



ART IN CONTEXT

**A VISUAL ARTS AND ART HISTORY EDUCATION RESOURCE
FOR SECONDARY TEACHERS, INSPIRED BY BILL CULBERT'S 2013
VENICE BIENNALE EXHIBITION, *FRONT DOOR OUT BACK***

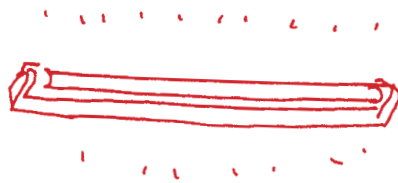
Helen Lloyd, Senior Educator Art, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Education
Programme Manager for Creative New Zealand (2013)

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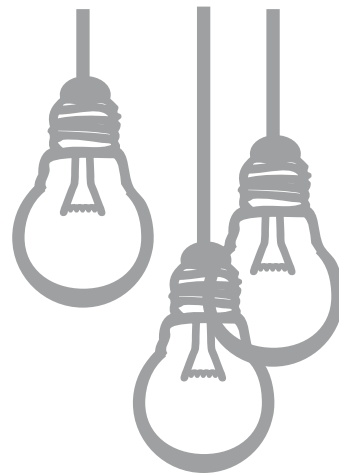
ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This visual arts and art history education resource has been created in association with *Front Door Out Back*, Bill Culbert's exhibition for the New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2013. The first such resource of its kind, it is part of a wider education programme developed as a result of a partnership between the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Creative New Zealand.



The programme's aim is to increase New Zealand teachers and students' access to the exhibition, and to raise awareness of both Culbert's work and the Venice Biennale – arguably the world's most significant international contemporary art event. It includes this resource, *Experiments with Light* (an art and science resource for primary and intermediate teachers), and teacher professional development events.

Art in Context is inspired by the relationships between Culbert's sculptures and the contexts within which they are situated. It is designed for secondary teachers of visual arts and art history, to teach students about studying 'sculpture in context'. The activities are intended to be adapted by teachers for use with their students.



The resource has four major components:

- **Analysis cards** for each of Culbert's art works in *Front Door Out Back*. The cards are designed to introduce students to how to interpret art works and consider issues relating to context and site. **Page 8**
- **Wellington waterfront sculpture trail map** with contextual information on 11 public art works (including three by Culbert) for teachers to use as the basis of an art in context field trip (real or virtual). **Page 24**
- **A set of question cards and worksheets** for teachers to use with students as part of the Wellington waterfront trail or a field trip in their own locale, or when studying the context of any public sculpture. **Page 47**
- **Visual arts project:** A project brief for students to create their own sculpture in response to a particular context. **Page 53**



THE VENICE BIENNALE

The Venice Biennale has been described by some commentators as ‘the Olympics of the art world’, and is widely viewed as one of the contemporary art world’s pre-eminent events. Held every two years (‘Biennale’ is Italian for biennial), it runs from June to November and features exhibitions from more than 80 countries. Over 30,000 international curators, critics, collectors, and artists attend the three-day opening vernissage (preview) alone.

New Zealand has exhibited at the Venice Biennale since 2001. New Zealand artists who have exhibited as part of the New Zealand Pavilion at the Biennale are Peter Robinson and Jacqueline Fraser (2001), Michael Stevenson (2003), et al. (2005), Judy Millar and Francis Upritchard (2009), and Michael Parekowhai (2011). Exhibiting at the Biennale has led to a greater national and international profile and opportunities for all these artists.

New Zealand’s presentation at the 55th Venice Biennale is an initiative of Creative New Zealand, Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, with key partner Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and supporting partners Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Massey University, and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

VENICE – THE CITY

Venice is a unique city located in north-eastern Italy and situated on a group of small islands separated by canals and linked by bridges. It is renowned for the beauty of its setting, architecture, and art works. The entire city is listed as a World Heritage Site, but it is very susceptible to high tides and regularly experiences floods, placing it at risk from rising sea levels. Venice has been variously known as the ‘City of Water’, ‘City of Masks’, ‘City of Bridges’, ‘Floating City’, and ‘City of Canals’.

