



Exceptional archivists

For over 30 years, London-based Artangel has been commissioning “art that operates by ambush”. Co-director James Lingwood was in Aotearoa over the summer and spoke to Hamish Coney about its public projects in the contemporary commons.

At Te Tuhi’s Platform Gallery in Parnell, James Lingwood is explaining Artangel’s role in breathing life into the 2008 artwork *Seizure* by Roger Hiorns.

I feel a twinge of recollection. The chemical-concentrate ‘forest’ is one of my favourite artworks of the last decade or so. *Seizure*’s location, a condemned council flat in the London suburb of Elephant and Castle, is typical of the type of off-piste art destination that Artangel favours to present what Lingwood describes as “a particular type of entanglement”. Those glistening blue copper sulphate crystals, the result of 80,000 litres of reactive solution poured into the flat’s abandoned interior, have lingered long in my memory.

So too has Rachael Whiteread’s Turner Prize-winning concrete-cast *House* (1993), commissioned by Artangel. Likewise Jeremy Deller’s *Battle of Orgreave* (2001), a faithful reenactment of the infamous street confrontation between police and striking miners that was a flashpoint of Maggie Thatcher’s union-busting Tory government in the 1980s. Who can forget Roni Horn’s *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* (2007), in which the waters of 24 endangered and receding Icelandic glaciers are held for both display and future research? Or the first installment of Matthew Barney’s *The Cremaster Cycle – Cremaster 4* (1994) – set on the Isle of Man?

Over the course of Lingwood’s December presentation at Platform Gallery it becomes apparent that many of the

Roger Hiorns, *Seizure*, 2008. Commissioned and produced by Artangel. Photo: Nick Cobbing

21st century's most memorable, genre-defining or – more strictly – genre-blurring art moments have Artangel fingerprints all over them.

Hosted by Te Tuhi, James Lingwood was visiting Aotearoa to check out the New Zealand art scene, connect with public arts professionals and realise a long-held desire to experience the work of Colin McCahon in the flesh. Lingwood has been co-director of Artangel for over 30 years, working alongside Michael Morris, a former colleague of his from the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in central London. In 2012 the pair were awarded the MBE for services to the arts.

Lingwood's career began in the 1980s at the ICA, which was then something of a lone voice in the British contemporary art scene. It was the period just before Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin and the YBA generation exploded onto the scene in the early 1990s. In conversation a month after the talk, Lingwood explains that his early experience at the ICA set the platform for his involvement with Artangel.

“London now has a plurality of galleries dedicated to showing the art of our time. But at that point the ICA, whilst not quite on its own, had a particularly important place within what was still what I would call a quite insular culture. I had studied art history but there was no straightforward career path into working with contemporary art at that time. Via a few happy accidents I found myself working at the ICA at a very propitious time when the art world was opening out from the traditional information networks in Europe and North America. So at the ICA we had some important shows of Soviet artists such as Ilya Kabakov and began reaching out into South America. There was a growing appetite for wider connections. It's also in this context that I first saw the work of Colin McCahon.”

After leaving the ICA, Lingwood joined Artangel in 1991. Described as “patrons of the unknown” by its co-director, Artangel and its supporters have since acted as midwife for scores of installations and events. These may fall within the catch-all phrase ‘public sculpture’, but some of Artangel's presentations transcend that definition altogether. In Gregor Schneider's *Die Familie Schneider* (2004), for instance, two near-identical London terrace houses present visitors with a doppelgänger suburban tableau – twinned performers wash the dishes, take a shower and lurk in bin bags. Performative, temporary and interactive ‘aktion’ works like this inhabit a space where the traditionally passive viewer, in the process of accepting the challenge to be more than just a pair of



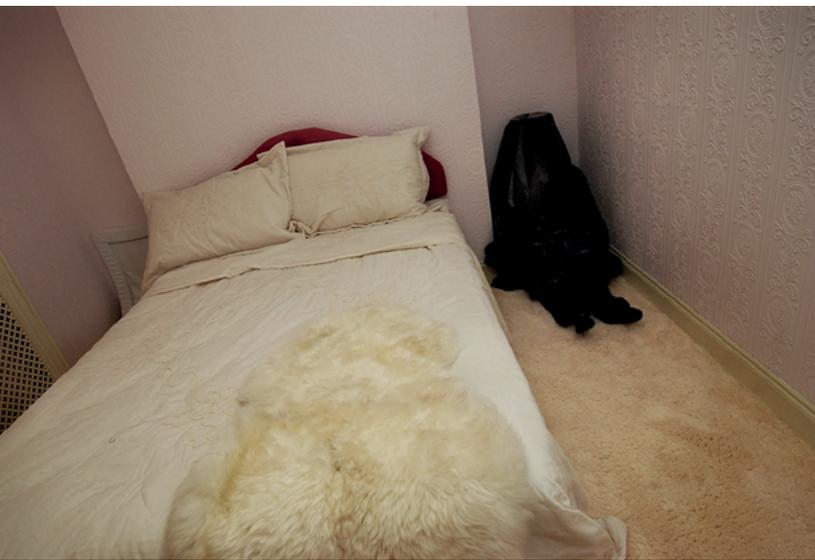
James Lingwood at Mokopōpaki in Auckland, in front of *The True Artist Helps the World by Asking for Trust (After Bruce Nauman)* by PĀNiA!, commissioned by Te Tuhi, 2019. Courtesy of Mokopōpaki

adoring eyeballs, can morph into an actor, participant, paying guest or citizen activist in their own right.

