

LIGHTWORKS

Bill Culbert



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Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Recent work by Bill Culbert

at the City Gallery, Wellington

from 10 May – 13 July 1997

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Foreword

It is with a considerable sense of pleasure that the City Gallery, Wellington presents *Lightworks*, an exhibition of Bill Culbert's recent work. Although now resident in France and the United Kingdom, Bill Culbert has continued to have a dynamic presence in this country's visual arts culture. He has consistently exhibited in New Zealand since his departure in 1957. Culbert's collaborations with New Zealand artist Ralph Hotere have developed some of the more significant contemporary artworks produced here in recent years. The City Gallery is proud to display one such collaboration between Culbert and Hotere, *Fault*, as a permanent installation on the façade of the gallery building.

Skylight 3, a new work sited for the duration of this exhibition outside the Gallery, expands Bill Culbert's existing presence in Civic Square, and further extends the Gallery's physical engagement with Wellington City. Other sculptural pieces included in the exhibition are highlights of Culbert's output from the '90s, revealing his work to be consistently vital and inventive. *Lightworks* also brings together a substantial selection of Culbert's photographic images, which exist independently of and yet inform his sculptural practice.

Working with the paraphernalia of industrial and domestic lighting systems — neon tubes, light bulbs, lamp shades and fixtures — Culbert forges extraordinary transformations of simple materials to create richly poetic effects. While clearly speaking the language of the international artworld, Culbert's works nonetheless embody an engagingly New Zealand quality. Culbert's status as a traveller between New Zealand and the art centres of Europe is pointed to by the presence in the Gallery foyer of *Hôtel Voyageur*, a work constructed from neon tubes and suitcases, which also may in this context symbolically affirm the City Gallery's ongoing relationship with the international artworld.

Although he is now a senior artist with a considerable international profile, this is the first in-depth exhibition of Bill Culbert's work by a public gallery in New Zealand. *Lightworks* continues the City Gallery's tradition of presenting monographic exhibitions of the work of New Zealand artists whose achievement is substantial. Such exhibitions have made a major contribution to the artistic life and heritage and visual arts scholarship of New Zealand. They also offer

opportunities to both specialist art audiences and to a more general public to see the work of each generation of senior artists as it comes to maturity.

The City Gallery, Wellington is pleased to be associated with GP Print in the production of this significant book devoted to Bill Culbert's work. The sculptures and photographs that have been assembled for the current exhibition are documented in the publication, which also features texts explicating various aspects of Culbert's oeuvre. French scholar Yves Abrioux has examined the intriguing relationship between Culbert's use of light to illuminate everyday objects, and the function of light in historical Dutch still life painting. New Zealand writer Christina Barton has provided a thoughtful consideration of Culbert's use of photography, while Francis Pound has contemplated the links between Culbert's work and the 18th century discipline known as sciography, or the science of shadows. Finally, Lara Strongman from the City Gallery has reflected on Culbert's poetic use of light to alter the way in which we perceive the world. We are grateful to these writers for their insights.

The City Gallery, Wellington acknowledges the generosity of the sponsors for this exhibition, without whose crucial financial support the project could not have been achieved. We are delighted to continue our ongoing association with The Rutherford Trust, supported by the Electricity Corporation of New Zealand; and with The British Council and the British High Commission, who have invested in the project as part of The Link programme. We also gratefully acknowledge the support of Roderick and Gillian Deane, and Jenny Gibbs. Their commitment opens Bill Culbert's work to a wide New Zealand audience for the first time. And the City Gallery warmly thanks the artist, Bill Culbert, whose good-natured commitment to realising this project has resulted in a significant and serious opportunity to view the mature work of one of New Zealand's leading artists.

Paula Savage

Director, City Gallery, Wellington

Accidents of Light

Yves Abrioux

Some ten years ago, Stephen Bann suggested that the work of Bill Culbert could be read in terms of Dutch genre painting, and in particular of *A Courtyard in Delft*, a painting by Pieter de Hooch whose staging of different qualities of light, in conjunction with a household scene containing domestic implements, enacts an allegory of the opposition between the sacred and the secular¹. Pointing to the juxtapositions of banal objects and fluorescent tubes characteristically produced by Culbert, Bann argued that, whether such conjunctions were jarring or pure (and consequently more peaceful), the light produced by the fluorescent tubes transfigured the everyday connotations of the accompanying objects.

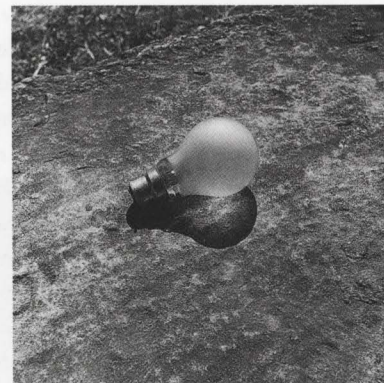
This analysis remains particularly effective with regard to the works from 1975 and 1976 in which the long handle of a gardening implement (shovel, hoe or fork) is replaced with a 4-foot fluorescent tube. However, it seems retrospectively that another distinction which emerged between the various objects employed by Bill Culbert throughout the 70s and into the early 80s (the period most generously illustrated in the catalogue in which Bann's text appeared) was to prove more significant in the long run. The difference here concerns the function of particular objects, rather than the degree of tension which completed works may or may not embody. It is not so much between, say, apparently jarring suitcases and more serene jugs, as between containers (such as jugs and suitcases) which, as the current exhibition demonstrates, were to feature ever more prominently in the artist's work, and other articles (such as pieces of driftwood, gardening tools, and sundry fragments) which were largely to disappear from it. The crucial distinction would therefore be between objects illuminated by light and objects from which light emanates. From this point of view, the 'humble

submission' which Stephen Bann senses in the modest jug, out of which Culbert first got light to pour around 1980, would perhaps not be so much that of the vessel itself as of the light which took so easily to being materialised and treated in this way.

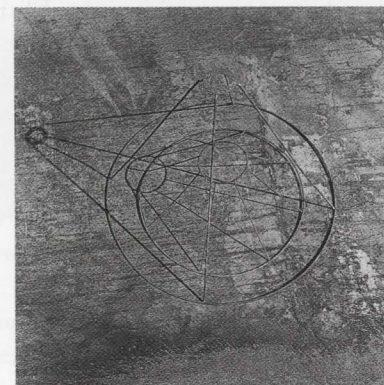
In religion, metaphysics or painting, light traditionally streams down from above: it emanates from a transcendental source. Bill Culbert's suitcases, jugs and sundry jars or cans bring this light down to earth — as it were, domesticating it. The relevant contrast here is perhaps between Plato's cave, which acted as a recipient for the last feeble rays of an ideal light (already mediated by a bonfire), which was all that humanity was allowed to perceive, and Culbert's suitcases, which will allow anyone to carry light around with them and produce it at will. The significance of the latter gesture should not be underestimated. It can be measured by recalling the terrible fate suffered by Prometheus for having handed over to humanity the divine gift of fire, and also that inflicted on humanity at large by Pandora who, having been sent by the gods as a punishment for the benefits bestowed by Prometheus, sowed pain and evil in this world when she opened the box which had been entrusted to her. In Bill Culbert's work, the gift of light and the urgings of curiosity are happily free of such horrors. Indeed, the serenity of Culbert's art implicitly encourages the viewer to put these chilling myths down to the ideological terrorism of the high priests of the ideal. Such is the quiet triumph of the artist's materialism; such, the fortunate effect of treating light in terms of genre, rather than in the heroic mode.

The opposition between illumination and emanation does not only concern objects, whether represented in paintings or staged by an artist like Culbert. Bill Culbert's first exhibited works were paintings. A number of works in this exhibition preserve a painterly format, while those which are more sculptural in appearance continue to treat effects of light in painterly terms.

Culbert, as the exhibition further recalls, is also a remarkable photographer. Photography is activated by the impact of light on a photosensitive surface. As such, it was famously described by Fox Talbot, one of its most distinguished pioneers, as drawing with light considered as 'the pencil of nature'. Light, such a pronouncement reminds us, is involved in generating works of art and in determining their status. In the photographic *Winework* (1992) as in the installation of *Lamp Shade Skeletons* (1992), an intriguing family of shapes is literally traced out in shadow by a beam of light, which transforms banal objects



Sun Frosted Bulb, 1992



Abat-jour, 1993

into strange silhouettes that appear to belong to the world of science fiction. *Light Fall* (1992) and *Blind Window* (1991) appear to go one step further. Pencils of artificial light constitute the entire picture plane as a surface of emanation, so that in the former light liquidizes and flows down on to the floor, while in the latter it is projected as a separate splash. Projected light or shadows usefully return us to Dutch painting. Vermeer, as modern scholarship has demonstrated, had recourse to the technique of the camera obscura, whereby the rays of light reflecting off the subject to be painted and passing through a lens were projected on to a translucent screen, so that the artist had only to trace out the outline drawn in light and transfer it to his canvas, prior to painting. The use of this technique was, of course, widespread. It is interesting to observe that it constitutes a fully functional variation on Plato's myth of the cave, with sunlight now being mediated, not by firelight at the shadow-casting stage, but by the medium of paint, one step further down the road. Especially at the hands of Vermeer, the technique furthermore operates a striking reversal in the values of idealism, by producing remarkable effects of light which belie the Platonic strictures against copies. Indeed, Vermeer's painstaking attention to qualities of light peculiar to the camera obscura screen not only explains the enhancement of tone and colour in his work but also causes him to reproduce — and indeed disseminate beyond the places where it is strictly speaking appropriate — the effect of gleaming highlights jumping out from the surface of the canvas, in the form of what are known as 'circles of confusion'. Enhanced colour jumping out in quasi circular blocks is precisely what — on an entirely different scale — characterises the works in Culbert's *Total* series (1991), where the empty oil cans act as a translucent screen concentrating all the effects of the works around the phenomenon of emanation.