The city is well known for its part in several important artistic movements and as a centre of the Renaissance. Every year, it holds a flamboyant cultural celebration, Carnevale, in which Venetians and visitors don 18th-century masks, wigs, and costumes. Venice has also played an important role in the history of classical music, and is the birthplace of composer Antonio Vivaldi.

Murano, one of the islands situated next to Venice, is famous for its glass factory. The glass industry has been in existence on the island since the 14th century. Murano glass is an iconic product that can be seen in tourist shops across Venice, and in chandeliers decorating the many opulent Venetian palaces.



BILL CULBERT

Bill Culbert (1935–) was born in Port Chalmers, a small port town on Dunedin’s harbour, in 1935. He attended Hutt Valley High School and studied at the Canterbury University School of Art and the Royal College of Art in London. He now lives in the United Kingdom and France.

Culbert’s fascination with light has fuelled his practice for decades. He first experimented with light and movement in the 1960s and, since the 1970s, his work has encompassed photography, light, and found objects. He investigates, manipulates, observes, and experiments with light as both subject and medium.

Culbert has exhibited widely in New Zealand, England, France, the United States, and Australia, and has created public sculptures for Wellington, Christchurch, and Auckland. His work is held by Te Papa and in other major public collections throughout New Zealand.

FRONT DOOR OUT BACK

Bill Culbert’s exhibition *Front Door Out Back* was held from 1 June to 23 November 2013 at the Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà, the site of New Zealand’s national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It was curated by Justin Paton, senior curator at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

Culbert carefully selected the venue, situated by the canal on the busy pedestrian thoroughfare between Piazza San Marco and the Giardini. Following several site visits, he created works that responded to its interior and exterior spaces. These include the long entranceway once famously used by the composer Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) to teach his students, a small garden, and an enclosed courtyard.

Culbert has described how he felt when he visited the venue:

Walking through the Pietà complex and seeing the canal through the doors, straight to the water, was magic. There was also the sound – no cars and not many boats either. My notebook started filling fast with drawings.¹

The exhibition features nine sculptural works. All but one (*Level*) employ a combination of found objects and fluorescent light tubes.



¹ Quoted in Justin Paton, ‘There, Now! A conversation with Bill Culbert’ in *Bill Culbert Front Door Out Back Exhibition Readings*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, 2013, p7.

IMAGES:

Bill Culbert at the entrance of the New Zealand Pavilion, La Pietà, for the 2013 Venice Biennale. Photograph by Jennifer French. Creative New Zealand
Bill Culbert, *Level*, 2013 (detail). Photograph by Jennifer French. Creative New Zealand



STUDYING ART IN CONTEXT

Studying the contextual factors influencing an art work's creation and reception is an important feature of learning within the fields of the visual arts and art history.

The New Zealand Curriculum guidelines for art history include a focus on studying art in context. Students need to 'connect art works to a range of contextual factors that influence their development, production, and value. Contextual influences may include personal or artistic, historic, religious, economic, social, political, technological, philosophic, theoretic, and gender'.²

Guidelines for teaching the visual arts within the New Zealand Curriculum include a focus on understanding the context for art. It is expected that students will identify 'particular

examples within art works that show the impact of a time, place, or culture on how and why they were made' and that they will develop the skills required to describe 'how personal, social, historical, and technological factors influenced or informed elements of the art work, such as how they were made, perceived, and appreciated by the audiences and critics'.³

When studying sculpture, and in particular public sculpture, the relationship between an art work and its physical location is a crucial factor. Determining whether a sculpture responds to its site, or whether the site was decided after the work was created, affects the way we understand its physical context.

^{2,3} tki.org.nz, 2013

CURRICULUM LINKS



Years 9–13

New Zealand Curriculum, levels 5–8

Learning area: The Arts

Visual Arts

- Understanding the arts in context
- Developing ideas
- Communicating and interpreting

NCEA Visual Arts

AS90913 1.1 Demonstrate understanding of art works from a Māori and another cultural context using art terminology.

