry Smith wrote in 1974 (from the perspective of an expatriate Australian in New York), ‘Provincialism appears primarily as an attitude of subservience to an externally-imposed hierarchy of cultural values. It is not simply the product of a colonialist history, nor is it merely a function of a geographic location.’¹³³ Provincialism is a state of mind brought about by repeated comparison by regional cultures of their productions, and of their conditions of production, with those of the world’s cultural centres; or perhaps more accurately by comparison of the distortions of the local culture against the supposed ideal state of the centre’s cultural blueprint. It is effectively a kind of cultural inferiority complex.

The productions and criticism of New York, and historically, of London, constitute the benchmarks by which the western provinces measure the significance of their high culture.

¹³¹ Derek Walcott, ‘Omeros’, 1990.

¹³² Curnow suggested that an artist working in a young province would accordingly need ‘special reminders as to the authenticity of his experience.’ Wystan Curnow, *High Culture in a Small Province*, op.cit., p.168.

¹³³ Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem’, op.cit., p.54.

But distance creates misunderstandings. In provincial cultures such as Australia and New Zealand, as Smith observed, the models and prototypes of advanced art arrive late, and ‘devoid of their genetic contexts.’ Not everything arrives; some art movements never gain traction in the regions. Works of art which originate elsewhere are detached from the ‘early innovative struggles’ that formed the intellectual context for their production; characteristically experienced in reproduction, they are unaccompanied by adequate criticism, illuminated only by ‘gnomic artists’ statements.’ The art that is made in the provinces in response to the art that travels from the centre is—like its criticism—necessarily formed by the interplay of the provincial culture with that of the centre, but very little of what results filters back to the centre.¹³⁴ ‘Distance looks our way’ is the formulation used to account for the effects of geographical remoteness on New Zealand culture, but it’s a misleading phrase.¹³⁵ Distance has very rarely looked New Zealand’s way. Even though New Zealand artists have achieved greater visibility internationally under conditions of globalisation and the expansion of the international art world within western Europe since 1990, New Zealand itself, like other provincial cultures, is habitually overlooked.

In Australia, the effects of provincialism are colloquially known as the ‘cultural cringe’, a phrase popularised by Melbournian Arthur Phillips in his account of the phenomenon in 1950.¹³⁶ The ‘cultural cringe’ describes a generalised assumption that the products of domestic culture will be inferior to those made elsewhere; and that local productions will only be considered to be of merit when they have been sanctioned by international authority.

¹³⁴ An exception to this one-way traffic is Julian Schnabel’s *Pope Pius* series from 1987, which he produced after seeing McCahon’s work in Australia; but the fact of the influence is of course of more interest in New Zealand than it is in New York. While Schnabel’s interest in McCahon has been recorded, and so forms part of the afterlife of McCahon’s work in the world culture of art, there have been other occasions—Wystan Curnow cites the example of the British/US artist John Walker, who saw McCahon’s work in Auckland and Wellington in 1981—in which productive encounters with McCahon’s practice remain publicly unrecognised. Curnow writes: ‘When Walker came to show these works in London and New York, no one remarked on the McCahon connection because no one who saw his paintings had seen a McCahon. Paul Brach, reviewing the work for *Art in America*, misread the work instructively, identifying a “dialogue” as he called it, with the New York painter Robert Motherwell. And that is one of the ways in which the histories of the art world get written. So McCahon slipped across the border unnoticed and joined the ranks of countless other unidentified influences loose on the streets of New York.’ Wystan Curnow, ‘Writing History on the Margins: New Zealand’, conference paper, Conference 1, Wrocław, Poland, June 1999, <http://www.apexart.org/conference/curnow.htm>

¹³⁵ ‘Distance looks our way’ is a phrase from Charles Brasch’s poem ‘The Islands’ (1941), which gave the title to a public lecture series at the University of Auckland in 1960, and a subsequent publication of essays about the effects of remoteness on New Zealand culture, edited by Keith Sinclair and published by Paul’s Book Arcade in 1961. An exhibition by ten New Zealand artists in Seville, Spain, in 1992, with an accompanying publication edited by Mary Barr, was also titled *Distance Looks Our Way*.

¹³⁶ A.A. Phillips, ‘The Cultural Cringe’, in Jenny Lee, Philip Mead, and Gerald Murnane (eds.), *The Temperament of generations: fifty years of writing in Meanjin*. Melbourne: Meanjin, 1990, pp.102-5. [Originally published in *Meanjin*, no.4, 1950, pp.299-302.].

Phillips suggested that the difficulty and alienation that Australian artists and intellectuals faced within their culture was as a result of the cultural cringe endemic to broader Australian society. His theory was later challenged by academic Leonard Hume who argued that the cultural cringe existed not in wider society but largely only in the minds of artists and intellectuals, who used it as a means of deflecting criticism of their work.¹³⁷ It was related to nationalism, suggested Hume, and reflected cultural insecurity and self-doubt. Arguably central to the cultural cringe problematic—but little recognised by it—is the alienation between the high and the mass rather than between the international and the domestic. While Phillips's evidence for the presence of the cultural cringe was based on a comparison that an ABC announcer made of the equivalence of quality in the interpretation of two pieces of music, one by an Australian and one by an international performer, Hume's counter was the obvious support that Australians showed for popular Australian productions. But they were comparing two different things. The Australian public was vocal in its enthusiasm for popular local productions, if not for Australian high culture. Though critics ascribed it to wider society, arguably the cultural cringe reflected—and was largely limited to—the specific anxieties of the Australian high culture in regards to the development of a sophisticated audience for their practice.

Writing at much the same time as Terry Smith laid out the 'Provincialism Problem', but from home rather than abroad, three years after his return to Auckland from a period studying in America Wystan Curnow described New Zealand as a country 'short on history, a cultural province.' He remarked that it was evident enough that New Zealand's intellectual life is not very rich, and that any discussion of this country's high culture would have to 'dwell on failure, inadequacies and possibilities rather than achievements.'¹³⁸ Within this framework, one of the principal problematics of the local high culture was its inability to replicate the more conducive conditions of the world's centres of high culture. New Zealand artists working at the highest level of cultural richness—'specialists' like Len Lye—went overseas to work within a like-minded community; those who stayed in New Zealand and attempted to work at such an advanced level—like Colin McCahon—were profoundly troubled by the lack of support and understanding for their practice. Effectively New Zealand artists working in New Zealand were too close to their society to be able to rise above it. But from Fairburn

¹³⁷ See L.J. Hume, *Another Look at the Cultural Cringe*, St Leonards: Centre for Independent Studies, 1993.

¹³⁸ Wystan Curnow, 'High Culture in a Small Province', *op.cit.*, p.156.

onwards, what this analysis of New Zealand high culture has repeatedly missed is that failure and inadequacy and inarticulateness can be richly generative forces within a culture.

As Terry Smith noted, the provincial artist cannot choose not to be provincial. If an artist decides to remain in the provinces and not to leave and become an expatriate, then the particular cultural conditions of the provinces will to some extent be formative on his or her practice. But living in the provinces is not the same as being unsophisticated. In dwelling on the failure of the provinces to replicate the centre, New Zealand high culture has historically not accounted for the antagonisms and inadequacies and strange thickenings of the culture based on misunderstandings and mistranslations and local customs of use that are generative factors in producing a distinctive local form of high art. Such regional accents in the language of international art may not be so much a weakness as a distinction. McCahon's asynchronicity in relation to the currents of international modernism, for example—something which is almost never mentioned in New Zealand art historical accounts—less weakens his project than simply sites it here; a product of, and a commentary on, the particular cultural conditions and specific history of Aotearoa New Zealand as well as part of the broader international history of modernist painting.

Music criticism has dealt with this issue more effectively than visual art criticism, engaging with musicologist Paul Gilroy's concept of the 'changing same' when looking at the dispersal of particular musical forms across a diaspora of peoples. Gilroy observes that in the 1980s, black British cultures ceased simply mimicking or reproducing music styles that had originated elsewhere, producing new hybrid forms which responded to the conditions of everyday life in British cities. Following Edward Said, Gilroy noted that:

The critical space/time cartography of the diaspora needs, therefore, to be adjusted so that the dynamics of dispersal and local autonomy can be shown alongside the unforeseen circuits and detours that mark the new journeys and new arrivals, which, in turn, prompt new political and cultural possibilities.¹³⁹

The history of a particular form of culture thus properly includes the various currents and eddies and whirlpools and backwaters and the delta through which the flow of culture streams, in addition to the branch which has been mapped as the mainstream. Yet in New

¹³⁹ Paul Gilroy, 'Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity and the Challenge of a Changing Same', in *Popular Music: Music and Identity*, ed. Simon Frith, New York: Routledge, 2005, p.188. (Originally published in *Black Music Research Journal*, no. 11, vol.2, 1991, pp.111-36.)

Zealand, the high culture's essential *embarrassment* at what it has traditionally regarded as the provincialism and thinness of intellectual life in New Zealand—the concern that the nation may be perceived as a cultural backwater—has at times led it to miss the new political and cultural possibilities of art produced in such conditions. Its concept of 'authentic' New Zealand experience did not include mass culture at a time when everyday life was beginning to be saturated with it. The degree to which the provincial high culture internally polices its own externally-generated standards might also in itself count as a symptom of the provincial; a self-conscious concern for how one might look from the *outside*, as well as a feeling of personal responsibility for the local collective endeavour of culture which does not appear to be experienced in the same way by people at the centres of world culture.

The conditions of globalisation which have characterised the post-1990 period have resulted in a waning of the significance of national identity as a force for determining the personal identity—the identifications—of individuals, at least for citizens of western nations. (At the same time, as Roger Horrocks insightfully comments, we are now more likely 'to think of our expatriates as still linked in some respects to our culture, so our sense of the nation is not limited by physical boundaries.'¹⁴⁰) Globalisation has also resulted in a reassessment of the limitations of provincialism, where provincialism is defined as alienation in the relationship between the national and the international. Wystan Curnow proposed in 1999 that a new kind of cultural history was required. Whereas the internally-focused national art histories of places at the margins have been written partly as some sort of compensation of the exclusion of the margins from the centre, proposing whether explicitly or implicitly the margin as a place of difference, a new critical project which expanded the centre by redefining the terms of its constitution to include the variations of the margins should now be undertaken. 'Historians of and at the margins will need to undertake revisions of the modern and the contemporary in the terms proposed by their own and comparable scenes,' suggested Curnow. 'The outcome of histories written from, rather than of, the margins, would not be a new monolithic history in the grip of a rigid teleology, rather it would be made up of multiple strands woven with coincidence, knotted with misreadings and fringed in loose ends.'¹⁴¹ I would argue that the knotty history of mass and high culture in New Zealand constitutes just such a strand.

¹⁴⁰ Roger Horrocks, 'A Short History of "the New Zealand Intellectual"', op.cit., p.66.

¹⁴¹ Wystan Curnow, 'Writing History on the Margins: New Zealand', op.cit.

IX: After McCahon

May other artists now be seen only in his name, only around him, by him, through him, after him, before him, for him, against him? As though what came before McCahon was merely his 'foreword', and what came concurrently was merely marginalia to his text, and what came after, an 'afterword', or postscripts, merely.
Francis Pound¹⁴²

And then of course there is Colin McCahon. Who, like Elvis, casts a sort of posthumous shadow over everything.
Luke Wood¹⁴³

There is a sense, perhaps, in which McCahon's work has become understood by New Zealanders in recent years as a carrier of the national cultural genetic blueprint, like *Moby-Dick* or *Leaves of Grass* or even Elvis within American culture. The self-doubt, the inarticulateness, the awkwardness, the isolation, the intimacy, the inscribing of two cultures and traditions within the same landscapes, even the monochromacity; these are internalised characteristics of New Zealand identity, recorded in McCahon's work. After his death in 1987, at a moment when the old high/low antagonism had waned and new paradigms for both art and popular culture were emerging, McCahon's work took on new roles both within the high culture of art (where it represented the modernist search for 'essence'), and the common culture (where it stood as a sign of local 'authenticity'). The two values are, of course, closely related. I argue that McCahon's work contains a sense of the culture so embedded in local observation that the culture has drawn in turn from it to reorient and ground itself, and even reinvents it from time to time according to its own needs.

Robert Leonard has written about the way in which McCahon represented an impasse for a generation of artists during the 1970s, who had to work in the local tradition that he had invented.

¹⁴² Francis Pound, 'In the Wake of McCahon: A Commentary on After McCahon', *Art New Zealand*, no.52, Spring 1989, p.81.

¹⁴³ Luke Wood, 'Trespassers will be Prosecuted: A B-Grade Horror in Four Parts', in *Printing Types: New Zealand Type Design Since 1870*, ed. Jonty Valentine, Auckland: Objectspace, 2009, p.50.

Everywhere they went, he seemed to have been there already. He could seem to occupy almost any position, depending on which aspect of his complex oeuvre you cared to emphasise. He was a nationalist and an internationalist; he was a primitive, a modernist, and ultimately, a postmodernist; he was a landscape painter, an abstractionist, a conceptual artist, an installation artist. He started as a white man laying claim to a silent land, he went on to embrace things Maori. ... He could mirror anyone's interests and anxieties. In McCahon, it seemed, you could find a precedent for almost anything that had or could happen in New Zealand art.¹⁴⁴

In Leonard's formulation, McCahon's forty year career thus encapsulates the whole of New Zealand modernist art history; his is a powerful presence at each of its significant moments. Having invented the local tradition, McCahon proceeded to work in *all* of it, and it is here where Leonard's analysis is particularly acute. In its diversity, its range, its continuous line of enquiry, McCahon's work is capable of representing almost everything to almost everyone, depending upon the cultural imperative of a given moment. McCahon's is a source of visual authority that spans the broad compass of culture, including both 'difficult' high modernism and the local everyday vernacular, frequently in the same work. It is subject to the fierce pressure of cultures from above and below, and bears the imprint of both. After McCahon died, the New Zealand art world had to reset itself to account for the end of his oeuvre. The 'tradition of his own invention' had become history. His inevitable canonisation in the art world led to a consequent adjustment within the common culture. A major reassessment of McCahon's legacy—and hence a re-evaluation of the local visual tradition—took place in both the high and the common culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

McCahon had become aware of the start of his work's inescapable slide into history a decade earlier. His name was repeatedly in the media in 1978, with the controversial purchase of his work *Through the wall of death: A banner* (1972) by the Dowse Art Gallery; the even more controversial gift of *Victory Over Death 2* (1970) to the people of Australia by the New Zealand Government; and the acrimony which developed around the National Art Gallery's purchase of the *Northland Panels* (1958), in June. He described the effect of this public exposure to Ron O'Reilly early in 1979: 'I'm swamped—I don't know a thing about me—I'm being done and I don't like it. In a few years, I'll be dead. It's chilling to be done now. I can't understand what's happening—I'm not me anymore. I am becoming a historical

¹⁴⁴ Robert Leonard, *Nostalgia for Intimacy*, op.cit., p.14.

image.’¹⁴⁵ Later in 1979 he made a series of considered gifts of his works to cultural and educational institutions throughout the country (including *Storm Warning* (1980-1), which would be sold by Victoria University of Wellington in the face of great opposition in 1999): he was, as William McAloon noted in 2003, effectively organising his legacy.

Two years after his death, an exhibition curated by Christina Barton in 1989 (at possibly the very last moment when McCahon still remained solely ‘in art’s hands’, to borrow Wystan Curnow’s phrase) aimed to problematise the idea of making art ‘after McCahon.’¹⁴⁶ There was no doubt that McCahon had represented a problem for artists. Having practically defined the boundaries of New Zealand art for three decades, commented Jim and Mary Barr, McCahon represented ‘a mountain most artists at the end of the 1980s felt they needed to get over.’¹⁴⁷ Barton proposed something subtly different. The artists she selected for inclusion in the show (most of whom were born between the mid-1950s and early 1960s) neither emulated McCahon as an act of homage nor confronted his practice as an obstacle to be overcome, she stated. Nor did they ignore him with the kind of dogmatic refusal to engage which is actually a form of engagement in itself. Rather than looming overhead as a peak to be climbed, McCahon-the-mountain lay behind them in the cultural landscape. Barton’s project sought instead to look at the younger artists’ practice ‘in the light of McCahon’, in order to find ‘differences without opposition’ and ‘connections without indebtedness.’¹⁴⁸

The title of the exhibition was written with a small ‘a’ for ‘after’, as if it were a fragment of a missing longer phrase, as Francis Pound suggested in a discursive review.¹⁴⁹ The little ‘a’ served to problematise the idea of ‘afterness’, and to wrest it from an art-historical tradition of emulation and influence. It was not so much a question of ‘out-doing’ a master but of doing things differently thereafter. Barton stated that part of her motivation for putting the show together was curiosity, resulting from a desire to see the work of younger artists ‘in those very spaces so recently filled by McCahon’. A major retrospective exhibition, ‘Colin

¹⁴⁵ Colin McCahon, undated letter to Ron O’Reilly, received 10 February 1979. Quoted in William McAloon, ‘Where is Uncle Frank: McCahon’s Late Works and A Question of Faith’, in *Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith—Papers from A Seminar*, Auckland Art Gallery, 2003, p.63.

¹⁴⁶ Wystan Curnow, ‘High Culture Now! A Manifesto (for Hesketh Henry)’, op.cit.

¹⁴⁷ Jim and Mary Barr, ‘The Indefinite Article: Michael Parekowhai’s riff on representation’, *Art Asia Pacific*, no.23, 1999, p.74.

¹⁴⁸ Christina Barton, ‘after-words: conversations around McCahon’, in *after McCahon*, Auckland Art Gallery, 1989, p.7.

¹⁴⁹ Francis Pound, ‘In the Wake of McCahon: A Commentary on After McCahon’, *Art New Zealand*, no.52, Spring 1989, pp.79-83.

McCahon: Gates and Journeys', had closed at the Auckland Art Gallery a few weeks earlier, in February 1989: 'after McCahon' was therefore a response to the context of the recent exhibition as well as an exploration of the new cultural possibilities arising in the aftermath of the artist's work. Barton's curiosity positioned the project as *experimental*: an exhibition as a laboratory for culture. Although as curator she was its 'author', there was an implicit acknowledgment that there could be multiple possible readings and interpretations of 'after McCahon', rather than a single institutional account. In his Director's Foreword in the exhibition catalogue, Christopher Johnstone was unusually careful to position 'after McCahon' as the 'opinion' of the curator.

Several—although not all—of the artists included in the exhibition quoted from McCahon, by incorporating versions of his painted handwriting, characteristic landforms, and compositional structures into their own works, or by giving their works versions of his titles; but as Leonard observed, the purpose behind quoting McCahon was not to emulate him but to point to 'the impossibility of being a McCahon now'.¹⁵⁰ Borrowing from his work questioned modernist notions of authorship and authenticity, and effectively treated his work as a given of the culture, a historical source of authority available to be reinterpreted and re-examined in the light of new frameworks. Although the project aimed to confound traditional notions of artistic influence and lineage, as Pound pointed out, it inevitably served to further canonise McCahon simply by 're-uttering his name, and making him the boundary point, the place determining a certain "before" and "after"'.¹⁵¹

Barton argued convincingly for a paradigm shift between McCahon's practice and those of the artists whose work she assembled for her project. While McCahon's work expressed doubt about Christian faith, the work in 'after McCahon' expressed scepticism about essentialist meaning. In the new polyvalent conception of culture ushered in by a postmodern debunking of essentialism, 'traditional claims to originality, authenticity, and 'self' expression have been cast into doubt,' she noted. No longer in all seriousness able to search for universalising 'truth' in art as McCahon had, artists would be required to find ways to

¹⁵⁰ Robert Leonard, *Nostalgia for Intimacy*, op.cit., p.17. The artistic practice of quoting McCahon is dealt with in detail in Chapters XI and XII.

¹⁵¹ Francis Pound, 'In the Wake of McCahon', op.cit., p.83. Pound also pointed out that one of the reasons that the artists in the exhibition no longer saw McCahon as an obstacle to be overcome was that an older generation, including Ian Scott and Richard Killeen who were both taught by McCahon, had seen him as such; and had dealt with the problem by finding a way into international currents of modernism through McCahon—an escape from 'the reactionary impasse of New Zealand regional realism'. (pp.81-2).

articulate the new cultural landscape of ‘critical disbelief’, producing work which questioned the idea of communicability itself.¹⁵² Barton used McCahon as a foil to illumine the different philosophical approach to art-making taken by his successors. In one telling example of the difference she saw between McCahon and a younger generation of artists, Barton contrasted the local specificities of the voices in Michael Stevenson’s images of religious banners in the provincial halls of Taranaki from 1988 against the booming prophetic voice resounding over the land in McCahon’s work, critiquing the totalising ‘I’ of the first person singular which conflated the artist with the Creator at the expense of hearing from anyone else. In comparison, the small quiet voice brought forth from Stevenson’s work neither appeared to wish to speak for all nor to seek to articulate a common condition in the light of its own experience. As Barton indicated, it was not so much a case of ‘I Paul to thee in Ngatimote’ but ‘Jesus loves us in Clinton.’¹⁵³

The effect of Barton’s project was to draw a line between McCahon as a modernist and the new postmodernist turn in contemporary New Zealand art. While acknowledging traces of a postmodern sensibility in McCahon’s work—his appropriations from both high and mass culture, his use of found texts—Barton figured McCahon as a modernist seeker of essence, whose outlook on the world was informed by binary oppositions (light and dark, good and evil, matter and spirit); the holder of an outmoded position that was ‘no longer tenable’ under the contemporary’s terms of plurality and multiplicity. ‘There is no one direction,’ stated Barton.