Bearing in mind that the majority of Culbert's works feature domestic articles (or pieces of furniture), the genre which they most forcefully call to mind is that of the still life. A work from 1987 entitled *Plastic Still Life* has light emanating from some of its plastic containers. Many of the artist's photographs confirm his interest in this theme — from the *Dumped Esso Cans* (1983) or the burnt-out *Flashbulbs* (1979) which sit on the edge of a table, to the collection of brackets both reflecting light and casting shadows in *Metal Shelf* (1987) or indeed the extravagant lights and lanterns incorporating the setting sun as the incandescent element of a light bulb (1989-92), and beyond. Culbert has also produced a



Willem Claesz-Heda, *Still Life with Oysters, Wine Glass and Silver Tazza*, 1634, Collection of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

number of works in which the surface of a table is occupied by an object, or an assortment of objects. *Plain of Jars* (1996), in this sense, follows on from the series initiated by *Small Glass Pouring Light* (1983), while the title of *Six Pack* (1994) implicitly assimilates the work's table and chairs into packaging for the liquid light emanating from its fluorescent tubes.

It is essential to hold on to the sense that the objects in Bill Culbert's constructed or photographic still lives are devices for the propagation of light. A remarkable series of Dutch still lives will help to clarify what is involved here. The works I am thinking of feature not only items of food and drink (the latter especially being equally a familiar theme of Culbert's) but also the frame of a window, traced out in yellow light on the sides of the glassware. In perhaps the most fascinating painting of this kind — Willem Claesz-Heda's *Still Life with Oysters, Wine Glass and Silver Tazza* (1634) — the window is reflected four times in the glass standing monumentally at the centre of the composition or on the surface of the wine which it contains. It is also reflected in the silver dish lying on its side next to the glass and again, more faintly, in another glass further to the right in the background. The first impression is of the stations of the setting sun, following a diagonal that sinks slowly from left to right and imparts a notion of the end of things, which is confirmed by the general disorder, evocative of the remains of a feast: toppled or broken tableware, scattered remnants of food. The lemon in the centre of the foreground and its dangling peel twice prolong the series of declining yellow splashes of reflected sunlight. Yet at the same time the fruit changes the direction of the light, setting it spinning slowly towards the glistening scrap to its left and the oysters beyond.

Claesz-Heda's silhouetted reflections of a window recall Culbert's *Window Mobile* of 1985, consisting of a lamp and a window frame, which are balanced at either end of a bamboo pole so that the shadow of the frame glides round the walls of the room, both transforming the perspective device of the Renaissance window/frame into a gleaming splash and undercutting the transcendent status of the source of light by sending it into orbit. In the Dutch still life, reflected light continues to invoke the possibility of divine salvation, which is to be understood as still shining down from on high, despite the tendency of sublunary corruption (as evoked by the food which belongs to the traditional iconography of the vanitas) to drag it down into the depths. Yet the source of illumination is absent here. The direction from which light falls being only just decipherable in

the brighter patch of wall in the background, the lasting impression is of a dissemination of gleams accidentally produced by the objects scattered around the table.

Bill Culbert's entire oeuvre may be suggested to involve the stimulation and dissemination of such accidental gleams of light. It is not so much a question of redeeming fallen nature: more one of demonstrating that the excitement — the non-conceptualised opening on to the promise of a future — which is somehow implicit in the merest glow or glimmer escaping from our familiar world of objects, is not some emanation from a putative higher authority which (hoping against hope, in our secular age) many continue to seek for in art, but rather an elusive phenomenological quality within material being, which the art of chance or accident can unexpectedly provoke. This is the uncanny lesson of Culbert's characteristic use of unredeemable objects and mere artificial light. The effect may extend to an altogether larger scale than that of the still life. *Plain of Jars* is a still life translated into a paradoxically sublunary cosmology; *Light Plain* floats in space, recalling the large yellow pool, detached from any conceivable heavenly source, formed by an invisible beam of sunshine reflecting on the surface of a splendid landscape painted by Van Ruisdael, now in the Louvre. In both of these *Plains*, the discrete glory of Bill Culbert's accidental occurrences of light goes hand in hand with the espousal of a supposedly minor genre, in a silent upturning of the hierarchies of the academy which is integral to the power of his art's material magic.

1 See the untitled essay by Stephen Bann in *Bill Culbert: Selected Works 1968-1986* (London: 1986). For an outstanding exposition of the function of light in Dutch still lives, see Jean-Louis Schefer, *La Lumière et la table: dispositifs de la peinture hollandaise* (Paris: 1995). For a more extended theoretical development on light in Culbert's work, see also Yves Abrioux 'Incidence Of Light' in *Bill Culbert* (Annecy: 1997).

**'Mon soleil' — Considering photography
in the work of Bill Culbert**

Christina Barton

In the summer of 1835 I made in this way a great number of representations of my house in the country, which is well suited to the purpose, from its ancient and remarkable architecture. And this building I believe to be the first that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture.

William Henry Fox Talbot, 'Some account of the art of photogenic drawing...', 1839

This is the true role of photography: to isolate things, so as to render that which is familiar strange.

Pierre Bost, *Photographies modernes*, 1930

If 'a print is the widow of the stone', to quote Robert Rauschenberg, then a photograph is the twin of an event.

Lawrence Alloway, 'Artists and photographs', *Studio International*, 1970

As an indexical as well as an iconic image, the photograph draws the (represented) world into the field of the artwork — thereby undermining its claims to a separate sphere of existence and an intrinsic aesthetic yield.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Photography after art photography', 1984

Photography is creation with light.

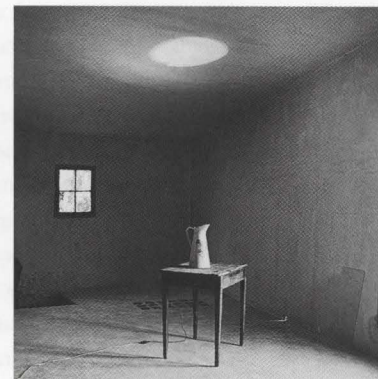
László Moholy-Nagy, *Bauhaus*, 1928

Bill Culbert uses light to make objects, installations and images. For him, it is medium, message and metaphor. It comes as no surprise, then, that photography — the technical procedure which literally fixes light — plays an important role in his practice. Here, I want to explore this fact to exemplify one of his working methods and to place him within a particular history of contemporary art practice. But more, I propose that in both Culbert's photographs and his three-dimensional work, we witness the embodiment of the meaning and mechanics of photography, which enables us to trace the complex interplays between vision and representation, viewer and world, which lie at the heart of his practice.

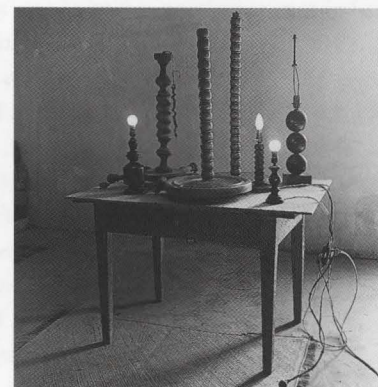
Perhaps it is not surprising that photography is a potent presence (or a latent subtext) in Culbert's work, if we agree with Jeff Wall that, at a particular juncture in recent art history, this medium became the 'paradigm for all aesthetically-critical, model constructing thought about art'.¹ Culbert's work is informed by and participates in the major shifts which occurred within art practice in the late 1960s and 1970s, which are the ground from which his work and much contemporary critical practice springs. His deployment of photography, in both the construction of images and objects, is a crucial instance of that breakdown of discrete media categories, that shifting of attention from object to situation and that downplaying of the role of the artist, which is fundamental to a critique of modernism, to which a specifically conceptual art was addressed.

Culbert's use of light and his admission of photography to his practice, were undertaken in a climate where artists had become deeply sceptical about the claims of high art. Like so many others, he sought to get away from the object and its laborious manufacture, to redefine art as 'a field of research and experiment, a process of participation in life'.² Photography served his, and others, aims exactly because it was tied to reality, but in a way which was fundamentally different from more conventional modes of representation.

Photography, it was argued, was an art of transmission, not creation.³ By doing away with facture, it allowed more direct apprehension of things, chosen not for aesthetic contemplation, but in situations which could be located both temporally and spatially. As Culbert has put it, the medium is of interest because it is not about appearances but 'about circumstances at a moment in time'.⁴ Furthermore, being infinitely reproducible and therefore less likely to accrue value, with its applications in science, the media and mass culture, photography seemed at home beyond the pale of Art.



Jug, Croagnes, 1980



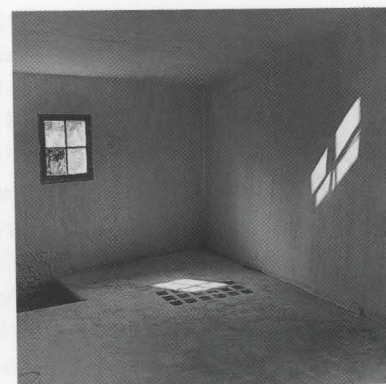
Tablelamp 5, 1996

Like his peers, Culbert was attracted to photography for these reasons. While a certain kind of formal and expressive photography was beginning to be recuperated for the museum, conceptual artists chose to work against its aestheticisation. They wilfully paid little attention to formal values and refused to demonstrate much technical proficiency, using the medium instead in a deadpan, an-aesthetic manner, to record actions and situations which were either 'found' or staged for the camera. Such practice draws not on the newly named greats of modernist photography (Steichen, Weston and the like), but on the amateur practices of snapshooters, on the 'objective vision' of photographers like Moholy-Nagy, on the uncanny manipulations of Dadaists like Man Ray and, of course, on the end-game gambits of Marcel Duchamp. With antecedents like these and with a commitment to the idea of photography not as artifact but as event, the aim was to render the autonomy of art problematic and the outcome, to establish the critical questioning of the meaning and function of art as one of the key conditions for contemporary practice.

