This Model World, Travels to the Edge of Contemporary Art

by Will Gresson

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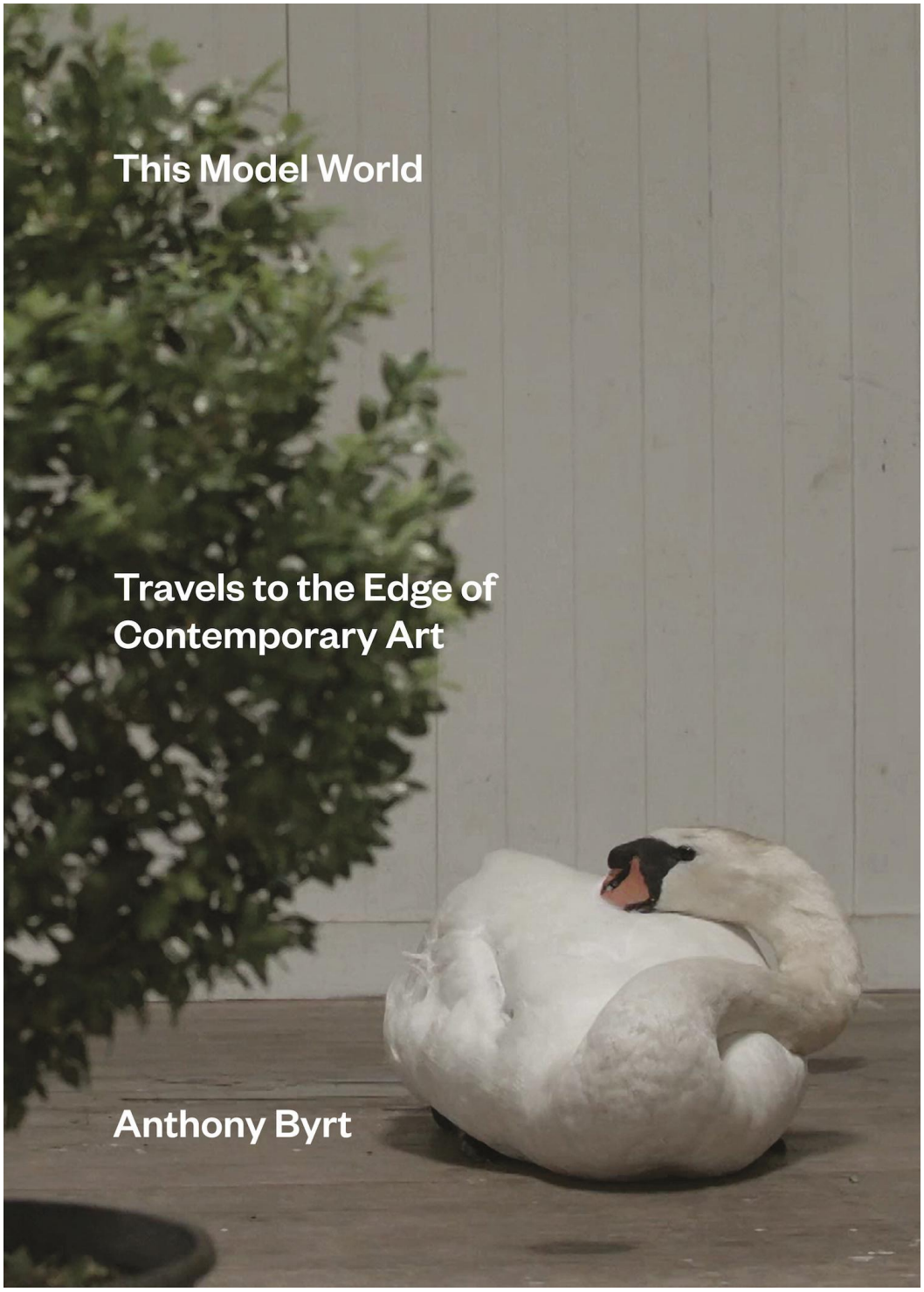
It's difficult not to look at Anthony Byrt's book, *This Model World*, through two distinct but equally overarching prisms. The first of these is perhaps best articulated by Byrt himself, as quoted by Barry Schwabsky on the inside dust jacket: that art has "a hopeful promise at its heart." There is a palpable enthusiasm and appreciation that runs throughout the book; a feeling of personal connection and investment in the people and the work he writes about that gives it an engaging sense of energy, while also demarcating it as something distinctly separate from conventional art criticism.