No doubt Barton would have had in mind not McCahon’s South Island works from the late 1940s and early 1950s with their wild assemblage of diverse cultural registers, but instead the characteristic works of his middle and late years in Auckland, the monochromatic canvases and biblical texts of the 1960s and 1970s, the spiritual journeys mapped by a dotted line through a landscape abstracted to the divide between sea and sky and land. McCahon’s modernist essentialism is not figured as a classical Greenbergian one in which the ‘purity’ of the art form itself—its desire to rid itself of effects that belong outside its area of concern—takes centre-stage. McCahon, as Barton indicates, is no abstract expressionist; his images are drawn both from the storehouse of common culture and from his observations of the

¹⁵² Christina Barton, *op.cit.*, p.15.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p.12.

everyday world. Instead McCahon's essentialism is a spiritual one, concerned with the land as a symbol (and repository) of matters of faith and doubt.

'After McCahon' was a key project in the first wave of postmodernist exhibitions in New Zealand art discourse, which had their theoretical basis in phenomenology, feminist theory and post-structuralist theory. It was a response, commented Barton, 'to that profound shift marked by the demise of the ideologies of Romanticism, as they have impinged on our social, economic, and cultural history. ... It is within this over-arching framework that our contemporary critique of modernist discourse should be heard. By conceiving postmodernism thus, problems of relation, definition and degree retreat and, in their place, programmes for an effective, critically-mediated practice emerge.'¹⁵⁴ Barton's critique of McCahon's work was philosophical, pointing out McCahon's belief in his own representative response to a universal human condition, his faith in the essential communicability of the work of art, and questioning the validity of this approach in the postmodernist condition of culture. Whereas McCahon's practice was concerned with the communication of doubt, the postmodernist position was to doubt the practices of communication: recognising that both the receiver and the noise inform the signal. The new postmodern work, argued Barton, was constructed within a different philosophical and theoretical framework..

At the same time that the younger generation of artists included in Barton's project were beginning to form a new relationship with McCahon's work as cultural legacy, a similar—and related—change was occurring in the common culture of the late 1980s. One of the distinctive effects of the growth of middlebrow culture in New Zealand was the iconisation of Colin McCahon's work in the years following his death. And as McCahon's legacy took on a new value within the broader culture, it also assumed a new financial value. News media reported that McCahon's works were fetching record prices at auctions, with institutional buyers competing against wealthy private collectors from New Zealand, Australia, and occasionally the United States of America. An increasing internationalisation of interest in his work also reflected the gradual expansion of the borders of global modernist art history. While the market for modernist and contemporary art in New Zealand experienced a great boom in the early 1990s—the effect of which was to enable some younger artists to make a

¹⁵⁴ Christina Barton, 'Framing the real: Postmodern discourses in New Zealand art', in Mary Barr (ed.), *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, ed. Mary Barr, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992, p.183.

good living from their work, something that was impossible in the limited market of McCahon's generation—McCahon's works continuously set the benchmark for the top of the market. Again, he was out on his own. As Wystan Curnow noted, 'the prices paid for his work separated him from his predecessors and contemporaries more decisively than years of critical praise and discussion had managed to do.'¹⁵⁵

Whereas once McCahon had been a household name as a local synonym for the incomprehensibility of modern art, after his death his work became a sign for New Zealand culture, in all its unease, its uncertainty, and its vernacular traditions. As processes of globalisation and decolonisation began to alter New Zealand's economy and governmental policy frameworks, the late 1980s and 1990s correspondingly marked an increasing self-consciousness in and of New Zealand culture. Over this period McCahon gradually became seen as foundational not only to the tradition of modern New Zealand art history but to the national sense of identity (the propagation of which was a specific goal of the Fifth Labour Government led by Helen Clark—who was significantly both Prime Minister and Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage between 1999 and 2008). Gradually, through a series of public projects, commemorations, and local and international events involving his work, McCahon's invention of a New Zealand visual tradition was sanctioned *as* national tradition.

While his works had always been talked about, after his death it seemed that he was more frequently mentioned in the mass media than ever. His paintings were exhibited in Amsterdam (1995) and Berlin (1999), and with increasing frequency in Australia. A set of commemorative stamps featuring his work was minted by New Zealand Post. In 1997 Māori activists stole McCahon's Urewera mural from a remote Department of Conservation building and held it to ransom, capturing the headlines for weeks and thereby changing the status of the work from largely-unknown to 'the most famous painting in New Zealand'; that year his work became the first by a New Zealand or Australian artist to exceed the \$1 million dollar mark at auction. A dispute over the sale of his work *Storm Warning* (1980-1) by Victoria University of Wellington in 1999 developed into a bitter and lengthy cultural argument waged in the news media and literary journals. His family home at Titirangi was bought by the local council in 1999 and turned into an artist's residence. In 2002 a major retrospective exhibition of McCahon's work was mounted by the internationally-prestigious

¹⁵⁵ Wystan Curnow. 'High Culture Now! A Manifesto (for Hesketh Henry)', op.cit.

Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where he was lauded as the ‘Van Gogh of the South Pacific’; on the exhibition’s return for a triumphal tour of New Zealand art galleries, the Governor General invited those associated with the project to a state dinner.¹⁵⁶ Finally a public vote accorded McCahon the status of New Zealand’s ‘greatest artist.’ ‘In becoming an icon McCahon has become more than a painter,’ commented Curnow, ‘and this changed and complicated his relation to younger generations of artists. His work is out of art’s hands now.’¹⁵⁷

Following the early artist-appropriations of McCahon’s characteristic forms, over the course of the next decade a variety of these quotations seeped out into the common culture, appearing on T shirts, signage, and commercial packaging. A new genre of instantly recognisable ‘McCahon-esque’ design emerged. It was unmoored from the safe harbour of art, but retained its reference to the context of the original. Its associations—*the brand values* which it appropriated from McCahon’s work—were of national identity and local authenticity. In a full-circle recouping of McCahon’s work for the common culture, eventually his signature style of painted handwriting became a typeface applied to commercial products whose brand was designed to express a particularly down-to-earth and sincere impression of New Zealandness.¹⁵⁸ The story of the trajectory of the ‘McCahon font’ from vernacular signage to expressive mark to commercial brand is instructive. Luke Wood, a graphic designer and scholar, made a digital typeface as a response to McCahon’s characteristic painted lettering. When it was accidentally disseminated and digitally copied, it took on a life of its own, and became, in his description, a monster, a zombiefied version of the original which could not be killed and which spawned in multiple locations. Infinitely reproducible, ‘at odds with the original’, Wood’s typeface was doomed to keep duplicating itself over and over. [p.51] ‘Over the next few years the thing kept appearing in the strangest places—in the pages of *The Listener*, the titles for a reality TV show, a logotype for Peta Mathias [a popular TV cook], an insurance company, a film festival guide.’ [p.52] Finally, following its usage by a design company to advertise a major exhibition of McCahon’s

¹⁵⁶ In an interview with Virginia Were, artist Stephen Bambury described the ‘Van Gogh of the South Pacific’ marketing slogan as a ‘narrow and Eurocentric view’, proposing that it limited ‘the ability of the reader to deal with the work.’ ‘I’d like to suggest,’ said Bambury, ‘that they might want to approach him from a point of view that doesn’t come with all those co-ordinates.’ Stephen Bambury, quoted in Virginia Were, ‘Taking McCahon Neat’, *Art News*, Autumn 2003, p.45.

¹⁵⁷ Wystan Curnow. ‘High Culture Now! A Manifesto (for Hesketh Henry)’, op.cit.

¹⁵⁸ See Luke Wood, ‘Trespassers will be Prosecuted: A B-Grade Horror in Four Parts’, op.cit., pp.50-4.

paintings, Wood reconceived his font as an exhibition, reasserting his ‘ownership’ of the work.

Finally, Wood was approached by a juice company, which sought to use his McCahon font as a visual brand for its new range of ‘honest’ branded juices; he accepted their offer, and was paid for ‘an exclusive licence for the beverage sector.’ He describes a certain satisfaction in this; his attempt to return the font to the world of art through the gallery exhibition had been unsuccessful (‘a failed gesture’) as he was not, in his own estimation at least, an artist. Finally, as a design appearing on the labels of locally-made fruit juices, after a fifty-year passage of misunderstandings and misperceptions, arguments, re-appropriation, and excoriating critique, the font would be symbolically returned to its originary source, the place McCahon had found it, the New Zealand vernacular of hand-painted signs on roadside fruit stalls and orchards. More than fifty years after he had first trialled it in his early religious paintings, McCahon’s painted sign-writing, once condemned as an ‘inauthentic’ expression of local culture, had come to signify local visual ‘authenticity’; arguably the common culture’s version of the modernist distillation of form and medium into essence. The culture—both high and common—had reprocessed McCahon’s legacy, reworking it for its own ends.

PART THREE: AFTER AFTER McCAHON: ART AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE 1990s

X: Introduction: The New Crisis of National Identity

In 1990, New Zealand marked the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. It was a momentous year in which national pageantry collided with the politics of Māori tinorangatiratanga, or Māori self-determination; a year in which a bitter election battle was fought between the two-term Labour Government—the architect of unpopular social and economic reforms designed to bring New Zealand into the modern global economy—and the National Party, campaigning on a vague and antiquated notion of ‘The Decent Society’ while planning to further privatise profit-making state assets; a year when the Bank of New Zealand nearly collapsed; a year in which the Sesqui Festival, conceived as a national celebration of commerce and culture along the lines of an Expo exhibition, became a byword for spectacular public failure; a year, in short, in which symbolic expression of nationhood ran up against the exigencies of contemporary history.

New Zealand’s late 20th-century crisis of national identity—prompted by the profound economic, social and cultural transformations associated with both globalisation and decolonisation—was particularly strongly articulated in and by contemporary art practice of the early 1990s, spearheaded by the new Māori art which drew on the forms and aesthetics of globalised culture and international art to represent local urban experience. While global flows of culture, people and capital appeared to destabilise the idea of a settled national identity, biculturalism challenged the national hegemony of New Zealand Pākehā culture. The idea of the broad commonality of the modern national culture which had endured since the late 1940s was problematised by a new generation of postmodernist artists speaking from a wide range of subject positions, including urban Māori, blue-collar Pākehā, second-generation Chinese, second-generation feminist, and Auckland-based Pasifika, among many others. The New Zealand subject was no longer singular but multiple. The New Zealand voice had a wide range of possible inflections. And by the early 1990s New Zealand art was suddenly a matter of politics again, as the struggle for visibility being played out in the social sphere was manifest in the visual regime of representation.

Much as McCahon had done in the late 1940s during a similar crisis of nationhood, art in the early 1990s registered the social impact of changing macro-economic forces on the representation of everyday experience. And as the ‘user-pays philosophy’—the approach to pricing of services that suggests that the most efficient allocation of resources is achieved when the individual consumer pays for the full cost of his or her consumption—began to affect the state sector and drive public policy, the familiar antagonism between the high and the low, the elite and the mass, the intellectual and the inarticulate, was once again in play in New Zealand culture. While the high culture evolved new strategies to resist the predation of market forces, contemporary art sought to articulate the new conditions of culture.

This section of the thesis examines a number of exhibitions in the early 1990s that attempted to articulate the new forms of hybrid identity which were emerging under conditions of postmodernism in New Zealand. While this was a broad international phenomenon, the New Zealand exhibitions were largely inwardly-focussed, concerned with negotiating the visibility of new forms of national identity under conditions of globalisation and decolonisation, and with a revisionist critique of modernism. Whereas previous group exhibitions in New Zealand public galleries had been medium-based, or concerned with regional activity, or with stylistic schools, the new curated exhibitions were primarily theory-driven and concerned with renegotiating the relationship of the uncertain, amorphous present to the supposed certainties of the past. This period of exhibition-making also reveals the high culture as a contested space, in which arguments about contemporary art and its situatedness in history move rapidly around and between cultural institutions, critics, curators, and artists.

The new exhibitions were as much works of philosophy as of art history, conceiving of art both as language and as a material form of thought. In particular, ‘Choice!’, an exhibition of work by urban Māori artists, inaugurated a national discussion around the politics of identity expressed through the visual arts that would last for much of the decade. It included *The Indefinite Article* (1990), a sculptural installation by Michael Parekowhai, then in his final year at art school, which restaged a painting by McCahon from 1954 in three dimensions, ‘finishing’ McCahon’s signature phrase I AM with the Māori word ‘he’, meaning ‘some, or ‘a.’ In its problematicisation of bicultural identity and invocation of a new politics of aesthetics, *The Indefinite Article* has come to be regarded as one of the most pivotal works from this period of New Zealand art history, and was subsequently included in a number of

local, national and international exhibitions concerned with the expression of new forms of cultural identity. ‘Choice!’ and Parekowhai’s *Indefinite Article* initiated a conversation about national identity in New Zealand art history that was echoed in other decolonising nations whose artists were similarly concerned with the renegotiation of the public representation of personal identity: with what Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy have called ‘the re-fashioning of the post-colonial self.’¹

Faulkner and Ramamurthy argue that the political and social changes that have occurred in former British colonies since the end of World War II have been negotiated and expressed across a broad spectrum of local visual cultures. They describe a ‘decolonisation of the imagination’, concerned firstly with critique of the spectres of colonialism and imperialism which linger on in what Edward Said has referred to as ‘a kind of general cultural sphere’, and secondly with the expression of new forms of identity which involve the articulation of diverse cultural components. Such theories of identity, informed by the post-structuralist destabilisation of the subject position, deny an essentialist origin of identity rooted in the historical past of both individuals and nations: instead, as Stuart Hall notes, ‘identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.’²

‘Choice!’ represented a rejection of ascribed identity—the notion that New Zealand identity lies dormant in the land, waiting to be written—in favour of an identity formed by negotiation with culture, which is never finished, never fixed, always in a state of becoming. Hall’s concept of personal identity, like Benedict Anderson’s model of nationalism as an ‘imagined community’, is rooted not in the idea of the homeland but in a process of identification with the ‘strategic fictions’ of culture. ‘Belonging’ is not only a matter of nationality or ethnicity but of personal choice, while identity is ‘multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions.’³ Such a model of identity includes the possibility of identification with multiple cultures and subcultures, which might

¹ See Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy, *Visual culture and decolonisation in Britain*, University of California Press, 2006, p.9, and *passim*.

² Stuart Hall, ‘Who Needs Identity?’, in Stuart Hall and Paul de Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: Sage Publications, 2003, (originally published 1996), p.4.

³ Stuart Hall, ‘Who Needs Identity?’, *op.cit.*, p.4.

exhibit mutual antagonisms between themselves. ‘The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent “self”,’ argues Hall.

‘Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about.’⁴ As much as these contradictions and antagonisms are manifest in regimes of representation, the struggle for visibility in the cultural field is equally an internal, psychological state; culture, in such a formulation, might be seen as the collective representation of society’s psychology.

Vanguard art in the early 1990s not only modelled the social antagonisms of a changing society subject to processes of decolonisation and globalisation, but also actively constructed new forms of identity and ways of making meaning. Identity had become a site of contestation, a place of becoming, lying not outside representation but constructed by and within it. While ‘Choice!’ was concerned specifically with the representation of contemporary urban Māori identity, seeking a new paradigm for Māori artists beyond the limiting essentialism of their modernist role as ‘re-presenters of the land and the past’⁵, the bicultural policies which the New Zealand state put into place during the late 1980s and early 1990s prompted a visual renegotiation of various forms of personal identity. And while biculturalism challenged the nation’s concept of itself at home, globalisation and the flow of international cultures provided broader opportunities for the development of new hybridised identities. Building on the social agitations of the transitional decades of the 1970s and 1980s, issues of gender, social class, nationality, sexuality, ethnicity, and the role of the artist in wider society were suddenly in play in New Zealand art. If New Zealand was no longer—by official decree—a culturally homogenous nation in 1990, then neither, argued its artists, was the nature of identity itself unitary, but was instead an assemblage of various fragmentary components, whose scope and affect would be determined by the interaction of personal psychology with lived experience and with the representations of broader culture. Broadly speaking, while the first wave of postmodernist art practice in New Zealand challenged the hegemony of regimes of representation in ascribing identity, the second wave reworked the material culture of the recent past in order to create new, more complex and personal versions of identity, in which the futures imagined by modernism were re-examined in the light of the present.

⁴ Stuart Hall, ‘The Question of Cultural Identity’, in Stuart Hall, David Held and T. McGrew (eds.), *Modernity and Its Futures*, Cambridge: Polity, 1992, p.277.

⁵ George Hubbard and Robin Craw, ‘CHOICE! Beyond Kia Ora: The Paraesthetics of Choice’, *Antic*, 8 December 1990, p.28.

Two ancestor-figures stood behind ‘Choice!’ and the other New Zealand exhibitions concerned with the politics of identity in the first half of the 1990s; the legacy of Colin McCahon and the tradition of customary Māori art. (Michael Parekowhai’s considerable achievement with *The Indefinite Article* was to call on the visual heritage of both cultures and position his work as part of two parallel histories; he continued to do so with later works such as *Ten Guitars* (2000), which functioned in two worlds at once, both as objects of Pākehā contemplation and Māori sociability.) McCahon and the whare whakairo, the decorated meeting house; the two aesthetics effectively represented the visual traditions of New Zealand, as forms of high art rooted deep in the common culture of this place. Their manifestation in creative works seeking to define a new relationship to tradition was subject to the radical historicisation of the post-historic period of the early 1990s. The question of the relationship of the present to the past, of the contemporary to the customary, constituted a particular field of struggle in contemporary Māori art. The antagonistic element in the nationalist discourse was tied to ethnic identity by the 1990s, as opposed to the critique of mass culture in the 1940s and early 1950s; but mass culture was implicated in it. A series of exhibitions starting with the National Art Gallery’s ‘Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake: Artists Construct New Directions’ in 1990, taking in the Auckland Art Gallery’s ‘Korurangi: New Maori Art’ (1996) and ‘Purangiaho: Seeing Clearly’ (2000), and ending with ‘Techno Maori’ at City Gallery Wellington in 2001—all of which except the first included work by Michael Parekowhai—constituted a rolling argument about tradition over a decade.⁶ In the work of both Māori and Pākehā artists of the 1990s, the material culture of the past was represented—

⁶ For a considered discussion of the cultural politics of contemporary Māori art exhibition-making after ‘Choice!’, particularly in the contested relationship of the contemporary to tradition, see Peter Brunt’s essay ‘Since “Choice!”: Exhibiting the “New Maori Art”’, in Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers, *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004, pp.215-242. Brunt sets Hubbard’s exhibition against the foil of the National Art Gallery’s ‘Kohia Ko Taikaka Anake: Artists Construct New Directions’, a project conceived as a celebration of New Zealand’s sesquicentennial year, and the legacy of the Māori artists’ organisation Nga Puna Waihanga. In the ‘new Maori art’, as it was called in the 1990s, Brunt identifies a rupture with marae-based tradition which he ascribes to the transformed historical conditions of the post-colonial era, distinguishing this work from the ‘transitional decades of activist decolonisation from the 1960s leading up to it.’ In his analysis of the discourse of contemporary Māori art, Jonathan Mané-Wheoki describes the anxiety with which members of the Tovey generation of Māori artists—those artists trained as specialist arts and crafts teachers in the 1950s and 1960s—regarded the arrival of the ‘new Maori art’, conscious of a divide in experience and expression between their own generation whose background was in the traditions of the rural marae, and the young generation of urban Māori, artists ‘operating at- or beyond-the-margins of the Maori art world whose ancestry nevertheless demands that they be accorded recognition as Maori.’ (p.13.) See Jonathan Mané-Wheoki’s ‘The Resurgence of Maori Art: Conflicts and Continuities in the 1980s’, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 1995, vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 1995, pp.1-19.

appropriated, remade, reassembled, referenced, recontextualised—as a means of expressing the distance and the difference of the contemporary.

