

echo
chamber
echo
chamber
echo
chamber
chamber

echo chamber

steve lovett

Art School Press
Manukau Institute of Technology
Private Bag 94006 Manukau
Auckland New Zealand

ISBN-0-473-07225-4



*Welcome to the Pleasure Dome,
going where lovers roam,
we're a long way from home,
moving on keep moving on,
never doing what I'm told*

*Welcome to the Pleasuredome,
Frankie Goes to Hollywood, 1984.*

xanadu

Cushla Parekowhai
translating the original 'Lovett speak'

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree
Where Alph the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea*

Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1798

I have a collection of favourite images that I carry around. Among my top ten all time faves is one of my friend Paul. I can see him now joking with somebody as he pushes his way into the Dome, no worries in the world.

As I remember, the image comes from one night out, in Sydney, at one of the many dance parties. Over in Sydney big, big dance parties are held in huge venues like the Royal Show Grounds. That is where the Dome is. Unlike the Royal Haughton or the Agricultural Hall, the Dome is not an enormous and anonymous barn, it is really an idyllic little neo-classical arcade somewhere out in a gorgeous garden. In former, less frantic and more genteel times you could imagine respectable tea dances being held at the Dome but on this occasion however, it had been colonised by a large crowd of over excited dance party people, off their faces having a totally fantastic time.

On this hot and humid night I am with friends. Inside the Dome the air is wet and there is condensation running down the walls as if the structure itself is breathing. The atmosphere is physical and intense and I am sure that cloud formations must be gathering under the roof. Just for a moment between the crush of people I watch Paul. In that split and single second I can see the look of pure and unadulterated pleasure on his face as he is at one with the crowd.

Paul is an incredibly important figure to me. We became friends by chance. We first met each other at a public meeting back in late 1991 when among the assembly a very strong divergence of views was emerging. At that time I didn't exactly agree with Paul's take on the issue so during the course of debate we found ourselves engaged in what you might call a "calibrated difference of opinion". After the discussion Paul came up to me and said in this typically off-hand and deeply patronising way, "So what's your name again?". We instantly became friends.

Our lives reflected one another quite closely for a while as we felt ourselves being contained at the end of something while hanging around waiting for the next something to begin. Each of us had talked of living for a long time with an internal monologue which told us again and again that our lives were awful.

For as long as I can remember there has been this incessant chatter inside my head which constantly tells me about what was good, what was bad, what was total crap, what was worth worrying about, what was not and so on. Almost continuously this monologue tries to reflect and describe what I think is happening to and around me. It is always asking questions and these questions help me to make the qualitative judgments or assessments which form the basis of my opinions and views. As an experience having an internal monologue is much more than just making a response to external sensations alone as often abstract ideas and impressions will articulate themselves as verbal statements too. Although this discussion is mostly private and unvoiced sometimes I surprise even myself as I hear my internal monologue spoken out loud while I conduct an animated conversation with no one else but me!

For Paul and I, it was a kind of sourness that first drew us together. The ability to say, "I hate my life", became one of the cornerstones of our friendship. Without necessarily subscribing to the therapeutic model of the 'damaged but recovered' self it was none-the-less true that neither of us had an easy road to go down. To alter the facts of our personal circumstances meant that the scope of change had to be really huge where perhaps the only chance ever going to be allowed us was to accept a different set of compromises.

Working against family history, working against where you had grown-up, working against a situation not necessarily of your own creation or choice, working against a story or script in which you figure but which was ultimately authored by someone else - any attempt to change such prescribed outcomes means that you

are forced into doing something incredibly drastic and personally costly like burning down the house. It was not until Paul and I were able to pick our way through the charred remains of the houses and histories which we had both destroyed that either of us could begin to construct something different. As might be expected our dialogue with each other had the effect of biting deeply into the ruins of memory and that which we knew.

