



*TALKING MY WAY  
THROUGH  
CULTURE*

*Dr Jill Smith*

*Curated by Peter Smith, OBE*

*Blue Orange Gallery*

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# Acknowledgements



Gallery Director - Stuart Dobson

Exhibition Curator – Peter Smith, OBE

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Photographer - Kerry-Ann Boyle

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[smith.j.p@xtra.co.nz](mailto:smith.j.p@xtra.co.nz)

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## Curator's perspective

A pervasive and significant dimension of Jill Smith's doctoral thesis was that we as human beings inhabiting our own cultural space will, affected by our inheritances and our life experiences, shape our conceptions of what constitutes art. Consciously and perhaps more substantially unconsciously we will have our rationales, our preferences, and what in others' eyes may be judged to be our prejudices. The plebeian may dismiss the western world's fine arts as élitist, often incomprehensible, and of little importance in their daily lives. The cognoscenti of the fine arts will dismiss and often despise the visual artefacts of the 'common' people as uncultured, trivial, and mere working objects of daily life. Working as she does in the fields of art education in New Zealand's predominantly Europeanised dispositions, Jill has become increasingly aware of the colonising both of our arts and our art education policies. Her research reveals that such attention as curricula may give to the arts of Māori, or to immigrant cultures, often remains patronising. We see 'our' arts as aesthetically superior to 'theirs'.

In this installation Jill seeks to transpose academic discourse into the territory of the visual arts. It is a brave enterprise. The art forms that are intended to reflect the theoretical substance may risk being seen as simply illustration, insufficient to carry the weight of an independent life. Or they may be construed as decoration. If so, the visual substance of the 'talking sticks' may only reinforce our views of what is worthwhile, and what is trivial and transitory. To avoid such risks requires that not only must the works have artistic quality and substance but must provide commentary and possess a contextual reference. Artistic quality is evident in the perceptive selection and ordering of the components, including textual references which are not so much explanations of the visual but are ingredients of it. The ordering of the component parts has been attended to systematically to ensure aesthetic consistency. These are not random collections of disparate parts.

The talking sticks may at first view be seductively attractive. Closer attention reveals that they make sharp and ironic commentary upon how we as individuals and social members make our judgements, affirm our values, and exhibit our inbuilt prejudices. In the talking stick *Why am I like I am?* Jill honestly recognises the specificity of her own inheritances, upbringing and career path, but notes that she may have been unconsciously a product of a more global and diverse environment. She, also, in such sticks as *The women's circle* and *Bottled Godzone* demonstrates a gentle affection for cultural manifestations of which she is a part.

As she notes in her statement Jill's research revealed that there are frequently gross generalisations made about culture, particularly about those other than 'our' own. There is, too, what she considers a questionable alliance made between ethnicity and culture. A particular and significant dimension of her research is that within both ethnic and societal commonalities there exist multiple cultural manifestations. Such talking sticks as *Ukulele lady: A tourist's guide to the South Pacific*, *Blonds have more fun – yeah right*, and *I'm not a Chinese takeaway!* expose unthinking assumptions, ignoring the rich diversity that exists within what we may generalise as a cultural sector. In taking this stance Jill is not patronising or judgemental. To be so would mean that she herself is adopting a superior role

which would align with the élitism she perceives within the so-called fine arts. Rather, she questions the validity of hierarchies of culture and art.

From a curatorial perspective the geometry of the display plays an important part. In her statement Jill defines the role and significance of talking sticks and talking stick circles. Within the gallery this dimension contributes a meaning which takes the sticks beyond individual works to generate a totality; the exhibition is essentially a cohesive installation. To repeat an old adage, 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. This is not to say that each stick does not demand individual attention. They are works in their own right.

This is a first solo exhibition for Jill Smith. She has always asserted that she is "an art educator first and foremost" and her *curriculum vitae* testifies to her national and international reputation in the fields of teacher education and art education research. A graduate of Elam School of Fine Arts, and qualifying with distinction in her teacher training year at Auckland Secondary Teacher's College, she was head of art department at Papatoetoe High School from 1969–1979. Following her appointment as Lecturer in Visual Arts at the Secondary Teacher's College, Auckland, she became Convener of secondary art and art history teacher education programmes, Auckland College of Education. She is currently Principal Lecturer in the School for Visual and Creative Arts in Education in the recently established Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland. Jill has contributed extensively to the development of national curriculum, assessment and moderation policy for secondary art and art history education. As testimony to her reputation in 2002 she received one of ten national inaugural *Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards* for Sustained Excellence in tertiary teaching.

This career grounding lies behind the shaping of this exhibition. A feature of Jill's teacher education programmes is her focus upon the connections between art, culture, policy, and curriculum. In 2001 she completed a Master of Education from the University of South Australia, Adelaide. The findings from her thesis, *Biculturalism: The relationship between education policy and art education practice in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand*, have been presented at numerous national and international conferences and published in a number of books and journals. This study, and her approach to supporting non-indigenous teachers working with indigenous knowledge, has been widely disseminated.

In 2007 Jill graduated as Doctor of Education from The University of Auckland. Her thesis, *Art education in New Zealand: Issues of culture, diversity and difference* was motivated by a sense of professional responsibility towards New Zealand's increasingly multicultural population, and by her analysis of the Ministry of Education's (2000) *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum*. That curriculum declares that "the arts and culture are inextricably interconnected" (p. 104) and that students' learning in the arts is to include "developing an understanding of art forms in relation to the tangata whenua, to biculturalism in New Zealand, and to the multicultural nature of our society and its traditions" (p. 7). Hers is a vigorous critique and was the prompt to explore the possibilities of re-presenting this academic research into the vehicle of visual presentation. This exhibition is the outcome. I see its value as not only encouraging viewers to look on at the works but also to look at their own perceptions of 'culture'.

Peter Smith, OBE

# Artist's statement 1: The conceptual framework

## The 'talking stick'

My decision to use the talking stick as a vehicle for artistic expression arose from a long-held interest in ngā rakau tu marae, the Māori ceremonial staffs of the marae. Different forms of talking staffs were, and continue to be, used by orators to indicate authority and mana and to make important announcements. According to Mead (1986), forms include the taiaha, a long staff or weapon; walking sticks, which are hooked staffs based on British forms; the rakau whakapapa, a genealogical staff used as a memory aid for the recitation of whakapapa; and tokotoko or rakau kōrero, talking sticks decorated with symbolic imagery, often with human figures arranged in the manner of a totem pole. Mead explained that some elders have several tokotoko to choose from whenever they go to a hui, that some sticks have been carved and gifted to orators, and that some are named and have been "passed down the male line to their present owners" (178). The importance to Māori of the tokotoko is documented in a number of paintings by C. F. Goldie, for example *The Calm, Close of Valour's Various Days: Te Aho-o-te Rangī, a Noted Warrior*, 1906, and *Thoughts of a Tohunga: Wharekauri Te Hana, a Chieftain of the Tuhoe Tribe*, 1938 (Blackley, 1997). At a modern hui, possession of a tokotoko signals that the owner is an orator, that he has authority to speak, and that the group with whom he appears "recognises tacitly his right to speak for them" (Mead, 1986: 178).