What McCahon represented within the wider New Zealand culture by the 1990s was not the legacy of colonialism—to paraphrase Faulkner and Ramamurthy—but the expression of modern New Zealand Pākehā identity, though arguably that might be close to being the same thing.⁷ In considering how aesthetic identity in New Zealand had been historically represented, and how new national identities might seek to express and represent themselves, McCahon's work, like the art of the traditional meeting houses, became a site of negotiation. By 1990, three years dead, McCahon was becoming a cultural touchstone, his work taken as increasingly emblematic of New Zealand's national visual identity as his aesthetic filtered out from the world of high art into the common culture. At the same time, the rapid growth of the New Zealand art market—and the development of an international market for McCahon's work—combined with, and amplified, increasing reverence for his status as New Zealand's greatest artist. While, as Barton observed, for a younger generation of artists he no longer represented an obstacle to be tackled, his legacy was gradually taking on other generative possibilities. In McCahon's work artists began to see, perhaps, a yardstick by which to measure their own achievements; or a modernist representation of 'New Zealandness' to be revised in the light of the present; or a means of asserting a decisive break with the historical past. Even after his death, McCahon's work remained an active force in the culture. McCahon increasingly represented New Zealand culture to itself; and for artists (and art curators) concerned to use the resources of the national visual tradition as a play of difference to express new forms of identity, McCahon offered a starting point.

'After McCahon', curated by Christina Barton for the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1989, was, as we have seen, the first project to deal explicitly with his legacy. 'After McCahon' was followed in 1994 by 'after after McCahon', an exhibition of pastiches, parodies, and various reworkings and restagings of McCahon's paintings, which took place at a temporary space in Wellington. While Barton's project had drawn a line between McCahon as modernist and the new postmodernist turn in contemporary New Zealand art, 'after after McCahon' represented another stage of development: a good-humoured form of resistance to

⁷ Perhaps the first reference for this notion of McCahon's significance to New Zealand culture was Hamish Keith's obituary of McCahon in May 1987. Keith wrote that: 'McCahon 'defined the essence of an emerging Pakeha culture...[and] gathered together all the threads of its origins.' Hamish Keith, 'Ungrateful nation scorned his genius', *Sunday Star Times*, 31 May 1987, B.5.

the high-mindedness of the high culture. Like the various bodies of work produced in the early 1990s which drew on lowbrow cultural references—beer, tattoos, horror films, heavy metal music, pub games, fake ‘real life confessions’, tabloid journalism—‘after after McCahon’ sought both to renegotiate aspects of identity and to broaden the territory of high-cultural production. Even in its irreverence—arguably, *particularly* in its irreverence—it testified to McCahon’s continued significance within the culture.

Though by the mid-1990s there was little residual scholarly antagonism towards popular culture, the old tension between the high culture and the common culture simmered below the surface, occasionally bubbling up in the national media. It boiled over in the final exhibition project examined in this section, ‘Parade’, one of the opening exhibitions at Te Papa, the new National Museum and Art Gallery, in 1998. Examining various aspects of creativity in the historical formation of national identity, ‘Parade’ saw McCahon’s magisterial *Northland Panels* (1958), produced following his return from the USA, exhibited in proximity to a refrigerator of the same vintage, as a way of commenting on the influence of American culture in New Zealand. The juxtaposition was fiercely denounced by high-cultural critics and commentators who saw in it an affront not only to McCahon’s work, but also to the status of art within—and by—New Zealand’s national museum. Rather than its traditional role as a bastion of high culture, Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand, had been reinvented with a populist mandate to tell stories of local identity. Critics of ‘Parade’ resisted its co-option of art in the service of social history and national identity, and objected to Te Papa’s retooling of the national museum as a space of entertainment rather than contemplation. In viewing the museum as a remedial project, however, what its critics may have passed over is a broader critical view of Te Papa itself as a symbolic representation of New Zealand culture⁸; an institution intelligently constructed with the same techniques of bricolage and self-conscious quotation—‘Antipodean camp’, to use Nick Perry’s term—which characterise the culture as a whole, and which demonstrate the cultural predicament of provincial modernity.⁹

⁸ The notion is Ben Dibley’s, expounded in his paper ‘Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and The Museum: Te Papa, For Example’, *Cultural Studies Review*, vol.13, no.1, 2007.

⁹ Nick Perry, ‘Antipodean Camp’, in *Hyperreality and Global Culture*, London: Routledge, 1998.

XI: 'Choice!' and The Indefinite Article

Installation photograph, 'Choice!', Artspace, Auckland, 1990. Works shown are Michael Parekowhai *Contiki Nett 1850*; *Atarangi: 1350*; *Everyone will live quietly: Micah 4. 4, 1840*; Mike P 'me etahi atu' *The Indefinite Article*. All works 1990. Far wall paintings by Darryl Thomson.

'After McCahon' was followed in 1990 by 'Choice!', a show whose profound impact on New Zealand exhibition-making and Māori art discourse was belied by the lack of resource with which it was produced, as Peter Brunt has noted.¹⁰ While 'after McCahon' had been image-based, and had included predominantly two-dimensional works, 'Choice!' also included video works, large-scale spray-can bombing paintings, and freestanding sculptures, among them Michael Parekowhai's *The Indefinite Article* (1990), which translated a text-based painting by McCahon from 1954 into three dimensions. 'Choice!' expressed a concern for the material culture of the world outside the gallery; an interest in the relationship between art and the mediated expressions of everyday life. It ran for only a short time in a comparatively hard-to-find space; there was no accompanying public programme and little advertising; its

¹⁰ Peter Brunt, 'Since "Choice!": Exhibiting the "New Maori Art"', op.cit., p.215.

publication was a broadsheet rather than a catalogue.¹¹ Only 555 visitors saw it. Yet the polemic around which it was constructed—that art made by Māori artists can be considered Māori art, no matter what its aesthetic or its affiliation to tradition—provided an impetus for argument about the relationship between tradition and the contemporary in several subsequent large-scale exhibitions and publications produced by mainstream art institutions.¹²

When George Hubbard and Robin Craw asked in the final line of their exhibition text ‘Who decides what Maori art is?’, and went on to answer immediately and emphatically: ‘Maori. It’s a Maori Choice!’, they laid down a challenge not only to the ethnocentrism of museological and art institutions predominantly staffed by Pākehā, but to an older generation of Māori artists whose work had hitherto set the terms for discussion. With its concern for the land and spirituality, and its reworking of traditional forms, Māori modernism had become an orthodoxy, by which, as Brunt points out, the identity of contemporary Māori art was authenticated with the authority of the cultural past.¹³ Robert Leonard went so far as to argue that by the end of the 1980s, ‘Contemporary Maori Art’, as a category of thought, had become ‘formulaic, moribund.’¹⁴ Hubbard and Craw argued for a wider definition of what Māori art could be, one which would not be limited to visual appearances through ‘specifically Māori image/symbol/technique/theme’, nor which would require Māori to be ‘bearers of tradition and children of nature’; they argued that contemporary Māori art could be something other than a mere spectacle in the new national politics of bicultural representation. The identity of contemporary Māori art could be less a matter of ascription by others than determined by the personal choice of the artist.

In 1990 ‘choice!’ was an everyday expression of approval. (‘What did ya think of it?’ ‘Choice, bro!’) While the exclamation mark lent the project a Pop sensibility, Hubbard’s title immediately suggested a direct relationship with the lived experience of everyday New Zealand. Although standard New Zealand diction had moved a long way from the cut-glass faux-British received pronunciation of its broadcasters at mid-century, in 1990 ‘choice!’

¹¹ The exhibition broadsheet published by Artspace was reproduced in the critical magazine *Antic*. See George Hubbard and Robin Craw, ‘CHOICE! Beyond Kia Ora: The Paraesthetics of Choice’, *Antic*, 8 December 1990, p.28.

¹² Peter Brunt argues that ‘Choice!’ was ‘seminal to the direction and tenor of contemporary Māori art and much vanguard art in general in New Zealand since 1990.’ ‘Since ‘Choice!’: Exhibiting the ‘New Māori Art’’, op. cit, p.215.

¹³ Peter Brunt, *ibid*, p.229.

¹⁴ Robert Leonard, ‘Michael Parekowhai: Ten Guitars’, in *Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2000, p.100.

represented a degree of linguistic informality—the vernacular—which was still more-or-less alien to the discourse of New Zealand’s public art galleries, if not to its artists. It was a gambit which was quickly picked up by a younger generation of curators and writers. By the mid-1990s, the new informality of address ushered in by ‘Choice!’ had made its way into institutionalised art discourse. There was *Log Illustrated*, an art magazine named for the Captain’s Log on TV’s *Star Trek*, which launched in 1997. The catalogue for ‘Hangover’ (1995-6), an exhibition which toured to four metropolitan venues—its title conceived in ‘Choice!’s similarly cheerful vernacular vein—was described in its introduction as being offered in ‘the spirit of a fanzine’¹⁵. At the same time, popular music provided the titles for a series of public gallery exhibitions, including ‘Vogue/Vague’ at the Canterbury Society of Arts in 1992 (referencing—to the initiated—Madonna’s single); the Auckland City Art Gallery’s ‘Station to Station: The Way of the Cross’ in 1994 (David Bowie’s tenth studio album), and ‘Parallel Lines: Gordon Walters in Context’ in 1994 (Blondie’s third studio album); and ‘Stop Making Sense’ at City Gallery Wellington in 1995 (a live album by Talking Heads). As much as the vanguard pop musicians referenced by the music titles had supplanted the dinosaurs of rock from the 1970s, a new generational spirit was at work in these projects, organised by young New Zealand curators and art writers whose knowledge of popular culture was arguably at least as well-informed as their knowledge of art history.¹⁶ Their exhibition titles, as well as related projects such as ‘Now Showing: Artists Go to the Movies’, an exhibition at the National Film Archive in 1997 curated by artist Robin Neate, suggested a new relationship between art and the wider culture; one which acknowledged the generative power of popular culture tropes such as fandom, quotation, cut-ups, in-jokes, productive mis-readings and misappropriations; and which revealed an interest in ideas that could be networked across the boundaries of cultural forms.

Like the subsequent projects, the exclamatory ‘Choice!’ suggested a certain resistance to the high tone of the high culture; an announcement, perhaps, that a different group of people were to represent themselves here. This was underlined by the invitation to the opening,

¹⁵ John McCormick et al, ‘Introduction’, in *Hangover*, eds. Robert Leonard and Lara Strongman, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Waikato Museum of Art and History Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, 1995, p.5.

¹⁶ It might also be argued, of course, with some justification, that while the re-use of high-brow pop music titles for art exhibitions opened the doors to a new and younger audience for art, and effectively remade the boundaries of the high culture, it was also designed to be an exclusionary strategy, albeit a stealthy one. If you recognised the reference, if you got the joke, if you were delighted by the appearance of ‘your’ popular culture within the walls of the academy, you had effectively printed your own invisible membership ticket to an exclusive club of like-minded people.

which featured ‘Choice!’ written in street graffiti style, with a cartoonish profile of a tattooed Māori warrior visible in the middle of the word. The title strongly suggested the diction of urban Māori, speaking from within the art gallery. McCahon, as ever, had been there before with *Am I Scared Boy (EH)*, a work on paper from his ‘Scared’ series in 1976, which was triggered by a newspaper photograph of two young Māori men venturing hesitantly into the Peter McLeavey Gallery in Wellington in December 1975 to view an exhibition of McCahon’s Urewera posters.¹⁷ In his analysis of McCahon’s *Untitled—Parihaka Triptych* (1972), Jonathan Mané-Wheoki considered that the diction of *Am I Scared Boy (EH)* captured the ‘authentic voice of contemporary, urbanised, often detribalised Māori youth.’ His essay also drew attention to McCahon’s own intertextual linkage of the visitors’ ‘invasion’ of the gallery’s ‘sacred’ precincts ... with one of the most shameful episodes in New Zealand’s colonial history: the Pakeha invasion of the Maori domain of Parihaka’, with McCahon’s inclusion of a quote from one of the displaced Parihaka prisoners.¹⁸ The visit of two Māori men to an art gallery in 1975 seemed newsworthy enough to be documented by a reporter, and the inclusion of the newspaper photograph of their visit in *Necessary Protection*, the 1976 catalogue of McCahon’s work written by Wystan Curnow, has ensured that the image has become part of the lexicon of New Zealand art discourse. Fifteen years later most New Zealand art galleries were still very much Pākehā-based institutions, only just beginning to grapple with the organisational implications and issues of representation implicit in a bicultural partnership. ‘Choice!’ signalled that urban Māori would speak for themselves.¹⁹

¹⁷ As a readymade image of doubt, anger, and alienation, with a back-story filled with cultural antagonisms, *Am I Scared Boy (EH)* was reworked by several artists in the 1990s, including Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett who refigured it as *Angry (Scared Too, After Colin McCahon)* in 1992, and Peter Robinson (Kai Tahu) with *Boy Am I Scarred Eh!* (1997). With the inclusion of a spiral that recalled the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa’s ‘thumbprint’ branding device, Robinson’s work also functioned as an ambiguous critique of institutionalised biculturalism. In 2000 Auckland-based artist Steve Carr produced a miniature painting with doors like a religious icon, in which the text of McCahon’s image had been altered to read ‘Boy am I sacred Eh!.’

¹⁸ Jonathan Mané-Wheoki, ‘An Ornament for the Pakeha: Colin McCahon’s Parihaka Triptych’, in Te Miringa Hohaia, Gregory O’Brien and Lara Strongman (eds.), *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance*, Wellington: Victoria University Press and City Gallery Wellington, 2001, p.129.

¹⁹ There is a danger, of which I am horribly conscious, in the presumption that the experience of members of any cultural group will be homogenous, and that the artist whose work is identified with a particular cultural standpoint will be seen to be speaking for others. Such a stance reassigns the ‘universalising voice’ of the past to the contemporary artist as spokesperson for the identity of a specific group of others. This seems to be a kind of essentialising position which stereotypes experience and identity on ethnic or cultural grounds, and which packages up increasingly small and tightly-defined groupings of the ‘Other’ as in various modes including ‘urban Māori’, ‘sex-positive feminist’, ‘blue-collar worker’, etc. Understandably, many artists working in the mode of post-colonial identity politics have been anxious to avoid any reading of their work in such terms, employing strategies such as self-portraiture, the inclusion of images and objects from their personal lives, and the publication of parallel texts which draw attention to personal history, as a means of indicating that they are speaking for and about *themselves* rather than attempting to represent the experience of anyone else.

A R T S P A C E

25 July - 17 August 1990

You are invited to the opening of
an exhibition of work by

Jacqueline Fraser
Rongotai Lomas
Barnard McIntyre
Michael Parekowhai
Diane Prince
Lisa Reihana
Darryl Thomson

On 24 July 1990 at 5.00 pm

With the support of the
Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand

FIRST FLOOR • QUAY BUILDING • 6-8 QUAY STREET • AUCKLAND
• TELEPHONE 3034-965 • GALLERY HOURS 11 am - 5 pm MONDAY-FRIDAY

Invitation for the opening of 'Choice!', an exhibition curated by George Hubbard, Artspace Auckland 1990.

‘Choice!’ included work by seven artists.²⁰ These were artists whose practice was outside the mainstream of Māori art, excluded on grounds of youth, radicalism, medium, or a combination of all three; artists whose work addressed the cultural politics of the historical moment. Many of the works included in the exhibition drew on popular culture and urban experience; Darryl Thompson (the rapper known as DLT) exhibited large-scale spray-painted canvases, whose aesthetic was a direct translation from the contemporary hip-hop street art with which he was also involved. Diane Prince’s wall installation represented a withering symbolic attack on the co-option of Māori art into the national sesquicentennial, with the phrase ‘Destroy consciousness: Tenei hei Māori-ora’ issuing in a cartoonish speech-bubble from a bird-headed figure.²¹ And Michael Parekowhai, who was in his final year at art school, exhibited four conceptual sculptures—ambiguous objects capable of a variety of readings depending on one’s point of view or investment in one’s own personal identity—one of which, in particular, revealed a remarkable ability both to problematise biculturalism and to enter into a dialogue with the wider culture.

The first of Parekowhai’s sculptures, *Contiki Nett 1850*, was a broken gumball machine filled with plastic tikis, a comment on both the commodification of contemporary Māori art and the earlier dismissal of Māori modernism as ‘tourist art.’²² A readymade assemblage, it reworked Duchamp by investing the critical tradition of western art that he spearheaded with specifically Māori content. It accompanied three large-scale text-based sculptures, which, in the context of New Zealand art in 1990 as much as today, immediately brought McCahon’s painted words to mind: it’s impossible to include text in New Zealand art without harnessing oneself to the tradition of McCahon’s work. But for Parekowhai, as for other artists of his generation who came to public attention after McCahon’s death, McCahon was not so much an artistic force to be negotiated as a cultural element to be remixed; and in Parekowhai’s practice, to be refigured—along with the work of other significant twentieth-century artists from outside New Zealand—as a means of talking about contemporary Māori identity.

²⁰ Jacqueline Fraser, Rongotai Lomas, Barnard McIntyre, Michael Parekowhai, Diane Prince, Lisa Reihana, and Darryl Thompson.

²¹ Peter Brunt, ‘Since “Choice!”: Exhibiting the New Māori Art’, op. cit, p.226.

²² Plastic ‘greenstone’ tiki were given out as souvenirs to international passengers by New Zealand’s national carrier, Air New Zealand, a practice that continued until the late 1970s.

Jonathan Mané-Wheoki comments that the ‘emerging, distinctively Maori contemporary art’ of the Tovey generation was ‘commonly dismissed by the mainstream New Zealand art world of the 1960s as tourist or airport art, or museum fodder, or because it seemed merely decorative.’ He notes that the ‘new Maori art’ of the 1960s did have its Pākehā champions, however, including Colin McCahon’s friend the librarian and art collector Ron O’Reilly. Jonathan Mané-Wheoki, ‘The Resurgence of Maori Art: Conflicts and Continuities in the 1980s’, op. cit., p.10.

Parekowhai's *Atarangi: 1350* was a trident-shaped hard-edged geometric sculpture whose form recalled the three-fingered hand of customary Māori carving design. It looked like a Māori version of one of Donald Judd's minimalist Specific Objects. If you imagined it turned on its side, it spelled the word 'HE.' Constructed from an assemblage of scaled-up Cuisenaire rods (the modular system used to teach numeracy in classrooms of the 1960s and 1970s, and later adapted to the teaching of te reo Māori), its title referred firstly to the Māori system of total immersion language education and secondly to the arrival date of the great fleet of Māori waka or canoes in Aotearoa New Zealand. We learn about the past, the work seemed to suggest, by using the building blocks of the present; history is given form by the language of today. Tradition does not endure in an essential form, but is reconstituted and remade in each generation.

Likewise, Parekowhai's *Everyone will live quietly. Micah 4: 4, 1850* used contemporary materials to evoke a historical subject, problematising the present's relationship with the past. A set of four faux-greenstone Formica-covered three-dimensional words each spelling MICAH were arrayed in serried ranks on the floor, the words variously a pun, an allusion to the artist's own identity and to the history of Māori millennial prophetic movements of the late 19th century. The font was fat and square and blockish, like the commercial sign-writing on New Zealand buildings in the first half of the twentieth century. The work was clearly a text to be read, yet its readings were multiple and seemingly subject to internal argument; not so much a matter of being one thing or the other, it suggested many things, all at once, some of them quarrelsome and antagonistic towards the others. In a complex and generative exchange of relationships between form and title, between material and metaphor, between Māori social history and contemporary art practice, the journey of the chosen people to the biblical promised land prophesied by Micah was contrasted with the Māori struggle against colonial oppression for land and resource following the European settlement of New Zealand. (McCahon, of course, had painted the same subject four decades earlier: his *Promised Land* (1948) was buried deep in the Takaka hills near Nelson, materialising in the form of a bubble let into the landscape, inside which was depicted the curve of coast at Farewell Spit, a landscape-within-a-landscape, a spiritual homeland which signified 'the end and the

beginning of it all'²³ ... and 'the place where the painter never arrives.'²⁴) The present, clearly, had failed to live up to the promises of the past.

The last of Parekowhai's four works in 'Choice!' took on McCahon's legacy directly. *The Indefinite Article* (originally titled *Mike P 'me etahi atu' The Indefinite Article*) was a huge three-dimensional version of McCahon's instantly-recognisable 'cafe cubist' lettering from the painting *I Am* (1954), rendered in customwood and white house paint, roughly applied.²⁵ The letters stood individually on the gallery floor, rising to more than two-and-a-half metres: a palisade of language barring the way of the viewer who was confronted by their address. But who was the 'I'? For whom did the work speak? Was it a quote, or an original statement? Robert Leonard has written about the way that McCahon's painted biblical texts 'confuse the identities of the artist and the Creator to the point where he could be accused of blowing his own trumpet', and likewise, the identity of the monumental 'I' whose speech Parekowhai's work articulates remains ambiguous.²⁶ Rather than stopping at 'I am', however, Parekowhai added the word 'he.' I AM HE. In English, the sentence was slightly baffling: was Parekowhai, just out of art school, equating himself with McCahon—who, since his death in 1987, was rapidly approaching iconic status in New Zealand culture—or was it a bold statement of masculine identity? When the work was exhibited in Sydney a couple of years later, and a group of female artists mounted a protest alongside it, chanting defiantly 'I am SHE!', it was not so much a misreading as an acknowledgement of the work's own antagonistic possibilities, its recognition and incorporation of the slippages and difficulties of translation as well as of the unpalatability of the universalising voice appearing to speak for all.