For me this need to establish the possibility of change in what was the seemingly unalterable screenplay of my life was a moment of dislocation really. I grew up in Ponsonby and Grey Lynn in the days when it was a very different neighbourhood to the one that it is now. It was not until I was in high school and was shifted over to the North Shore to live with my Grandparents that I saw how a change in context effects the way in which you are seen. Because I came from over the bridge, from a poor neighbourhood I was thought of differently. The rules and social structures were completely alien. For the first time in my life I was separated from all the kids I knew. I was intensely lonely and miserable. At the time the script for the internal monologue that I carried around with me said, "this is awful, none of my friends are here, nothing works the same here, I really hate here".

I remember that when I arrived at Takapuna Grammar from Ponsonby Primary I got put in the dumbest stream in the school with mostly all the brown faces. Later when the school hierarchy worked out I wasn't so thick I was moved again and put up a couple of classes. What made the point really sharp was the fact that I was quite good at history. I'm good at history because being a poor reader I learnt to remember information on a first hearing. Eventually I won the history prize at Takapuna Grammar and as the history teacher put my award winning exam paper down on the desk it was said to me, "Lovett, I don't

know how you did this".

Back then I never thought about this incident much, as you do when you are a kid, but a couple of years later I remember thinking quite angrily, "where the fuck did a comment like that come from?"

I suppose the script I got handed in high school was one which read, "accept your lot and don't expect to achieve". In my family expectations didn't go beyond getting a couple of passes in School Certificate or maybe getting an apprenticeship. In fact when I was in the sixth form and not enjoying school very much my Mum said, "That bloke who makes furniture down the road is looking for someone and you like working with your hands, so you'd be really good". No wonder I ran away at eighteen and left the country to escape it all.

Like my treasured image of Paul pushing his way into the Dome possibly everybody carries with them some kind of image reservoir. This is a catalogue of visual keys made up of photographs and almost spoken video-like-moving images which record sights and sounds and smells and impressions that form a personal visual archive. From these highly individual references are drawn points in each of us which are sometimes sentimental, sometimes resistant, other times nostalgic or just plain troubling. These moments have a defining function, naming us by their agency where the images they inspire provoke responses in us that filter and measure events in the present.

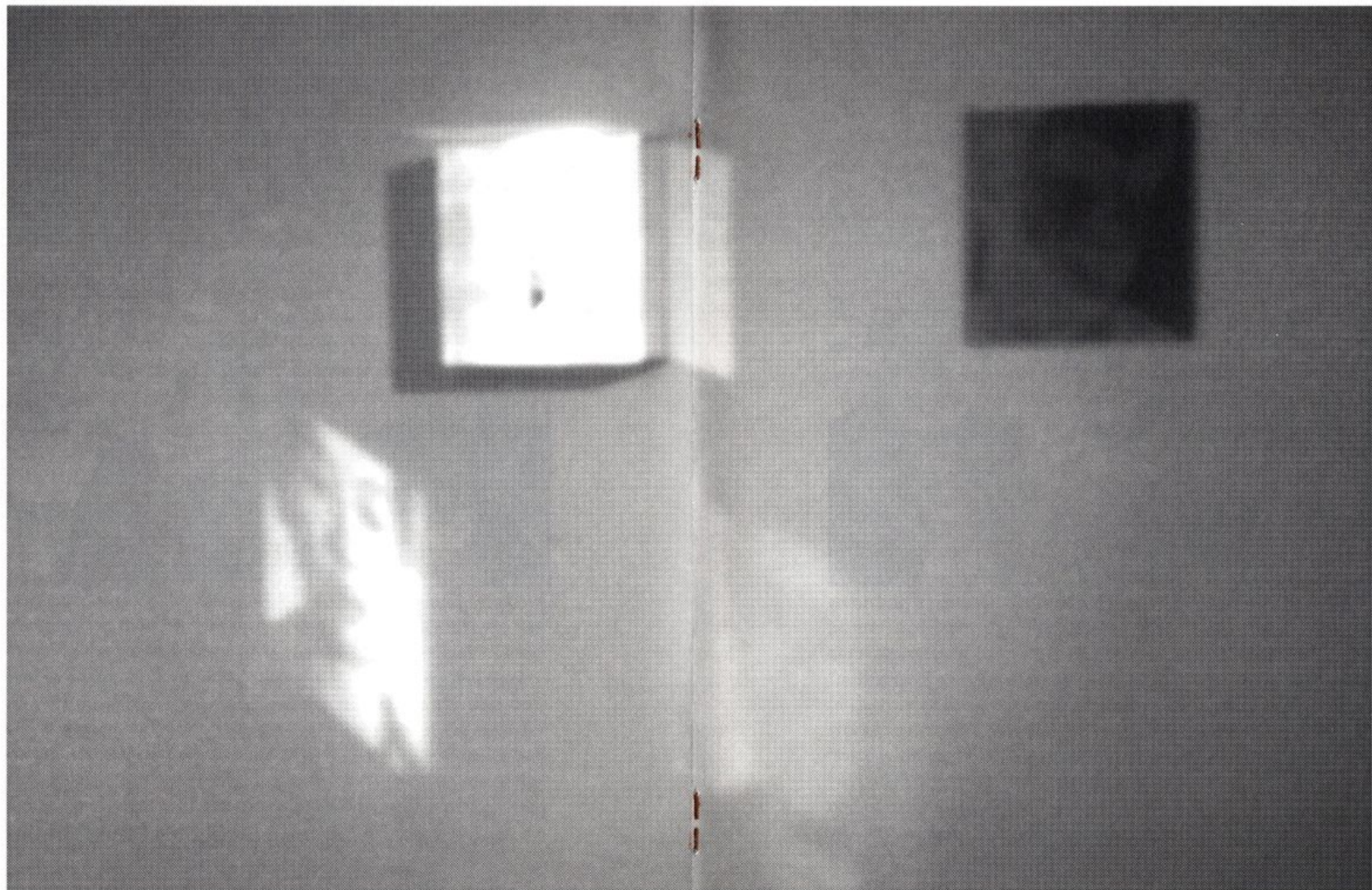
Being a dyslexic person this is doubly so as I often feel that I have a somewhat exaggerated visual sensitivity where images speak more to me in their lateral associations and mystery than the fixed and flat symbols of words ever do. For me pictures form themselves into visual phrases that have etched themselves into my life. When I "remember" images come to my mind first then words follow as a means of articulating this recall. Although the