Talking sticks appear in other cultures and are used for various purposes. In Hawaii, the stick is called 'paoa', which means "talking from the tree" (LewAllen, 2006: 1). Australian Aboriginal people used 'message sticks' as a means of communication within neighboring groups (Matthews, 1897). These message sticks were made of pieces of wood of varying lengths and sizes and the ornamentation on them consisted of notches, dots, strokes and curves. The design, decoration, and detail of each stick depended on the artist who constructed it and on the tribe to which the stick belonged. According to Matthews, message sticks could be used for organising a corroboree (a ceremonial meeting), conveying messages or reminders between friends, planning festive gatherings, making announcements in cases of sickness or death, and summoning a gathering for hostile purposes. The *Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival*, held annually in Sydney, attests to the continuing significance of this communication medium.

The talking sticks of the Northwest Coast First Nations peoples have many functions. As well as being a prayer stick, as a representation of the property to be given away during the Potlatch ceremony, and as a Gwispeck staff carried by the herald who went from house to house to invite people to events, it is used to manage the conversation in informal and formal meetings (Grimes, Kramer & Hill, 1996). The talking stick is regarded as a respectful way to give each person the opportunity to speak, uninterrupted. When the leader of the meeting, usually a chief, finishes speaking the stick is passed to the next person, and no one speaker talks too long for fear of upsetting the spirits in the stick. Sometimes, members bring their own talking sticks. The imagery on Native American talking sticks differs from the imagery on the Māori tokotoko (which emphasises the

human head or figure) in that it usually includes symbolic items of nature. Hence, a wide range of sacred animals, among them ravens, bears, eagles, salmon, and whales are depicted. Decorative elements often comprise feathers, leather, beads, fur, bone, and shells. The head of a talking stick in my collection, carved by Peter Charlie (a member of the Salish Nation of Northwest Coast Native people) [see sketch below], features the raven which symbolises creation, knowledge, and the Bringer of the Light. A snake, symbolic of the life force, is entwined on the body of the stick. The *Talking Stick Festival: A Kaleidoscope of Aboriginal Art and Expression*, held in Vancouver in 2005, 2006 and 2007, reinforces the significance of the talking stick for these indigenous people.

### **The 'talking stick circle'**

The concept of the talking stick circle, an ancient tool for improving decision making and strengthening communities, is used for the presentation of my talking sticks. The talking stick circle is regarded by the First Nations people as a key symbol for understanding life's mysteries, since much of nature in the physical world is circular. The circle has also been described by Baldwin (1994: 1) as "a mechanism of self-empowerment in which the leadership rotates, responsibility is shared, and the group relies on Spirit to hold and focus energy". Within the New Zealand context, Metge (2001) has developed a procedure, drawn from tikanga Māori, for talking together (tahi kōrero) and for managing group discussion in settings where Māori and non-Māori from differing ethnic backgrounds meet to talk about common concerns.

### **My re-conceptualisation**

My talking sticks do not replicate or appropriate the forms and cultural significance of the tokotoko of Māori, nor the talking sticks of other indigenous peoples. Rather, I have drawn upon the concept of the talking stick and re-conceptualised it so that the talking sticks themselves have a 'voice'. The sticks in my exhibition thus 'speak' of differing interpretations of art and culture and their significance for art education. The concept of the talking stick circle is also re-conceptualised. Rather than being passed around the circle my sticks are mounted on pedestals (to make the 'reading' of them more accessible to the viewer) and are positioned in a circle within sub-sets of cultural frameworks. The sticks can be selected by speakers to convey messages, raise issues, advance an argument, or mount a challenge.



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## Acknowledgements

My first experience of a First nations people's talking stick was in 2004 when I was invited by Professor Graeme Chalmers, then David Lam Chair in Multicultural Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, to present a public lecture, 'Biculturalism and multiculturalism in visual arts education in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Pākehā perspective'. Following my welcome into the Longhouse 'Sty-Wet-Tan' by its Director, Dr Richard Veden, he laid his personal talking stick upon the lectern to support me during my presentation. This moving gesture ignited my interest in exploring the talking sticks of differing cultures.

My husband Peter Smith played a critical role in physically shaping a number of the talking sticks and in providing technical support. His experience as a fine craftsman, as well as art educator, artist, and writer enabled him to understand the design specifications and conceptual drawings with which he was presented. Without Peter's support and assistance this exhibition would not have been possible.

Kerry-Ann Boyle, a former student in my pre-service teacher education course in visual arts, generously gave of her time to photograph me and the talking sticks for the exhibition catalogue.



## The 'talking sticks'

Text	Titles	Images
p. 10	<b><i>The ultimate cultural icon</i></b> - timber, acrylic paint, slide transparency mounts, archival photographic paper, 1240 x 55mm	p. 25
p. 12	<b><i>The 'best' and the 'rest'</i></b> - timber, archival photographic paper, lace, ribbon, muka, braid, beads, 1240 x 45mm	p. 26
p. 13	<b><i>The women's circle</i></b> - acrylic tubing, timber, aluminium, archival photographic paper, fragments of knitting, embroidery, beading, quilting, 1300 x 70mm	p. 27
p. 14	<b><i>Bottled Godzone</i></b> - acrylic tubing, cork, tourist paraphernalia, 1230 x 80mm	p. 28
p. 14	<b><i>Hands on the land</i></b> - totora fence batten, archival photographic paper, 1150 x 65mm	p. 29
p. 15	<b><i>The power of black: New Zealand made</i></b> - dowel, acrylic paint, archival photographic paper, paper, transparency film, 1240 x 40mm	p. 30
p. 15	<b><i>Ukulele lady: A tourist's guide to the South Pacific</i></b> - doll, baluster, archival photographic paper, kete, shells, beads, lei, 1220 x 45mm	p. 31
p. 15	<b><i>Blonds have more fun – yeah right</i></b> - doll, baluster, archival photographic paper, bling, lace, silk flowers, beads, ribbon, fur, sequins, 1240 x 45mm	p. 32
p. 15	<b><i>I'm not a Chinese takeaway!</i></b> - Chinese New Year Barbie doll, baluster, archival photographic paper, chopsticks, braid, lace, tassels, 1170 x 45mm	p. 33
p. 16	<b><i>Gendering identity: Reigning cats and dogs</i></b> - timber, acrylic paint, archival photographic paper, cat and dog collars, 1240 x 50mm	p. 34
p. 18	<b><i>Why am I like I am?</i></b> - Timber, archival photographic paper, paper, 1240 x 45mm	p. 35
p. 19	<b><i>The young consume visual culture: Visual culture consumes the young</i></b> - compact disks and cases, archival photographic paper, transparency film, acrylic rod, timber, 1200 x 90mm	p. 36
p. 19	<b><i>Technology has seized control of culture!</i></b> - acrylic tubing, acrylic sheet, electrical wiring, globe, compact discs, circuit boards, bicycle safety lights, 1300 x 90mm	p. 37
p. 21	<b><i>Ethnically classified... but culturally different</i></b> - dowel, archival photographic paper, binding, globe, 1350 x 50mm	p. 38

## Artist's statement 2: The relationship between theory, art practice, and art education

My art works were inspired by a number of interpretations of culture that are significant for the pedagogical practices of art teachers working with students in a culturally diverse society. Employing the metaphor, 'talking my way through culture', I used the talking sticks as a tool to reinforce and challenge perceptions about the relationship between art, culture, and education. The intention, also, was to show that the 'voice' of art works can be a creative means of re-interpreting and re-presenting research.

### **Interpretations of culture which influenced the art works**

- **Culture of the western aesthetic**

The belief in culture as an essential quality of a civilized person became widespread during the Enlightenment, a phase in cultural history that emerged during the seventeenth century and reached its height in late eighteenth century Europe. When the writers, philosophers, and scientists of the eighteenth century referred to their period as "the Enlightenment", they meant that they were breaking from the past and replacing the obscurity, darkness, and ignorance of previous European thinking with the 'light' of truth (Hooker, 1996). This philosophical movement encouraged people to apply human reason to religious, political, economic and societal issues. It was thought that rational consideration of such problems would lead to progress, with society moving gradually towards perfection. Nineteenth century cultural theorist Arnold (1882) described culture as having its origin, not in mere curiosity, but in a love of 'perfection'. Contrasting culture with social chaos and anarchy, Arnold advocated for culture as a pursuit of human perfection through the acquisition of excellent 'taste' arising from intellectual development. Culture thus became linked with social cultivation and the progressive refinement of human behaviour. Pursuing cultural activities was one way in which admirable human beings could be cultivated.

The idea of culture as a hallmark of a civilized person remains a characteristic of modernism, a term which covers a variety of political, cultural, and artistic movements rooted in the changes in western society at the end of the nineteenth century. Deriving from the rationalist epistemology of western Enlightenment, modernist concepts emerged in France, from the 1880s, where forward-looking artists, thinkers, and writers embraced science, logic, perfection, and especially progress, in order to escape previous academic and historical styles (Levenson, 1999). This was based on the assumption that what is new is a progressive reform of past practices. The modernist interpretation of culture promoted theories of 'high art' criticism and aesthetics which were inaccessible to all but a few (Clark, 1996). Culture in the European world was, in these terms, associated with elite notions of art and aesthetics. Cultured people knew about and took part in pursuits such as ballet, classical music, drama, literature, and the fine arts. The latter, defined by Tulloch (1997: 556) as "those appealing to

the mind or to the sense of beauty ... or which appealed to taste", comprised a limited number of visual arts forms. Painting, sculpture, and printmaking were included, but not photography or design. These fine arts forms, which became an integral part of the western 'canon' (a canon of books, music, and art that is thought to have been highly influential in shaping western culture), remain an enduring dimension of modernist culture. The canon lists works considered to have the greatest literary and artistic merit. It is a canon which holds that the "best art in the world has been produced by Europeans ... men ... and ... individual geniuses" (Chalmers, 1999: 173), although the majority of figures considered significant are described by critics as mostly Dead White European Males (DWEM).

- 1 My talking stick, ***The ultimate cultural icon***, features eighty re-presentations of the *Mona Lisa* by the "individual genius", Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519).<sup>1</sup> This painting was selected to illustrate a supreme example of high culture, High Renaissance perfection, and the western art canon. Immortalised in its high-security frame in the Louvre Museum, the *Mona Lisa* has been canonised in art and art historical discourse and held up by art historians, theorists, critics, and the public at large, as the ultimate cultural icon. The head of my talking stick is topped by an image of the attested 'original' painting by Leonardo, below which are four paintings claimed to be the original (see Storey, 1980). My use of the slide mounts on the stick parodies the 'projection' of the *Mona Lisa* image in a multiplicity of art, cultural, and educational contexts. As an artistic device, the slide mounts reinforce the ways in which this most famous of art works has 'captured' the imagination of other creators. Their re-presented images are, in turn, captured and projected.

In my thesis I postulated that examples of western art, and their European cultural contexts, continue to pervade art (and art history) education in New Zealand secondary schools. *The ultimate cultural icon* draws attention to a continued reverence for the high art of the western aesthetic. It seeks to challenge educationalists to consider how the western art canon, predominantly the products of DWEM, resonates with the lives of young people. It is designed to provoke teachers to examine the arts curriculum and the pedagogical practices they adopt with students living in a contemporary multiculturalised society and globalised world.

- **'High culture' versus 'low culture'**

An examination of the literature on art and culture of the western aesthetic, which emphasises the difference between high culture and low culture, provided a rich source of ideas for a number of my talking sticks. Classified as 'high culture', the fine arts and other élitist cultural activities were elevated above forms of low culture. 'Low culture' has been described as those cultural elements that prevail in any given society and that result from ordinary peoples' daily interactions, needs and desires, and from the

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of images on this talking stick were drawn from my extensive collection of *Mona Lisa* paraphernalia, much of it gifted by family, students, colleagues, and friends. For example, the corrugated iron *Mona Lisa* was given to me by former student and artist, Jeff Thomson, and *Moana Lisa* is a cherished gift from Māori artist and friend, Fred Graham.

cultural moments that make up the everyday lives of the mainstream population (Bullivant, 1993; Efland, Freedman & Stuhr, 1996). Designated as 'popular culture', or the culture of the people, its forms find expression through the mass circulation and consumption of technologically-driven mass-produced products such as calendars, postcards, tea-towels, ornaments, and other forms of memorabilia. Representations of well-known items or icons, another source of popular culture, are disseminated in a world of cultural fluidity by the media, corporations, and advertising. McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood and Park (2003: 452) have argued that the realm of the popular "drives and is driven by national (and nationalistic) identities and significations". The kiwi bird, black singlet, plastic tiki, and buzzy-bee are construed as unmistakable icons of New Zealand culture, just as the kangaroo and koala are connected with Australia and the panda with China. These forms of popular culture are considered by the art élite to be nostalgic, romantic, sentimental, entertaining, decorative, patriotic, or 'cute'. Set against the norms of the western aesthetic, popular culture is abhorred for its tendency to endorse a limited experience of life through 'common', unsophisticated feelings and attitudes and for an emphasis on the banal, the superficial, the capricious, and the disposable. On the other hand, McCarthy *et al* are among those who claimed that popular culture provides greater insight into "the tensions and contradictions of contemporary society by observing and interpreting popular culture ... than by analyzing canonical texts" (453). They argued that "the popular arena is perhaps the clearest window into the contextual specifications of ... life" (ibid).

Folk art is also excluded from the modernist, hierarchical, western cultural hegemony (Efland *et al*, 1996; Chalmers, 1999). Dismissed as naïve, unsophisticated, or primitive, folk art is considered static, unchanging, and rooted only in the past. However, proponents Congdon and Blandy (1999) maintained that folklore, the study of traditional aspects of culture, has long recognised the dynamic aspects of cultural traditions; that folk art is usually intended to be used in everyday life among members of small, close groups; that it displays cultural symbology known to a specific group; and that it frequently functions as a remembrance of the past or a demonstration of respect for ancestors or older adults. In their view, the folkloric creator is simply using a different language from the art-school-trained artist.

A further exclusion from high culture is craft. Historically the work of women (see Wayland Garber, 1995), craft has been omitted from a hierarchy of fine arts that reinforces the values and beliefs of the powerful, and suppresses the experiences of others. While the inception of the feminist art movement in the early 1970s has brought about a commitment by feminist artists and art historians to break down this historically-determined hierarchy, the aesthetic qualities of craft remain largely overlooked or celebrated. Parker's (1986) description of embroidery, as both a site of construction of the feminine, which also allows for creativity and pleasure, and as a resistance against such constructions, encapsulates the conflicting ideological strains of aesthetics, expressive outlet, and repressed femininity. The west tends also to overlook crafts created in non-western countries. Herald (1992), for example, argued that while

westerners admire, import, and even take inspiration from these craft objects they also undervalue them because they are both anonymous and inexpensive.

Exclusive and dominating discourses of modernity also classified the cultural forms of indigenous and non-western peoples as inferior in aesthetics and value when compared with European fine art. 'Primitive' or 'savage art' was patronisingly viewed as quaint. Its very existence was largely ignored in school curricula and, in the case of New Zealand the art of the Māori was despoiled by some of the early missionaries who saw it as idolatrous. Zerffi (1876), an instructor at Britain's South Kensington (a system of art education imported to the colonies, see Smith, 2007), referred to Māori and Pacific Islanders as 'Oceanic Negroes': "He never goes beyond geometric ornamentation ... His reasoning faculty is very limited, his imagination slow ... He cannot create beauty, for he is indifferent to any ideal conception" (23-24). In contrast, Zerffi maintained:

To him (the white man) exclusively we owe art in its highest sense ... He surpasses the other ... groups of humanity, not only in technical skill, but especially in inventive and reasoning power, critical discernment, and purity of artistic taste. The white man, alone, has produced idealized masterpieces in sculpture and painting (26).

Over a century later similar attitudes were expressed by United States art educator, Smith (2006), who argued that while the history of art engenders an appreciation of difference and contributes to cultural literacy, it is western art history that provides an undeniable record of artistic accomplishment. For him, "historical creative moments ... make us proud of our equivocal humanity" (120). Issues of exclusion and marginalisation were an important dimension of my research and led to the conceptualisation of the pivotal talking stick in the exhibition.

- 2 Placed in the centre of the circle, ***The 'best' and the 'rest'*** is a double-ended talking stick presented in a horizontal position. The two ends of the stick, separated by a handle, are painted in a cultural stereotype of 'white' and 'black' to denote the dominance of high culture (white/good) and low culture (black/bad). This distinction is further reinforced by the white classical temple, illustrative of the 'best', and the black whare (Māori meeting house), representative of the 'rest'. On both shafts of the talking stick five bands of indicative images are separated by divisions of selective 'linear' media which parody cultural lineage. Each band of images is supported by a passage of text extrapolated from my thesis. Thus, the 'rest' comments upon the marginalised forms of tribal art, folk art, the decorative arts, the popular arts, and the craft work of women. Conversely, the 'best' features predominantly the work of male artists. Here, images and text draw attention to the art works of classical antiquity, the Middle Ages and Christianity, the Renaissance, modernist art of the nineteenth century, and critically acclaimed works of the twentieth century, mostly by male artists. This double-ended talking stick can be held horizontally by a speaker to demonstrate belief in a conception of culture in which the 'rest' of art is as important as the so-called 'best'. To turn either end of the stick to an upward position is to express a preference, advance an argument, or engender debate.

**3** The literature consulted for my research was dominated by the colonizing traditional views of European male authors. The emphasis given in and through art to the voices of male artists is thus countered in the talking stick, *The women's circle*. The clear acrylic tube provides a 'window' into the significance and pleasure of the lace-making, quilting, beading, sewing, knitting, and embroidery circles of women. Positioned on the exterior and within the tube, six circular bands of text and images celebrate female creative output. Contained within the stick are fragments (memories) of my own embroidery, knitting, and patchwork quilting with which I adorned myself during my time as a secondary school art teacher in the 1970s.

- **Material culture as cultural signification**

Material cultural objects or artefacts are frequently used as identifiers or manifestations of a culture. In this third interpretation of culture, focus is upon the material culture of objects created or modified by humans, which derive from the culture's norms and values. These objects may have their sources in extinct human cultures which disclose something of the way in which people once lived, or they may be manifestations of living cultures. Stott's (1987) anthropological approach to material culture was to examine the object itself, its context, and the process of the object's manufacture to determine its functions, meanings, and aesthetic qualities. In comparison, Dant's (2004) interest lay in the impact that material objects have on contemporary life. Dant challenged the well-established idea that consumerism is the principal relationship that we have with material objects in our lives. He argued that it is through physical interaction with the objects around us that we confront our society. Similarly, Hodder (2003: 159) claimed that artefacts are "not simply a passive by-product of life ... that material culture is active". Although artefacts may be regarded as a form of silent or muted discourse, Hodder argued that they can represent the intentional, if covert, exercise of power to limit or remove individual resistance. In his view, artefacts are produced "so as to transform, materially, socially, and ideologically" (ibid).

A number of art education theorists held the view that the field, at least in western nations, has been bedevilled by this conception of culture (Efland *et al*, 1996; Chalmers, 1999). On the one hand, these authors identified a problem, originating in the western view of a single and pre-eminent culture, of the dominant use of European artefacts within the fine arts as signifiers of a culture. On the other hand, they maintained that this view of western superiority gives rise not only to the assumption that indigenous peoples are inferior species, but also to the belief that their cultures, artefacts, languages, and ways of life are culturally insignificant. Chalmers (1995: 113-116), for example, cited instances in which the artefacts of the Northwest Coast First Nations Peoples in North America were considered "objects of ethnological interest" or a "quaint variant of 'real' art". This implied that cultural artefacts can be looked at with curiosity, but without knowledge and understanding. Parallels exist in New Zealand where Māori artefacts, referred to as tribal art rather than understood as taonga (cultural treasures), are held up as signifiers of the Māori culture or even the wider New Zealand culture.

- 4 The talking stick, ***Bottled Godzone***, contains cultural objects and artefacts bottled in clear acrylic tubing. Kiwis, plastic tikis, rugby balls, sheep, buzzy-bees, jandals, kete, paua shell, Māori dolls, the silver fern, and other items of 'New Zealand' paraphernalia are presented as identifiers of 'New Zealand culture'. Anchored in place by a cork, these iconic manifestations of life in Godzone, many of them plundered from key-rings and tourist outlets, are also employed as active signifiers of souvenir consumerism.
- 5 A further challenge to the perception of material culture as cultural signification is the talking stick, ***Hands on the land***. Images of 'New Zealand' landscape are framed within carved niches on an old, lichen-covered, half-round totora fence batten. Dating from the 1840s to the present day these images signify both the 'managed' and the 'imagined' land. They speak of the culture of New Zealand, from its colonizing practices of propagandist paintings to attract immigrants, and the response of settlers to the new land (albeit painted in the Romantic landscape style imported to the colony from the Mother Country); the breaking in and destruction of the land both in the interests of survival and economic potential; the response of its first generation of home-grown artists; and the subsequent expression of successive generations of New Zealand-born artists. On one level, this talking stick provides a 'snapshot' of the history of landscape painting in this country. On another, it questions superficial material representations of New Zealand culture. Together with *Bottled Godzone*, this stick questions curriculum and pedagogical practices that persist in treating material culture as passive by-products of life. Both challenge art educators to address how active manifestations of material culture can impact upon and be used to confront contemporary society.

- **Symbolic forms as conveyors of culture**

A view of culture that holds symbols to be both the practices of people, and the context that gives such practices meaning, was a fourth conception interrogated in the research and in the exhibition. In this model, Geertz (1973), a champion of 'symbolic anthropology', saw culture as an organised collection of symbolic systems in which people's cultural behaviours are based on the meanings of signs and symbols that sustain their social life. In declaring that "man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun", Geertz took culture to be those webs (5). Arguing that without people there can be no culture, and more significantly, that without culture there can be no people, Geertz asserted that "man is not just the producer of culture, but, in a specifically biological sense, its product" (26). Further, he believed that each culture is unique and can only be understood in a culturally relative way. Consequently, there cannot be a universal epistemology or science of human motivation common across different cultures. In this conception of culture, primacy is given to the role of symbolic forms such as words, images, and behaviours that are seen as guiding how people represent themselves to themselves, and to one another. Culture is seen as 'text', a construction of symbolic signs. Commenting on the legacy of Geertz, Cohen (1985: 18) wrote of the "symbolic gloss" that allows people in society to use common symbols, which he defined as "things standing for other things", to communicate and understand each other while still imbuing these symbols with personal

significance and meanings. Cohen stressed the relational aspect of a community, by which symbols and their enactment in ritual mark the community in relation to other communities. In this conception of what Cohen called 'personhood', symbols make culture possible, reproducible, and readable.

- 6 My talking stick, ***The power of black: New Zealand made***, illustrates the dominance of 'black' in politics, sport, literature, and artistic expressions in this country. This stick speaks of the powerful use of protest art and political proclamations by contemporary Māori artists and writers (see Smith, 1992). It encapsulates the "symbolic gloss" of manifestations which instil community and national pride through promotion of sporting heroes, New Zealand teams, and symbolic identifiers (black caps, black socks, black singlets, the black boat, and the 'Black Grace' dance company, to name but a few) that speak of New Zealand culture.

It has also been argued that the concept of the 'self', as it has been understood in the west (the interest of the self as an individual), is very different from the sense of personhood in non-western cultures. Smith (2006: 167), for example, referred to the latter as "alternative cultures". He suggested that an inseparable link can exist between art and life in non-western cultures because of the more cohesive sameness of people in those cultures. This notion of "life approximating art" (168) implied that, for Smith, Geertz's theory of cultural relativity manifested through symbolic systems was more applicable to non-western cultures. A non-western conception of culture and symbols, framed in terms of culture-as-symbols, is implied in the arts curriculum. While students are encouraged to study "ritual, motif, and symbol from a variety of cultures" (MoE, 2000: 78), it is possible that a limited perception of culture, which does not extend beyond the superficial use of motifs or symbols, could be considered adequate.

- 7 The talking stick, ***Ukulele lady: A tourist's guide to the South Pacific*** illustrates the cultural stereotyping that results from the superficial use of symbolic forms as conveyors of culture. A doll of indeterminate Pasifika ethnicity (purchased from the Two-Dollar-Shop) crowns this stick. 'Pacific' words, images and motifs are presented as a guide to the symbolic representation of the happy-in-a-Pacific-paradise, ukulele-playing, lei-adorned hula girl.
- 8 Presented alongside *Ukulele lady* is another talking stick which challenges cultural stereotyping. Also crowned by a two-dollar-shop doll, the shaft of ***Blonds have more fun – yeah right*** features photographs of famous blonds with glamorous facades and sad lives, and provocative soft porn images, mostly by male artists, of semi-clad nudes. This stick, which is further adorned with the trappings of glitz and glam, comments upon perceptions of the culture of the 'blond'.
- 9 A third talking stick in this sub-set, ***I'm not a Chinese takeaway!*** is crowned by a Chinese New Year Barbie doll reconfigured from the long-legged, pouting stereotype of the original American Barbie. Accompanied by images of beautiful women of unspecified Asian ethnicity, clamped between



chopsticks, this stick speaks, similarly, of the co-modification of the bodies of individuals, as well as those of culturally-specific groups, as a resource for pleasure. Each talking stick in this sub-set draws attention to the perpetuation of cultural stereotyping which results from generalising and simplifying other's complex identities (hooks, 1992). Each calls for transformative practices in art education which consciously work against racism and exclusion in all its forms.<sup>2</sup>