But the reading of the work abroad might be quite different from its translation at home. In te reo Māori, the word 'he' is the indefinite article; it translates as 'some', or 'many.' *I am* not an individual, suggested this approach to the work: I am a people, a multitude, one of many. I am Mike P, 'me etahi atu', one of some. The work could be read either way, as an expression

²³ Colin McCahon, quoted in L.H. Bieringa, *McCahon: 'Religious Works 1946-1952'*, Palmerston North: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1975, p.49.

²⁴ Colin McCahon, letter to Nola Barron, December 1969, printed in *Art New Zealand*, no.51, Winter 1989, p.103. For a discussion of this work, see Gordon H. Brown, 'McCahon and the Promised Land', in his *Towards a Promised Land: On the Life and Art of Colin McCahon*, op.cit., pp.123-134.

²⁵ 'Cafe cubism' is Robert Leonard's term for McCahon's characteristic block lettering, in 'Perverse Homages', *Planet*, no.13, Winter 1994, p.78, and 'Against Purity', *Art New Zealand*, no.59, 1991, p.53.

²⁶ Robert Leonard, 'Against Purity', *Art New Zealand*, no.59, 1991, p.53.

of the individualism of the western art tradition or of the collective identity of Māori visual culture; but it could also be read as both at once, a bicultural position of equivalence. ‘I’ in English, at the same time, *in the same sentence*, as ‘He’—many—in te reo Māori. Not an either/or but an and. The article—that is, the work—is indefinite, in that it resists definition. Its ambiguity is part of its charge. Twenty-one years after making *The Indefinite Article* (which he completed aged twenty-one), Michael Parekowhai stated of the work:

It’s that ability to be one and some simultaneously, an individual in a much greater cog. It wasn’t a flippant one-liner. I understood from an early age that I was a small part of something that was bigger than the single entity. The thing about identity—it’s much more complicated than just being Māori or just being this or just being that. It’s a complicated set of parameters in which, in order to have a voice, you have to be aware of where you fit into the larger picture.²⁷

‘It looks like an incredible assertion of self,’ he commented. ‘But the flip-side is very humbling. I’m part of something. I’m “some”. I’m “a”.’²⁸

While Barton had deployed McCahon in order to effect a critique of the essentialism of modernist art, Parekowhai offered a critique of an essentialist reading of Māori art by reworking McCahon as a readymade. In Parekowhai’s *The Indefinite Article*, McCahon is treated in part as a cultural meme, a component of the free-floating material detritus of the just-past, available to be remixed and attached to a new context. The original is an unspoken presence in the work, an ancestor standing behind it; a point of reference that gestures towards a field of interpretation. The condition of being ‘after McCahon’ has here moved on from an articulation of difference to a reworking of tradition: an approach which acknowledges McCahon’s work as an active agent in the culture. Parekowhai’s achievement was to turn an icon of New Zealand art into a statement about the complexity of contemporary bicultural identity; effectively to remake a work by McCahon as a work of Māori art; and to locate the potential for Māori identity in the work of a Pākehā artist.

²⁷Sally Blundell. ‘Art’s Bright Star’, *New Zealand Listener*, 14 May 2011, p.31.

²⁸Michael Parekowhai quoted in Margo White, ‘Mike’s World’, *Metro*, March 2004, p.59. Critics also noticed that the work included an anagram of the letters of Parekowhai’s first name, minus ‘C’ and ‘L’ which do not appear in the Māori alphabet.

Michael Parekowhai, *The Indefinite Article*, 1990, wood and acrylic, dimensions variable, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and Chartwell Gift Collection, purchased with generous assistance from Jim and Mary Barr

Colin McCahon, *I Am*, 1954, oil, 373 x 568 mm. Collection of the Hocken Library, Dunedin.

Colin McCahon, *I Am*, 1954, oil, 373 x 568 mm. Collection of the Hocken Library, Dunedin. (The reproduction on which Michael Parekowhai based *The Indefinite Article*.)

Barton had indicated this potential in her catalogue essay for ‘after McCahon’, pointing out that while McCahon had played a vital role in complicating and extending ideas of what constitutes a response to the local, he had also ‘become part of the texture of this place, to be taken (or left) as one of many cultural indices in a proliferating field of possibilities.’²⁹ However, Parekowhai’s approach differed subtly from that of the artists in ‘after McCahon’ who referred directly to McCahon’s work. Rather than treating McCahon’s characteristic forms as identifiable elements in an assemblage, Parekowhai reworked a single well-known image by the artist on a monumental scale, retaining the signature aesthetic while subjecting the idea to a radical transformation of context. Parekowhai’s selection of McCahon from the field of cultural possibilities signalled a certain kind of combative relationship with history; a desire to remake it on new terms; remixing history simultaneously as homage and critique. (He did the same thing a couple of years later with *Kiss the Baby Goodbye* (1994), remaking Gordon Walters’s koru painting *Kahukura* (1969) in sheet steel at a scale of four by four metres.³⁰)

²⁹ Christina Barton, op.cit., p.16.

³⁰ Parekowhai’s appropriation of work by Pākehā artists contributed a degree of complexity and generative ambiguity to the heated debate about cross-cultural borrowing in the early 1990s that had been centred around Gordon Walters’s use of the koru form, and which had been ignited by Rangihira Panoho’s essay ‘Maori: At the Centre, On the Margins’ in *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art*, ed. Mary Barr, Sydney:

Far from questioning the possibility of communicability, *The Indefinite Article* unleashed a flurry of communication, a multitude of voices speaking at once, each of them identifying themselves as ‘I.’ Speaking in the first person could be problematic under the unswerving gaze of postmodernist theory in the early 1990s in New Zealand: in her essay for ‘after McCahon’, Barton had critiqued the first person voice—the big I AM—as an ‘omniscient narrative technique which assumes the coherence of the unitary self, one which entails an exclusive, focussed point of view’, commenting that while *I* am speaking ‘other voices holding different speaking positions cannot be heard.’³¹ But rather than either conducting or frustrating the validity of McCahon’s universalising voice, Parekowhai split the signal into multiple channels. His ‘I’ was demonstrably many; multiple histories and identities competed with one another for visibility within the work, capable, in their various generative antagonisms, of productive readings and misreadings.

It’s worth noting that Parekowhai’s *Indefinite Article* was itself generated by a misreading. Criticised by his tutors at art school for not producing preparatory drawings and keeping a workbook through which they could assess the development of his ideas, in a calculated provocation to the idea of the teaching of art as an iterative process he found a reproduction of what he assumed was a graphite drawing by McCahon—a small black-and-white gutter illustration in the *I Will Need Words* catalogue—which he used as his blueprint.³² (‘They can blame McCahon if they don’t like it!’ said Parekowhai, secure in the knowledge that McCahon was inviolate.³³) Parekowhai treated McCahon’s ‘drawing’ not as a mode of thought but as a plan for an unrealised three-dimensional object. ‘I thought,’ commented

Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992. Panoho had detected a ‘residual colonialism’ (p.133) in Walters’s appropriation of the Māori form, in which his ‘programme of abstraction ... progressively simplified the form, divesting it of meaning and imperfection and distancing it from its cultural origins’ (p.130). This charge was answered by Francis Pound who argued that ‘as a “translation”, Walters’s work has actually enhanced the prestige of the Maori koru. ... In Walters the koru “swells with a new strength, it draws itself up to its full height, it takes to itself a maximum power”.’ (Francis Pound quoted in Robert Leonard, ‘Perverse Homages’, *Planet*, no.13, Winter 1994, p.78.) The stakes were high and the positions adversarial. With his *Kiss the Baby Goodbye* (1994), Michael Parekowhai, argued Robert Leonard, effectively moved the debate on from its moralising mire. His work could neither be reduced to a prosecution nor a defence of Walters’s work, nor could it be understood as a critique of appropriation, given that it was itself one. Instead, suggested Leonard, ‘Parekowhai prefers to generate interference patterns.’ (p.79)

³¹ Christina Barton, op.cit., p.8.

³² Wystan Curnow, *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon’s Word and Number Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1984.

³³ Michael Parekowhai, quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, ‘The Indefinite Article: Michael Parekowhai’s riff on representation’, op.cit., p.74. (Other quotes in this paragraph are drawn from the same source, in which Jim and Mary Barr also recount the story of Parekowhai’s productive misreading of McCahon’s original.)

Parekowhai, 'that I would present the letters as objects so that your physical body would engage with the space, which was something that McCahon could never manage in his painting.' Like McCahon in the 1940s working from brightly-coloured chromolithographic reproductions of paintings by Titian, Parekowhai's primary experience of the original in reproduction informed the aesthetic of his work. When he saw McCahon's *I Am* for the first time in real life—exhibited as part of 'Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art' at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1992, an exhibition which also included Parekowhai's *Indefinite Article*—he was surprised. 'My God, it's got colour in it,' he said later, recounting the experience. 'It's a painting!'

Central to the argument of 'Choice!' (and Parekowhai's *Indefinite Article* was central to the exhibition) was the late 20th-century notion that identity is not one thing but an accumulation of many; that the personal or cultural or even the national self is an assemblage of fragments drawn from traditions and histories and memories and the experience of daily life; that authenticity of expression is always a matter of selected fictions. Identity—like the meaning of a text or a work of art—is not fixed, is not a matter of direct line of succession between root and branch, but is an endlessly mutable proposition, the unruly rhizomatic structure described by Deleuze and Guattari which careers off in many directions at once and, connected by multiple nodes, is always in a state of remaking itself. Misreadings, misunderstandings, and failures of communication are frequently productive of new cultural forms. In a networked and digitised society, 'belonging' is fundamentally a matter of imaginative identification; cultural elements are links in a chain of identity, and are remixed continually, looping and combining to make new derivative works, and to express new hybrid identities. The art of the 1990s concerned with identity politics represented not only critical sites for the production of new identities, but, with their multiple references from across the broad spectrum of culture remixed in juxtaposition and occasional antagonism with one another, modelled the process by which people in a globalised, digitised world economy understand and construct their own identities. As much as—to evoke Wystan Curnow's definition of high art—they brought new forms of thought and feeling into the culture, such works explicitly manifested new ways of making meaning.

In much the same way as McCahon's work had done immediately after the war, Michael Parekowhai—and other New Zealand artists concerned with identity politics in the early 1990s, particularly Shane Cotton, Tony de Lautour, Séraphine Pick, Ronnie van Hout and

Peter Robinson—represented a circuit-breaker in the flow of culture.³⁴ There is a schism embedded within their work; a stoppage or rupture; a collapse of history into intertextuality, as the tradition of New Zealand art becomes a mode of visual representation among many others to be sampled and remixed. Implicit in their project is the interplay of everyday experience with the traditions of the high culture. As appropriation artists, concerned with reworking found images—readymade cultural components drawn from art history, or national history, or popular culture, or even from personal memory—their practice had a great deal in common with musicians who sample and recombine elements from other recordings to make new works. Gilroy's concept of the 'changing same' in popular music has been influential on much subsequent thinking about the nature of identity in a digitised and diasporic world.³⁵ As we have seen, the 'changing same' suggests that links to an originary tradition are essentially performative, expressed through cultural productions which are constructed by means of reiteration and recombination. Tradition is not only renewed but is reinvented by the constant processing and reprocessing of cultural forms. This is achieved by the process of transgressive repetition that Deleuze identified as a critical element in the affirmation of culture.³⁶

Whereas in the late 1940s McCahon saw no credible national tradition of art in which he might work as a modern New Zealand artist, and proceeded to invent his own—a sense of New Zealandness based on an intersection between high art and the common culture, which admitted a bricolage of influences from the world at large—fifty years later 'Choice!' and a new generation of artists (most of whom were graduates of the university art schools at Auckland and Canterbury) assumed a similarly broad cultural position from which to speak about the lived experience of detribalised urban Māori. The result was to establish contemporary Māori art as a contested category in relation to customary Māori practice. While critics began to argue that Māori art could not only employ the techniques of western

³⁴ This idea is Garry Nicholas's, from a personal conversation in Brisbane as we stood looking at Michael Parekōwhai's *Ten Guitars* installation at the Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 2000.

³⁵ See Paul Gilroy, 'Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity and the Challenge of a Changing Same', in *Popular Music: Music and Identity*, ed. Simon Frith, New York: Routledge, 2005, pp.182-205. (Originally published in *Black Music Research Journal*, no. 11, vol.2, 1991, pp.111-36.)

³⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, 'Introduction: Repetition and Difference', in *Difference and Repetition*, London Continuum Publishing, 2004 (originally published 1968), pp.1-35. Deleuze posited that repetition is an element of humour and irony, in that both require a 'false submission' to a law of generalities, which is then overturned by means of 'too-perfect attention to detail.' 'Repetition is ... by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws.' (pp.5-6.)

art, but also its forms and practices, to speak about Māori experience, Michael Parekowhai's particular contribution was the suggestion that Māori identity might also be located within globalised commodity culture and the material detritus of everyday life; in guitars and pianos, in Hallmark cards, in number-plates, in Vegas neon, in plastic Croc sandals, in the Lone Ranger and Tonto, in sheriff's badges and ornamental seals and pick-up sticks and elephant-shaped bookends and Elvis.³⁷

Rather than resist commodification, Parekowhai's work appears to approach or to incorporate commodification as the underlying condition of contemporary culture. The material form of the commodity inserted into the discourse of art is the vessel for the distribution of the idea. This implies less a lack of criticality than a desire to work with the material substance of the world as it presents itself. In reviewing 'Choice!', Stephen Zepke saw an aspect of Debordian *détournement* in Parekowhai's use of the gumball machine filled with plastic tikis. He read the presence of the commercial machine stationed in the gallery as 'a symbol of colonial commercial exploitation', suggesting that its brokenness represented Māori resistance to appropriation of culture by 'Pakeha commercial interests'.³⁸ If the gumball machine were a symbol of Pākehādom, then effectively Parekowhai had appropriated it—had disarticulated it from the dominant discourse and rearticulated it around the interests of the marginal, to borrow from Laclau and Mouffe's analysis of the operations of hegemonic struggles—in order to effect a critique of colonial exploitation.³⁹ But writing ten years later, Peter Brunt suggested that such a simple colonial binary no longer existed; the interests of the commodification system were those of the system and could no longer simply be read as

³⁷ In 'Techno Māori', an exhibition he co-curated in 2001 with Deidre Brown, Jonathan Mané-Wheoki argued that Māori artists have, in fact, moved rapidly to incorporate western techniques since first contacts with European people, and continue to do so. 'Just as, when European technology and materials first arrived in Aotearoa, our ancestors embraced and acculturated them, and just as their descendants embraced and acculturated the artforms, materials and techniques of western modernism; so a new generation of Maori artists is utilising digital media.' Jonathan Mané-Wheoki, *Techno Māori: Māori Art in the Digital Age*, CD-Rom, City Gallery Wellington.

John Walsh, artist and curator, similarly identified contemporary Māori art not by its aesthetic or its technique of production but by the ethnicity of its maker, stating that 'Māori art is simply work by artists of Māori descent, regardless of how it looks.' Cushla Parekowhai, Michael Parekowhai's older sister and collaborator, suggested by contrast that the primary determinant of Māori art was the response of a Māori audience to it: 'Māori art is art where Māori can see themselves in the picture, either through visual motifs, reference to history, or subject matter. If it speaks to Māori, of Māori, then it is Māori.' (John Walsh and Cushla Parekowhai are quoted in Natalie Poland, *Into the Present: A Resource Kit on Recent Māori Art*, Palmerston North: Manawatu Art Gallery, 1999, p.2.)

³⁸ Stephen Zepke, 'Difference without Binary Oppositions. A chance for a: "Choice!"', *Antic*, no.8, 1992, p.29.

³⁹ Laclau and Mouffe define articulation as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.' See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985, p.105.

‘Pākehā’, or ‘western.’ Parekowhai, like almost everyone else in New Zealand, had grown up with globalised commodity culture.⁴⁰ Rather than a generalised critique of colonial economic exploitation, Brunt suggested, Parekowhai instead sought to address the ‘commodification of Maori art, full stop.’⁴¹ By using the plastic Air New Zealand tiki as a readymade, Parekowhai offered a trenchant commentary about cultural tokenism, problematising the nature of the inclusion of Māori culture in contemporary representations of the national, including art exhibitions.

In 1999 Michael Parekowhai commented that he and his brothers and sisters had been taught at home that ‘being Maori does not necessarily depend on physical things or the traditional symbols to express itself. Being Maori draws upon all that’s around you so that we might understand its underlying spirit.’ His ancestral meeting house, the traditional source of Māori identity, had been abandoned, ‘but only in the physical sense. This is because we know that we belong to this place. We carry its spirit with us wherever we go.’

Our living marae is really our suburban family home. It is a 1960s two-storeyed brick-and-tile house with five bedrooms, four toilets and a carport that can hold a trailer and caravan. That’s how it is. That’s the marae I know, that’s the meeting house I know. Our house is not decorated with taonga. We have TVs, a radiogram, some Copenhagenware crystal vases, beige Berber carpets and central heating instead.⁴²

One of the ways that Māori spirit was carried from place to place through post-war New Zealand society was in the form of the guitar, a popular history revisited by Parekowhai in his *Patriot: Ten Guitars* (1999). Parekowhai inlaid ten archtop guitars—the blues guitarist’s instrument of choice—with ornately swirling paua-shell kowhaiwhai patterns. Displayed on circular white bases that looked something between modernist museum plinths and go-go dancers’ podiums, they were banked by ten lightboxes each with a different kowhaiwhai pattern computer-cut from adhesive vinyl, which recalled the heke, or rafters, of the Māori meeting house. At the time of the ‘second great migration’ of Māori, as people moved en masse from rural tribal rohe to the cities in search of industrial work, the guitar figured as an instrument of sociability, bringing people together as they adjusted to—and made for

⁴⁰ For a discussion of biculturalism through the lens of American movie westerns, see Cushla Parekowhai, ‘What do you mean *we*, Whiteman? The Lone Ranger and Tonto in a Puha Picture Show’, in Cushla Parekowhai, Kerry Buchanan, and Selina Crosbie, ‘Americanisation: American popular culture’s influence on Maori and Pacific Island identity’, *MidWest*, no.3, 1993, pp.27-29.

⁴¹ Peter Brunt, ‘Since “Choice!”: Exhibiting the “New Māori Art”’, *op.cit.*, p.219.

⁴² Michael Parekowhai, quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, ‘The Indefinite Article: Michael Parekowhai’s riff on representation’, *op.cit.*, pp.72-76.

themselves—an urban way of life. Engelbert Humperdinck’s *Ten Guitars* (1967), played in the characteristic boom-chucka ‘Māori strum’ style, has been described as New Zealand’s alternative national anthem. It was the constant refrain of a thousand Saturday night suburban parties and pub band sets of the late 1960s and 1970s. (‘Dance, dance, dance to my ten guitars / And very soon you’ll know just where you are...’) A B-side to *Please Release Me* everywhere else in the world, in New Zealand popular Māori culture made *Ten Guitars* a grassroots hit. Parekowhai’s ten guitars were made to be played as well as exhibited; the exhibition, in fact, was almost secondary to the opening nights in different cities which saw pick-up bands of local performers play *Ten Guitars* and other ‘Māori standards’ like *Guitar Boogie*. These occasions affirmed the communality of music in conferring group identity; and pointed up the sociable collectivity of Māori identity in comparison to the silence and the austerity of the guitars viewed by day in the art gallery.

Michael Parekowhai, *Ten Guitars*, from *Patriot: Ten Guitars*, 1999.

Parekowhai’s *Ten Guitars* figured both the song and the instrument primarily as emblems of evolving Māori identity rather than evidence of the predations of globalised American popular culture, or as testament to the loss of forms of customary culture, although the currents of both of these histories run through the work. *Ten Guitars* suggested that Māori identity could be represented by the cultural forms that Māori chose to use to express themselves, wherever and whenever those forms had originated. ‘For Parekowhai,’ commented Robert Leonard, ‘it was the Maori that colonised the guitar, not the other way

around.’⁴³ And from the crucible of urban Māori culture of the 1960s and 1970s, out to the wider culture of New Zealand; in July 2011 *Ten Guitars* was included in a range of ‘Kiwiana’ stamps put out by New Zealand Post, which included other such icons of national identity as No.8 wire, the four stars of the Southern Cross, and the Bluff oyster.