Each major chapter follows a rough pattern whereby Byrt introduces the artist both from a personal perspective and more generally, before taking a tangent to explore the relationship between that artist and one of the international settings he has visited on his travels. When discussing Yvonne Todd, Byrt sidesteps to Mike Kelley's work in Detroit, with Shane Cotton it's the Rothko Chapel in Houston. Peter Robinson's work is tied to the Istanbul Biennale in 2013, where government interference and local protests controversially scuppered a plan to create works in public spaces. These tangents make for engaging reading, their initially tenuous links usually resolved by the time Byrt returns to the focus of the chapter. With Billy Apple and Judy Millar, two artists that Byrt is particularly close to, the backstory is necessarily more extensive and involves discussing their respective overseas links (Apple's work in the UK and USA, Millar's base in Berlin).



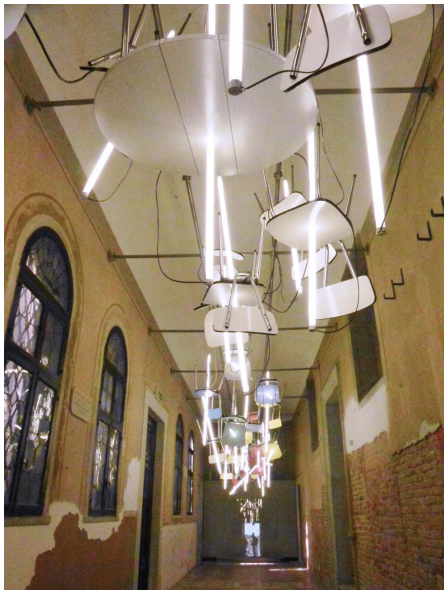
In contrast to these more wide-ranging overviews, the shorter chapters on figures like Te Ao or Steve Carr have a narrower focus, usually on a specific recent work or body of works. Sometimes these are explored in such a way as to create a sense of threads being picked up and developed, evident perhaps most explicitly when Byrt follows up his discussion of Billy Apple by examining Steve Carr's 'inheritance' of certain elements of Apple's legacy. These shorter sections can make for slightly bemusing reading, given how recent some of the work is. Any art writing of this kind is

to some extent or another an exercise in myth building, and to read a critical exposition of a more recent artist's work not on a blog but in a larger printed anthology alongside some of the other prominent names here is occasionally jarring.

The second crucial prism and perhaps the most significant element of the book is Byrt's conclusion, which addresses the oft held assumption that New Zealand is always defined in some way by its remoteness. In many ways, this idea has always been folded into the folklore of the country's creative culture, be it visual arts, literature or music. Perhaps inevitably, Byrt uses Simon Denny's success at the Venice Biennale in 2015 and subsequent international acclaim to highlight how those assumptions are increasingly beginning to seem outdated. Almost all of the artists he looks at are discussed with reference to their international links, whether they be through study, being partially based overseas or through recent international exhibitions. The tangents Byrt takes where he links New Zealand based artists with overseas artists and projects are all done reasonably nonchalantly, as if to suggest that there is little question of those long distances still being relevant in an increasingly globalised world. A discussion he mentions near the end of the book with Lise Strathdee about establishing an arts residency in Kohukohu, Northland that is similar to the Marfa Arts Residency in Texas is particularly interesting to consider. Similarly, when discussing larger events like the Venice Biennale or the Walters Prize, there is no great attention paid to the controversy which often surrounds both events. Byrt is happy to acknowledge their importance and move on to the more interesting discussion of the artists and their work.

Arguably however, it's the choice of featured artists that potentially raises the biggest issues for Byrt. The selection includes three previous Walters Prize winners and three previous representatives at Venice, which while implicitly acknowledging their relevance, potentially opens him up to criticism on other counts. By leaning heavily on these institutional frameworks, Byrt reinforces the kind of establishment dominance that has long existed in New Zealand's contemporary art scene. To really make the claim that New Zealand artists are not as disconnected from the global art world as they were even fifteen years ago, a wider picture of the country's art scenes would need to be painted than