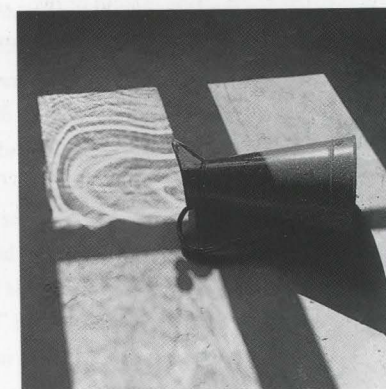
Culbert's photographs are such events. They record a thinking process in action, where real objects are placed, arranged or simply framed. They are both pictures of sculpture and pictures as sculpture, a kind of two- and three-dimensional assisted readymade. To reinforce the conceptual nature of his project, Culbert's photographs are usually black and white.⁵ He prefers a square format to eschew any associations with the more loaded conventions of 'landscape' and 'portrait' photography. His subjects are prosaic to say the least. Everyday objects, often the worse for wear, are positioned especially for the camera. Hardly beautiful, never unique, they bear mute witness to a history of use or to the play of light across their surfaces — which often becomes the subject of the work.

If Culbert's photographs of objects fail to fully function as 'still life', then his depiction of places never aspires to the condition of 'landscape'. Refusing to coalesce into views, they remain always as details, fragments cut from a larger whole, in which line and texture, the juxtaposition of shadow and form, threaten to both dismantle the coherence of three-dimensional space, and undermine the very substance of matter itself. Their reason for being, then, is in the revelation and perception of a momentary coalescence of fact and fabrication, whose effect is more like that of a joke or pun. In this there is a strange kind of lapse, a time delay between seeing and 'getting it', the sort of 'spacing' which reminds us of the coded nature of vision.⁶

For when time fills in for space, we witness a shift from the object to language,



Light, Croagnes, 1980



Jug, Windowpane, 1980

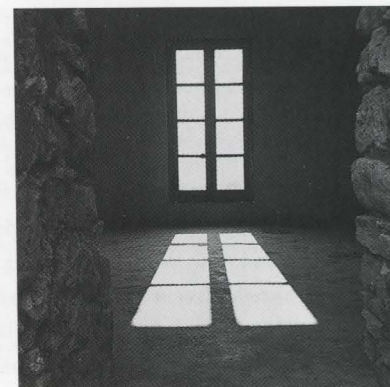
and the camera becomes not a repository for the real, but an 'allegorical theatre' in which a challenge to the meaning and authority of the object is 'acted out'.⁷ Culbert's photographs accumulate like words rather than things. They are formed in a material layer of syntax, in sentences and phrases, commands and *double entendres* — 'on/off', 'look/see', 'from here to there' — which function both within and between his images. If light is his subject, then it is a radiance captured only in the image, a trace written as two words above a door: '*mon soleil*', my sun, child of light: the photograph and its object are one at the surface, as text.

But their embeddedness in language goes further, for they also operate discursively as a meta-narrative about vision and representation. Culbert uses photography not as a formal or expressive medium, nor as a simple device to record visual truth, but rather as an analytical tool, a means, as he puts it, to 'think through the camera'.⁸ His images demand attention, then, not for what is in them, nor for what they say of the artist, but rather for how they figure the very acts of seeing and transcribing, how they re-present the model of consciousness and the conditions of representation which the camera and the photograph signify.

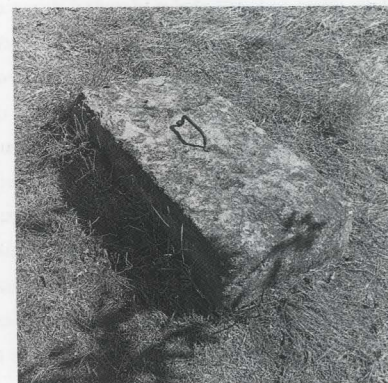
Light, through human history, has been thought of as the conditioning factor for life, the vehicle of and sign for conscious thought, and the medium by which information about the world is transmitted to the mind, via the liminal membrane of the eye. In art, as in philosophy, these meanings have been figured metaphorically, from the constructions of perspectival space; to the symbolic deployment of natural and artificial light, by means of open windows, doors ajar, lit lamps and burning candles.

Within this history, the camera has, likewise, been thought of as a mechanical device which functions as a metonym for the changing-room between objective reality and sentient being: its aperture the 'eye' which channels light into a dark chamber, where fleeting appearances collect and are transfixed. The photograph, too, has been thought of as a magical and yet mundane trace: no more than the by-product of a technical procedure, no less than a miraculous demonstration of the properties of light.

Culbert's images and objects exploit such meanings, in a subtle play of infinite regress. While they may literally describe or articulate interior, transitional and exterior space, they also re-present it metaphorically. Home and studio, then, double as the dark *camera* or room of the mind. Doorways and windows are the literal and metaphorical openings to the realm of light. And outside in the



Window, Light Outside, 1980



Stone with Handle, 1979

material world, Culbert repeats the play of inner and outer, by either relocating homely objects out-of-doors, or by disrupting continuous space in his extreme manipulation of depth-of-field.

Culbert's fascination with the mechanics and the mystery of the transmission and reception of visual images is physically evident in his three-dimensional practice. It can be traced in early sculptures — like *Cubic Projection* (1968, Auckland Art Gallery) or *Celeste* (1970, Auckland Art Gallery) — which operate literally as camera obscura, projecting images of the form and filament of a light bulb into three-dimensional space. It also underpins light works like *Shadow and Reflection* (1975, limited edition) and *Reflection II* (1975), which replicate the object as an image by means of its reflection in and projection on to mirrored, opaque or transparent surfaces. Here then, the action of light in the field of representation is called upon to unsettle the authority of the original, to test the boundaries of the real.

Such experimentation is evident, too, in *An Explanation of Light* (1984, Serpentine Gallery, London), where Culbert constructed a tangible corollary for the action of light. He installed a pair of french doors, pierced them with fluorescent tubes, and set them in front of the identical doors of the real gallery. The object is posed thus, as a para-text for the relation of photography to reality. Like the photograph, it is a twin; not an original, but a copy; whose genetic makeup is further proliferated as a chaos of reflections within the space and as 'holographic' effect in the grounds outside.⁹ Here, in effect, we witness a process which is emblematic of the role of photography in Culbert's work. Space is articulated by means of light, the wall pierced and made to decompose, a window opened, shadows cast, matter made insubstantial and recomposed as light.

Thus, rather than better grasp the real, we witness its retreat. For Culbert shows us things as they appear only before the camera, in the extended time of a 'fictional present'.¹⁰ He shifts attention from things to the acts of placement and to the passage of time. Objects dissolve and multiply in shadow and light, their appearance altered by the time of day or point of view. Photography is re-deployed to record, with a revised and fateful contingency, the movement of shadows through the course of a day, the action of sunlight on skin, the radical transformation of matter when it is plunged into darkness or exposed to light. Like the unsecured handle on a block of stone, Culbert shows us that we have but a fragile hold on things.

- 1 Jeff Wall, 'Marks of indifference': aspects of photography in, or as, conceptual art', in *Reconsidering the object of art 1965-1975*, (eds) Ann Goldstein & Anne Rorimer, Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995, p.253.
- 2 Olivier Blanckart, 'Not a lot but a whole world', in *Bill Culbert — Afterdark*, Limousin: Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain, 1994, p.61.
- 3 See Lawrence Alloway, 'Artists and photographs', *Studio International*, v. 179, n. 921, April 1970, p.163.
- 4 Bill Culbert, interview with Yves Abrioux, *Bill Culbert — Afterdark*, op.cit, p.42.
- 5 Culbert does use colour from time to time, but he makes the distinction between black and white photographs which are taken for analytical purposes and colour which he normally uses to record things, *ibid*, p.37.
- 6 The idea of spacing is borrowed from Rosalind Krauss in her analysis of surrealist photography. See her essay, 'Photography in the service of surrealism', in *L'Amour fou: photography and surrealism*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1985, p.28.
- 7 David Wall, 'Introduction', to special issue on 'Photography and sculpture' in *Creative Camera*, 1996, p.10.
- 8 Interview with Yves Abrioux, in *Bill Culbert — Afterdark*, op.cit, p.37.
- 9 *ibid*, p.39.
- 10 Wall, op.cit, p.13.