At once good-natured and hard-hitting, capable of being read dialectically both as celebration and critique, Parekowhai’s *Patriot: Ten Guitars* is, like *The Indefinite Article*, concerned with the interplay of power and resistance in the culture of the everyday. While locating the potential for Māori identity in global material culture, it also invokes the repressions of New Zealand history. A related work is *Untitled (Before Elvis there was nothing)*, originally produced as a billboard project for Artspace in Auckland in 1993, and remade as a pagework for the Australia Pacific Triennial catalogue in 2000, when *Patriot: Ten Guitars* was exhibited at the Queensland Art Gallery.⁴⁴ Parekowhai overlaid the infamous observation attributed to John Lennon, ‘Before Elvis there was nothing’, over a photograph by Ans Westra of Māori children pretending to be a show-band, ‘hamming it up’ with toy instruments and a microphone made out of an Edmonds baking tin on a broom-handle. While, like *Ten Guitars*, it evokes the rich narrative of Māori showmanship, the work equally alludes to the repressed history of black music to which Elvis Presley was indebted; and by implication, to the repression of Māori culture and its subsequent appropriation by Pākehā artists. It also invokes the history of Māori adoption (and transformation) of globalised popular culture at the expense of indigenous cultural traditions; though arguably, within the wider context of Parekowhai’s work and statements, the adoption of new material forms might not involve the loss of Māori spirit, which exists both within material culture and beyond it. Any reading of the work is made more complex still by the knowledge that the unidentified Māori children in Westra’s images were photographed in rural Parikino School in 1967, where Parekowhai’s parents were the sole teachers, and which his older brothers and sister attended as students (Parekowhai was born the following year).⁴⁵ Tensioned between traditional culture and globalised popular culture, the subjects of the photograph share common identity with the artist.

⁴³ Robert Leonard, ‘Patriotism’, in *Michael Parekowhai Ten Guitars*, Artspace, Auckland, 1999, p.10.

⁴⁴ Illustrated facing Robert Leonard’s article, ‘Michael Parekowhai: Ten Guitars’, in *Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2000, p.100.

⁴⁵ See Cushla Parekowhai’s interview with her parents about their time at Parikino School and the context for Ans Westra’s photographs, ‘Lucky no-one’s got a camera eh: Ans Westra in Parikino on the Whanganui River’, in ed. Lawrence McDonald, *Handboek: Ans Westra Photographs*, Wellington: BWX, 2004, pp.29-41.

Ten Guitars, a party compilation CD released in 2009, whose playlist features songs by local and international artists including the Doobie Brothers, Kenny Rogers, and Engelbert Humperdinck, under the tagline of ‘from Heartland New Zealand.’

Identity politics—expressed through remixes of the widest possible spectrum of culture—moved through and beyond ‘Choice!’ to become the critical issue in New Zealand art in the first half of the 1990s. ‘Choice!’ signalled a new energy and direction in contemporary Māori art practice, and arguably raised the stakes for the expression of the lived experience of individuals from other cultural groups.⁴⁶ It also pointed to broader processes beginning to have effect in the culture, as decolonisation and subsequently digitisation led to the fragmentation and networking of social identity across geographical boundaries. Identities were less concerned with the geographical boundaries of the nation-state and more with the interplay between culture and experience. In New Zealand, this turn from an identity based on a sense of connection with place in favour of one based on a sense of connection with cultures happened at much the same time as the decolonising moment. The combined effect was a seismic shift in the national culture that resulted in the development of new identities, many of which were first articulated in the visual arts by means of transgressive repetition and recontextualisation of pre-existing cultural forms. Inevitably, this process had an effect on the nation’s collective view of itself. Against the background of the rapid globalisation of

⁴⁶ Anthropologist David Graeber points out, however, that those identities most likely to be celebrated within the framework of the academy’s new identity politics were those most likely to be determinant of social mobility; those identities which (still) saw higher education as a means to social advancement. ‘Dramatically lacking in debates about identity politics are identities like, say, “Baptist”, or “Redneck”,’ notes Graeber. ‘That is, those that encompass the bulk of the American working class, who are made to vanish rhetorically at the same time as their children are, in fact, largely excluded from college campuses and all the social and cultural worlds college opens up.’ David Graeber, ‘Value as the Importance of Action’, *The Commoner*, no.10, 2005, p.8, <http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=22>. In New Zealand the general invisibility of working-class identities as a subject of academic address is complicated by a generalised belief in the nation’s social egalitarianism (underpinned by supposed equality of access to educational opportunities). Consequently, there has been comparatively little critical engagement with the blue-collar cultural identities that feature in the works of New Zealand artists from the early 1990s, including Tony de Lautour, Ronnie van Hout, and Terry Urbahn.

culture and commerce, the development of ‘Brand New Zealand’—a national point of global distinction—started to be seen by cultural administrators as increasingly important for the visibility of New Zealand artists and other government-supported export products in overseas markets. Such an instrumental notion of art as a means of asserting national identity was frequently resisted, at times vehemently refused, by artists themselves; and as the 1990s progressed, the relationship of art, visual culture, and ethnicity to the evolving sense of national identity became progressively more highly-charged.

XII: Afterwards: After After McCahon and Zombie Nationalism

Awareness of what great gloom
Stands in a land of settlers
With never a soul at home.

Allen Curnow, from 'Home and Land', 1941

Ronnie van Hout, *The Living Dead*, 1994, 340 x 510mm , black and white photograph

By the early 1990s it was becoming apparent that something in New Zealand art had ended, and that something else was forming in the smoke which had obscured its passing. Afterness was in the air of the culture, less as a constitutive form than as a mood, and frequently as a subject. There was the sense in the new art not of a previous experience having been absorbed and built upon by the indebted follower—art history's evolutionary chain of links—but instead of a rupture; the discomfiture of something already having finished, or having broken, or having collapsed in on itself; the confirmation of a discontinuity in the account.

Although, as Pound points out, New Zealand art in the 1930s likewise ‘proclaims itself as discontinuous with the art that proceeds it’, the postmodernist moment involves a different kind of schism.⁴⁷ What had changed in the culture by the early 1990s was a sense of the present’s relationship to the past. The contemporary was no longer being defined by the new but instead by a reworking of the old.

The modern had suddenly become outmoded; and some, at least, mourned its passing. But there was also considerable ambivalence about its loss. Much as ‘Choice!’ had problematised the category of contemporary Māori art—and in so doing had subjected Māori modernism, which had previously stood for the contemporary, to a process of radical historicisation—both Pākehā and Māori artists were similarly reappraising the legacy of modernist art. A popular strategy involved the parody and pastiche of modernist tropes, or appropriation of significant modernist works. Such works restaged notable moments in modernist art history using everyday non-art materials, or forms and aesthetics borrowed from mass culture. Michael Parekowhai recast Duchamp’s *Fountain* as a plastic press-out kitset (1994); Julian Dashper made geometric ‘stripe’ paintings from pre-painted commercial awning canvas (1992). In dealing with the legacy of modernist painting in New Zealand, there were two ancestor figures whose works were appropriated more than any others by a younger generation concerned with the expression of new identities and the historicisation of the modernist past: Gordon Walters (1919-95) and Colin McCahon, each of whom offered distinctive aesthetics generated by the application of a local idiom to a high modernist modality.⁴⁸ This chapter is concerned with the reception of McCahon’s work by artists in the 1990s, in particular with the ways in which it was deployed as a critique of modernism and tropes of national identity. It also examines the legacy of McCahon’s work within a renewed contestation of high cultural identity.

Robert Leonard has commented on the ‘epidemic of McCahon quoting’ that occurred after his death.⁴⁹ New Zealand artists (and Australians including Imants Tillers and Gordon Bennett) drew on diverse aspects of his practice, appropriating and reworking his titles, written phrases, characteristic landforms, painted ‘signwriting’, pictorial compositions,

⁴⁷ Francis Pound, *The Invention of New Zealand*, op.cit., p.329.

⁴⁸ Gordon Walters’s works moved out into the culture in a similar way to McCahon’s, being the subject of appropriation and reworking by a younger generation of artists in the early 1990s, and through incorporation into design practice thereafter.

⁴⁹ Robert Leonard, ‘Nostalgia for Intimacy’, op.cit., p.15.

letterforms, and even his photographic image.⁵⁰ Their intent was, frequently, ambiguous. Leonard suggests that some quoters wanted to mock ‘McCahon’s gravitas’ and ‘its claim to Capital-T truth’, while others seemingly wanted to borrow it.⁵¹ I suggest instead that the ‘McCahon quoters’ saw his historical oeuvre as active material which could be put to work in new ways in the contemporary culture. It represented unfinished business.

Following ‘after McCahon’ and ‘Choice!’, a third exhibition almost entirely generated by McCahon quotes added another layer of complexity both to McCahon’s legacy and the broader cultural concern for ‘afterness’. ‘After after McCahon’ was organised by art collectors and commentators Jim and Mary Barr and writer Stuart McKenzie, and opened at their shared office/gallery in downtown Wellington, Cubewell House, in April 1993. The largest work in the show was Michael Parekowhai’s *The Indefinite Article*, which had been in storage since ‘Choice!’ closed three years earlier; it was so large, in fact, that the capital ‘E’ of ‘He’ would not fit in the lift and had to be carried up six flights of stairs. Ronnie van Hout produced a series of photographs titled *Five Hours in Nelson and Canterbury* as a response to McCahon’s *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* (1949): whereas McCahon had travelled by bicycle, van Hout roared through the landscape on a motorbike. Isobel Thom exhibited *Five Minutes in Nelson and Canterbury*, a photograph taken out of the window of an aeroplane. Neil Dawson made *I Am*, a hovering cloud sculpture; Patrick Pound brushed McCahon-esque sweeps of horizon on an arrangement of bike seats; P. Mule painted over the glass of a framed work on paper by McCahon then in the collection of Jim and Mary Barr (and now in the collection of Te Papa). While McCahon’s text read ‘I am scared/ I Stand Up’, the artist rewrote it to read ‘I am/ P Mule.’ ‘This will offend people who can’t get over McCahon,’ a spokesperson who described him or herself as a ‘cubist’ suggested in the local paper, perhaps hopefully.

If it pokes fun at him, he won’t mind, another cubist said. The cubists like to think that he is up there as a benevolent old dinosaur, chuckling at the antics of those involved in the debate.⁵²

One critic, at least, sent up six flights to view the exhibition in the old office block, entirely missed the joke. Unamused by the exhibition’s arid ‘anti-aesthetics’ and ‘infinite quoting’,

⁵⁰ Leonard’s list of the ‘McCahon quoters’ includes Julian Dashper, John Reynolds, Michael Parekowhai, et al, Ronnie van Hout, Ian Scott, Stephen Bambury, Peter Robinson, and Shane Cotton.

⁵¹ Robert Leonard, ‘Nostalgia for Intimacy, op.cit., p.15.

⁵² Elinore Wellwood, ‘Post-McCahonism’, *Capital Times*, 21 April 1993.

he stated flatly: ‘This show is not about refashioning McCahon. While quoting McCahon’s words, none of these works (with the notable exception of P Mule’s sardonic *I Am P Mule*) look remotely like a McCahon.’⁵³

While the critic was disappointed that the ‘after after McCahon’ exhibition confounded traditional mimetic notions of ‘afterness’, the implication of the title, of course, was to draw a line under the earlier ‘after McCahon’ exhibition; to indicate an attitudinal shift in response to his legacy. A new form of afterness. It marked off a historical period as ‘after McCahon’, and indicated a new theoretical space—after *afterwards*—in which artists might operate. The relationship between ‘after McCahon’ and ‘after after McCahon’ might be taken as a paradigmatic illustration of the first two waves of postmodernism in New Zealand art; the first a theoretically-inclined ‘high’ postmodernist practice concerned with asserting difference from the modernist tradition; the second a culturally-engaged identity politics which was more distinctly concerned with the recuperation and reassessment of outmoded material culture, including that of modernist art. In the former, McCahon’s absence is still a generative presence in the culture; in the latter, his work is receding into history. It is important to acknowledge, however, that there was considerable overlap between the two positions. New developments in contemporary art practice—including that of exhibition-making—followed rapidly on the heels of others in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and given the small scale of the New Zealand art world, several individuals were involved at almost every stage. (McCahon’s work was a critical factor in all.) ‘After after McCahon’, for example, included three artists—Julian Dashper, John Reynolds, and P. Mule—whose work had been exhibited in the Auckland Art Gallery’s ‘after McCahon’ show four years earlier.⁵⁴

Parekowhai’s *The Indefinite Article* had come to ‘after after McCahon’ from the National Art Gallery in Wellington, where it had been shown as part of the return to New Zealand of ‘Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art’ from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1992.⁵⁵ Curated by Robert Leonard and Bernice Murphy, ‘Headlands’ was a large-scale project—then the most ambitious survey of New Zealand art to be exhibited

⁵³ Chris Cain, ‘Paintings to Change the World’, *Evening Post*, 6 May 1993.

⁵⁴ The exhibiting artists were Chris Cane, Julian Dashper, Neil Dawson, Michael Harrison, Philip Kelly, Daniel Malone, P Mule, Michael Parekowhai, Patrick Pound, John Reynolds, Isobel Thom and Ronnie van Hout.

⁵⁵ *The Indefinite Article* subsequently travelled to Germany as part of the contemporary New Zealand art survey exhibition ‘Cultural Safety’, organised by the Frankfurter Kunstverein and City Gallery Wellington, touring New Zealand on its return. Part of Jim Barr and Mary Barr’s private collection since the early 1990s, it is now in the collection of the Auckland Art Gallery.

internationally—which sought to reconsider the paradigm of post-war New Zealand art. (Julian Dashper’s *Here I was given*, an arrangement of unstretched canvases behind frames which referred to McCahon’s *Here I Give Thanks To Mondrian* (1961), was likewise included in both ‘Headlands’ and ‘after after McCahon.’) Jim and Mary Barr had been involved with the conception of ‘Headlands’; and after the show returned from Australia and was exhibited, somewhat controversially, at the National Art Gallery in Wellington, their Cubewell House gallery hosted a project in response to it by artist Ronnie van Hout. ‘When Art Hits the Headlands’ restaged ‘Headlands’ without the actual works; it was laid out much as it had been at the National Art Gallery but solely by means of the exhibition labels (which van Hout had uplifted following the demount of the exhibition). An early excursion into the existential conceptualism which has characterised his later practice, van Hout’s title referred to the various acrimonious debates about the representation of national identity which had arisen in the New Zealand art world over ‘Headlands’⁵⁶, as well as to an earlier project by Jim and Mary Barr, *When Art Hits the Headlines*, an exhibition at the National Art Gallery in 1987 concerned with public controversies in New Zealand art.

The exhibition catalogue for *When Art Hits the Headlines* included an annotated scrapbook of clippings from newspapers and magazines detailing controversies in New Zealand art between 1891 and 1987. Detailing public scandals over nudity, incomprehensibility, pretension, public safety, cost, censorship, aesthetic quality, thefts, and hoaxes, it is a comprehensive index of the ways in which art has functioned as a subject of address in the common culture during the modernist period of New Zealand history; a history of the public life of art in New Zealand.⁵⁷ Like many of the more theoretically-inflected exhibition projects of the late 1980s, it is essentially revisionist, reframing the historical account. Following their description of an incident in 1961 in which an incensed visitor punched the bronze busts in a touring Jacob Epstein exhibition (‘The man was quietly dealt with by a member of the gallery staff. He left peaceably shortly after with a bicycle pump tucked under his arm’), the authors observed that art controversies in New Zealand can be extremely heated, at times

⁵⁶ Artist Richard Killeen wrote a strongly-worded letter to the co-curator of ‘Headlands’, Bernice Murphy—circulated widely within the New Zealand art world—in which he defended the senior artist Gordon Walters from what he regarded as an unduly negative attack on his practice by the scholar Rangihira Panoho, published in the exhibition catalogue in an essay dealing with the appropriation of Māori forms and concepts by Pākehā artists. The debates around this, and other aspects of the exhibition and the catalogue were acrimonious; elevated tempers were on public display at a critical symposium; and in the end the Auckland City Art Gallery declined to exhibit ‘Headlands’, though it was included as a touring venue in the exhibition catalogue.

⁵⁷ Jim and Mary Barr, *When Art Hits the Headlines: A Survey of Controversial Art in New Zealand*, Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1987.

emotionally-charged, and are often very funny.⁵⁸ McCahon's work features on several occasions, including a challenge by the director of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Les Lloyd, to the public to prove that they could better the attempts of modern artists during the exhibition of Colin McCahon: a survey exhibition, in 1972; a furore which developed over a New Plymouth city councillor calling his work 'a load of rubbish' in 1975; and the claim of a Lower Hutt city councillor to be able to 'knock up a Colin McCahon-type painting in his lunch break', which he proceeded to do on national television, in 1978.

When Art Hits The Headlines is effectively a survey of anti-intellectualism as it relates to advanced New Zealand art; a history of the anti-aesthetic attitude of the common culture played out in the public sphere. The position of the authors, though, is less to condemn or dismiss the public reaction to art as to locate in that antagonistic reaction a measure of the power of art within the wider culture. Implicit in this approach is a rebuke to the way art and artists have been positioned by the art world's own institutions; as Luit Bieringa, then director of the National Art Gallery, noted in his foreword, the project offered a challenge to the 'very institution it has been organised by as well as those which are part of the supposed controversy chain whether community group, individual, local body council, politician or media.'⁵⁹ Opening with a quote from Walter Benjamin—'We can remark in passing that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter'—it is apparent from Jim and Mary Barr's assembly of New Zealand's frequently ridiculous art scandals that the jokes were as much on the institutions of the art world as they were on the general public.

When Art Hits The Headlines was informed by a conception of intellectual enquiry as not distinct from humour; and by the notion that the funniness of many of New Zealand's historical art scandals might in itself be revealing of a particular dimension of national culture. (The humour of many jokes, after all, hinges around *inappropriateness*, the rude irruption of one cultural register into another.⁶⁰) This sense of cultural playfulness was also

⁵⁸ Jim and Mary Barr, *ibid*, p.7.

⁵⁹ Luit Bieringa, 'Foreword', in Jim and Mary Barr, *When Art Hits the Headlines: A Survey of Controversial Art in New Zealand*, Wellington: National Art Gallery, 1987, p.3.

⁶⁰ John Morreall has theorised that there are three philosophical types of humour. These are Superiority—laughing at someone else's perceived inadequacy; Relief—laughing as a diffusion of stress; and Incongruity—laughing at the ludicrousness of the subject/object relation. The Incongruity theory of humour, which is based on Schopenhauer's concept, is strongly related to irony. It requires an understanding of the stylistic norms of the subject, which are then disrupted by an incongruity that, in its exaggeration or distortion of the premises of the subject, reveals hidden assumptions in our approach to and understanding of the subject. See John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1983.

behind the design for the opening invitation for ‘after after McCahon’, which featured a photograph of McCahon graffitied with a scrolling moustache and pointy beard, echoing at once Duchamp’s revision of the Mona Lisa, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, as well as Salvador Dali’s facial hair design. McCahon figured as trickster; a trick played on his image; the gesture was clearly irreverent, yet at the same time still canonical in its concern for McCahon as a subject of address.

Ronnie van Hout, *Some Dead Artists*, 1994, Pegasus photographic print, 340 x 510mm,

A similar strategy is apparent in works such as Ronnie van Hout’s photographic ‘shoebox dioramas’ of the empty New Zealand landscape (1992-4), which brought the grand themes of mid-century modernism down to a miniature scale. Van Hout’s photographs refigured the empty landscape of mid-century New Zealand arts and letters as the backdrop to a horror movie, complete with dramatic under-lighting and ominous shadows. He made small-scale models of the New Zealand landscape drawn from its high modernist art historical tradition—which sampled McCahon’s folded hills and stark horizon lines, or Christopher Perkins’s Taranaki-as-Mt-Fuji—lit them apocalyptically, and photographed them in greenish sepia

tones. Subsequently van Hout would exhibit the models themselves; in one, McCahon, wearing a checkered shirt and denim shorts, paints a 'Necessary Protection' painting on his deck; in another, he 'explains painting' to artist Theo Schoon.

Ronnie van Hout, *Gopas, Weeks, Page*, 1992, Pegasus photographic print, 340 x 510mm

Van Hout's 'Return of the Living Dead' parodied the New Zealand landscape's haunted, emblematic qualities, and cast its past protagonists as the un-dead, mighty colossi in model form whose shadows still marked the terrain. His title borrowed from George A. Romero's 1968 black-and-white zombie movie, a low-budget trash comedy/horror film which had assumed the status of a cult classic. Several of van Hout's images included the names of New Zealand modernist artists in three-dimensional block letters, rising like mighty monoliths in the dark landscape. They looked a little like the Hollywood sign, a little like credits rolling at the end of an old movie, a little like McCahon's own block lettering. Van Hout's words loomed, bright and white, textual beacons shining out of the dark land: New Zealand art reduced to a sign in the landscape. Although the blocky lettering referred the initiated to the same source as Parekowhai's *The Indefinite Article*, McCahon's *I Am* (1954), van Hout's 'Return of the Living Dead' took its critique of modernist transcendence in a different

direction. Satirising the silent land of mid-century New Zealand culture, van Hout replayed history as farce. ‘It felt,’ wrote Leonard, ‘like Van Hout was filtering McCahon through Ed Wood, riffing on the cinematic qualities of McCahon’s serial landscapes, recasting the worthy nationalist grail-quest as a trashy B-grade movie.’⁶¹ This was *zombie nationalism*: the past dug up and reanimated as an act of simultaneous homage and vengeance.

