

(\$elling New Zealand

30 YEARS OF NEW ZEALAND TELEVISION ADVERTISING



City Gallery

Wellington

10 September -

20 November 1994



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New Zealand

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An exhibition organised by the
City Gallery, Wellington and
The New Zealand Film Archive

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Selling New Zealand is not like other exhibitions.

The masterpieces in this show have been hung in virtually every living room in the country. We thought we had completely forgotten them, but instantly remember them when we see them again. They hold a telling depiction of the way we have lived (or at least wished we could live) since the 1960s.

The City Gallery, Wellington and the New Zealand Film Archive have joined forces to present a completely fresh look at our culture from a strangely familiar viewpoint.

Selling New Zealand fulfils the Gallery's mission by presenting a fresh, critical eye on aspects of art largely ignored by art museums. For the Film Archive it is an opportunity to explore the possibilities contained within its huge collections and reveals just one dimension of our moving image heritage.

Ever since the first days of television in New Zealand many of the country's best writers, designers, musicians and film makers have devoted their talents and energies to producing these tiny jewels. It is particularly gratifying that three leading agencies - Saatchi & Saatchi, Lintas and Colenso - are sponsoring the exhibition.

When these commercials were being made, many involved in their planning and production thought of them as ephemeral, but an understanding of their potential at these three agencies led to the establishment of in-house archives which provided some of the earliest and best in this survey of 30 years of ingenuity and inspiration.

Paula Savage
Director
City Gallery, Wellington

Frank Stark
Chief Executive
NZ Film Archive

"Advertising is, after all, the official art of capitalism ..."

Nick Perry, *The Dominion of Signs: Television, advertising and other New Zealand fictions*

New Zealand's first public television broadcast was on June 1, 1960. On April 4, 1961 television went commercial. The ad-men were quick to recognise the possibilities of the new medium. In the four hours of broadcasting on that Saturday night there were 72 commercials. Eight days later the NZBC studios were hit by fire. Some people saw this as a divine condemnation of advertising. Truth and Reality succumbed to artfulness, illusion and desire. Just like the fallout from the Tower of Babel, simplicity fell into confusion, one voice gave way to many competing voices ... Well, that's business. And by 1990 even Sunday had ad breaks.

Selling New Zealand celebrates thirty years of television advertising in New Zealand. There are over 200 commercials in the show, many of them old favourites from the 60s, 70s and 80s, including such classics as the Greggs' Coffee commercials, the BASF Dear John ad, Crunchie Goldrush, Colmans Sponge Pud and Lion 10. There are also many famous faces — Sir Howard Morrison, Captain Hotshot, Alison Holst, the Milky Bar Kid and Vim's Pakuranga housewives. These characters and small dramas were part of our everyday reality. But they also conjured up an extraordinary reality, taking on a mythological splendour. They illuminated us. Sometimes they gave us images of how we would not want to look.

Ads do not simply reflect our world. They legitimise some social impulses, while ignoring and so discouraging other points of view. Visibility is a virtue in advertising, invisibility looks like powerlessness. Lesbians, gay men and ethnic minorities are all too invisible on our screens. Most of our tv commercials are aimed at the nuclear family and white middle-class, heterosexual couples. But, increasingly, this poly-unsaturated homogeneity is being challenged. Whereas in the 60s we were all middle-aged white men with British accents advising our wives how to clean the house, today we are both young and old, Maori and Pakeha, married, single and divorced, indoors and out, conservative and liberal, cosmopolitan and nationalistic. Sensitive to new markets, advertising is starting to represent and encourage a diversity of lifestyles — although it's still got a long way to go.

Cultural critic John Berger has quipped that advertising "proposes to each of us that we transform

ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer — even though we will have been poorer from having spent our money." Following this interpretation, most commentators have gloomily decided that advertising necessarily provokes dissatisfaction. *Selling New Zealand* zeroes in on the satisfaction that ads can arouse. Often surreal, they are visually and dramatically inventive, witty, and catchy. Yes, they can be slick, but as Nietzsche said, "Nothing is deeper than the surface."

A society without ads would be like a restaurant without menus. Although many critics condemn ads for encouraging passivity, it is surely more instructive to understand how they are an activity. They call upon us to engage with the world and what it has to offer. They cultivate desire in us, and so arm us against indifference. They train us in the manners of society and, like any education, empower us with choice. In fact — a consumer vaccination — ads are the best defence against what they're targeted to sell.

Despite, or probably because of the huge impact on our culture of tv advertising, its cultural value is all too often dismissed. As a consequence of this, a large amount of advertising material has been lost. Sometimes it only exists on inferior video formats. For this reason, *Selling New Zealand* has been instigated by the New Zealand Film Archive as part of its mission to persuade people to value film and tv advertising material more highly.

To clearly transmit this message we have curated *Selling New Zealand* as a cross section of tv advertising, representing a range of stories, personalities, ethical and social allegiances, genres, visual styles and budgets. We want people to have fun and recognise the creativity of ads. Many of our best thinkers, writers, directors, actors, cinematographers and musicians make these short films. Obviously the collective expression of this group of people is an art which should be seriously enjoyed. In a country which makes pitifully little of its own drama, tv ads comprise a large proportion of local content on New Zealand screens. We hope that this show will encourage discussions of tv advertising in relation to film, art and wider culture.

Selling New Zealand excites nostalgia while presenting a social history of New Zealand through television advertising. By looking at old tv ads in relation to contemporary advertising we can see clearly the ways in which our society has evolved. Of course, we also begin to understand how in certain areas we have stayed the same, or not changed as significantly as some of us might wish.

In order to address the diversity of the material we have seen, Selling New Zealand is divided into ten lively and open-ended themes: Family Ties; Forbidden Pleasures; Games People Play; Godzone; Great Big Melting Pot; Hard Yakka; Kiwi Icons; The Latest Thing in Latest Things; Squeaky Clean; and Stereotypes. Some commercials play along with our groupings, many resist them. Most commercials enact a range of ideas and can therefore work in several of our groups. We have encouraged this permissiveness so as to highlight the complexity of the advertising message. A commercial may seem morally liberal and yet politically conservative. Explicitly it may say one thing while implicitly endorsing a different point of view. Adverts cultivate innuendo of all sorts.

New standards of wit and social consciousness mean that many of the ads in this exhibition seem quaintly obvious, conservative or aggressive in their marketing. Many of the ads we make today will soon appear strangely naive themselves. A recent article in Wired argues that advertising is on the brink of becoming interactive. "Advertisers will no longer find it beneficial to irritate viewers into remembering their brands. Not only is this a bad way to begin a dialogue, but it is very likely that in the interactive future a consumer who feels irritated with a certain ad or brand will be capable of forbidding that brand from appearing on his own set again."

Advertising and media are symbiotically related, one can't survive without the other. However, as one adman has remarked, "You can have all the technology you want, but it won't help you if you don't have ideas." Selling New Zealand proves that there is no shortage of ideas in New Zealand advertising.

Stuart McKenzie and Neil Pardington
exhibition curators

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