Plates



Skylight 3, 1997



Hôtel de l'aéroport, 1990

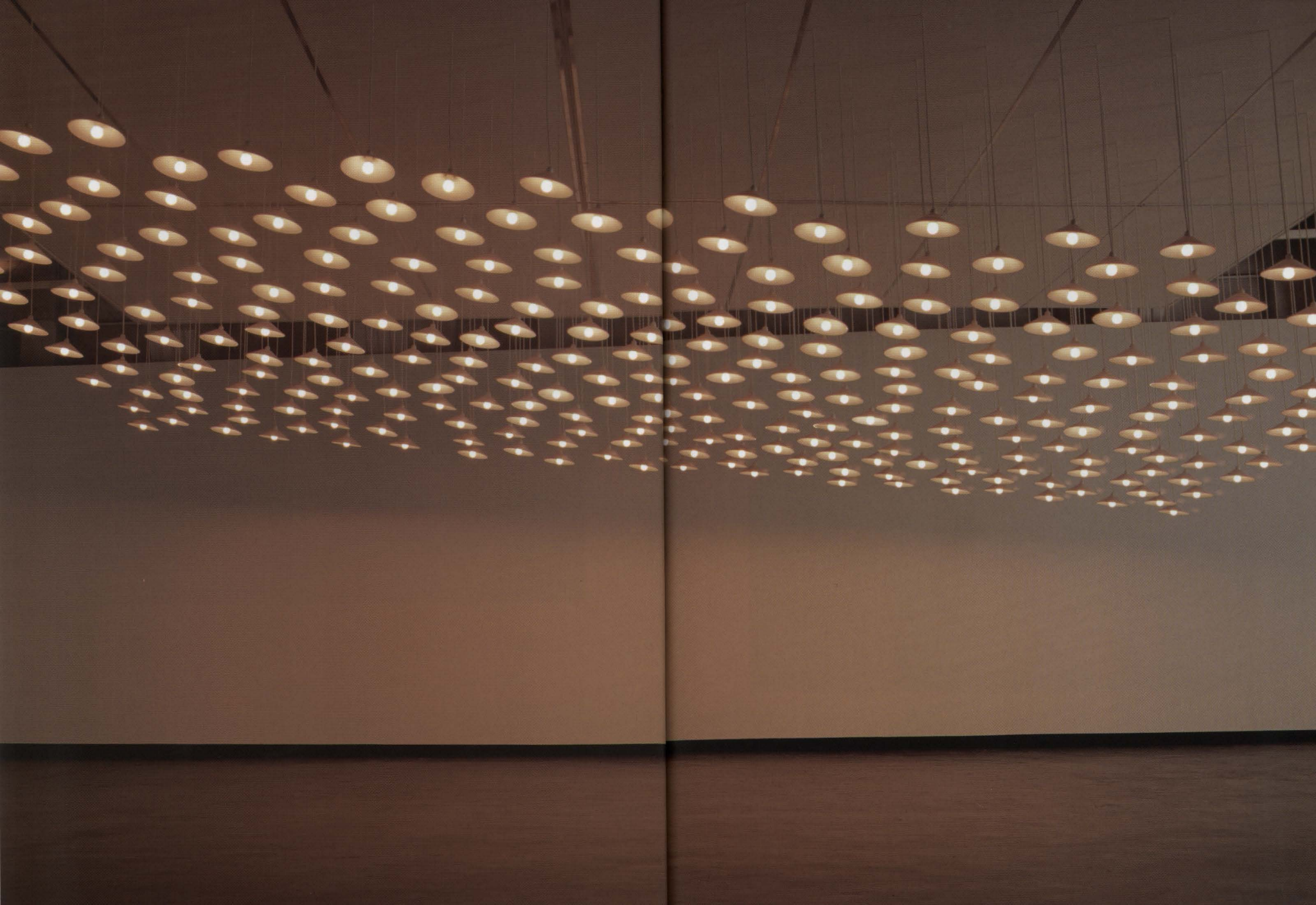




Plain of Jars, 1996



Light Plain, 1997
Following pages: *Light Plain, 1997*

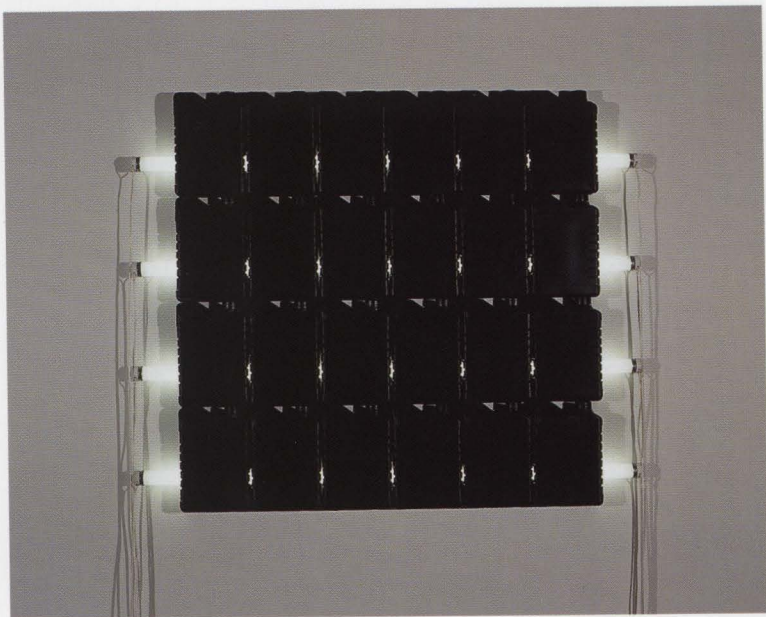




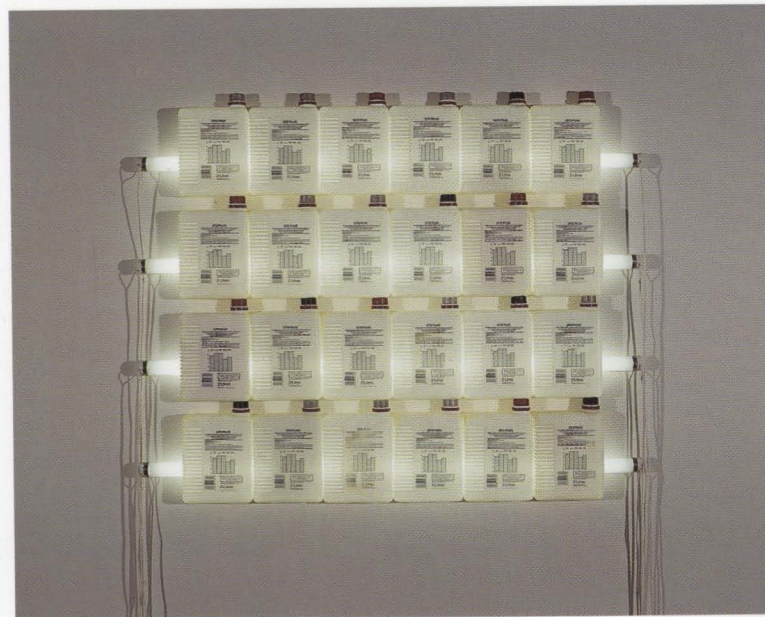
Blind Window, 1991



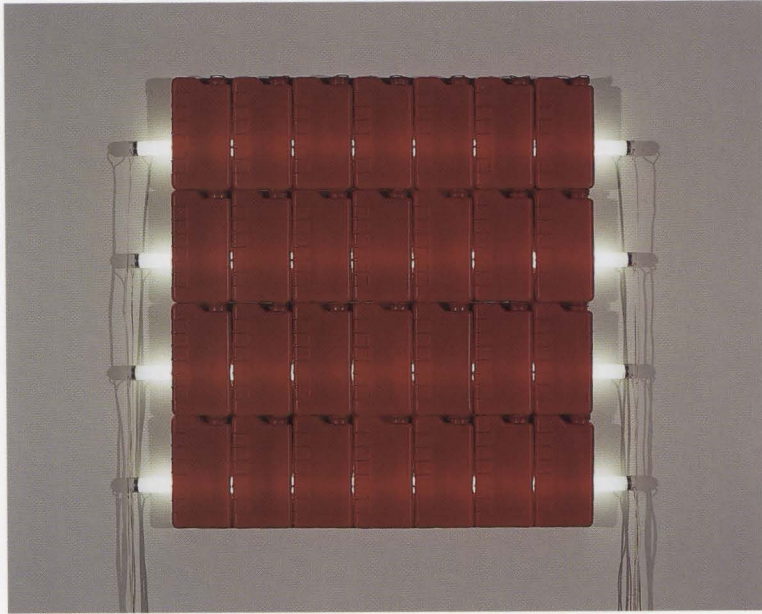
Light Fall, 1992



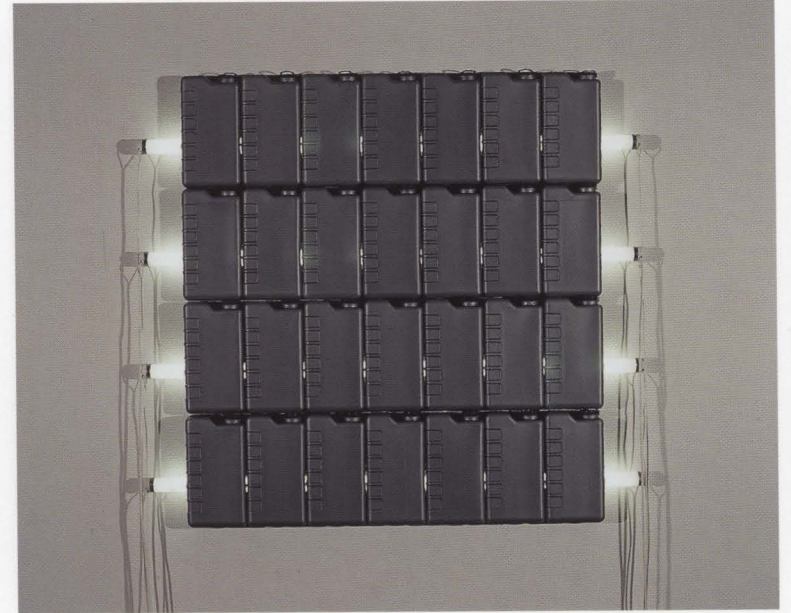
Total Black, 1991



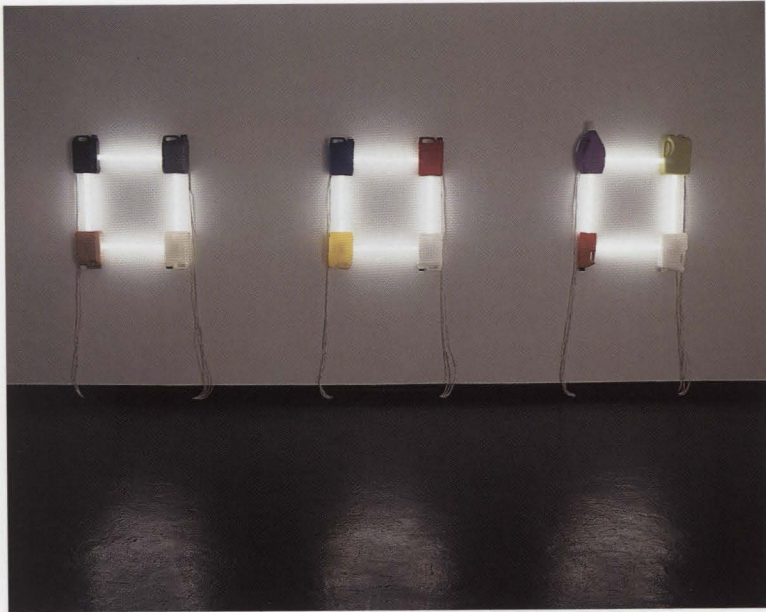
Total White, 1991



Total Red, 1991



Total Silver, 1991



Colour Theory, 1991



Hôtel Voyageur, 1990



Winework, 1992



Tree with Plank III, 1989



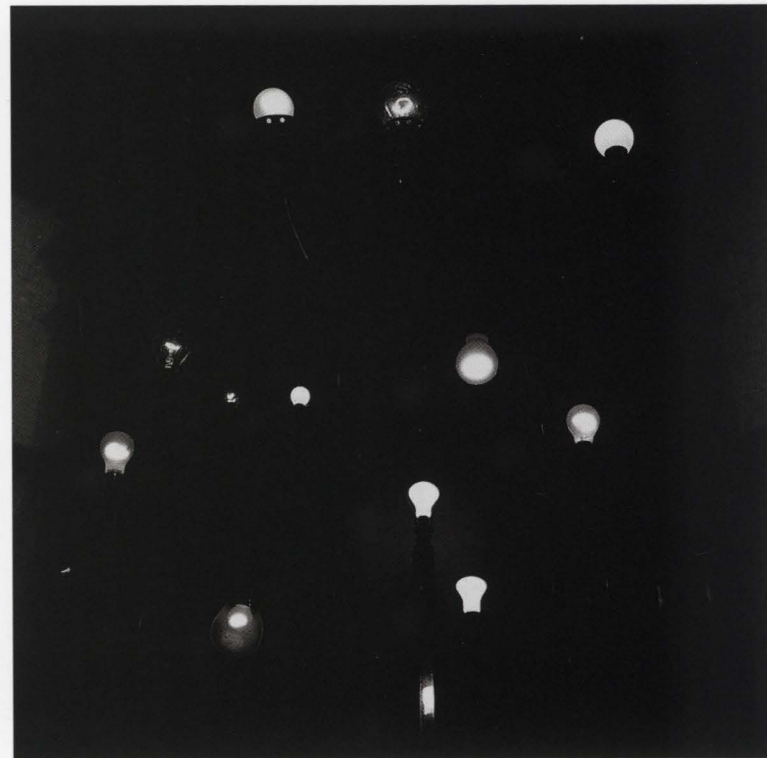
Table Lamps Day, 1996



Table Lamps Night, 1996



Standard Lamps Day, 1995



Standard Lamps Night, 1995



Lampdown, 1995



Lampdown, 1995



Culbert
as Sciographer

Francis Pound

Michael Baxandall's book, *Shadows and Enlightenment*, offers in its title a play on physical light and shade and the time known as the Enlightenment — the so-called Age of Reason: the 18th century¹. No space is granted by Baxandall to enlightenment as a mystical concept — an un-Baxandallian and equally un-Culbertian notion. I bring Baxandall into play because he is a marvellous guide to the 18th century shadow world of shadow science, a science of which Culbert may — without too much perversity — be seen as the heir; and which, even in its moments of absolute difference from him, in showing what Culbert is not, may serve to show what he is. For not only may Culbert be regarded as the heir to an 18th century science of shadows: at the same time, when viewed against it, he may be seen as standing out in all the relief permitted by a contrasting light.

Baxandall examines a sub-branch of linear perspective, known in the 18th century as Sciography: the representation in two dimensions of the calculated forms of projected shadows. This definition snugly fits many a Culbert photograph, though, for Culbert, we will have to use the word "calculation" in a non-mathematical sense. Suggestively, too, Culbert's title *An Explanation of Light* (1984), in the ambitious grandeur of its claim, would make a perfect title for an 18th century treatise on light, though the work itself has a most untreatiselike humour, with its 21 fluorescing tubes rushing through the glass panes of two French doors.

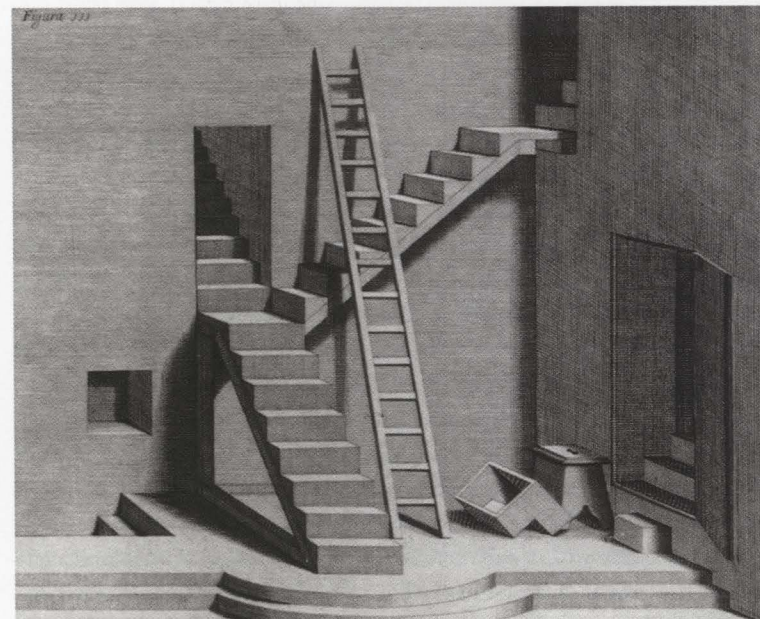
A particular concern of sciography was to differentiate between the shadows cast "from sunlight (parallel rays from infinity) and from a candle (located point source)."² If we replace the candle with the household light bulb — its 20th century equivalent — the same might be said, with perfect justification, of