Baudrillard suggested that the ironies of postmodernist appropriation art reflected a radical shift in culture, and that its black humour was generated from the present’s underlying mood of scepticism about the sureties of the past:

The humour here is merely the transparent invocation of humour. Like the worn threads of a piece of fabric, it is an irony produced only by the disillusion of things, a fossilized irony ... It is the irony of repentance and *ressentiment* towards one’s culture ... It is a parody of culture by culture itself as an act of vengeance, characteristic of radical disillusionment. It is as though history were rifling through its own dustbins and looking for redemption in the rubbish.⁶²

For New Zealand artists engaged in the cultural politics of the post-modernist moment, the ‘rubbish bin’ of local history contained not only modernism but also the representations of mid-century nationalism. Artists located—and critiqued—hidden codes of colonialism curled up inside earlier representations of ‘New Zealandness’. The emergence of new subject positions inevitably resulted in a revision of past histories. Bitter arguments over local identity, such as the question of Gordon Walters’s abstraction of Maori motifs in the 1960s and 1970s, and the representation of New Zealand art overseas, dominated art world discourse in the 1990s. A critical aspect of postmodernist appropriation art in New Zealand was its corresponding critique of cultural *proprieties*.

Another approach to art historical vengeance was taken by Tony de Lautour, who pushed the principle, and practice, of appropriation and parody still further with the development of his historical ‘Revisionist’ paintings from 1997. He literally rifled through the junk rooms of local history, acquiring naive landscape paintings from second-hand shops and garage sales—another variant, perhaps, of McCahon’s ‘awful stuff’—to which he added debased motifs of British empire and New Zealand nationalism. Over the dusty and formulaic vistas of colonial

⁶¹ Robert Leonard, ‘Hello Darkness: New Zealand Gothic’, *Art and Australia*, vol.46, no.1, Spring 2008, p.88.

⁶² Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Illusion of the End’ in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, Stanford University Press, 2001 [orig. 1984], p. 263.

New Zealand, whose long-forgotten artists strained for dramatic effect beyond the limits of their technical ability, de Lautour added mangy lions, seedy, drunken, pot-bellied kiwi, maps of New Zealand sunken into the earth like shallow graves, and cigarette-smoking snakes coiled around tree-trunks. Any illusion of the nobility of or putative redemption for the colonial enterprise was erased by de Lautour's depiction of early settlers as disorderly, degenerate vandals: beer-swilling Barbarians in paradise.

Tony de Lautour, *Shore Party*, 1999, oil on board, Collection of the Real Art Roadshow

There is something undeniably camp about these works from the 1990s by van Hout and de Lautour, and others of the same era that investigate the pastness of the past, reworking modernism as a triumphal failure. Van Hout's *Return of the Living Dead* is camp, in Susan Sontag's sense of camp as an inclination towards something that is slightly 'off', something that is exaggerated, something that revels in its own artifice, something which reduces the

serious to the risible by exaggerating its characteristics.⁶³ Camp is something which points out at the same time as sending up; a sensibility of simultaneous critique and homage in which the fan assumes the guise of the object of fandom through inadequate means. Sociologist Nick Perry observed in his notes on ‘Antipodean camp’ that bricolage, self-mockery and pastiche are familiar stratagems of broader New Zealand culture. He argues that they are everyday tactics of resistance of a culture ‘for which colonisation was constitutive’, against the ‘master discourse’ of a ‘(m)other country.’⁶⁴ Drawing on Susan Sontag’s definition of camp, ‘the Antipodean versions’, Perry notes, work ‘to call up nationalist sentiments through cultural images that are constructed in accordance with bricoleur tactics, placed in quotation marks by the signalling of their own fabrication and asserted through self mockery.’

Antipodean camp is a form of cultural antagonism that admits the second-hand nature of the ex-colony’s culture; which acknowledges it as part of its own distinctive conditions of possibility; and which sends up tradition by producing its own knowing version of it, and thus speaks in two registers at once. Although it has arguably always been part of modern New Zealand cultural production, it assumed greater significance as a mode of address in the early 1990s at the decolonising moment. As Perry remarks, ‘the versions of cultural identity it prioritises are those which amplify the accident of place.’⁶⁵ Such works signal ‘an affirmative indifference to the world’s hostility.’⁶⁶ They anticipate their own lack of affect, and incorporate it within themselves as a dark joke.

One of the great limitations of making art in New Zealand—as for artists in any other provincial context—has been the sense of being out of step with art made elsewhere; of being too early, too late, unnoticed, unremarked, unsupported by the local culture; the provincial artist always reads off his or her position in relation to the world’s art centres. Ronnie van Hout, criticised early on for being promiscuously derivative—he has made works which have reminded reviewers of Colin McCahon, Sigmar Polke, David Levinthal, Paul McCarthy, Marc Quinn, Bruce Naumann, Rosemarie Trockel, and Don Driver, among

⁶³ See Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’ [1964], in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London: Picador, 2001, pp.275-292.

⁶⁴ Nick Perry, ‘Antipodean Camp’, in *Hyperreality and Global Culture*, London: Routledge, 1998, p.12. Perry did not include art as one of the loci of Antipodean camp’s manifestations, but I would argue that art is an important site of critical resistance.

⁶⁵ Nick Perry, *ibid.*, p.12.

⁶⁶ Nick Perry, *ibid.*, p.8.

others—has at times appeared to make derivation a conscious strategy; a strategy which articulates the cultural conditions of time and place. It is a strategy that might be considered ‘post-provincial’, in the sense expounded by literary theorists Peter Simpson and Leonard Wilcox as an abandonment of the oppositional stance of modernism while being undismayed by the condition of living on the margins.⁶⁷ While the provincial modernist artist lives in a state of perpetual alienation, isolated from local society by his or her minority tastes and from the world’s centres of culture by geographical distance, the post-provincial postmodernist artist is ‘no longer compelled to pursue the centre.’ [p.355] Bill Manhire argues that derivativeness is a normal part of daily experience as a New Zealand writer:

The poetry I write is strongly marked by tonal drifts and lurches, and I think these come mainly from the diversities, disjunctions, juxtapositions and incongruities which constitute my experience. Much of my experience is derivative, a matter of influence and imitation. I think that’s a fairly normal thing not a matter for apology.⁶⁸

Van Hout has commented that as he was unable ‘to fulfil the concept of myself as a genius artist’, he would instead do ‘small things, small acts.’ ‘I just want to get to that edge where it’s kind of nothing, where meaning starts disappearing. It’s like getting to a kind of end of modernism and the modernist ambition to create yourself and then the failure of that.’⁶⁹ As Leonard has observed, the point of much of van Hout’s work ‘seems to be the pleasure derived from occupying the subordinate position.’⁷⁰ A group of works by van Hout even expressed a degree of disappointment at their own low status. As part of an exhibition titled ‘Father, Son, and Holy Ghost’ in 1995, van Hout placed four rubber casts of his own head in a circle on the floor. Each had a small cassette tape recorder secreted inside. One head babbled incoherently; one intoned instructions for hypnosis; a third muttered a tuneless version of Elvis’s ‘Are you lonesome tonight?’; while the fourth complained about van Hout himself: ‘I wish I was made by somebody special, somebody important ... like Picasso.’⁷¹

⁶⁷ Leonard Wilcox, ‘Postmodernism or Anti-modernism?’, *Landfall*, September 1985, p.354. See also Peter Simpson, *Ronald Hugh Morrieson: New Zealand Writers and Their Work*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1982.

⁶⁸ Bill Manhire, ‘Breaking the Line: A View of American and New Zealand Poetry’, op.cit., p.152.

⁶⁹ Ronnie van Hout, quoted in Robert Leonard, ‘Ronnie van Hout: Overimpressed’, *Art/Text*, no.57, 1997, p.33. The original quote was drawn from Robin Neate, ‘The King of Comedy: The Cinema, Cezanne, Nazis and Sausages’, *MidWest*, no.6, 1993.

⁷⁰ Robert Leonard, ‘Ronnie van Hout: Overimpressed’, op.cit., p.34.

⁷¹ Robin Neate, ‘Ronnie van Hout’, *Art & Text*, no.54, 1996, p.91.

These are works which not only embody their contextual limitations as specific content, but which make a passive-aggressive joke of the situation in which they find themselves. Black humour, is, after all, a type of gallows humour, a form of subversion; the revolt of the mind against a situation of personal powerlessness.⁷² While the works are part of an international interest in ‘slacker culture’⁷³, the limitations of making art in a local provincial situation are equally incorporated as part of the work’s address, part of its conditions of cultural possibility. These are works which deal with the ‘problem’ of New Zealand high culture. In works by artists including Marie Shannon, Peter Robinson, Séraphine Pick, van Hout, de Lautour and others working in the mid-1990s, failure is a constant preoccupation: failure to communicate, to be significant, to be profound, to be worthy, to work hard enough, to be well-enough made, to demonstrate a unique vision, to be the artist whom the art world wants one to be—that is, a failure to be both locally relevant and internationally successful (an echo here of Fairburn’s call-in-vain for the new New Zealand artist at mid-century). Robert Leonard argues that the plethora of quotations of his work point the impossibility of actually *being* McCahon: a failure to be great.⁷⁴ Critically, failure is not the result of these works but their subject.

Leonard identified van Hout’s ‘Return of the Living Dead’ as the first move in what he described as the ‘Gothic turn’ in New Zealand art, a cultural realignment that involved a ‘parallax shift in reception as well as production.’ He relates the Gothic turn in New Zealand art to a similar quality in New Zealand film, described and explored by actor Sam Neill in his documentary, *Cinema of Unease* (1995), a project conceived as New Zealand’s contribution to the British Film Institute’s ‘Century of Cinema’ series.⁷⁵ Neill’s thesis was that New Zealand cinema has been characterised by a dark quality in which acts of violence take place against a menacing and alienating landscape. (This is, of course, the scenario established in McCahon’s paintings of Christ’s passion in the New Zealand landscape in the 1940s.) Neill suggests that this Gothic sensibility—drawn from the 18th century literary tradition, which stitches together aspects of both horror and romance, and takes pleasure in terror—reflects a

⁷² See André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997. (Originally published as *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, Paris: Éditions de Sagittaire, 1940.) The term ‘black humour’ was Breton’s own coinage.

⁷³ The phrase is director Richard Linklater’s, from notes he made on the release of his film *Slacker* in 1991 (which were subsequently included on the DVD release), detailing a counter-culture attitudinal shift in young people in the early 1990s away from institutional ambition and towards personal intellectual validation.

⁷⁴ Robert Leonard, ‘Nostalgia for Intimacy’, op.cit., p.17.

⁷⁵ Co-directed with Judy Rymer.

nation in search of identity, caught in the process of making itself at home in a strange place. Read in this light, the ‘silent land’ of mid-century New Zealand literature is a Gothic badlands, uneasy and haunted: a place whose Pākehā inhabitants are uncomfortably aware not only of the condition of their exile but—more significantly—of the strangeness of their occupation. A place where ‘home’ is, in fact, *unheimlich* or unhomely.

Writing in 2008, Leonard suggested that van Hout’s ‘Return of the Living Dead’ exhibition in 1992 marked the first point at which a strain of New Zealand visual culture suddenly seemed to have *always* been dark and brooding, haunted and melancholy; the first time, in effect, that works of art produced in the Gothic mode were recognised as a national *tradition*. ‘Return of the Living Dead’ unleashed the latent Gothic qualities of McCahon’s work; it folded Petrus van der Velden and Tony Fomison’s gloomy recalcitrant antimodernism into a local lineage; in general it suggested an appealingly refractory mode of address for Pākehā artists who, as Leonard stated, ‘were interested in exploring their cultural background while reacting against the pieties of biculturalism and earnest 1980s theory art.’⁷⁶

At the same time, the ‘haunted’ New Zealand landscape is, as William J. Schaefer points out, in the first instance a Māori cultural tradition, in which the place of one’s ancestors is correspondingly the place of one’s belonging. For Pākehā artists the Gothic tradition might be considered as a way of locating personal identity in the land, through a kind of surrogate history which foregrounds the uncanny—the recapitulation of experience, the double mode of address, the familiar made strange—as one of the underlying conditions of New Zealand culture.⁷⁷ The Gothic is a way of being at home in New Zealand, for the descendants of its European settlers; living at the end of the world, stuck halfway between despair and comedy, dealing with the ‘great gloom’ of provincial culture by making both art and jokes about it, much as Bob Gormack had done with his *Bookie* publications fifty years earlier. Cataloguing its manifestations in Taranaki, sociologist David Craig casts the provincial Gothic as a ‘national sensibility and narrative store’, something that New Zealand musicians, film-makers and artists ‘are expected to brand themselves with’—a paradigm of the national, in short,

⁷⁶ Robert Leonard, ‘Hello Darkness: New Zealand Gothic’, op.cit, p.88. Leonard also points out that the Gothic is a mode of address used by some Maori artists, including Shane Cotton, Michael Parekowhai, and Lisa Reihana.

⁷⁷ William J. Schafer, *Mapping the Godzone: A Primer on New Zealand Literature and Culture*, University of Hawaii Press, 1998, p.139. See in particular his chapter on the ‘Antipodean Gothic’, pp.137-159.

which operates as a form of Antipodean camp, a self-aware and self-mocking sign of national identity.⁷⁸

Certainly, Leonard's essay was the first time at which this tradition of New Zealand art practice had been described as 'Gothic': but it was not the first time it had been described as a tradition. Jim and Mary Barr had alluded to it in their discussion of art history's treatment of South Island expressionist painters, from their exhibition catalogue surveying Philip Clairmont's work in 1987.⁷⁹ They collected together a miscellany of quotes by critics referring to a particular structure of feeling ('an often told tale of New Zealand art history') associated with expressionist (male) painters from Christchurch, centred around art school lecturer Rudi Gopas, but reaching back into a deeper history involving Petrus van der Velden at the turn of the 20th century.⁸⁰ Among the quoted critics was Michael Dunn, who described the 'unrest, social comment and emotional frustration' of young Christchurch-based artists such as Clairmont, Barry Cleavin, and Tony Fomison working in the expressionist idiom in the early 1970s; and Hamish Keith, who wondered how 'angst—that inexplicable sadness—became the principal imaginative factor in the country's "Garden City"'.⁸¹ When Leonard notes that the Gothic is a sensibility particularly associated with Christchurch, it is clear that his identification involves a reframing—a *reanimation*—of an older history, which might also take in McCahon's works of the late 1940s, painted in Barbour Street, Linwood; albeit a history which, as Jim and Mary Barr pointed out, had served to suppress other implications for the reception of artists' work, as well as to ignore the concerns of other artists whose work did not fit this 'South Island myth'. In outlining the limitations of the southern expressionist tradition for both artists and their audiences, Jim and Mary Barr had sought to revise the earlier New Zealand modernist framework which cast the land as the source of inspiration and emotional authenticity, and which viewed artists as links in a chain of influence and association; something that Barton's 'after McCahon' project, as well as postmodernist critics such as Horrocks, Curnow and Pound, also sought to redress.⁸²

⁷⁸ David Craig, 'Taranaki Gothic and the Political Economy of New Zealand Narrative and Sensibility', *New Zealand Sociology*, vol.20, no.2, 2005, p.36.

⁷⁹ Jim Barr and Mary Barr, *Philip Clairmont*, Wanganui: Sarjeant Gallery, 1987.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.62.

⁸¹ Michael Dunn, 'Paintings seethe with unrest', *Sunday Herald*, 11 November 1973; Hamish Keith, *Auckland Star*, 20 March 1971. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp.62-3.

⁸² They also sought to broaden the cultural base through which Clairmont's work might be viewed, suggesting that the 'explosion of underground drug culture in the sixties, mediated through the States', the books and magazines which he collected, and the 'comics and films and music and television' in which he immersed

Leonard's reframing of this history as 'Gothic' enabled it to incorporate postmodernism, as well as artists working outside Christchurch. It effectively detached the 'southern tradition' from its stylistic association with expressionism, and removed its gender implications and its association with artistic 'bohemianism'. What was left—what artists as diverse as Van Hout and Van der Velden, or Leek and Fomison might have in common—was the communication of a palpable sense of cultural unease. Leonard went further, arguing that much of New Zealand's Gothic-inflected art of the early 1990s also evinced a 'bogan' quality: that is, in its borrowing from the aesthetics of everyday life, it referred to a particularly anti-authoritarian, blue-collar, male-dominated subculture concerned with cars, beer, tattoos, and heavy metal music.⁸³ 'Bogan Gothicism' is a factor, for example, in Bill Hammond's smoking, drinking, pool-playing bird figures, or in printmaker Jason Greig's *Southern Man* (1993) (an image of a flayed man leaning on a 'Ministry of Works issue shovel'), and his zombie *Beatles Reunion* (1993).⁸⁴ There's a distinctly bogan aesthetic evident in Judy Darragh's *Ring of Fire* (1995), an installation of empty wine bottles and vinyl flames; and perhaps it is also apparent in Terry Urbahn's monumental stack of audio speakers in the shape of a primitive robot, *Vocal PA* (1992). Tony de Lautour's coke cans and spirit bottles emblazoned with motifs drawn from prison tattoos and blurry Special Forces insignia, his kiwis smashing bottles in the native bush and raising two fingers to the viewer, are pure bogan; he added to the half-jokey sense

himself might be at least of equivalent weight as background to his work. Jim Barr and Mary Barr, *Philip Clairmont*, op.cit., p.64.

⁸³ 'Bogan' has largely replaced the earlier 'hoon' as the New Zealand term of choice, though 'hoon' persists as a verb meaning 'to drive antisocially.' Bogan is now more generally used to describe a lifestyle; 'boy-racer' has emerged as a pejorative term for an anti-social driver.

The bogan quality of New Zealand art in the first half of the 1990s was one of the themes explored in 'Hangover', an exhibition curated by Robert Leonard and Lara Strongman which showed at Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton; the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Dunedin Public Art Gallery; and the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1995-6.

⁸⁴ It is perhaps unsurprising that the bogan Gothic is a sensibility particularly associated with Christchurch artists, or artists who have Christchurch associations. Christchurch is a city with a public concern for anachronistic British tradition, which prides itself on being cultured; its public buildings were built by European settlers in the Victorian Gothic Revival style, and its private schools were founded on the British public model. At the same time, it is a place of stark social contrasts, of unemployment and poverty, where social background has historically affected social mobility arguably to a greater extent than other New Zealand cities.

While the bogan Gothic is primarily Christchurch Gothic, sociologist David Craig describes a similar kind of darkly comedic artistic sensibility operating in provincial Taranaki. The genre of 'Taranaki Gothic' was established single-handedly by the novelist Ronald Hugh Morrieson in the 1960s and 1970s in his vernacular novels of small-town life, *The Scarecrow* (1963), *Came A Hot Friday* (1964), *Predicament* (1975), and *Pallet on the Floor* (1976), which veer between horror and black comedy. Artist Michael Stevenson, who grew up in Inglewood, activates the trope of Taranaki Gothic in his works of the 1980s depicting revivalist halls. See David Craig, 'Taranaki Gothic and the Political Economy of New Zealand Narrative and Sensibility', *New Zealand Sociology*, vol.20, no.2, 2005, pp.18-40. Taranaki Gothic is 'a story of provincial delusion and slapstick exhilaration, getting caught up in things that turn out to be much bigger, shakier and more sinister than anyone had imagined ... Innocence and exuberance running to trauma and its sequelae.' (p.19)

of menace with exhibition titles including 'Bad White Art' (1994) and 'Prole Art Threats' (1995), putting Pākehādom into play as a blue-collared ethnicity.⁸⁵ These works articulated new identities drawn from popular, mass, and common culture; they also offered some form of contestation of the theoretically-inclined post-modernist practices that had immediately preceded them. They added a demotic voice to local high cultural discourse in the first half of the 1990s.

However, as Mel Campbell points out, discussions of 'boganism' in Australia are complicated by the fact that the Antipodean word 'bogan' is, like the British 'chav' or the American 'white trash' or 'redneck', almost invariably used as a term to describe someone else other than the speaker. No one calls themselves a bogan. Bogans are other people.⁸⁶ The term is slippery, variously used to refer to a subculture, to a set of consumer preferences, and as a casual euphemism for lower socio-economic status. But the bogan, suggests Campbell, is better thought of as an abstract idea that is expressed through culture. The bogan is an instrumental construct.