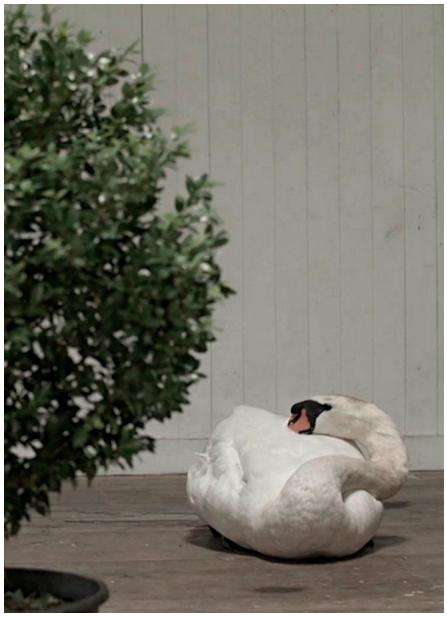
what he does here too. As it stands, those notions might feel limited to those who can take advantage of particular networks through art schools (particularly Elam in Auckland) and galleries in the cities, which are not always easy to access for artists in other regions of the country. For the book's subtitle 'Travels to the Edge of Contemporary Art' to really be accurate, one might argue that Auckland in particular would need to appear far less in the biographies of the chosen artists than it does here.



Bill Culbert, *Front Door Out Back* installation view, 2013, Venice Biennale. Photo: Will Gresson.

Yvonne Todd, *Vegan Portrait #11*, 2014. C-type print, 80 x 63 cm. Photo courtesy Ivan Anthony.

Yvonne Todd, *Morton*, 2011. C-type print from 4x5 transparency, 110 x 86.5cm. Courtesy McLeavey Gallery.



Shannon Te Ao, still from *two shoots that stretch far out*, 2013-14. Single Channel video, colour and sound, 13:22min, cinematography Iain Frengley. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery.

A more pressing observation was raised in an interview with Louise Rutledge published on the Enjoy Gallery Blog in October 2016,[01] which referenced the gender imbalance of having eight male artists and four female artists featured. Byrt's response highlighted among other things that his focus was particularly centred on the period 2011-2015, and he also suggested "that if you must balance it out, what does that do to the narrative of the book?"[02] What's more broadly revealing in his answer is that it cements the notion that the book is very much a personal project, and not, as he tells Rutledge, "a piece of canon building."[03] The relative notoriety of the featured artists may contradict this slightly depending on your view of the recent New Zealand arts canon, but first and foremost the book isn't meant to be viewed as impartial, removed art criticism. How this second criticism then plays out perhaps depends mostly on the reader.

I left New Zealand in 2009 at the age of 21, moving first to Berlin for four years before relocating to London in 2013 where I'm based currently (incidentally Byrt did the opposite, starting in the UK before his all too brief experience in Berlin). What's interesting to me personally about the book is that it covers a sizeable part of the period that I have lived overseas, exploring the recent work of artists that I have generally read a lot about, but (with exceptions like Simon Denny and Judy Millar), mostly haven't been able to experience in person. After seven and a half years overseas, and with only one visit back in that time due mostly to the financial practicalities, Byrt's urge to reconnect with New Zealand's art scene when he returned is something that I find entirely relatable. His experience of the particular period he has chosen to focus on is therefore significant to me on a level that has little do with art criticism, so much as it does with a more convoluted experience of being a New Zealander based overseas.

It's also what gives me an appreciation of the conclusions Byrt reaches with regard to New Zealand's sense of distance being more of a psychological phenomenon in some instances than anything else. I've been very fortunate to experience so much incredible art from New Zealand while being based overseas, and yet frequently the coverage of these activities in the national press feels either indifferent or largely non-existent. It's almost as if being based overseas somehow disconnects you from the country in a way

which is not always to do with how you view your own place, so much as it does an unspoken idea of what constitutes being from New Zealand. This last idea in particular was maybe most evident to me in 2013, when Bill Culbert's selection as New Zealand's representative at the Venice Biennale was met with criticism that focussed significantly on his having been based in France for so many years, as if that somehow disqualified him from representing New Zealand at an international event. At the same time, I am highly aware (as Byrt also acknowledged in a comprehensive interview with Kim Hill this past September 2016)[04] that to be able to travel to these different spaces and approach New Zealand art in a much broader international context is an incredible privilege, and something which a great many people cannot do. Negotiating that difference in perspective should be done carefully, something which Byrt generally manages to do here.

