

A Mobile Library

26 November 2011–12 February 2012

A library can be a bus. It can be a website. Once there was a library in a tent on our lawn, officiated by my small sister until the ‘robbers’ did a shooting raid and looted her shelves. If you Google ‘mobile library’ you’ll find a Harper Collins mystery series, featuring ‘Israel Armstrong, one of literature’s most unlikely detectives’.¹ Anyone who has ever been a school library monitor knows that library users, and a library’s uses, are endlessly various. Reading is somewhere among them.

The defining factors are two: the provision of reading material, and public access.² *A Mobile Library* appropriates the form and some of the functions of a library, temporarily encamped within the gallery space. The exhibition recognises a strong link between many of the roles of a public gallery and a public library—a commitment to the common good: cultural literacy, and a quiet, freely accessible place one might stay out of the weather. In City Gallery the relationship is a more literal one: the Gallery’s current building originally housed the Wellington Public Library, until 1991.³

The exhibition also reflects the connection between contemporary art production and publishing. An interest in the archive—literal or imagined—in page works, documentation, print distribution and technologies inflects many visual artists’ practices, as does a love of the properties of paper, registering a pull opposing digital media. *A Mobile Library* actualises the blurring of boundary lines between visual art and its texts, making space for publications of many shapes and sizes, many of which may fall outside of conventional library collections or distribution channels.

In as much as artists and makers are engaged by the potential of print forms, an audience of avid readers and bibliophiles circulates contemporary art print production. Most of us have shelves swollen with non-standard size publications variously linked to fields of contemporary art and writing: beautifully bound books of artist’s writing such as the candyfloss pink recent Clouds’ release *Julian Dashper: This Is Not Writing*; hand distributed newsprint serials such as risograph-printed *The Silver Bulletin*; incomplete back runs of journals *Hue & Cry* or Auckland Art Gallery’s *Reading Room*.

The temporary reference library in this exhibition is drawn from such collections, through a widely circulated call requesting the short term loan of books (by or about artists, produced in New Zealand, by New Zealand authors or focused on New Zealand makers) published in the last six years. The resulting collection includes contributions from a vast range of private libraries, alongside a couple of institutional loans. Brought together they offer a cross section of what ‘we’—a self-defining community of believers-in-print—are reading, what we are writing and making, and represent a vital interface with contemporary art’s audience.

¹ ‘Israel is an intelligent, shy, passionate, sensitive sort of soul....he’s just arrived in Ireland to take up his first post as a librarian. But the library’s been shut down and Israel ends up stranded on the North Antrim coast driving an old mobile library.’ See Ian Sansom, *The Case of the Missing Books* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

² More recently, libraries are understood as extending beyond the building’s walls, including electronically accessible material; the exhibition’s website provides links to a host of online libraries and publications.

³ In 1993 the City Gallery moved into the former Wellington Public Library building, a 1940 Art Deco style building which itself replaced the original red brick City Library building of 1893. The Library moved into its current premises, adjacent to the old site.

Integral to the mushrooming of contemporary interest in print media is the role of design, and of designers as autonomous producers. Designer and writer Daniel van der Velden writes, 'It's not headline news ... that some of the emerging forms of design are built less around commissioned work and more around the possibilities of individual agency of designers. In this seemingly fluid process, much of what once comprised graphic design's practical and social legitimacy has been jettisoned.'⁴ Many of the publications included in this gallery-based library are the work of designers as sole initiators, editors and producers and propose unorthodox formats, content dictated by design or redefining reader expectations. Journals such as *The National Grid*⁵ represent a vocal and very active community of designers directly engaged in dialogue and research around contemporary design and its local history.

Joseph Churchward is a pivotal, prolific and highly influential figure in this recently reclaimed history.⁶ Samples of his typographic design are displayed on the back wall of the gallery, giving visual articulation to statements from a recent interview with the Samoan-born designer of some 690 typefaces to date. The buoyancy and expressive punch of Churchward's alphabets earned him international standing from the late 1960s, when he founded what became New Zealand's largest typesetting firm, Churchward International Typefaces. German company Berthold Fototypes acquired his fonts for global distribution, and they have remained in popular use here and throughout the world.⁷

Type designer Kris Sowersby and graphic designer Duncan Forbes (one half of design studio The International Office) often collaborate to make work.⁸ For *A Mobile Library* they present a series of posters, each featuring the ISBN and publishing information of design-related books instrumental in their respective practices. Eloquently re-presenting the coded and technical detail pertaining to a book's production, cataloguing and distribution, these works intimate the role of design in crafting every element of a text, while suggesting an alternative categorisation of the book, as physical object, or unit of archived data. Adopting a purely technical language, meaningless and banal to most people, amplifies attention to Sowersby's typefaces as abstract letterforms.

Candywhistle designer Holly Beals is interested in how spatial and furniture design affect human habits, and habitation of an interior environment. Her designs for *A Mobile Library*—Gallons table, Print-rung bench seat and untitled reading desks—acknowledge the singular ways people like to read and occupy communal space, as well as offering storage and display

⁴ Daniel van der Velden, 'Shadow Practice', in David Bennewith (Ed.), *Joseph Churchward* (Clouds (Auckland), Jan van Eyck Academie and Colophon (Amsterdam), 2009), p.97.

⁵ Copies of this journal, and all other publications mentioned, may be found in the exhibition library.

⁶ *Letter Man: Joseph Churchward's World of Type*, a 2008 exhibition at Te Papa Tongarewa, acknowledged Churchward's pioneering role in local design, and ongoing research by David Bennewith continues to see his work at the heart of contemporary design discussions.

⁷ Churchward's design was used in the mastheads for former *The Evening Post* and current *Dominion Post*, and the logo for the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs; many other examples of his work in use can be found in Bennewith's book *Joseph Churchward* (2009).

⁸ See <http://klim.co.nz/> and <http://www.the-international-office.com/index.html> for examples of Sowersby's and The International Office's work.

options for publications across a variety of formats. The desks allow for the standing posture for a short-term leaner, scanning a book. Typically concerned with clean lines and spare, unobtrusive presence, Candywhistle's designs include moments, such as the felt sling between tables, where practical rectangularity is turned on its head in favour of a more playful utility.

The library without its public is deficient, a lifeless archive. *A Mobile Library* is designed as a user's space, to serve a community of readers; those interested in the connection between print and contemporary visual art and those who simply like handling books. Similarly, the type designs in the gallery may be considered in relation to print and publication design, or as wall works in their own right. Sharing a language with the print material in the library collection, they open up that conversation to design considerations, assert that there are other levels of engagement with text than reading for information.

Most people have simple requirements of a library. Peter Campbell, late art columnist for the *London Review of Books* writes (of the new Reading Room at The British Library), 'You will...find your seat, get your books, read, note and, if you are not very unusual, eventually yawn, doze, wander and scan the room for an acquaintance to drink tea with.'⁹ The gallery space is designed for good light, relative lack of distraction, and to spend time looking; it shares many characteristics of a good library. Before tea and after, make use of what's plentiful and free: public space, fine books and design, spare time.

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⁹ Peter Campbell, *At...writing, mainly about art, from the London Review of Books* (London: Hyphen Press, 2009), p.12.