Bogans pop up in the media and in the public imagination as figures that are both embarrassing and 'un-Australian', and instantly, recognisably 'hyper-Australian.' We use the idea of bogan to quarantine ideas of Australianness that alarm or discomfort us. It's a way of erecting imaginary cultural barriers between 'us' and 'them.'⁸⁷

Campbell's argument, of course, translates readily to the New Zealand context, where the term is used in almost exactly the same way, as does her assertion that 'when we talk about bogans, we're really talking about national identity.' When Australian or New Zealand

⁸⁵ Christchurch art critic Robyn Ussher went so far as to describe de Lautour's work as 'An art of youth, with a grunge quality which induces a sense of the generation gap in anyone over 35', noting that de Lautour's aesthetic recalled the 'cheap scribbling of the glue bag or the Borstal.' Robyn Ussher, 'Tattoos and Loan Stars', *The Press*, 2 November 1994.

The identification of Greig's dead man's shovel as 'Ministry of Works issue' is Peter Vangioni's, in Peter Vangioni, *Jason Greig: The Devil Made Me Do It*, Christchurch Art Gallery, 1996, unpaginated.

⁸⁶ While 'bogan' and its Auckland equivalent, the 'Westie', originated as terms of denigration, they were gradually adopted by people to describe themselves in a jokey, almost camp manner. West Auckland comedian and TV presenter Ewen Gilmour has frequently referred to himself as a Westie ('Long hair, black jeans, leather jackets, tattoos, motorbikes and the best one-liners in New Zealand') and Paula Bennett, Minister for Social Development in the Fifth National Government and member for Waitakere, incorporates the phrase 'Proud to be a Westie' in the National Party logo on her website. The New Zealand comedy drama series *Outrageous Fortune* (2005-2010), which followed the doings of a family of Auckland Westies, has done most to popularise the subculture. It has sold widely internationally and was the subject of a major exhibition at Auckland Museum over Summer 2010-11, a promotion for which asked people to send in photographs of themselves in the guise of the show's central matriarchal character, Cheryl West, played by Robyn Malcolm. There was no shortage of participants.

⁸⁷ Mel Campbell, 'Perhaps there's a little bogan in everyone', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 2006. Campbell's MA thesis was concerned with representations of bogans in the mass media.

national identity has been perceived as being under threat from new subject positions—particularly evident at the modernist moment immediately after World War II, and the postcolonial/postmodernist nexus of the early 1990s—the bogan (the philistine, the barbarian) is invoked as a distancing mechanism from those elements of culture and society which remain uninflected by the consensus of intellectuals. Bogans are not part of the official account of national culture, although they are a part of everyday life. The bogan is a suburban outlaw, someone outside the culture of the polis (although he or she lives within it); a primitive, threatening individual who speaks another language and is indifferent to the traditions of the high culture. Bogans engender unease: they are, arguably, the millennial version of Fairburn's barbarian at the gate: barbarians now armed with mullets and a V8.

If 'boganism' or the 'bogan gothic' represented one form of end-of-century resistance to a supposed prescription for high culture, another was found in a recalcitrant pose of assumed anti-intellectualism. Writing in the exhibition catalogue for 'A Very Peculiar Practice', his large-scale survey of contemporary New Zealand painting in 1995, Allan Smith identified various 'portable life-worlds', and consequently nuanced approaches to signification, which characterised aspects of recent painting practice. Among them he described the 'strategic idiocy' that he detected in recent works by Ronnie van Hout and Robin Neate. Van Hout's *I'm with Stupid, Stupid's with me* (1993)—a down-market T shirt slogan inscribed on concrete blocks—and Neate's *Dumb Painting* (1994), empty cartoon speech bubbles painted on stretched brown-checked 1970s fabric—implied a 'careless disregard for their own credibility'.⁸⁸ 'Contemporary painting,' wrote Smith, 'is predicated on the alienations that separate modern society into its isolated, specialised enclaves. [...] The paintings are written all over with the desire to announce and detail the problem of signification, yet the messages they relay to us are incomplete. Every apparatus of signification is set in motion only to be stalled mid-flight.'⁸⁹ Others in this vein might include Marie Shannon's accounts of ideas for conceptual works of art that she didn't make as they would have been 'too much work to organise', and Saskia Leek's invented girlhood confessions written in biro on vinyl. Both are handwritten, in the New Zealand tradition of art making 'invented' by McCahon: but what is written is resolutely lacking in profundity.

⁸⁸ Allan Smith, 'A Very Peculiar Practice: A User's Guide', in *A Very Peculiar Practice: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting*, City Gallery Wellington, 1995, p.12.

⁸⁹ Allan Smith, *ibid*, p.10.

Van Hout and Neate arguably went the furthest of the painters Smith assembled for ‘Peculiar Practice’ in acknowledging and frustrating the potential for meaningful communication. In their works the mass-cultural communication devices, which McCahon had used fifty years earlier to proclaim the word of God, were used to say nothing of any significance whatsoever. They cast painting as a site evacuated of meaning, lacking in transcendence, yet still physically present, hanging around, leaning nonchalantly against the wall (in *I’m with Stupid’s* case); outmoded, powerless, persistent, self-referential, wise-cracking. Drawing formal and conceptual analogies between modes of art-making and the banalities of mass culture, their works called into question art’s ability to signify very much at all.

The ‘strategic dumbness’ of these paintings paralleled a similar strategy in popular film and television culture from the early 1990s, in which symbols of authority are defeated not by superior force but are instead worn down by a relentless barrage of puerile remarks, pratfalls, and gratuitous pop cultural references.⁹⁰ Although their political charge has diminished with the years—or perhaps the culture has caught up with their provocations—along with the closely-related mode of the ‘bogan Gothic’, such works represented the rude irruption of another cultural order into New Zealand art galleries in the first half of the 1990s: the lowbrow co-opted as an antidote to the high-mindedness of the high culture. There was a strategic insolence about them; a deliberate ignobility; a dumbness and literality that was resistant to conscription. While their strategy of incorporating representations of mass culture in order to expand the territory of the high recalls McCahon’s of the late 1940s, the purpose of the ‘dumb’ works—the frustration of communication, the denial of transcendence—was ultimately very different. But like McCahon’s use of mass culture in the late 1940s, the ‘strategically dumb’ paintings as well as the ‘bogan Gothic’ represented only a temporary strategy, which artists abandoned as other matters of cultural negotiation grew more pressing.

⁹⁰ The Farrelly brothers’ *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), Mike Myers’s *Wayne’s World* (1992) and *Wayne’s World 2* (1993), and *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989) were intelligent films about a particularly transgressive kind of stupidity. In a similar vein, Richard Linklater’s *Slacker* (1991) strung together a sequence of plotless scenarios, each peopled by characters who could never quite turn their ideas into actions; his *Dazed and Confused* (1993) did much the same thing, in its examination of what film critic Peter Travers described as a ‘spectacularly funny celebration of the rites of stupidity.’

XIII: McCahon and the Fridge: Te Papa, 1998

Contemporary culture must be to the Museum's intellectual, spiritual and conceptual existence what the earthquake-resistant 'base isolators' are to its material architecture. Its incorporation of contemporary culture will be what stops the Museum cracking when the ground shifts. Contemporary culture will be the tool with which it investigates the pastness of the past, the traces of imperial cartographies, the nationalising urge to sovereignty, the denationalising embrace of the 'foreign'—the *unheimlich* nature of its cooking, the diasporas of its team colours.

Ian Wedde, 1997⁹¹

The previous two chapters in this section have examined the various ways artists drew on McCahon's work as cultural legacy in the decade after his death in 1987; and have considered the implications of these drawings for the construction of new cultural identities, as well as their role in the articulation of residual antagonisms between the high and the common cultures (still operant over this period, though their political charge was waning). This final chapter is concerned with the public furore that blew up over the exhibition of McCahon's work in proximity to a vintage Kelvinator refrigerator in 1998, on the opening of Te Papa, the new national cultural institution. Fifty years earlier, Fairburn had erupted over the insult that he considered McCahon had offered the high culture by exhibiting work which might be mistaken for toilet graffiti; ten years after McCahon's death, high cultural critics were similarly incensed by the insult they considered had been done to McCahon—and by implication, to the status of art within the broader culture—by exhibiting his work next to a household appliance. The old antagonism between the high and the common culture had not, it seemed, entirely been laid to rest.

When Te Papa opened to the public in 1998, the eyes of the world—and the nation—were on New Zealand's new national museum. A large and visually distinctive building on Wellington's waterfront (Wellington's 'profane' waterfront, suggested curator Ian Wedde, casting it in opposition to the 'sacred hilltop' of the old National Museum and National Art Gallery, which institutions Te Papa had collapsed together and replaced), Te Papa was

⁹¹ Ian Wedde, 'Living in Time: A Day at the Footie', Museums Aotearoa 'Engaging Practices' Symposium, Auckland 1997, <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/wedde/living.asp>.

established to tell the stories of New Zealand.⁹² Working with the combined national art, social history, Māori, and natural history collections, the narratives of national identity would be recounted in an interdisciplinary way through the exhibition of material culture and textual quotation. The result of a bicultural partnership between Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti, the opening of Te Papa would be a triumphal symbolic moment of nation-building for the postcolonial New Zealand nation-state. And although Te Papa's mandate was to 'speak with authority', its approach would not be didactic, nor 'elitist'. The design of the exhibitions, and of the museum itself, were deliberately established in a way that would allow the visitor to choose his or her own path; to become, effectively, a flâneur or a bricoleur or a window-shopper of culture and national history; to 'curate' one's own experience of the museum.⁹³ The exhibition halls were developed as a 'mall with chapters'.⁹⁴ 'Experience has convinced me,' mused Wedde shortly after the museum opened, '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.'

The new national museum offered considerable scope for high-cultural critical disapproval. It placed the common culture of New Zealand, and the experience of the public visitor, at the centre of its organisational philosophy. There was the positioning of a fast-food outlet on the ground floor; there were the themed rides, 'Blastback' and 'Future Rush', which whizzed the visitor through 65 million years of virtual New Zealand history in eight minutes; there was the way that art was relegated to hard-to-find areas of the building, including the vertigo-inducing mezzanine sixth floor; there were the simplistic exhibit labels, none of which were longer than 35 words; there was the limited funding strategy of central government, which required the organisation to seek commercial partnerships; there was the readily acknowledged influence of American theme parks and mass cultural leisure attractions in the scripted interactions with visitor hosts and the strategic monetization of the 'visitor experience'.⁹⁵ 'The great private sector institutions of Disneyland and McDonalds have a lot to teach us,' stated the Museum's Chief Executive, Cheryll Sotheran, who had formerly been

⁹² Ian Wedde, 'Living in Time: A Day at the Footie', op.cit.

⁹³ The wandering path of the bricoleur was not one with which the viewing public were particularly comfortable, and it went against the example of the US leisure attractions which construct a design environment of benign reassurance and predictability for visitors. Visitors to Te Papa found the museum difficult to navigate and frequently lost their bearings; design consultants were subsequently brought in to improve the museum's way-finding over a process of several iterations.

⁹⁴ Ian Wedde, 'Our Place in the World', *New Zealand Listener*, 14 February 1998, p.26.

⁹⁵ The 35-word label rule is cited in Jenny Harper, 'Memo to Te Papa', *Museum National*, May 2001, p.23.

an art history academic and the director of two New Zealand metropolitan art galleries.⁹⁶ But the single act that irritated members of the high culture beyond all other provocations was the exhibition of a major work of modernist art by Colin McCahon, the *Northland Panels* (1958), next to a restored Kelvinator fridge.⁹⁷ ‘Is it art? You decide!’ proclaimed the tag line of the ‘Parade’ exhibition, breezily.

The positioning of the *Northland Panels* in the interdisciplinary ‘Parade’ was widely interpreted by members of the high culture as an insult not only to McCahon as New Zealand’s modernist master, but more broadly as an affront to the field of art itself.⁹⁸ Among the kind of people whom critic William McAloon would later describe as ‘art purists’—thus invoking the modernist language of cultural contamination—condemnation was swift and uncompromising.⁹⁹ ‘A shoddy little stunt,’ thundered the philosopher and cultural critic Denis Dutton: ‘This is a museum that would site a Rembrandt next to a chocolate box, with the excuse that they’re both expressions of Dutch cultural identity.’¹⁰⁰ In the opinion of Jenny Harper, an art history academic and curator who had previously been director of the National Art Gallery, Te Papa’s interdisciplinary narrative of national identity was ‘superficially “feel-good” but ultimately debilitating[ly] ... anti-intellectual.’¹⁰¹ For Robert Leonard, reviewing Te Papa’s opening exhibitions for *Artforum*, one of the problems with Te Papa’s interdisciplinary representation of national identity was the anxiety arising from its treatment of art as a cultural artefact; the worry that New Zealand culture would be seen—from an international perspective—as provincial. ‘Although New Zealand artists have long dodged

⁹⁶ Cheryll Sotheran, in Simon Collins, ‘Big Bangs for “Disneyland”’, *City Voice*, 10 June 1992. Quoted in Ben Dibley, ‘Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and The Museum: Te Papa, For Example’, *Cultural Studies Review*, vol.13, no.1, 2007, p.133.

⁹⁷ History—in the form of many dozens of subsequent articles concerned with the place of art at Te Papa, and the many analyses of the ‘new museology’ represented by Te Papa’s exhibition practice—remembers the *Northland Panels* being literally positioned next to an old fridge. This is the phrase that is continually cited. The image conjured is one of a student flat, in which one of the treasures of New Zealand art is stuffed into a corner next to a wheezing old appliance. However, the painting, cordoned off from the public by stanchions, was adjacent to a large display about modern consumer conveniences in the 1950s, which contained the streamlined Kelvinator refrigerator. In between the two was a back-lit cabinet display of Hamada pottery. (Japanese potter Shoji Hamada was influential on a generation of New Zealand studio potters from the early 1960s.)

⁹⁸ Ben Dibley describes ‘Parade’, ‘housed in a gaudy shopping-mall-like environment’, as ‘a cultural history exhibition on the artistic, design and media production of A/NZ [Aotearoa/New Zealand].’ See Ben Dibley, ‘Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and The Museum: Te Papa, For Example’, op. cit., p.140. The exhibition ran from 14 May 1998 to May 2001.

⁹⁹ William McAloon, ‘Signs and Blunders’, *New Zealand Listener*, 21 February 2004, p.55.

¹⁰⁰ Denis Dutton, ‘Te Papa: National Embarrassment’, *The Weekend Australian*, 6 June 1998, p.23. Te Papa did, in fact, subsequently present an exhibition about Dutch cultural identity in New Zealand between 2000–2002, ‘Nieuw Zeeland—Going Dutch’, as well as ‘Inheriting the Netherlands’, an exhibition by Dutch artists and artists of Dutch descent living in New Zealand, in 2001.

¹⁰¹ Jenny Harper, ‘For the Sake of Your Art’, *The Dominion*, 2 June 1998, p.10.

the mandate of national identity,' he wrote, 'the display at Te Papa will only reinforce the perception that our art is parochial, recruiting work to illustrate social histories.'¹⁰²

Scholarly defenders of 'Parade' were few. But criticism of it was equally problematic. Critics risked being perceived as unreconstructed modernists, outmoded elitists lamenting the rise of cultural democracy and the decline of the hierarchical top-down model of culture. To complain about anti-intellectualism in the New Zealand context was still, as Bill Pearson had identified in the 1950s, to be seen to be acting as if one thinks oneself better than everyone else. In short, critics of Te Papa risked looking like snobs, arguing for special treatment for art over other forms of culture. 'Whinge about Te Papa's charmless degradation of a New Zealand icon, and you're just being "elitist," trying to maintain an outdated, snobbish caste system that still believes works of art are better than refrigerators. Whaddarya?' observed Dutton, bitterly.¹⁰³

One of Ian Wedde's creative collaborators on 'Parade', the curator and artist Paul Rayner, mounted a spirited defence of their work on the exhibition, casting the antagonism that arose over it as a tension between modernist and postmodernist modes of address. 'Te Papa is creating a postmodernist environment where many strands of cultural practice are given equal spaces,' he stated.¹⁰⁴ He described the intellectual background to 'Parade' as a meditation on 'how we express ourselves creatively in this country', in which the arrival of ideas and the implications of new technologies were figured as part of the conditions of possibility. Rayner pointed out that the fridge and McCahon's *Northland Panels* were of almost exactly the same vintage; they were both distinctively New Zealand innovations, both informed by modern American culture. The Kelvinator fridge was the first of a style made in New Zealand but copied from the streamlined forms of contemporary US product design; and the museum had undertaken a nationwide search to find the specific model, produced in 1959, which it then had powder-coated and re-chromed so that the fridge looked as if it had just rolled off the assembly line.¹⁰⁵ McCahon painted the *Northland Panels* not long after returning from his

¹⁰² Robert Leonard, 'Papa's Bag', *Artforum*, vol. 36 (5), 1998, p.42.

¹⁰³ Denis Dutton, 'Te Papa: National Embarrassment', op.cit., p.23.

¹⁰⁴ See Paul Rayner, 'Paul Rayner, painter, curator, New Zealand', <http://bahai-library.org/bafa/r/rayner.htm>, 2010. (Originally published in *Arts Dialogue*, 2001.)

¹⁰⁵ Rayner commented that at the time that both the fridge and the *Northland Panels* were made, the fridge was a status symbol which sold for 10 times the cost of the painting. 'It is interesting that what was an item of status then is now considered an insult by those that consider a McCahon as a symbol of status.' Paul Rayner, 'Paul Rayner, painter, curator, New Zealand', op.cit. What this analysis glosses over, however, is that the two objects are not, and were not, perceived as items of status by the same communities.

tour of the United States in 1958, where he saw works by Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning and artists from the San Francisco Bay Area, among many others.¹⁰⁶ The impact of the trip registered in the scale and concerns of his work; in his adoption thereafter, as Peter Simpson has it, of a 'broader, less parochial perspective'.¹⁰⁷

Both the fridge and McCahon's *Northland Panels* were, suggested Rayner, the 'products of modernist ideology'; the curators of 'Parade' wished not only to recognise this relationship, but by placing the fridge and the painting in proximity thereby 'to extend beyond the boundaries of a modernist way of exhibiting'.¹⁰⁸ However, any meaningful relationship between the *Northland Panels* and the Kelvinator fridge was most stringently refuted by Denis Dutton, who commented that 'knowing they are from the late 1950s is as significant as learning that Lord Rutherford and Mae West were both Virgos'.¹⁰⁹ McCahon had commented in 1972 that he had painted the *Northland Panels* as a means of reacclimatising to New Zealand after the open spaces and cities with tall buildings and 'Faulkner country with magnolias in bloom' which he had encountered in America.

We saw a lot and learned a lot and came back to a first-light sight of North Head, and the despoiled landscape of Auckland. We were met by friends and drank wine all day to forget the aesthetic horror of Karangahape Road. We went home to the bush of Titirangi. It was cold and dripping and shut in ... My lovely kauris became too much for me. I fled north in memory and painted the *Northland Panels*.¹¹⁰

The *Northland Panels* thus arguably represented McCahon's response to *New Zealandness* (both the New Zealand rural northern landscape and a flight away from the ugliness of urban Auckland) rather than any celebration of Americana, though it was the first significant work painted on his return. While both the fridge and the painting registered the beginning of a local shift in cultural orientation towards America, they represented entirely different value

¹⁰⁶ The 'American influence' on McCahon has been much debated. While the increased scale and greater compositional freedom which characterised his work after his return to New Zealand is usually attributed to his encounter with American abstract expressionism, McCahon also encountered Asian art in American museums, and acknowledged the impact of seeing a large exhibition of Meiji-period Japanese painter Tomioka Tessai in San Francisco.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Simpson, *Colin McCahon, The Titirangi Years*, op.cit., p.72.

¹⁰⁸ 'It is the art world who has a problem, not the general public, who don't understand McCahon's paintings. Helen Clark, our current Prime Minister and Minister of the Arts said that the thing that was wrong with Te Papa was that it treats the fridge the same as a McCahon. The whole controversy centres on modernism.' Paul Rayner, 'Paul Rayner, painter, curator, New Zealand', op.cit.

¹⁰⁹ Denis Dutton, 'Te Papa: National Embarrassment', op.cit., p.23.

¹¹⁰ Colin McCahon, *Survey*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972, p.25.

systems. The effect of their exhibition together—if not the intention—was to point up their difference rather than to express their similarities.

Ian Wedde's thesis for Te Papa's interdisciplinarity had been laid down in a series of lectures and conference papers given prior to its opening. When Wedde began work at the museum during its development stages, the combined status of its collections was a given, and the tension between various traditions of culture including the popular and the high as well as Māori and Pākehā was constantly in play. Under the terms of its establishment, Te Papa brought the high culture and common material culture into uneasy proximity: 'Parade' applied this closeness to the granular level of an exhibition. It was both a logical outcome of Te Papa's mandate and an undoubted provocation to the culture of advanced art. A year before Te Papa's opening, Wedde (a poet, art critic, anthologist, and novelist, as well as Concept Leader Humanities at Te Papa) observed that 'the contemporary museum is not, cannot afford to be, a space of presentation, but of negotiation.'¹¹¹ The museum's success as an institution of collective memory would, in Wedde's estimation, depend upon how successfully it could incorporate contemporary culture as an agent of its own change. There would be a necessary and generative tension between the museum's functions of connoisseurship and entertainment, between ratings-driven populism and the need to serve the interests of 'narrowcast communities', between its antithetical languages of policy and marketing. Without the criticality of contemporary culture built 'into its material and virtual architectures, its infrastructures and its programming, [the museum] will lack an essential negotiability,' commented Wedde.