AS91309 2.1 Demonstrate an understanding of methods and ideas from established practice appropriate to sculpture.

AS91444 3.1 Analyse methods and ideas from established sculpture practice.

NCEA Art History

AS91017 1.3 Demonstrate understanding of links between context(s) and art works.

AS91182 2.3 Examine the influence of context(s) on art works.

AS91484 3.3 Examine the relationship(s) between art and context.

AS91186 2.7 Demonstrate understanding of art works in relation to their physical environments.

Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, taumata 6

Ngā Toi

Ariā Matua

Hei whakawhanake i ngā tūmomo tukanga me ōna mōhio ki te huhua o ngā āhuatanga toi, i āna ake mahi toi me tērā o ētehi atu.

Toi Ataata, taumata 6

Ka tūhura hōhonu, ka rapu mātāpuna whakahihiri, ka tautohu, ka whai māramatanga:

- i ētehi ariā whakamahi i te hangarau
- hei whakamahi tōtika i ngā taputapu hei whakawhitiwhiti whakaaro
- ki te kunenga me te tūhuratanga a ngā kaitoi.

USEFUL BOOKS



- Ian Wedde, *Bill Culbert: Making Light Work*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2009.
- *Bill Culbert: Front Door Out Back*, exhibition catalogue, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu in partnership with Creative New Zealand and Massey University, 2013.
- City Gallery Wellington, *Lightworks: Bill Culbert*, exhibition catalogue. City Gallery Wellington, 1997.
- Jenny Harper and Aaron Lister, *Wellington: A city for sculpture*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2007.

USEFUL WEBSITES



- **nzatvenice.com**
The official website for the New Zealand Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale features images of *Front Door Out Back*, as well as videos of Culbert at work in his studio in France and installing the exhibition in Venice.
- **artstepapa.govt.nz**
Arts Te Papa is the online home of art at Te Papa. The website has images, articles, interviews, educational resources, and videos.
- **sculpture.org.nz**
The Wellington Sculpture Trust website dedicated to featuring public sculpture in Wellington, with images and information.

Drop





Drop

BACKGROUND

Drop is a group of suspended, inverted chairs and a table, each of which has been pierced with a fluorescent light tube. The sculpture hangs high above the entrance lobby of the Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà – the site of Bill Culbert’s 2013 Venice Biennale exhibition, *Front Door Out Back*. It is the first art work visitors see when they enter.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Imagine standing underneath this art work and looking up at it. How does it make you feel? What does it remind you of?
- 2 Think about the art work’s title. Why do you think Culbert called it *Drop*? What does the title make you think about?
- 3 As the first piece that visitors encounter, *Drop* is like an introduction to the exhibition. The space in which it is exhibited is a small entrance lobby, which opens out to a canal. Within this context, why do you think Culbert chose to make a work that hangs from the ceiling rather than a floor or wall-based piece?
- 4 Venice is famous for its Murano glass factory and its opulent palaces, which are often decorated with chandeliers. How might this context have influenced the creation of this work?
- 5 The Venice Biennale is a huge contemporary art exhibition visited by people from all around the world. How might this context have influenced the creation of this work?

Bebop





Bebop

BACKGROUND

Bebop is a long sculpture made up of Formica tables and chairs and fluorescent light tubes. It is suspended along the entire length of a corridor that is famous for one of its previous uses. The Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741), who famously composed *The Four Seasons* in 1723, and taught students in the Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà, the site of the New Zealand Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2013. The corridor is the second space that visitors encounter in the exhibition and leads on from the entrance lobby.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Culbert sourced second-hand furniture for this sculpture. What period does the style of furniture belong to? What does the style remind you of?
- 2 Think about the title of this sculpture. What does it remind you of? Why do you think Culbert chose the title?
- 3 Think about the physical properties of this long, narrow, high-ceilinged space, and consider its historical use by Vivaldi. What do you notice about the grouping of the objects, the angles at which the furniture and lights hang, and the way they have been arranged? What does the sculpture remind you of? In what ways do you think the sculpture may have been inspired by the space?