Culbert. It has been the purpose of a number of his works to compare sun and bulb. So, for instance, in *Frosted light bulb on stone, lit by the sun* (1979), he shows a humble, domestic light bulb outshone by the sun, and made, in perverse contradiction of its purpose, to cast shadow rather than light. Later, in *Sun Lit Bulb* (1992), a clear light bulb, even when switched on, is put to shame by the sun. It is pleasing that Culbert should live largely in France, since sciography was such a highly institutionalised and prestigious discipline in 18th century French technical culture. "At the great new state schools of bridge and highway engineering, of mines, of naval architecture, of military science, and also at the proliferating craftsmen's schools," shadow projection was taught.³ Astronomy, especially the observations of eclipses, and optics had recourse to sciography; while it was also much in demand for surveying and indeed for any representing of spatial relations. All these grand, earnest and practical enterprises; engineering, military science, bridge-building, and so on, were sciography's institutional justification and triumph. It is Culbert's wilful triumph on the contrary to render sciography useless — to turn it, that is to say, into (mere) art: a form of handyman's pottering.

While sciography possessed a great institutional power, it was limited in its scope. As Baxandall puts it: "The shadow world of sciography was narrow. Perception of shadow only exists in the form of its distortion by perspective. And the shadow covered is limited to projected shadow and incidentally self-shadow from direct sun. Also, only the outer limits of extension of these, not the relative intensity or internal structure, is addressed."⁴ And, even more damning: "Reflection was scarcely addressed and refraction accommodated not at all."⁵

Culbert's concerns as a sciographer are far wider⁶: not only does he constantly address reflection and refraction as well as the outer limits of extension of projected shadow, he also addresses shadow's relative intensity and internal structure. And, happily, he adds coloured light to the austere, *grisaille*⁷ world of the 18th century French sciographer. Culbert's, one might say, is at once a kind of improved or corrected sciography, as well as being its scandal, aberration and parody.

The great 18th century theorists of light tended to dismiss sciography as — in Baxandall's curt word — a "playground."⁸ Indeed, Baxandall himself condemns sciography as "sterilised shadow", and even as "incompetent"⁹ — that is, as a too purely theoretical shadow system, merely formalist, and so incapable of dealing



Detail from Andrea Pozzo, *Prospettiva de' Pittori e Architetti*, 1700.

with the complexities of shadow-play in the real world. "Sciography failed to cover the phenomena."¹⁰ Yet if we abandon the requirement of scientific verisimilitude, and examine the works of the sciographers instead as aesthetic artefacts, there are pleasures there to be had. It is their very unreality, the very specialness and limitations of the conditions they set up for themselves, their very crankiness, that we may enjoy. Where instruction fails, and science falls away, delectation may succeed.

Generally in sciography we encounter unpeopled artefacts, "shadows in a block world", as Baxandall has it, an architecture without humanity. Ladders leading nowhere are much favoured, while stairs going nowhere and blind windows are also standard in the iconography.¹¹ Consider the detail from Pozzo. It reveals to us a world of silence. If it feels empty, it is because it is empty of us. No human voice will ever disturb that inviolate hush. No human will ever ascend those stairs. Here, the only actor is light, and the only action is what Goethe somewhere called "the deeds of light". But there are none of the gesticulatory outbursts the word "deed" implies — no lightning, no sunbursts. Rather, the only movement we may imagine here is slow, the very slow shifting of light and shade over forms in the course of a day or a night.

Culbert has stayed faithful to sciography in this, too: we may know humanity in his works only by its artefacts. If no foot will ever be placed on Pozzo's awaiting stair, likewise, no human hand will ever lift that Culbert glass of wine to the lips, filled and waiting though it might seem to be for us. It is curious, given the architectural matter of so many sciographical drawings, that Culbert should himself have produced architectural subject works like *Light Lintel, Decorated* (1979), where an ornately carved marble lintel is supported by three lit bulbs, and *Light Lintel, Plain* (1979), where we are instead in the "block world", and an unornamented piece of marble masonry is likewise supported — most implausibly — on three lit bulbs. (In the uncanny physics of these works, light is made to support weight.)

The sciographers whose work Baxandall examines sought parseable shadows, to use a nice phrase from that always nice author, a grammar of shadows, repeatable shadows, shadows construable by rule: what Culbert, seeks, rather, is astonishment. He seeks the unparseable, the exceptional, the bizarre. One could not easily — or rather, one simply could not — construe a bistro glass from Culbert's shadow/reflection bulb and filament, or vice versa. Nor should one be

able to pour light, as Culbert purports to do here, and in *White Jug Pouring Light* (1980);¹² nor should one be able to tip light out of a truck, as he seems about to do in *Skylight 3* (1997).

Shadows on a plane surface are meant — or so at least sciography would say — to offer a resemblance, a similitude to the form from which they project. This remains so even when they are anamorphic: twisted out of shape, by (always calculable) rules. (Hence the classic origin of painting myth which has painting — specifically, portraiture — begin with the tracing of a beloved's shadow.) But Culbert's shadows, rather than offering resemblance, proffer, often as not, dissemblance, dissimilitude, dissimilarity — as when the shadow of a wine glass seems to be that of a light bulb.

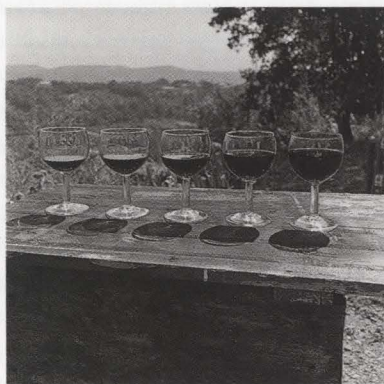
Eighteenth century artists and scientists, and their machine vision successors today, are shown by Baxandall to be concerned with shadows as information, useful primarily for the correct reading of complex forms in 3D. With Culbert, on the contrary, you might veer towards saying, we get shadow as disinformation, though what he offers is always seen to be true, since we find it demonstrated as physical fact before our eyes, or we see it with all the truth-effects that a photographic record allows. At the least, we might say of Culbert that his shadows contribute to knowledge by asserting that shadow is unpredictable: that its most crucial mental function is not to inform but to amaze.

Baxandall remarks of the photons, the invisible, sub-microscopic particles which constitute light that: "The behaviour of any particular photon is notoriously unpredictable. When photons meet opaque surfaces, when they address transparent substances like glass and water, when they pass through holes, when they go past sharp edges, their behaviour is unpredictable and strange..."¹³ Culbert seems to make light itself behave like the photon which constitutes it: he makes it unpredictable and strange.

Further following Baxandall, we might speak of "a decree of mind" by which Culbert decides to attend as much to shadows as to light. As Baxandall nicely says of his own endeavours to note the play of shadows in the room about him as he writes, Culbert makes an "address to shadow in terms of attention". So, for him, the shadow/reflection of a wineglass may be as important as the wineglass itself. Yet this very address, this deliberate attention, makes shadows no longer what they were. "If one thinks of shadow as an entity out there, it is strange," says Baxandall.¹⁴ With Culbert, it is strange indeed. Part of this strangeness might be



Wine in Perspective, 1996



Wine Real, 1996

said to inhere in the nature of shadow. "It is a real material fact", as Baxandall says, "a physical hole in light, but it has neither stable form nor continuity of existence".¹⁵

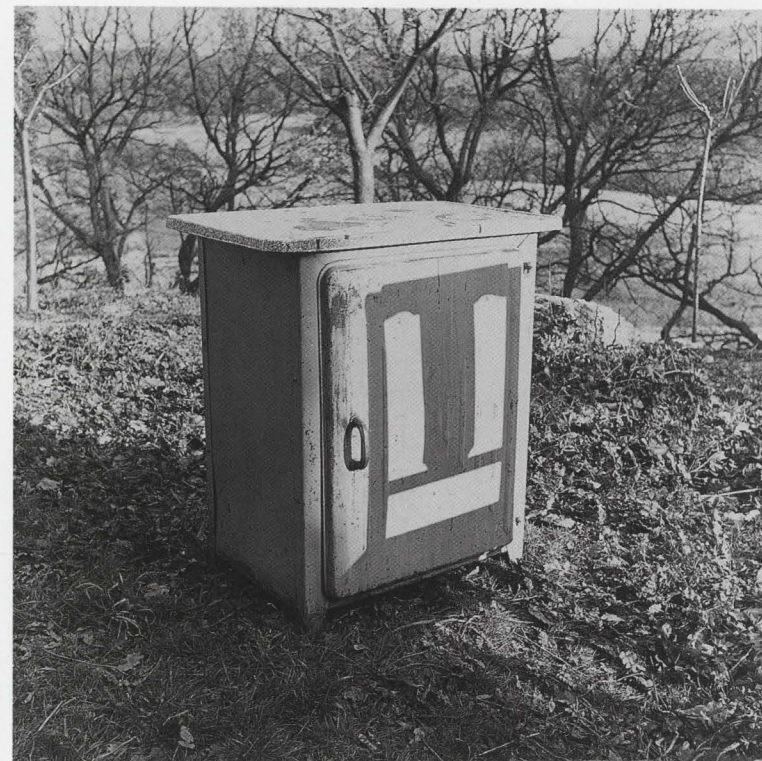
This fits well with Culbert, in whose art the shadow is at once a materiality brought to consciousness, and a hole or a gap, unstable and discontinuous. "On the other hand, the metamorphoses the shadow goes through are determinate, and though it is discontinuous, it can recur." Put the right glass of red wine, today, below a lamp on the table just so, and you will get the shadow/reflection bulb and filament of *Small Glass Pouring Light* (1979); a potential repeatability confirmed, in historical fact, in the 25 glass, 3 lamp version of *Small Glass Pouring Light* (1983) — an extraordinary "Last Supper" whose transubstantiation is again from wine-filled glass to filament and bulb.

Though Leonardo falls outside the temporal frame of Baxandall's book, his shadow analyses are granted an appendix, since he has for five centuries exerted a powerful influence on Western thought about shadows. The unpredictable powers of shadow make Leonardo wonder whether shadow is perhaps not simply a localised negation of light, and whether it exists, rather, in active contestation with light, "radiating from denseness as light radiates from a light source."¹⁶ Leonardo's lovely and now indispensable word for these putative dense, shadow-emitting bodies is 'umbrous' (*ombroso*). One might say, then, of Culbert's *Frosted light bulb on stone, lit by the sun* (1979), that here, in perversely making shadow radiate from a light bulb, he has made the bulb, that almost weightless, that delicate and light-projecting body, seem instead dense, shadow-emitting, umbrous.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the darkness of his paintings, which ushered in a general darkness of painting lasting until the Impressionists, Leonardo once went so far as to surmise that it may be that shadow is a more powerful force than light, in that while light cannot entirely eliminate the shadow cast by dense, shadowy bodies, shadow can entirely eliminate light. Curiously, though in Culbert's colloquy of light and shade, neither can be said to dominate, there are moments when a shadow and reflection seem more palpable — more dense — than the forms which project them. I think again of *Winework* (1992), where the reflection/shadows seem to be the wineglasses, and the actually material glasses to be their reflection merely, a hovering encumbrance — so much so that, in looking at this photograph for the first time, it took me some time to comprehend it. Here, in an act of counter-sciographical magic, Culbert has managed to reverse the material into the immaterial: the material seems mere shadow and light, the

shadow and light seem the material things. Baxandall defines shadow as a “deficiency in local visible light”, and borrows from an un-named 18th century scientist in beautifully describing shadow as “a hole in light”. Here, as so often in his work, Culbert turns the “deficiency” of shadow into a positivity, into a sufficiency or even a surplus; he turns the “hole” of shadow into what seems a materially projecting thing. If this is sciography still, it is one in which the certainties of the Enlightenment are undone; it is a sciography which makes its playground in reason’s ruins.