One of Artangel's largest and most complex projects in terms of logistics and public engagement is the current *Steve McQueen: Year 3*, a project Lingwood is clearly proud of. McQueen documented 76,146 children from 1504 London schools in 3128 classroom photographs. The series of images is currently on exhibition at Tate in London until May this year, but the photographs were first projected into the public realm last November via 600 billboards, on the street and in the Tube, across all 33 London boroughs.

“*Year 3* was launched at a very volatile and antagonistic moment in English political life, with Brexit and the election,” Lingwood says. “These developments have unfortunately given permission to xenophobia and racism, which may have been latent but have come to the fore. Landing amidst this very charged atmosphere, the work provided a sense of relief and joy, a word that appeared an awful lot. It was a kind of very public rejoinder to all the political rhetoric, via the medium of seven-year-old children. The sense of hope and optimism for the future, that the images individually and collectively embodied, created a lot of energy around the idea that whatever our political discussions might be, *this* is our reality, our future. Within the context of the Tate Britain show there is the very powerful sense of being included.”

Temporal and often ephemeral interventions like Schneider's *Die Familie Schneider* and McQueen's *Year 3*



Gregor Schneider, *Die Familie Schneider*, 2004.
Commissioned and produced by Artangel

Roni Horn, *Vatnasafn/Library of Water*, 2007.
Commissioned and produced by Artangel



the goal is to hold the space open for long enough to create a magnetic field of interest, for all the stakeholders to come together. To be enabling as opposed to disabling. There is a huge difference between the abstract and the actual. So we try to hold that space and not overdetermine what a work might mean until it is ready to communicate. We are constantly surprised, both during a project and then after the immediate life of a work, how these meanings can evolve and shift in relation to the events of the day.

“This means that works that may not have seemed foregrounded in addressing the climate crisis 10 years ago can now be seen through that prism. A good example is Roni Horn’s *Library of Water* in Iceland, which began as a space of reflection. Today the climate themes appear front and centre.”

Lingwood had mentioned a longstanding interest in the paintings of Colin McCahon, so I ask him exactly how and when he had first encountered the work.

“If I recall correctly it was in 1990. One of my colleagues brought over a smaller version of an exhibition that she had visited in New Zealand.” This must have been *Colin McCahon: The Language of Practical Religion* at the ICA from 12 April to 27 May 1990 – one of McCahon’s earliest international outings – after Iwona Blazwick (now director of the Whitechapel Gallery in London) saw the 1988–89 show *Colin McCahon: Gates and Journeys* at Auckland City Art Gallery.

“I had been looking forward to seeing more work in the flesh for some time,” Lingwood continues. “I think McCahon travels incredibly well, but there is something particularly moving about seeing an artist’s work in the place that he made it. He has a place alongside great painting of the second half of the 20th century – he plays into a type of post-war existentialism which is not something that is so current now.”

“I’ve now visited his studio in Titirangi (McCahon House) and I saw his exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery (*A Place to Paint: Colin McCahon in Auckland*). It was great timing for me with so much work on display. Sometimes when you carry a memory with you for a long time you are worried that your actual experience of the work might not measure up to your memory. I’m happy to say in the case of McCahon I visited his exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery on a couple of different days. The first time was wonderful and the second time was equally moving. So it really did measure up.”

James Lingwood gave his talk at Te Tuhi’s Platform Gallery, Parnell Train Station, on 10 December 2019.

billboards are performing vital work in 2020, defining culture by activating the commons. They press hard into the edges and boundaries of what we might understand as shared experience. As the collective base of information is being ported from the analogue to the digital realm, much of what in the recent past we agreed on as ‘our’ culture is now situated in a site of perpetual negotiation. The net result of which is more distance between the art object and the viewer.

“Artists are exceptional archivists and witnesses to what is in the process of being lost,” says Lingwood. The concrete square, park or street – a previously communal and hitherto unambivalent space – is increasingly under siege from corporate data mining or surveillance by both governments and non-state actors in the form of our friends from Google, Amazon and Facebook (a recent headline, for instance, described “The creepy way Facebook stalks you, even when you’re not using it”.) This is the fluid, fraught space that Artangel and the artist projects it supports find themselves operating within, and seeking to either locate or maintain boundaries for.

“Shining a light on how contested some of these spaces are becoming is important,” Lingwood explains. “I think



Fiona Banner/David Kohn, *A Room for London*, 2012.
Commissioned and produced by Artangel.
Photo: William Eckersley

Steve McQueen, *Year 3*, 2019. A partnership between Tate,
Artangel and A New Direction. Photo: Theo Christelis