- **Culture framed as identity**

A fifth conception of culture, framed in terms of 'identity', connected with this research and its re-representation in art. Drawn from discourses on identity formation, which suggest how culture and identity are linked, the term 'identity' has been used in many ways to emphasise different facets of how humans define themselves. For example, Erikson's (1975) psychosocial theory of social development encompasses a life cycle of eight stages and recognises the impact of society, history and, in particular, culture on personality. Drawing on Erikson's theories, Côté (1996: 420) differentiated between social identity, which designates a person's position in a social structure, personal identity, which denotes the more "concrete aspects" of individual experience rooted in interactions and institutions, and ego identity, which refers to the more "subjective" characteristics of an individual's personality. An alternative model was articulated by Kumar (2000) whose concern was to differentiate between identity and 'self'. Kumar referred to self as the acquisition by an individual of the social values that allow him or her to operate in multiple ways within a social construct and to fit and behave within different cultural contexts. However, there is a limitation to framing culture in terms of individuality in that a person's cultural identity is affected by factors of race, religion, age, economic status, geographic location, gender, sexual orientation, language, and political affiliation. It is also affected by the position the individual takes with regard to each of these factors, and by what an individual chooses to privilege.

- 10 In my exhibition the concept of identity was framed not within the ways that humans define themselves, but how art is used to privilege identity. ***Gendering identity: Reigning cats and dogs*** speaks of the ways in which women and men are represented 'differently' in art works. The history of art is abundant with images of people portrayed with animals, in particular cats and dogs. A feature of the great majority of the images of women with cats is that neither the female nor the feline is identified by name. On the other hand, men and their canine companions are usually named. Thus on this two-part, three-sided talking stick, images are presented as Female/Feline/Not Identified and Male/Canine/Identified. Positioned within gendered settings of pink and blue, and framed by cat and dog collars, these images call attention to what artists and society choose to privilege. They demand a re-examination of the assumptions that may

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<sup>2</sup> This talking stick was in part inspired by the digital prints of Ellen Hsu (2005) which comment upon cultural stereotyping. Ellen, a former student in my teacher education art programme in 2006, generously gave me permission to include 'cultural segments' from her images.

prevail by teachers, students, and society about taken-for-granted interpretations of art.

- **Race and ethnicity as definers of culture**

As a term, 'race' has a much longer history than ethnicity, having been used from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries in the "categorisation and classification of species (primarily plants and animals), based on their physical characteristics and traits" (Adams, Clark, O'Neill, Openshaw & Waitere-Ang, 2000: 85). By the nineteenth century, physically different human groups were being classified into races, for example, Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid. As a consequence of this linking of the concepts of race and biology to culture, the term 'race' attracted negative connotations. In the 1960s, the term 'ethnicity' became widely used as an alternative and more acceptable word for culturally different groups (Adams *et al*, 2000). While acknowledging the difficulty of defining ethnicity or an ethnic group, these authors condensed the components of various definitions to include:

[S]ome combination of a *distinctive* and *shared: cultural* heritage (for example, common language, food, music and religion); *ancestral* heritage (for example, ancestry, national origin, entry by birth and bloodlines...; *physical* heritage (for example, common physical characteristics...; and sense of *group identity* and *belongingness* (often termed 'peoplehood') (88, original emphasis).

For Adams *et al*, these four areas, in some combination, "comprise the *ethnic markers* and delineate the *ethnic boundaries* of the group" (ibid), although they conceded that such a conglomerate definition does not sufficiently deal with the proliferation of cultural diversity. May (1999: 12) warned, however, that ethnic descriptors can be "disguised" as cultural definitions. As such, they can be used as blanket categorisations, often of ethnic minorities, who are seen as being of one culture. In May's words, "new racisms can be portrayed as a form of *ethnicism*" (ibid, original emphasis) (see also, Rata, 2003).

My analysis of New Zealand curriculum documents, and the findings of my research, showed that in both policy and practice culture is thought of primarily in terms of ethnicity (Smith, 2007). The question of how to avoid confirming the concept of ethnicity as "a set of fixed cultural properties" was raised by May (1999: 27). He suggested that Bourdieu's notion of habitus was a way of addressing the "recognition of power relations in the structuring of ethnic and cultural identities" (ibid). Bourdieu (1990: 59), himself, described habitus as "a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings". Those dispositions exist within, and arise out of, the conditioning that a person's social and cultural experiences engender. Bourdieu saw habitus not as an ideology, but as a tangible actuality which members of a group acquire, move within, and alter. For him, habitus embraces all the social and cultural experiences that shape an individual as a person. In this interpretation of culture, habitus inherits and generates histories that will persist after the original conditions from which they arose have disappeared. In this sense, members of a social group can inherit, as much sub-consciously as consciously, elements of a social and cultural past even when they live in the different present. Habitus is not static. Rather, it is responsive to changing economic, technological, and

political conditions. Although habitus exists within a climate of conformity, individual dispositions permit singularity and difference. In this sense, habitus does not deny the importance of, for example, ethnic traditions and histories, but recognises that they are likely to be contributory to new regimes of culture. To attempt to return to the historic condition, as a model for contemporary living, would be to challenge the inevitability of change.

- 11** The most personal talking stick, *Why am I like I am?* speaks both of my ethnicity and elements of my habitus. The head of the stick announces the framework for my cultural opus and invites viewers to look in the mirror and consider theirs. The top part of the stick presents images which comprise the 'ethnic markers' (Adams *et al*, 2000) of my ethnicity – my distinctive and shared cultural, ancestral, and physical heritage and the sense of group identity and belongingness born of being one of identical triplets (the "we three" of Jill, Judith and Joy). The lower part of the stick speaks of other aspects of my habitus – those social and cultural experiences that have shaped me individually as a person. These images encapsulate a selection from the cultural moments of my inherited social and cultural past even when I live in a different present.

In my thesis I argued that while the majority of the art teachers observed in the study were respectful of the ethnicities of the students themselves in their classrooms, all thought simplistically of culture in terms of race or ethnic categorisation. This talking stick challenges art educators to acquire greater cultural knowledge and awareness of the individual differences of students within their cultures, and to implement culturally inclusive pedagogies that permit the individuality of each student's 'voice' to be heard.