Strait





Strait

BACKGROUND

Strait is a linear, wall-based sculpture consisting of a series of white plastic 'Anchor' branded milk bottles with blue or green lids, held together by a fluorescent light tube. In Venice, it hung on the bare brick wall of a narrow passageway linking the front and back parts of the exhibition, between a long corridor and a garden.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Look at the sculpture's colours, shapes, and forms. What does it remind you of?
- 2 This sculpture hangs in contrast to its surroundings. Describe all the contrasting elements you can see.
- 3 What symbolism might be involved in each of the following aspects of the work?
 - The title (consider the different meanings of 'strait' and 'straight')
 - The sculpture's location, with a narrow passageway linking the front and back parts of the exhibition venue
 - The Anchor logo on the milk bottles
- 4 Consider the ways in which the milk industry is important to New Zealand. How do Anchor's new, light-resistant bottles relate to the potential interpretations of this work?
- 5 In what ways do you think this sculpture may have been influenced by the dual contexts of New Zealand and the Venice Biennale?

Walk Blue and Walk Reflection



ART IN CONTEXT | RESOURCES PART 1: FRONT DOOR OUT BACK ANALYSIS CARDS

IMAGES: Bill Culbert, *Walk Reflection* and *Walk Blue*, 2001/2013. Photographs by Jennifer French. Creative New Zealand



Walk Reflection and Walk Blue

BACKGROUND

Walk Reflection and *Walk Blue* are large sculptures made from wardrobes through which three fluorescent lights run horizontally. Each wardrobe has a different front panel: one is a mirror, the other is blue. Both sculptures are positioned in an enclosed garden, exposed to the elements, between the end of a narrow passageway and the entrance to another room in the exhibition.

QUESTIONS

- 1** Culbert sourced second-hand wardrobes for these sculptures. What style or artistic period do they represent? What do you associate with this style of wardrobe?
- 2** How do the fluorescent lights change the wardrobes' function, and the way we view them? What do they remind you of?
- 3** Culbert has removed these objects from their usual domestic context. How does their new context change the way you think about them? Why do you think he called the works *Walk Reflection* and *Walk Blue*?

IMAGE: Bill Culbert, *Walk Reflection* and *Walk Blue*, 2001/2013. Photograph by Jennifer French. Creative New Zealand

Daylight Flotsam Venice





Daylight Flotsam Venice

BACKGROUND

Daylight Flotsam Venice is a collection of fluorescent light tubes interspersed with an assortment of discarded coloured plastic containers and bottles. Apparently random in their placement, the objects that make up this sculpture are positioned directly on the floor of a room that opens out to a canal at its far end. The sculpture is arranged at the foot of an ornate brick stairway. The fluorescent lights give the sculpture its own light source, creating shadows and dramatic up-lighting that illuminates the space. This type of sculpture is called an ‘assemblage’ (a three-dimensional art work made up of found materials or objects) or ‘installation’ (an art work made for a specific environment).

QUESTIONS

- 1 *Daylight Flotsam Venice* uses plastic bottles that look like they previously contained cleaning liquids or chemicals. What symbolism might be involved in Culbert’s choice of these objects? What relevance does a work like this have in a throwaway, consumer society?
- 2 Consider the work’s title. ‘Flotsam and jetsam’ is a phrase often used to describe useless or discarded objects, but the words have specific nautical meanings. Flotsam is the floating wreckage of a ship or its cargo; jetsam refers to material that has been purposefully cast overboard, often to lighten a ship’s load. Why do you think Culbert has chosen to call his work *Daylight Flotsam Venice*?
- 3 *The simplest and cheapest material to me is often ... the most exciting ... no matter how beaten up it is or how disintegrated. It can continue on and on, even if what it’s used for changes. A throwaway society. That’s pretty dumb.*³
- 3 Look carefully at the way in which this art work is arranged in the space. What aspects of the space does it respond to? How might it look different in a different space?
- 4 Venice is built on an island surrounded by water, with canals as streets. The city regularly floods, and is at risk from rising sea levels. What aspects of the work may have been inspired by this context?

³ Quoted in Justin Paton, ‘There, