Some Thoughts on *Cultural Safety : Contemporary Art from New Zealand*: travel and its hazards.

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Gregory Burke et al, *Cultural Safety: Contemporary Art from New Zealand* exhibition catalogue (City Gallery, Wellington, Te Whare Toi, and Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1995) ISBN 0-908818-30-0

The exhibition, *Cultural Safety*, jointly curated by Gregory Burke, then of the City Gallery, Wellington, and Peter Weiermair of the Frankfurter Kunstverein, was held at that institution in Frankfurt and at the Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen in 1995. It is programmed for the City Gallery in 1996. The City Gallery's Director, Paula Savage has characterised *Cultural Safety* as "one of New Zealand's most significant visual arts exchange initiatives," that aims, among other things, "to increase cultural understanding."[1] The bilingual catalogue for this putatively signal event has been available in New Zealand well in advance of the show itself, and it is the catalogue only, or, more precisely, just some aspects of it, which is the focus of this article, not the art, since I have not seen the exhibition.

The well-produced, book-sized (160pp., 23 x 22.7cm) catalogue includes a variety of textual and visual materials. There is a brief preface and a foreword by Savage and Weiermair respectively, a seventeen page essay (each page in two columns: the one on the right, narrower and in smaller print, the original English; the other, the German translation or equivalent) by Burke, titled "Cultural Safety," individual statements from the seven chosen artists (Julian Dashper, Luise Fong, Jacqueline Fraser, Fiona Pardington, Michael Parekowhai, Peter Robinson, Ruth Watson), as well as photographs of them and good quality reproductions of their work (about sixty in colour).

This section, devoted to the artists and their works, comprises the main body of the catalogue (pp. 33-106), and is followed by a list of the exhibited works, a time-line, and what is the second largest section of the catalogue (pp. 129-157), the artists' biographies and exhibition histories with further black and white reproductions of their work. There is also a page headed "Further Reading," which lists a selection of books, exhibition catalogues, and periodicals on New Zealand art and art history. The timeline and Burke's essay are interspersed with an assortment of images - for instance, reproductions of earlier artists' works (e.g. Augustus Earle, L. J. Steele and Goldie, Theo Schoon, Colin McCahon), stills from New Zealand films (e.g. *Once Were Warriors*, *Illustrious Energy*), and seemingly random photographs (e.g. Elvis Presley with female members of a Maori concert party from 1965, a group of female physical education instructors in training from 1944, the Westlake Girls' High School cultural group at the Maori and Pacific Islands Cultural Festival, Nga Tapuwae College in 1993). These were, presumably, meant to suggest salient or distinctive aspects of New Zealand life or "culture" at various stages in its history.

So *Cultural Safety*, the catalogue, constitutes a package of several kinds of information, commentary, translation, illustration and reproduction that could have been a useful supplement for German exhibition viewers who had little familiarity with, or knowledge of, New Zealand art and history. The catalogue certainly looks good, and it commendably foregrounds the artists and their works - in pleasing contrast to those exhibitions and catalogues which have been geared primarily to showcasing the curators, and in which the artists and their works are there mainly to serve the curators' self-interests.

However the relatively secondary role taken by the curators in the catalogue may, ironically, have been a strategic miscalculation, insofar as, given the brevity of their commentaries, there was no way they could do justice to, or adequately explore, the complexities and problematics of the issues and socio-cultural phenomena they chose to engage with. For the curators, in particular Burke in his essay, set themselves an ambitious and no easy task - to address matters of culture (or intercultural relationships), identity (national, ethnic and gender) and the visual arts, both within New Zealand and in terms of New Zealand's or various New Zealanders' interactions with the wider world, in particular the "first" world of Western Europe and North America. To do this effectively in such a short text for an audience of Europeans was probably impossible since for the

great majority of Europeans and North Americans (excuse this unresearched and possibly paranoid generalisation) the "first" world is still the only "real" world. The South Pacific, including New Zealand, only exists for them insofar as it either provides an exotic holiday location, or, within "high" cultural and academic discourses, it belongs to that increasingly commodified category, the "marginal."[2] Could that have been the niche that *Cultural Safety* occupied in Germany?

The topics Burke took on - the "nature" of identity and inter-, and intra-, cultural relations, the interplay of the local and the international, the "shifts in meaning that are brought about by changes in cultural context"[3] are, it should be noted, generally "hot," even fashionable, topics in Western Europe and North America, and have been so for some time. "Cultural Safety" (Burke's essay) could only touch on, introduce these matters. That their complexities and problematics have been keenly and widely argued and contested, wherein surely originates any productive energy in respect of the visual arts, remained largely unexplored. "Cultural Safety," rather than probing beyond the surface of this field of productively conflicting and differing views and practices, delivers up a comparatively tidy and comfortable package. It is a package constructed primarily in terms of Maori and European relationships, though, perhaps oddly, the term, Pakeha, is not used. There is a nod in the direction of the multi-cultural, with the classification of Fong as "of Chinese and European descent."