- **Effects of globalisation on culture**

The effect of globalisation on culture – and on art and art education - was a seventh interpretation which resonated with my research. While globalisation is not a new phenomenon, the effects of the multiple ties and interactions that link people across the borders of nation-states are altering conceptions of culture, identity, and nation. National or ethnic groups and cultures are becoming increasingly entangled, irrespective of their origins or group identities (Kennedy & Roudometof, 2002). It has been argued that the new nation-state comprises a progressively hybridised population, where "practices of identity construction are no longer bound by physical borders" (McCarthy *et al*, 2003: 451). It has been suggested that neither prevailing cultures nor arriving cultures can sustain independent identity, despite their efforts to do so (Chalmers, 2002). Conversely, globalisation and transnationalism have been seen to lead to increased recognition of the importance of ethnic, national, and cultural diversity. Stephenson, Rio, Anderson and Millward (2004: 1), for example, argued that the dynamics and contradictions of the dual process of cultural convergence and cultural fragmentation are played out daily, as "indigenous, colonizer, and migrant populations interconnect". For these authors, global trends impact on cultures at two fundamental levels. As groups that are brought together in the process accommodate new ideas, knowledge, and experiences, at the

same time their deeply embedded and previously taken-for-granted norms, values, and beliefs tend to become reaffirmed and practised with a conscious deliberation.

- 12** The global transformation of culture raised complex questions for my research as to what can today be labelled the 'art' of art education. As members of society, we are dependent on visual images and artefacts to help us make decisions ranging from what we wear to what we watch (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). This persuasive popular culture no longer permits us to ignore its cultural impact, international in extent, even if reinterpreted locally (McCarthy *et al*, 2003). Those sustaining this view have argued that art education must change in order to encompass a broader range of visual arts, popular arts, global virtual culture, and the forms of visual culture that surround and shape people's daily lives. This viewpoint is expressed in another work in the exhibition – ***The young consume visual culture: Visual culture consumes the young***. The aim of this talking stick is to urge art educators to give consideration to critical aspects of social theory and to the effects of visual culture on cultural identities, positioned within their contemporary, socio-cultural contexts (Duncum, 2001; Freedman, 2003; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004).
- 13** The effects of globalisation and transnationalism on art align with the rapid development of technology, itself a 'third culture' that has joined the cultures of the sciences and humanities (Kelly, 1998). Kelly's assertion that a "culture of youth" has emerged, and that culture is now controlled by technology, is reinforced by the technological practices employed (1993). Considered to be the aesthetic and creative tools of the future, these practices favour flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to cultural regimes. My talking stick, ***Technology has seized control of culture!*** articulates how technologically-conveyed messages, under the influence of consumerism and capital accumulation, now permeate people's daily lives. Technological representations of communication are thus suspended in a time-capsule of acrylic tubing. Metaphorically 'wired around the globe', and caught in a relentless beam of pulsating light, these devices reference the 'techno-speak' of mapping expressions, encoding experience as data, digital processing, numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, trans-coding, gesture-based input, and the multi-touch interface, to name but a few.

This stick encapsulates Grierson's (2001) warning to art educators of the danger faced when knowledge is produced and furthered primarily through the instrument of technological advancement. Her argument, that technology is "touted politically as ahistorical and apolitical, neutral, [just] as rationalized governmentality is touted as neutral in policy formations" (15), demands close scrutiny. Grierson maintained that in these formations cultural analysis, which may be a compelling and potent vehicle in art education, is left out of the frame.

- **Cultural diversity and cultural difference**

The politics and practices of art education, framed within understandings of culture, diversity and difference, were the prime foci of my research and

the source of inspiration for the final talking stick. In the literature which underpinned my study polarised views were expressed by those who argued that cultural diversity lies at the very core of a multicultural perspective (Kalantzis & Cope, 1999; Nieto, 2004), and by those who considered this notion untenable (Barry, 2001; Boyd, 1996). Kalantzis and Cope (1999: 247), for example, considered that attention to cultural diversity, framed within the paradigm of critical multiculturalism, was essential for bringing about "the increasing interrelation of differences". Bhabba (1995), however, called attention to the interchangeable use of the terms 'diversity' and 'difference'. Drawing a distinction between the two, he said:

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object - culture as an object of empirical knowledge - whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as *knowledgeable*, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification (34, original emphasis).

For Bhabba, the term cultural diversity positions culture as static, totalized and historically bounded; as something to be valued but not necessarily lived. He considered that the term implies the 'other'; some constructed and bounded identification that can be generalised, as occurred in 1970s multicultural ideologies. Bhabba argued that cultural difference, on the other hand, involves a dynamic conception of culture, one that recognises and incorporates its own ongoing fluidity and constant change. What needs to be challenged, using the concept of difference, are assumed and generalised norms that conceal the variables and hybridities. Bhabba saw the dichotomy of empowered/disempowered (we/they) interpretation of cultural identity as not only insufficient and deficient, but also dangerous, in that it sustains hegemonies of power under the cloak of enlightened rationalism. For Bhabba, cultural difference "demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present" ... but "becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (7). He concluded that:

The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization ... where adding *to* does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification (162, original emphasis).

*The arts in the New Zealand curriculum* (MoE, 2000) stresses the need for teachers to respond to the cultural diversity of their students. In her critique of the curriculum, Mansfield (2000: 308) argued that when the representation of art is promulgated within the formalist and expressive western aesthetic, rather than through a politics of difference, it operates as "an ideology which works to dispossess art of its meaning, to 'sanitise' the aesthetic, conditioning students' orientation to art". The result, she claimed, is "cultural neutrality" in curriculum (306). Similarly, Grierson (2003) argued that the construction of knowledge, which is neither neutral nor ahistorical, must be contextualised to reflect and engage with conditions of contemporary society, and must include the worlds of students. This, she said, would "open pedagogical procedures to new discoveries and innovative practices that may engage the politics of representation in wider fields of visual culture" (97-98). Grierson's

emphasis was upon replacing the modernist focus on identity with a postmodernist focus on difference.

- 14** The final talking is titled ***Ethnically classified... but culturally different***. A globe, representative of the peoples of the world, sits atop a circular stick. The length of its shaft features the cut-out faces of people 'bound' together in concentric bands. These people – among them members of the families of my husband Peter, my sister Joy (Azlina) and her Malay husband, my sister Judith and her Vietnamese husband, my brother Bryan, our parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and my closest friends – are bound together by ethnic classification. Each person is, however, culturally different. This talking stick challenges educators to not only "recognise the diversity of individual students within particular cultures" (MoE, 2000: 104), but to avoid 'sameness' in their pedagogical approaches by taking account of the individual 'differences' of students from diverse cultures living in a contemporary globalised world.