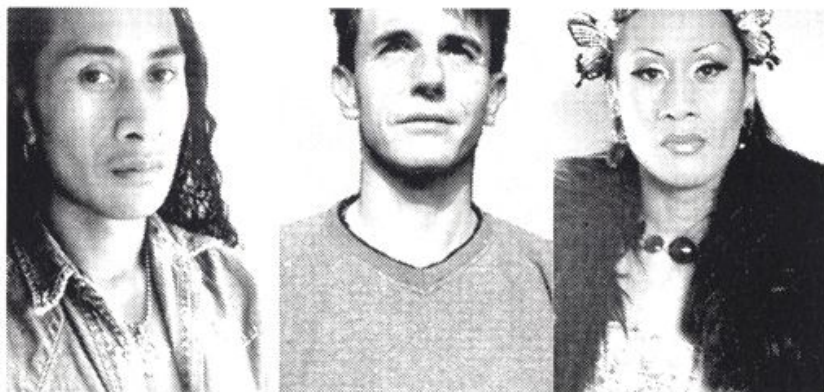
process of remembering is likely to be different for each person I think it is true that "we are what we remember". We reflect the new in the older. Maybe it is in this way that our memories, whether spoken or displaced in various forms of writing, are able to activate individualised scripts which are not necessarily congruent with those handed to us by circumstance.

Later on, when I came back to New Zealand and decided that I wanted to go to University, I began to imagine for myself a different kind of life than the one for which the screenplay or script had already been written. As there was no-one within the experience of my family who had tried anything like it before, it was as if I had to unpick entirely, a piece of fabric upon which a pattern or set of expectations had already been printed. This meant that when I went to university I had to begin right from scratch and pick up completely new and unfamiliar threads as I began to weave together for myself some sense of a possible reality that was going to be different from that which I and those others around me could "remember".