- 1 Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995.
- 2 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 84.
- 3 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 84.
- 4 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 88.
- 5 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 86.
- 6 When I apply the term ‘sciographer’ to Culbert, I do not wish to imply that he is in any way the conscious heir to an 18th century science or system of representation: that he is ‘influenced’ by it, as art historians say. I use it only for its exactitude, and its suggestiveness. In terms of what art historians like to call influence — a largely magical notion, as Foucault has remarked — Marcel Duchamp is a far more plausible candidate, in respect both of declaring found objects to be art (readymades), and in respect of shadow. See his *Tu um’* (1918), where the shadows cast by his readymades appear, minus the readymades themselves.
- 7 A *grisaille* is a painting painted entirely, or nearly entirely, in black and white.
- 8 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 88.
- 9 Both condemnations, Baxandall, op. cit, p. 91.
- 10 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 85.
- 11 Donatello, in the astonishing perspective excesses of the backgrounds of his bronze reliefs in Padua narrating episodes from the life of St Anthony, offers a precedent both for ladders and for stairs which lead nowhere. He uses so-called scientific perspective, a system for constructing a rational, measurable space, to make an irrational, almost Pirenesian world: a world curiously akin to that of the 18th century sciographer.
- 12 It is hard not to be reminded here of the inviolable hush of Vermeer’s *Maid servant Pouring Milk*, in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
- 13 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 1.
- 14 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 145.
- 15 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 145.
- 16 Baxandall, op. cit, p. 145.



Chair, Cupboard, 1983

Moments of
Illumination

Lara Strongman

Bill Culbert works with light. Light is both the material and the subject of his works, their medium and metaphor. Over the last three decades Culbert has explored the remarkable effects of light he observes around him, in an art practice that transforms groupings of prosaic materials into poetic encounters. The surprising beauty of ordinary objects, and the astonishing perceptual tricks with which light rewards the observant, combine in Culbert's work to create resonant images and experiences that flicker in the memory.

There is a cinematic quality to much of Culbert's work. While the elegant chiaroscuro of his light sculptures suggests a film noir nightscape, his photographs frequently resemble stills from European neo-realist movies of the 1950s and 1960s. Their emphasis on the significance of humble objects set against a rural landscape or barren interiors, and lit with dramatic intensity by natural light, suggests that these images are fragments from a concealed narrative. In these photographs, Culbert's remembered fall of light decisively transforms a moment of time into a moment of history.

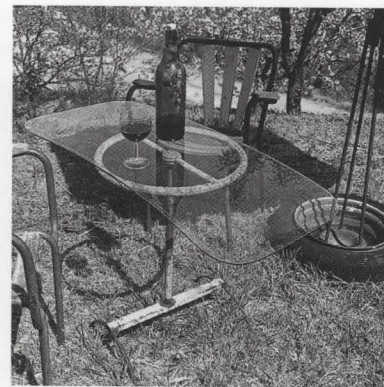
The dense narratives of Culbert's photographs are contrasted in the current exhibition with the austere elegance of his light sculptures. While each explores the interplay of light and shadow in the contemporary world, on a more philosophical level the works represent the results of Culbert's ongoing enquiries into the nature of space and time. Light, after all, defines distance, and at its most powerful, is measured by time. Light also enables vision, the primary sense through which we experience the world. We seem to recognise familiar places and objects almost immediately, in a process that privileges sight over the other four senses as a way of processing information we receive

about the world. But to make sense of what we see, memory provides a necessary context for vision. We thus comprehend the present through our experience of the past, space and time collapsed together in a momentary spark of recognition.

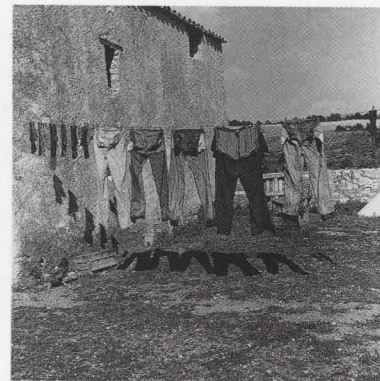
Culbert explores such moments of illumination, where what we see and what we know collide. His works navigate the uncertain territory between perception and cognition, between the seen and unseen. In sculptures such as *Light Plain* (1997), the viewer is cast adrift in a dizzy sea of spatial ambiguity. Here the customary visual clues for determining depth and distance — lines of perspective, and the gradient of texture — are skilfully disrupted by Culbert's subtle manipulation of a field of 280 illuminated white lampshades. He intervenes between vision and memory, between what we see and what we expect to see, rendering both uncertain. Similarly in photographic images such as *Winework* (1992), the laws of the physical world are rendered unstable: when light shines through wine glasses on a table at a critical angle, shadows appear solid while the actual glasses are swallowed by the light.

Such transformations are central to Culbert's work. In his sculptures and photographs, light transfigures everyday objects, providing both a physical and metaphorical flash of revelation as the work is contemplated by the viewer and its import understood. Culbert draws here on the deeply ingrained cultural notion of light as a metaphor for insight. In an etymological sense, light is used to describe both knowledge ('seeing the light') and distance ('light years away'). Light thus marks the successful end of journeys of discovery. Light signifies understanding, the vanishing point of the twin lines of perspective proposed by knowledge and distance. From the divine illumination of Giotto's painted saints to the cartoon light bulb symbolising a bright idea, artists have used light to represent movements between one state and another, whether intellectual or spiritual, scientific or mystical.

Working on the uneasy ground between a rationalist and an intuitive interpretation of the human environment, Culbert's "magic" is grounded in an appreciation of the real world. His works do not rely on illusion, but on real life mysteries. He comments: "When the wires and cables are visible in a work, you know where it comes from, where it stands." Thus the viewer remains aware of the close connection between the utilitarian and the imaginative, between the mundane and the magical.



ZCV Table, 1989



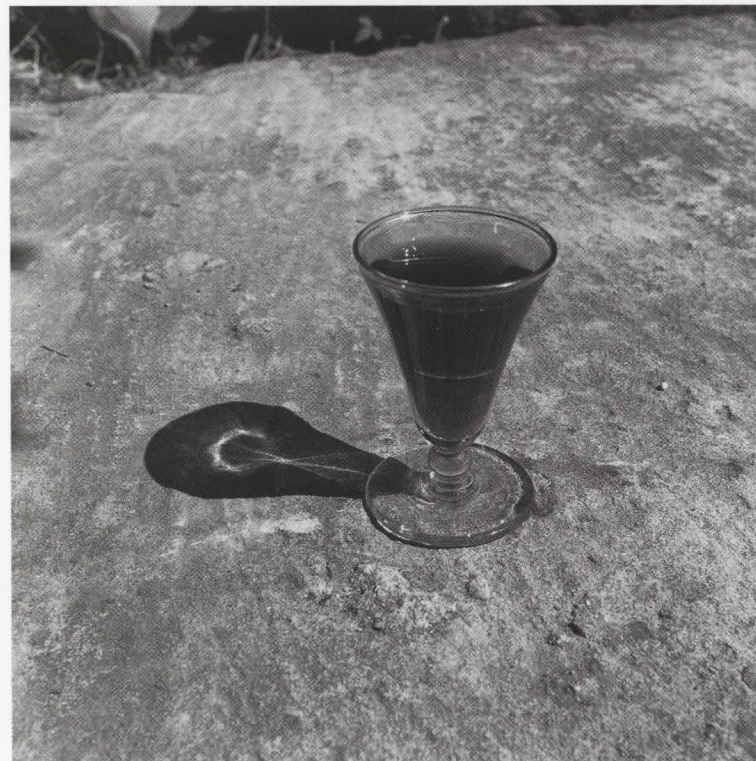
Trousers, Contadour 1977

Culbert returns again and again to the same simple few materials. Since the early 1970s, he has constructed his works variously from light bulbs, wine glasses, lampshades, window frames, fluorescent tubes, and plastic bottles. Seen as a whole, Culbert's work functions like a continuous experiment in observation, as research into the physical and metaphysical effects of light on what English writer Simon Cutts has described as Culbert's "world of ordinary objects". Culbert has commented: "The work is a question which I am trying to answer."

Culbert's work recreates his optical discoveries, reconfiguring science as art. There is an amusingly eccentric character to many of his constructions. It is as if principles of the phenomenology of light are being explained using materials closest to hand, perhaps over dinner and drinks. Culbert's work is characterised by his idiosyncratic combination of an engagingly down-to-earth system of invention with an aesthetic based upon startling formal elegance. One of the measures of Culbert's success is his ability to consistently reinvent new imaginative possibilities for ordinary things. Thus in images such as *Sun, Glass/ Wine* (1992), Culbert demonstrates the almost magical property of a wine glass lit from the side, to project an image which looks like an illuminated light bulb. *Abat-jour* (1993) and related works reveal the strangely three-dimensional shadows cast by skeletal lampshades lit from a single light source. *Sun Lit Bulb* (1992) captures the unlikely shadows cast by lit bulbs photographed with the sun behind them, a phenomenon Culbert describes as "real contradictions".

Culbert's revelation of the secret lives of familiar things is known in psychological theories of perception as "affordances". Theories of perception are divided into two schools of thought. The first, known as Constructive or Indirect Perception, emphasises the context in which an object is perceived. Identification of what we see is processed in this model through guesswork based on experience: we recognise a chair because it shares similar physical properties with chairs we have previously encountered. The second theory, termed Direct Perception, denies the function of memory in perception, suggesting instead that information about the world is transmitted by vision alone: we recognise a chair because we see something that "affords" sitting.