The very choice and use of the term "cultural safety" as the title of the exhibition, catalogue, and Burke's essay, could be seen as symptomatic of this tendency to bypass the problematic. The term "cultural safety" is best-known in New Zealand as a fundamental concept in nursing and midwifery education: the need, in the interests of good nursing practice, for nurses and midwives to have respect for, and sufficient knowledge of, the values and beliefs of their patients' cultures, whatever they may be. Whether or not "cultural safety," so articulated or theorised, and however worthy in intention it may be, has been misused, misapplied, or appropriated for narrow and partisan political ends has been at the centre of controversy in New Zealand over the last few years, with extensive media coverage, questions and debates in Parliament, and investigations and reviews by a parliamentary select committee and the Nursing Council of both the theory and the practice of "cultural safety." Very few people do not have an opinion on "cultural safety," it would seem. Yet Burke's essay makes no reference to this: that the term and the concept, or more precisely some of the practical applications of the concept, have generated so much contention and conflict, even though Burke clearly indicates that his adoption of the term for the catalogue essay and exhibition title was inspired by, or derived from, its use in the "national health care system."[4]

Weiermair in his "Foreword" asserts, without explaining why or how, that the choice of the term "cultural safety" was ironic, yet there is no irony apparent in Burke's use of the term. In fact he does little more than drop the term into the essay. It is left underdeveloped in relation to the art otherwise briefly described or referred to. Interestingly, "cultural safety" is not translated in the accompanying German text. It remains italicised in English, without a bracketed equivalent in German, in contrast to other English titles or terms in the German text (e.g. Tour of New Zealand (*Rundfahrt durch Neuseeland*)). Why this should be so remains unstated and unclear. Perhaps there is no satisfactory equivalent term in German. One wonders, though, whether the coincidental and no doubt inadvertent echo of the term in the rhetoric of Nazism of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, with its terminology of cleansing, public hygiene, ridding the social "body" of alien and "dangerous" elements, may have been potentially extremely discomforting in the German context. This possibility suggests that curators need to be very careful in using certain formulations or categorisations. The shifts in meaning or connotation that can occur from one socio-cultural context to another may be more than they bargained for. Hoped - for "cultural understanding" may end up as a misunderstanding.

In respect of this consider *Cultural Safety*'s identification of the artists in terms of "race" and ethnicity, part or whole (e.g. "European," or "Maori" and "European," with the Maori part given tribal affiliations, though ethnic distinctions are not made within the category "European"). Identifications of this sort are commonplace these days. Yet, depending on the contexts in which they are used, they can acquire unanticipated associations. For instance, the catalogue uses the term "descent," which can carry the implication, even if unintended, that a person's membership of a culture is biologically determined; that in being, for instance, genetically Patagonian, or part Patagonian, that person is Patagonian culturally as well. Presumably the intention sustaining *Cultural Safety*'s classifications of the 'race,' ethnicity and culture of each artist was to demonstrate or declare the multi-cultural make-up of both the contemporary New Zealand fine art milieu and New

Zealand society generally. There is, of course, nothing wrong with that. However, even though the curators denied that "political correctness"[5] or "ethnicity"[6] were criteria in the selection of the artists for the exhibition, their disavowals may have the opposite effect. They may serve, against the intentions of the curators, to avow what has been disavowed; and to direct attention away from the individual practices and specific qualities of each artist's works towards their (the artists') supposed memberships of certain categories, of which their works then function primarily as illustrations - e.g. of part Maori and part European, or part European and part Chinese, or European. Furthermore, no doubt unwittingly on the part of the curators, such classifications according to "race" and ethnicity, these labellings of the artists, could bring to mind, perhaps uncomfortably for some German readers, aspects of nineteenth and early twentieth century theorising about "race," central features of which were categorisations of people in terms of wholes or parts of particular "races" and a preoccupation with hybridity. The thesis presented by Robert Young in his recent *Colonial Desire* may be of interest here.[7] He argues that much contemporary theorising and writing about culture and identity, contrary to the intentions of the authors, serves to reinscribe "the racialised thinking of the past." Certainly any engagement with matters of identity, culture, and ethnicity in a schematic and superficial way may provide scope more for misunderstanding than understanding.