It is with this sense I suggest that speech or the act of realising ideas in vocal symbols metabolises the conflicts which exist between our internal and external scripts as prescribed by our understanding of the distances between what is and what we imagine. Art theorists Slotterdyck and James talk about cynicism as being the prerequisite which enables the individual to function in a post modern world. They say that in the great screenplay of our highly pressured technological lives we find ourselves performing not one but many roles. Given the need for editing the self centred dialogue which characterises the cynical nature of our multiple "speaking parts" there is this sense of distancing as we attempt to process the world sufficiently enough only to deal with it expediently.







Although I think that people like Paul who are able to target that acid tipped cynical barb into a conversation and hit the centre of the bulls eye exactly throw out for the rest of us an important device which allows us to cope, I also think that often we become a bit callous and take this facility for granted. However, at the point where we reduce the cynical observation to nothing more than an amusing diversion, to the prerequisite feature then I think cynicism can no longer be a process which enables the individual to function. To my mind when you fail to notice that cynicism operates merely in order to allow you to cope with immediate mire then you really are lost, in way over head without even a spoon to eat your way out.

Perhaps for our generation then cynicism becomes some kind of ambient background noise which plays over the contradictions and inconsistencies present in our internal monologues that are for most people, too problematic and painful to ever comprehend.

When I asked people to volunteer stories for this project many of those I approached said, "But I have nothing important to say", or "the cost of telling is too great". What these individuals were really expressing was a discomfort or suspicion about recording a personal account and committing it to public record. Maybe this is because so often so many of our stories are simply taken from us and presented as part of an official or "authorised" version of someone else's story. In this sense the act of capture or the wish to participate in the recording of history works against us given that the record which ultimately survives is not what we would have chosen to record for ourselves.

Typically the mistrust of record making is focused on the manner of remembering and on the workings of the technology which document that remembering. Where once the machine of memory was in analogue form composed of solid and tangible

structures like the Whanganui computer these days the site of our collective memory is more ephemeral still. In our digital age the ownership of collective memory is unclear foreshadowing perhaps not only a loss of identity but also an acceptance of our inability to participate in the recording of that identity.

During the making of **echo chamber** I had my new photo I.D drivers licence taken. Firstly it was returned featuring the image of a total stranger which could have belonged to either the person before or the person after me. Then the next licence I got back had my picture on the front but my name spelled incorrectly with the wrong address at the side. This experience made me wonder about the way in which technology had casually reassigned the essence of my identity as suddenly I became someone I was not.

It really is alarming to think that somewhere out there with computer aided mechanical precision a reservoir of images and information is being compiled which purports to be the projection of who and what we are. It seems to me that when we are no longer the ones doing the remembering the organic quality of memory is displaced. At this point all that the non-human engine of memory can ever create is only a memory of a memory as opposed to the actual memory itself.

I suspect that there is uneasiness about offering up and recording memories for the public record because people are always uncertain about the ways in which this information will be used. With this body of work I don't think I did a good enough job of communicating to my participants the value of what I call 'infecting' technology with a voice which has only the purpose of articulating the view that the owner of that voice intends. For no matter how far the political fictions of individual freedom may have undermined our ability to decide whether or not we want to leave some record or image of ourselves, for the participants

in the echo chamber project the importance of personal choice in the counter-archival process is one of the central ideas I am interested in exploring.

This series of works attempt to record the ordinary and the everyday where the vagaries of individual memory and response often subjectively intersect with organised "official" history in an imperfect, fractured and inconsistent account. What happens is that the stories these images tell provide an insight into a vast largely unremembered past.

The accepted view of history carries with it the implication of truth because of the processes by which that record was made. For most people the fact of writing, the imposition of editorial and the subsequent publication in consecutive volumes means that official history is more authentic, more impartial and more complete. But very often the subjects of our history are never given the opportunity to record their version of 'history' which might contradict or subvert the 'authorised' interpretation of that history. **Echo chamber** tries to address this omission by deliberately presenting narratives which fill the uncomfortable silences left by the public record. As the voices in this work begin to yield information they transcend both the confines of recorded history and the limitations of their internal monologues as they reconcile the discrepancies between the public and private account.