The everyday world is a rich source of unusual affordances for Culbert. Ordinary things are literally, as well as figuratively, transformed by Culbert's "vision". In his sculptural works, light, which normally illuminates another physical object, provides its own spectacle. In sculptures such as *Light Fall* (1992),



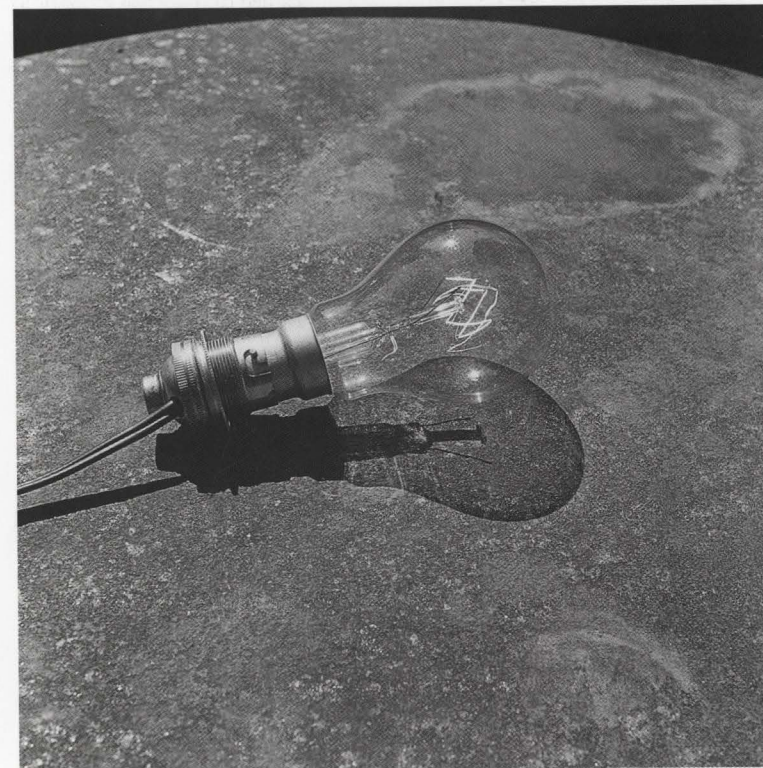
Wineglass, 1979

static white fluorescent tubes appear to afford movement, cascading through the room like a waterfall frozen for a moment in time. In earlier works, Culbert has appeared to pour light from a jug like liquid, and to cut through walls, floors and other solid objects with fluorescent tubes. Culbert's photographs likewise release familiar objects from the obligations of their original function. Thus a wooden table-top is transformed back into the trunk of a tree; a table with a lightshade hanging beneath it can become a little room; a discarded car tyre takes on various new lives as a plant pot, a decorative window in a stone wall, and a sturdy base for a road sign; while the happy combination of a car windshield and steering column affords a casual table for dining in the garden.

For his current exhibition, Culbert has assembled a montage of 78 black and white photographs. Taken with the same camera over a twenty year period, these images capture the light effects and object affordances of a variety of real life environments: ranging from the South Island of New Zealand to the South of France. These are places of special significance to Culbert, who spends a substantial amount of his time travelling — between his studios in urban London and rural Provence, as well as regular visits “home” to New Zealand and to install his work in galleries around the world.

While some of these images are constructed by Culbert, others are observed. The theory of perceptual affordance is put into daily practice in the rural landscapes of New Zealand and France. Inventive recycling of commonplace objects is common to each culture, from New Zealand's backyard inventions held together with No.8 wire to the ubiquitous 2CV car parts furnishing the outhouses of rural France.

Such philosophical notions of the spirit of place have been explored by, among others, the novelist Lawrence Durrell, who for the last twenty years of his life was a resident of the same Lubéron region of Provence as Bill Culbert. Like Culbert, Durrell theorised that certain places exert a significant effect on the lives of their inhabitants, that the cultural landscape plays its own decisive part in the unfolding of human events. Durrell was joined in this notion by two other great writers of Provence, Marcel Pagnol and Jean Giono, who likewise described the influence of the local light and landscape on the characters of its residents. Giono went on to establish a foundation devoted to rural pantheism in the hills at Contadour — a place often photographed by Culbert. His images such as *Trousers*, *Contadour* (1977) reveal the essentially timeless quality of the area, a



Sun Lit Bulb, 1992

place whose landscape, dwellings, and customs have remained unchanged for centuries. In Durrell's life and art, the significant locations whose "spirit" inspired his fictions were Corfu, Alexandria, and Avignon in Provence. Durrell wrote about the way in which the spirit of these places overruled conventional linear notions of time, dispensing with historical cause and effect in favour of what he termed the "space-time continuum".

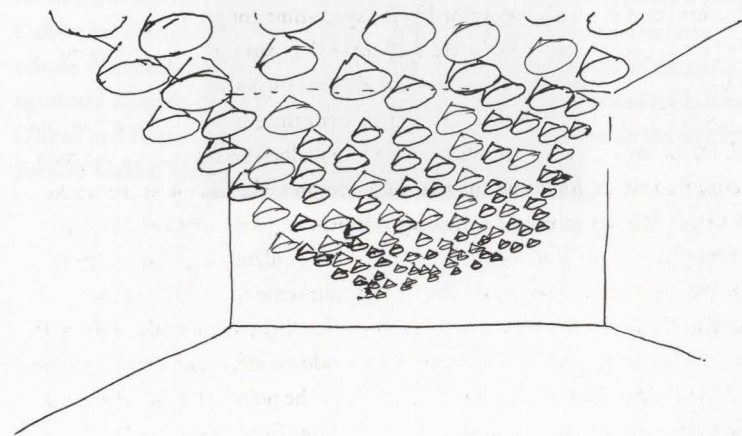
A recent image by Culbert neatly illustrates this precept. *Les Deux Côtés* (1991), a central image of the current exhibition, is a composite photograph of a mismatched set of demi-johns converted to table lamps. Placed in the backyard and photographed twice from opposing angles, seemingly impossible shadows are cast: it is as if the same objects were being viewed from two vantage points at once, as if their front and back views were simultaneously visible. Durrell explored a similar notion with his two famous series of novels, the Alexandria Quartet and the Avignon Quintet, in which the same series of events were replayed through the perspectives of separate characters and from various points in time.

Like Culbert's *Les Deux Côtés*, Durrell's fictions work on a Cubist principle, accommodating multiple perspectives within a single setting. Durrell's adoption of this structure as a basis for exploring the "space-time continuum" that underpins our experience of the world, was inspired in part by his investigations into the theory of relativity. The theory of relativity suggests that in order to describe the movement of a body through space or time, a second body is needed to which the movement of the first is related. In Culbert's work, just as the rules of perception are explored and subverted in order to make us look at the world with a fresh vision, so the principles of relativity are explored and overthrown. For example, a recent series of paired photographs of identical groups of lamps taken with and without ambient light, renders our sense of relative distance uncertain. While the contextual information in the 'light version' (the walls of the room, the wires and cords of the lamps, their shadows) affords us a sense of scale and distance, the 'dark' version has no such clues: the points of light might be a million miles away in the night sky, or bursting like fireworks immediately before the eyes.

Light and dark are measured by their opposites. They are relative principles: light is determined by the absence of dark, dark by the absence of light. Thus, in recording light effects, Culbert is necessarily concerned with shadows, the dark side of light. In Culbert's images, shadows are given the same sense of 'weight' as

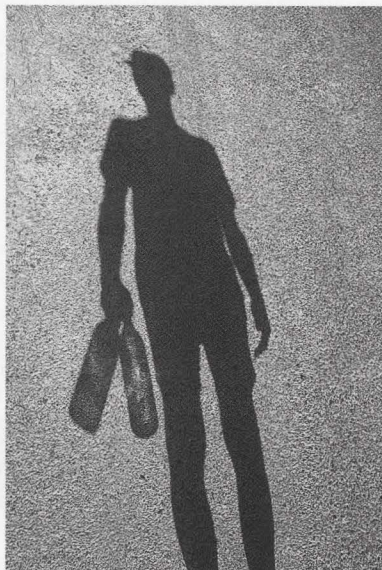
solid objects. In the exemplary myth of Plato's cave, where shadows projected by firelight on the wall of a cave are the only visual contact with the outside world experienced by a group of prisoners, the shadow is their reality: they have no point of relativity by which to comprehend the way light falls on a solid object. For Plato's prisoners, the shadow is the substance. For Culbert, shadows are a tangible physical presence in the real world.

Light is the shortest distance between two points, and works to connect the viewer with an object. Likewise, Culbert's constructions directly connect the viewer with the idea being expressed, through the most economical means at his disposal. Nothing is superfluous, nothing wasted. In Culbert's art, light works to transfigure simple objects, providing an unforgettably resonant moment of illumination.



Bill Culbert Nov 96

Bill Culbert, drawing of *Light Plain*, 1997



Bill Culbert, *Self Portrait*, 1994

Bill Culbert was born in Port Chalmers, New Zealand in 1935. He left New Zealand in 1957 with a scholarship to study painting at the Royal College of Art in London. In 1967 he began to investigate the possibilities of electric light to make environmental artworks. He also experimented with the effects of camera obscura, projecting light through pinholes on the surface of a globe. Since the late 1960s Culbert has explored the physical and metaphysical effects of light and shadow in the everyday world. His sculptures and photographs are constructed from ordinary objects, including light bulbs, lampshades, 2CV Citroën car parts, wine glasses, suitcases, fluorescent tubes, and plastic bottles. Culbert makes and exhibits his work regularly in many countries around the world. Dividing his time between studios in London and Southern France, he returns to New Zealand on average once a year. Culbert has continued to have a dynamic presence in this country's visual arts culture. His collaborations with Ralph Hotere have resulted in some of the more significant artworks produced here in recent years. One such collaboration between Culbert and Hotere, *Fault*, is displayed as a permanent installation on the façade of the City Gallery, Wellington.

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