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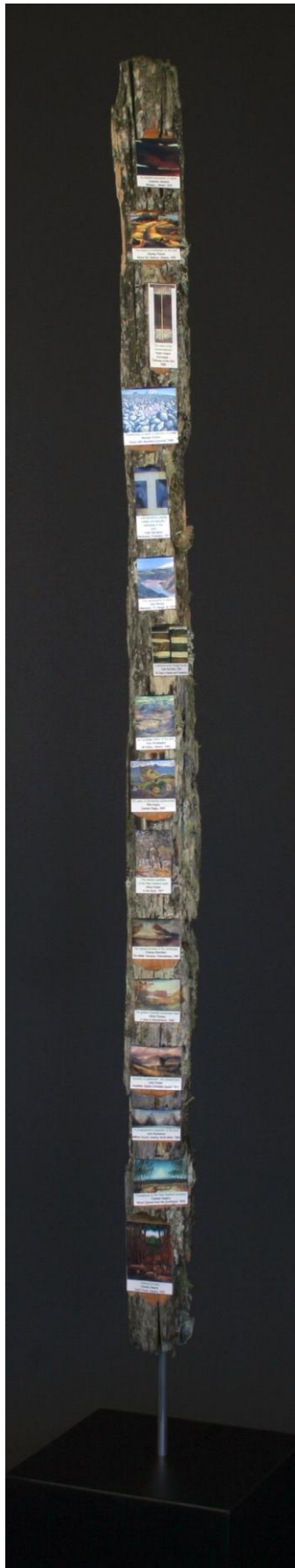
*The 'best' and the 'rest'*



*The women's circle*



*Bottled Godzone*



*Hands on the land*



*The power of black: New Zealand made*



*Ukulele lady: A tourist's guide to the South Pacific*

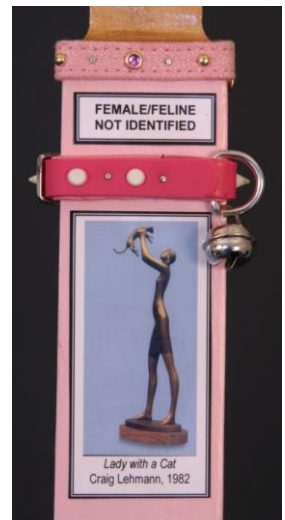
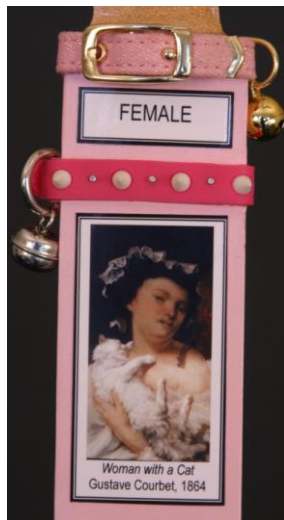




*Blonds have more fun – yeah right*



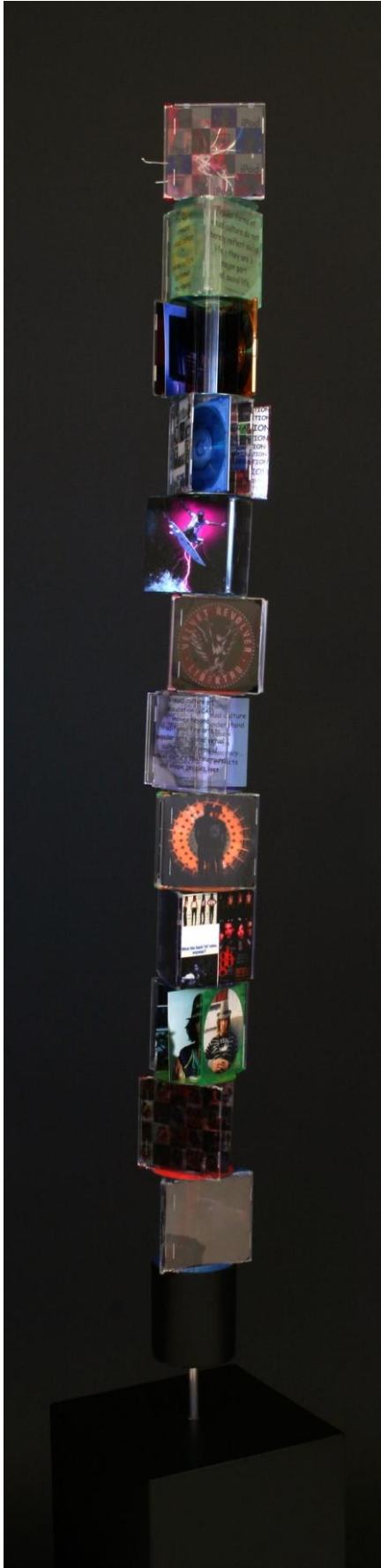
*I'm not a Chinese takeaway!*



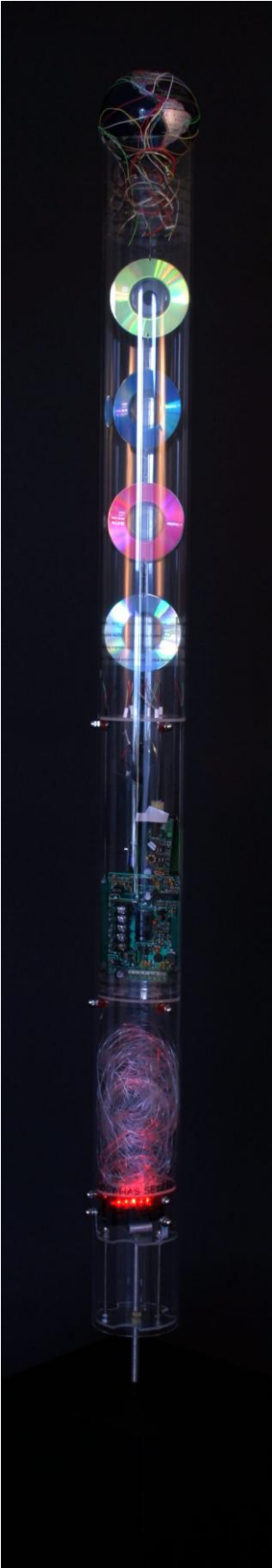
*Gendering identity: Reigning cats and dogs*



Why am I like I am?



*The young consume visual culture: Visual culture consumes the young*



*Technology has seized control of culture!*



*Ethnically classified... but culturally different*

## Contact details

**Dr Jill Smith** EdD, MEd, DipFA, Dip Tchg  
Principal Lecturer  
School of Arts, Languages and Literacies  
The University of Auckland-Faculty of Education  
Private Bag 92601 Symonds Street  
Auckland 1150  
New Zealand  
[j.smith@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:j.smith@auckland.ac.nz)



## Exhibition opening

At centre – Fred Graham, Māori kaumatua who opened the exhibition; Peter Smith (seated), Jill Smith