Every time I listen to a new story I find that the individual voice seems to speak its own history to me. In the end I am left wondering whose history was it that I really heard. Who in fact has had the last laugh. If through the exercise of personal choice the subjects of my work have presented a view of themselves and

their history which is merely some kind of subjective impression or analogued self portrait then I have no more certain answer to the question of what is really in a likeness than Toss Woolaston had when he thought about the way in which images contribute to the picture we have of ourselves both as individuals and as a nation. ²

The writer Homi Bhabha ³ has asked a similar question when he suggests that in the liminal post colonial state those who once found themselves at the margins of authority will be crucial in redefining what in fact that authority might be. Given the relatively easy access to the technology that we can purchase from Dick Smith Electronics or the Warehouse most people now have the means to record and produce their own versions of history. Now more than ever the contradictions between what was and what we remember can be exposed.

When I make images that present people I encourage the subject to become much more directly involved in the process of making that image. For instance I always ask them to tell a story they want to tell or to choose the photograph they want to discuss and so on. Although I might be pushing record on the tape or the camera shutter the subjects in the echo chamber images still own or direct the process by which those images were recorded. This means that the work is only able to exist as the outcome of a negotiated dialogue between us. Where I might facilitate the process I absolutely resist any attempt to define it. As an artist I don't see my role as being to obscure the integrity of my subject by overwriting their voice with any interpretive editorial of my own. Instead I focus on the process since the point of the work is not so much to represent the subject as encourage the subject to represent themselves. In echo chamber the voice you hear belongs entirely to the subject. They speak how and when they want to in order that the voice alone acti-

vates the impression that the viewer receives of that subject. To me it is the agency of the voice which presents the subject through and across time. This is the magical thing about breath where a sense of the self can be communicated simply by an exchange of "air"..

Six weeks after I caught that brief sight of Paul pushing his way into the Dome, Paul hanged himself at home in Sydney.

For those of us that have been told that our lives and our stories will be relegated to the endnotes of other peoples histories, Paul's contribution to the making of echo chamber will go unchallenged. As he talks and talks the voice endures in time and against time. The history he records maybe ironic, mostly sarcastic and often self deprecating but it is never without huge tenderness for the world around him.

When I heard that Paul had taken his own life I needed to hold onto that final image of him at the Dome. It is a view of the person that I recall with great fondness and will travel with me forever as a symbol of his attitude toward life and living. Paul refused to plan for the future or to think about what happened yesterday. For him the only thing that was important is this breath now and that you're here too.

Paul Dominic Kinder 1960 1999

Requiescat in pace

Cushal Parekowhai in
 conversation with Steve Lovett
 on 13 September 2000
 the artist's studio,
 31 Rose Road, Grey Lynn,
 Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand.

My thanks go to all the people who have given their help to me
 in this project, Miranda Playfair, Micheal Stevens, Tane Mete,
 Patrick Phillips, Marie, Gail Haffern, Louise Waghorn,
 Robyn Moore, Sandra Fisher, Jonathan Else, Rachel Shearer
 Cushla Parekowhai, Carole Sharpe, Sandra Phelps,
 Delwyn Archer, Kornisha, Carole Shephard, Tim Bell.
 Kim Taunga, Pam Doidge, and the staff at Northcote Library.
 With our friends, family, and caregivers we are tu meke.

¹ Slotterdyck and James quoted from the catalogue of the 1990 Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art show, **The Power of Contemporary Work**, 1992, and see also Andreas Huyssen's forward to the *The Critique of Cynical Reason*. See also Clifford James, 1988, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

² Sir Tossell Wollaston, cited in Leonard Bell, p130 and 131, **The Maori European Art**, 1980, A.H and A.W. Reed Publishing, Auckland, New Zealand. The question was originally put forward by Wollaston during the making of the studies for the Erua Brown portrait sketches.

³ Hommi K Bhabha, *DisemmiNations, Time Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation*, **Nation and Narrations**, Ed, Hommi K. Bhabha, Routledge, New York, & London 1990.



echo chamber 20 October , 26 November, 2000

FISHER GALLERY

This publication was made possible by a grant

from the Research and Ethics Committee

Manukau Institute of Technology



MANUKAU
INSTITUTE OF
TECHNOLOGY
*Te Whare Takiri
o Manukau*