While many contemporary scholars would have agreed in principle with Wedde's characterisation of the museum as a site of negotiation—a field of intellectual struggle—its actual application in the form of a multi-disciplinary, highly-designed, strongly-mediated, almost overwhelming sensory experience was little to their taste. New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark described it as 'jumbled and incoherent.'¹¹² Te Papa's strategy of pastiche, wrote Jenny Harper, 'undermined the seriousness of the high culture.'¹¹³ Reviewing Te Papa in the *New Statesman*, British writer Theodore Dalrymple went further and compared New Zealand's national museum to a giant amusement arcade or a casino:

¹¹¹ Ian Wedde, 'Living in Time: A Day at the Footie', op.cit.

¹¹² Helen Clark, quoted in Jenny Forsyth, 'Te Papa "a Terrible Warning to the World"', *New Zealand Herald*, 3 March 2000.

¹¹³ Jenny Harper, 'For the Sake of Your Art', *The Dominion*, 2 June 1998, p.10.

‘Coloured lights flash, there is a lot of electronic whizzing and banging.’¹¹⁴ He was particularly incredulous at a sign in the museum’s library which encouraged visitors to take some time to sit in ‘soft seats’, look at the ‘magnificent books’ and escape from ‘the hurly-burly of Te Papa.’ The sign promoted an unfortunate view, perhaps, of a library as a refuge from the real world outside: somewhere to gain comfortable respite from the masses, rather than the engine room of a cultural institution. While the national museum was extraordinarily popular with the public, reaching two thirds of its projected annual visitor target in the first nine weeks after it opened, for scholars, at least—despite the branding which proclaimed it as a place for all—Te Papa was clearly not ‘our place.’

The general critical assumption was that neo-liberal economic policy and the new managerial culture had sought to ‘dumb down’ the museum experience in order to maximise visitation and revenues. Yet this analysis, although pertinent background to a consideration of Te Papa as a historical phenomenon, missed the proposition that there was a distinctly critical cultural intelligence behind the museum’s displays. The strategies of bricolage and pastiche, in particular, formulated by historian Jock Phillips and Ian Wedde, sought to represent the diverse dimensions of New Zealand culture. ‘The museum is constituted,’ wrote Wedde, ‘by an exceptionally rich layering of realities, of simulations, fabrications, reconstructions or reconstitutions, copies, representation, coups de theatre, illusions and unique objects. All this is in the service of a series of broad investigations of national identities, a very rich text to which a large audience has responded with enthusiasm.’¹¹⁵ Wedde and Phillips also sought to critique the ‘museumification’ of national identity from within—to point out the fact of its construction.¹¹⁶ For ‘Exhibiting Ourselves’, another opening exhibition, Te Papa recreated the New Zealand displays from four international exhibitions—the 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London; the 1906 Christchurch International Exhibition; the 1940 Centennial Exhibition in Wellington; and the 1992 Expo in Seville, Spain. The implication, for the critically-engaged and reflective viewer, was not only that Te Papa was itself the latest iteration in this clearly politically-inflected series of nation-building displays, but that its intellectual architects recognised it as such. It was as if Te Papa were asserting its identity as

¹¹⁴ Theodore Dalrymple [Anthony (A.M.) Daniels], ‘An Amusement Arcade Masquerading as a Museum’, *New Statesman*, 12 February 1999.

¹¹⁵ Ian Wedde, ‘Complicit Objects, Duplicate Spaces: The Hyperreality of National Identity’, in Ian Wedde, *Making Ends Meet: Essays and Talks 1992-2004*, Victoria University Press, 2005, p.112.

¹¹⁶ For a discussion of the function and the anthropological significance of bricolage at Te Papa, see Michael Goldsmith, “‘Our Place’ in New Zealand Culture: How the Museum of New Zealand Constructs Biculturalism”, in *Ethnologies Comparées*, no.6, Spring 2003, <http://alor.univ-montp3.fr/cerce/r6/m.g.s.htm>

a national sign in quotation marks, with a cheeky (camp) wink to the knowing; incorporating the means of its own cultural critique within its structures.¹¹⁷

The debate that followed the opening of Te Papa might be seen as an extension of the local arguments over poetry that took place a decade earlier, when, as we have seen, Ian Wedde published his introduction to the new *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, advocating for the advancement of the 'demotic voice' in the national tradition. Compared with the mandates of the institutions that had combined to form it, the National Museum and National Art Gallery, Te Papa represented a fundamental shift in museum practice. At the base of this change was Te Papa's positioning of the demotic ahead of the hieratic; rather than a presentation of the 'sacred', and thus a perpetuation of the traditions of the high culture, Te Papa would be concerned with a representation of the everyday experience of New Zealanders, communicating with a broad public audience. The critical acrimony around the opening was, once again, a debate concerned with the representation of local culture. The equation of a critique of a democratic approach to culture with snobbery was also familiar. It recalled Pearson's lament in the 1950s, as well as Wystan Curnow's observation, in response to Wedde's call to the demotic in the Penguin anthology, that when categorised as hieratic, the productions of the high culture ('language') risk looking like members of the 'oppressor class'.¹¹⁸

In the end, after three years on display and a great deal of negative critical attention, 'Parade' was taken down and the local art world breathed a collective sigh of relief. Art would thereafter assume a greater visibility within the organisation in its own dedicated spaces. William McAloon expressed himself thankful that 'gone are Parade's plastic thumbs up/thumbs down signs and those execrable vox pop labels (not to mention the fridge).'¹¹⁹ It was seen as a victory, of sorts; the resolution of a profoundly troubling situation. Not long after Te Papa opened in 1998, Robert Leonard commented that he feared 'the 1990s will be remembered as the time when all the components of the art world as we know it actually withered and disintegrated.'¹²⁰ Asked in 2005 for the context of that remark, he recalled the air of profound pessimism which the opening of Te Papa (and in particular, the multi-

¹¹⁷ For a perceptive characterisation of Te Papa's representation of 'Antipodean camp', see Ben Dibley, *Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and The Museum: Te Papa, For Example*, op.cit.

¹¹⁸ Wystan Curnow, 'Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles', op.cit., p.130.

¹¹⁹ William McAloon, 'Hang Ups', *New Zealand Listener*, 10 November 2001, p.50.

¹²⁰ Robert Leonard, quoted in Philip Matthews, 'At the End of New Zealand Art', *New Zealand Listener*, 1 October 2005, p.38.

disciplinary ‘Parade’) had generated in the New Zealand art world; the concern that the reduced status of art, and of art connoisseurship, the *dumbing down* which members of the professional New Zealand art world detected in the Te Papa model would be extended to other public museums and galleries.

It was one thing when that stuff [contextualisation] was done by artists and curators as part of an art game, another when it was done to us from outside as part of Te Papa’s social-history game. Te Papa took a lot of ideas perfected in the art world but repurposed them to disempower art. We became the victims of our own devil’s advocacy.

In short—and in a distinct echo of Fairburn’s critique of McCahon in 1948—Te Papa’s combinatorial approach to art and the wider culture was seen by some members of the high culture as *bad for the politics of art*. Like Fairburn confronted by McCahon’s speech bubbles and painted words, Te Papa’s critics deplored the *illegitimacy of the means* by which, as high culture, it sought to broaden its viewing public and modes of address: its popularity was a cheque cashed at art’s expense. The critics had a point. Rather than follow Wystan Curnow’s prescription for the health of high art—whereby the role of the intermediary should be to *widen* the gap between art and life, and increase the status of art in the common culture in order to let artists go about their business, unimpeded and yet supported by the culture—Te Papa pursued the opposite course. Exhibiting art as material culture was to dismantle its ability to both to articulate and transcend its cultural and historical moment: to treat an acknowledged masterpiece as historical illustration, a pictorial footnote to history. The philistines were not waiting outside the walls to pounce on those who, in Fairburn’s formulation of half a century earlier, wanted ‘to escape from the encircling gloom of the Academy’, but seemed from the evidence of ‘Parade’ to be already inside, running it.

Like other critics of Te Papa, Leonard saw the museum’s treatment of art as a remedial project: a problem to be fixed. And the problem of art’s place at Te Papa gradually was addressed, over the following decades, with the building of new spaces dedicated to art and a return to white walls and discreet labels. The institution had indeed allowed itself to become a site for cultural negotiation. Leonard noted that it had greatly improved the way it dealt with art by 2005, ‘but undoubtedly as a result of sustained criticism.’¹²¹ The fundamental problem remained that Te Papa, a museum of New Zealand culture with integrated collections, was

¹²¹ Robert Leonard, quoted in Philip Matthews, ‘At the End of New Zealand Art’, op.cit., p.38.

not—and could not ever be—the National Art Gallery. Leonard cast the struggle for the institutional independence of art in terms of a military campaign, stating that Te Papa ‘had a long way to go to recover the ground we lost when the National Art Gallery was axed.’

When Ben Dibley points out that the academic literature which has accumulated around Te Papa is largely characterised by an air of disappointment that the museum has somehow not lived up ‘to its stated aims or some ideal of the museum form’, there is more than an echo here of the New Zealand tradition of high-cultural disappointments outlined earlier in this thesis. The situation of New Zealand’s high culture—its conditions of possibility within the broader national culture—has rarely if ever appeared to be what its critics think it might be in ideal conditions of culture, or what they wished it were.¹²² Disappointment about one’s situatedness in history and geography is, perhaps, one of the distinctive components of provincial experience. New Zealand’s high culture—although critically *not* the achievements of its individual artists—has been a continual source of disappointment to its critics and champions. It is always being compared with an idealised external standard and being found wanting; a pale shadow, a thin imitation, an inferior copy, a late entrant, a *dumbed down version* of what is assumed to function better elsewhere. The antagonism generated by and in ‘Parade’ and Te Papa in the late 1990s is fundamentally an argument about what New Zealand high culture should be like. On one hand there is a position of disappointment that the culture does not live up to expectations—that it is thin, weak, anti-intellectual, derivative, common, crude, *provincial*—and on the other there is an approach to the culture as the conditions of local possibility, what artists and critics work with and within, although this latter position implies no lesser criticality than the former. These two positions represent the twin poles of New Zealand high culture; and the current flowing between them informs most of its antagonisms.

While the reformist critiques of Te Papa did address matters of considerable importance to its operation—and unarguably of considerable concern to the politics of art—Dibley suggests what they passed over, in their dissatisfaction that the national museum was not something else, is a broader critical view of Te Papa itself as a symbolic representation of New Zealand

¹²² Dibley detects this common feeling of disappointment in a range of critical approaches to Te Papa, which variously point up ‘its programmatic inconsistencies, internal contradictions, representational inadequacies or its institutional paradoxes.’ It is Dibley’s notion that Te Papa’s critics have seen it fundamentally as an object for reform. See Ben Dibley, ‘Antipodean Aesthetics, Public Policy and The Museum: Te Papa, For Example’, *op.cit.*, p.129.

culture. A default setting of disappointment overlooks the analytical possibilities arising from the treatment of Te Papa as ‘an archive for reflection on the cultural predicament of an antipodean modernity.’ Dibley’s approach is to consider Te Papa itself as the object of analysis: rather than simply being derivative of ‘broader intellectual orientations and institutional practices’, his conclusion is that, with its tactics of bricolage, pastiche and self-mockery in which national identity is simultaneously established, sent up, but in the final count signified anyway, it is best understood as a ‘monument to antipodean camp’, in the manner described by Nick Perry.¹²³

What lies beyond the usual characterisation of the debate over McCahon-and-the-fridge as a clash between modernist and postmodernist ideologies and conventions of display—a struggle for the upper hand between old-fashioned purity and new-fangled pluralism—is, in fact, the characteristic New Zealand antagonism over the relationship of art to the common culture. While antipathy towards popular culture had largely died out among scholars by the 1980s, the antagonism between the high and the common (or the hieratic and the demotic) remained an active local fault-line well into the new millennium, where it continued to generate both works of art and other forms of critical discourse. The cultural problem of McCahon and the fridge represents the same ‘structure of feeling’ which was articulated both by McCahon’s work of the late 1940s and by Fairburn’s vituperative response to it; and which resurfaced in the various responses to McCahon’s work in the 1990s, including ‘Choice!’, Michael Parekowhai’s *The Indefinite Article* and Ronnie van Hout’s ‘Return of the Living Dead’.¹²⁴

In forceful opposition to Te Papa’s treatment of art as part of the material culture of national identity—a scenario in which an original masterwork would be rendered equivalent to a mass-produced fridge in telling the story of New Zealand ‘creativity’ and identity—the criticism of ‘Parade’ was generated by the desire to separate the domain of art from the domain of everyday life: to create an insulation gap between the broader culture and art. But it also arose equally strongly from the desire of art to escape the programmatic and the

¹²³ Ben Dibley, *ibid.*, p.129.

¹²⁴ Raymond Williams initially used this term in his *A Preface to Film* (1954) and extended it in *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Although his use of the term changes over time, in a general sense it refers to the common values and perceptions that are present in the contemporary culture at a particular historical moment. Williams argues that ‘structures of feeling’ are, though slippery and elusive concepts to grasp, most clearly articulated in the vanguard arts of a historical period.

instrumental; to evade the political prescription of meaning and value and thereby avoid conscription into the ranks of a new postmodern brand of cultural nationalism.¹²⁵

In the fifteen years since Te Papa opened, the emergence of new subject positions under conditions of postcolonialism and digital networking have radically altered the view of the national. While for artists of McCahon's generation the choice was between leaving the country or staying at home and being oppressed by New Zealand provincialism, developments such as international artists' residencies, cheaper air travel and the growth of the New Zealand diaspora has resulted in many New Zealand artists living overseas for extended periods while maintaining an exhibition presence in New Zealand. As their peers and sources of reference are as likely to be international as local, the notion of 'New Zealand art' as a determining category and a subject of address is of significantly less interest and less import to New Zealand artists working in 2012 than it was in 1948 or even in 1992. While much of the progressive art of the 1990s dealt with new subject positions for cultural identity in conditions of globalisation and decolonisation, we have entered a post-nationalist period in which the concept of New Zealand art is no longer relevant nor generative. New Zealand artists have found effective ways to subvert the cultural nationalist requirements of central government when representing the country internationally. Although there are still occasional public furores of the 'When Art Hits The Headlines' variety which pit the common culture 'against' the high, they are fewer in number and of lesser import than they used to be. While state funding for new work is still insufficient to support artists, artists are no longer actively undermined by the pressures of the broader culture. The championship of critics, the visibility of artists in the media, and the exponential growth of the art market, have combined to result in an increase in the social status of artists: an insulation, in fact, from the pressures of the common culture including the demands of the middlebrow. And the programmatic nature of local criticism has changed; as New Zealand artists no longer operate solely within the enclosure of the national high culture, consequently there is both less need to police its boundaries, and diminished need to see it as a remedial problem to be addressed.

¹²⁵ The title of a work by L Budd, *Art to Express New Zealand*, from 1991, a palimpsest of layers and erasures and words crossed out and rewritten, is instructive here.

CONCLUSION: THE WORLD AT PLAY

The underlying structure of feeling of a culture is especially evident at those specific and historically definable moments when new work produces a sudden shock of recognition. What must be happening on those occasions is that an experience which is really very wide suddenly finds a semantic figure which articulates it.’

Raymond Williams, 1979¹

This thesis has sought to extend a discussion about New Zealand modernist art history into a wider arena, by considering the role of the common culture in the development of high culture in New Zealand. Using a model of culture as a field of struggle drawn from the discipline of cultural studies, it has figured local high culture as a contested space, in which a range of positions and imperatives have been articulated and tested. The thesis has endeavoured to uncover the antagonistic nature of the New Zealand experience of modern culture and its representations in the field of New Zealand art, and to identify some of the figures—the artists, the exhibitions, the arguments, the insults—which most distinctly articulate it. The central figure in the thesis is Colin McCahon, whose work is critical to an understanding of the complexities of the New Zealand modernist tradition, and around whose practice New Zealand artists and commentators have repeatedly and diversely positioned themselves.

As Wystan Curnow has described it, with a small population and without a tradition of patronage that allows specialisation at the highest levels, effectively there has been insufficient distance between New Zealand’s high and common cultures to allow the enterprise of the high culture to proceed unimpeded or uninflected. The local high culture has thus incorporated the negative dialectic of the common culture within itself, limiting and shaping its address, wary of its audience, conscious of public accusations of elitism that conflate academic expertise with social snobbery, of being accused of putting one over on a credulous public. These are the social conditions of modern New Zealand culture, personified so acutely in the early 1950s by Bill Pearson as the scornful ‘man on the bus’. Roger Horrocks ruefully noted that half a century after Pearson’s ‘Fretful Sleepers’, ‘a sceptical

¹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, London: New Left Books, 1979, p.162.

listener of this kind is still internalised in me. I may disobey it or say rude things about it but I know it's always there.'² The high culture's internalisation of the 'scornful listener' figure has arguably acted as a mechanism of self-censorship, forcing intellectuals to moderate their public discourse. Horrocks writes: 'The specialised discourse of "high culture" is "grounded" in the public language of our community ... Writers have to be on their toes to address a community that barely welcomes them—they can't afford to waste words, they'd better have something solid, something bloody important to say ...'³ At the same time, while artists are members of the high culture, and share in its aspirations and its pressures, their primary allegiance is to the field of art, which belongs to and draws from both the common and the high cultures.

Tension between the high and the common culture has not only been a generative force within the history of New Zealand modernist art, but it has been tied to the development of national identity and particularly inflected by highly-charged issues of provincialism in New Zealand. The controversy over McCahon and the fridge at Te Papa was generated by the same complex cultural antagonism that was present in the 'celestial lavatory incident' of the late 1940s, and which appeared again in the postmodern art concerned with identity politics of the early 1990s, both of which, like the opening of Te Papa, involved symbolic moments of significant historic change to the idea of nationhood and New Zealandness. The conditions of globalisation which are currently prevailing are resulting in further change to the conception of New Zealand identity; but this identity is no longer solely tied to residence in New Zealand. As the old high/low cultural antagonism is fundamentally an argument over the nature and status of local high culture, its impact has lessened as new globalised communities of scholarship have emerged both for artists New Zealand and critics.

What remains particularly prescient in Ian Wedde's conception of Te Papa's cultural mandate in the late 1990s is his question of how the museum would best serve the interests of 'narrow-cast communities'; communities of interest are, over the fifteen years since the opening of Te Papa, what has inexorably replaced the previous idea of the mass, or the general public, which the high culture historically regarded itself as constituted in opposition to, or as

² Roger Horrocks, 'No Theory Permitted on These Premises', op.cit., p.129.

³ Ibid, p.129.

residing above; and which conception of culture Te Papa eschewed in favour of its multi-disciplinary, multivalent, pluralistic approach. There is a considerable danger for the high culture in this proposition. The risk is that the high culture—the culture of scholars and artists—will be perceived as one (particularly vocal) community of interest among many others, a situation that occurred with Te Papa's response to the criticism about 'Parade'. In a public sphere dominated by the representations of global capital, the intellectual traditions of the high culture risk being dismissed as irrelevant and outmoded, or of consequence only if they can be financially leveraged or should they generate a groundswell of public opinion that cannot be ignored. Increasingly the public sphere is not commanded by intellectual authority but by the battle for public opinion. The challenge for the high culture is now, as it was for McCahon in the late 1940s, one of communication; to broaden its public while retaining its criticality of address; to find new ways to embed itself within the common culture rather than reflexively defending itself from it; to find a new local paradigm beyond antagonism.

A final question arises. There is a particular quality in McCahon's work that has allowed him to be interpreted in opposing ways, to be simultaneously both popular and high, anti-authoritarian and the ultimate source of artist authority, to be everyday and transcendent, secular and spiritual, demotic and hieratic, primitive and conceptual, variously pre-modern, modern and postmodern—the particular quality in art made at the highest level of culture that Thomas Crow describes as 'compressed dissonance', or Morse Peckham as 'perceptual disorder'. Located initially in McCahon's conflation of mass culture with high art, and extended in later work which incorporated the common culture, this is the quality which has positioned McCahon's work as an active agent in New Zealand culture, riven as it has been by social antagonism between the high and the low. The question is: will McCahon's work continue to be of active service to the culture as it moves towards a new identity in a global context? In a post-national period of New Zealand art history, will McCahon's work continue to represent a baseline from which new positions articulate themselves? My guess, and it can only be a guess, is in the affirmative. The world was always at play within McCahon's work.

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