Cultural Safety's curators were well aware that "international" exhibitions, like their own, or more particularly the ways in which artworks are presented and written about in/for such exhibitions, can, to quote Weiermair, "unjustifiably simplify our understanding of other cultures and tend to stress similarities rather than differences."[8] Whether this catalogue (and exhibition) successfully negotiated that problem (a difficult one for any curator or catalogue writer) could probably be debated endlessly. On one hand the information about the artists and their works provided by the catalogue overall, and by Burke's competent capsule summaries or characterisations of their works in his essay did give, at least to this reader, some sense of the local, of New Zealand specificities. On the other hand the artists and their works were incorporated into discourses vis à vis contemporary art practice and theory (some of which have already been noted) that many German and other European readers and viewers would be well familiar with, that indeed could be said to have acquired in art periodicals and catalogues an often bland and homogenising "international" cast to them.

The very tone of the curators' writings in the catalogue was, maybe, a mark of this. In its earnestness, in its seriousness it was oddly out of keeping with, or did not give a sense of, the wit, irony, irreverence, the sense of the comic, that I would see as prime features of the art of most of the artists in the show; indeed aspects of their work that may carry a strong flavour of the local, of the New Zealand-specific (if such a quality can be postulated) at its best and most energising.

For German readers, otherwise little, or unfamiliar, with New Zealand, *Cultural Safety*'s timeline, with its selection of "facts" about New Zealand, its histories and peoples, may have contributed to establishing the grounds of difference between the contemporary New Zealand art in the exhibition and current art in Western Europe. Maybe not. Timelines, by their very nature, involve a certain arbitrariness in the selection of the "facts," and what is omitted may be as important, as loaded, as what is included. This timeline stressed, among other things, various German connections with New Zealand from the time of Cook's second voyage in the 1770s, on which were the German naturalists, the Forsters, father and son. Was this meant to suggest a German "investment" in New Zealand from the beginnings of European contact? On occasions the German connections were pursued overzealously, with two artists of other nationalities or ethnicities - the Austrian Eugene Von Guerard, briefly in New Zealand in 1876, and the Czech Gottfried Lindauer - being subjected to identification as "German." That is another hazard of "identity" politics and ethnic categorisations. Mistakes can be made. Just because someone has a German-sounding name, for example, does not mean that he or she is German. In several places the timeline listed the migration to New Zealand of people from European countries, besides Great Britain, so demonstrating that the European constituents of New Zealand history and society are heterogeneous, not homogeneous - a point that needs to be made more often in New Zealand. However, curiously, given the frequency of the German connections that are made elsewhere, the timeline made no mention that about a thousand central European, mostly Jewish and German-speaking refugees from Nazism immigrated into New Zealand in the mid to late 1930s, or that a number of these refugee immigrants made significant and lasting impacts on developments in the visual arts and culture generally here. Three such people, Ernst Plischke, Henry Kulka and Imres Porsolt, are

mentioned in a later section of the timeline, as if they came to New Zealand after World War Two, with no mention of the actual and crucial circumstances of their immigration. Were these omissions no more than accidental oversights? Or could they have been concessions to contemporary German sensitivities about the Nazi period? These are minor details, perhaps, but in a publication that deals with crosscultural relationships, and which is addressed to a bilingual and binational readership, they suggest how easy it may be to produce misconceptions; in this instance in relation to migration from Europe to New Zealand in a period of extreme social and political crisis, despite the most worthy sustaining intentions of the project overall.

There is, of course, much more that could be written about *Cultural Safety*, which has many good qualities. In commenting on just a few aspects of the catalogue, I have sought to suggest that matters of culture and identity in New Zealand and elsewhere are much more complex and problematic than the curators appear to have allowed for; that travelling from one place to another, relocation, is just as likely to result in mismatchings and misconstructions as in coordinated unions and understandings. To say, as Gregory Burke writes in the last sentence of his essay, that "*Cultural Safety* is both here and there" begs further questions, any answers to which will only come after much more intensive and extensive explorations.

NOTES

1 Paula Savage, "Foreword," *Cultural Safety: Contemporary Art From New Zealand* City Gallery, Wellington, Te Whare Toi, and Frankfurter Kunstverein, (1995), p. 6.

2 Re the academic commodification of the category of "marginality" see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* reading Defoe's *Crusoe/Roxana*," *Consequences of Theory: Selected Papers from the English Institute 1987-88* eds. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) p. 154.

3 Burke, "Cultural Safety," *Cultural Safety* p. 20.

4 Burke, "Cultural Safety," p. 20.

5 Weiermair, "Foreword," *Cultural Safety* p. 9.

6 Burke, "Cultural Safety," p. 17.

7 Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Race, and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

8 Weiermair, "Foreword," p. 9.