While I am already familiar at least to some extent with all of the artists Byrt has selected for his book due to previous media coverage, I'm equally aware that this only scratches the surface of a very particular sector of New Zealand's contemporary art scene. Consequently, however you feel about his personal connection to the artists and work he discusses, the book must be viewed through that particular understanding of the selection's limits. With that semi-caveat in place, *This Model World* is still an undeniably engaging text that among other things, demonstrates an affinity for the artists and their work which sometimes feels as though it's lacking in other media covering New Zealand arts. It also highlights how for many artists, the spectre of distance perpetually hovering over the country's creative communities needs to be re-examined and in some cases, drastically reformulated. If we were to seriously undertake that through strategic public policy in New Zealand, we may be able to facilitate ways for that increased access to international opportunities to filter down beyond the larger centres and their dominant networks. At a more basic level, the suggestion here that those distances are not as insurmountable as they might once have been portrayed is encouraging. In an increasingly anxious and uncertain political climate, the idea that you can return home and reaffirm your connection is outright comforting.

Footnotes

01. www.enjoy.org.nz/blog/2016/10/interview-with-anthony-byrt

02. Ibid.

03. Ibid.

04. www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/201816561/anthony-byrt-art,-criticism,-and-poker

Biographies

Bill Culbert (1935-2019) was one of the world's leading light artists. Culbert had more than 100 solo exhibitions worldwide during his incredible 60-year career. Having represented New Zealand at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, Culbert was notable for his inventive use of light and shadow in painting, photography, sculpture and installation work, as well as his use of found and recycled materials. From suitcases pierced with fluorescent tubes, repurposed furniture, vast arrays of reclaimed plastic containers, Culbert's poetic work invites us to revalue familiar objects and refocus our perceptions.

Judy Millar is one of New Zealand's most internationally recognised artists. Since 2005 she has shared her time between Auckland and Berlin. Highlights of her career include two exhibitions at the Venice Biennale; representing New Zealand with her solo exhibition *Giraffe-Bottle-Gun* (2009); and in the collateral event *Time, Space, Existence* (2011); inclusion in *Rohkunstbau*, Berlin (2010) and solo exhibitions at the Auckland Art Gallery (2002) and the IMA, Brisbane (2013). Her paintings are held in all major public collections in New Zealand and in several international collections including the Kunstmuseum St Gallen and Tichy Foundation in Prague.

Working predominantly with performance and film, the elegiac installations of Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Ngāti Te Rangiita, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui, b. 1978, Sydney) explore fraught dynamics of indigeneity, language and loss. Te Ao draws on a range of existing literary material, including Māori lyrical sources such as whakataukī and waiata, as well as poetic and lyrical texts from popular culture. Richly layered, Te Ao's works enact a compression wherein past and present co-exist, and daily life is inextricably linked to multifarious social, cultural and philosophical histories.

Simon Denny (*1982 Auckland/New Zealand, lives in Berlin) is an artist whose work explores the cultures and values behind contemporary technologies. In recent years, Denny has looked at the exploitation of information in data-economies, using his work to visualise systems of competing political and economic visions, interrelationships of labour, capital, developments in technologies, and impacts on the biosphere.

He studied at the University of Auckland (2005), and the Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main (2009). Denny's work has been exhibited recently in solo exhibitions in the K21 in Düsseldorf (2020); Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania (2019); MOCA, Cleveland (2018); OCAT, Shenzhen (2017); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2017); WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels (2016); Serpentine Galleries, London (2015); MoMA PS1, New York (2015); Portikus, Frankfurt (2014); Adam Art Gallery, Wellington (2014); MUMOK, Vienna (2013); Kunstverein Munich (2013). He represented New Zealand at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. His works are represented in institutional collections including MoMA (New York), Walker Art Centre (Minneapolis), Kunsthaus Zürich (Zürich), Sammlung zeitgenössischer Kunst der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Berlin) and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Wellington). Denny co-founded the BPA//Berlin Program for Artists, an artist mentoring program in 2016. Since 2018, he is a professor for Time Based Media at the HFBK, Hamburg.

Yvonne Todd was born in Auckland, New Zealand in 1973 where she lives and works. She received a BFA majoring in Sculpture from the University of Auckland in 2001. The following year she won the inaugural Walters Prize with a series of ten photographs made in her final year of study. Judge Harald Szeemann said it was the work that irritated him the most. Since then, Todd's work has been in numerous exhibitions in New Zealand and overseas. In 2019, Todd was a recipient of a Laureate Award from the Arts Foundation of New Zealand.

Will Gresson is a writer, musician and artist from New Zealand. He is the co-founder of *without appeal*, an independent publishing platform currently based in London.

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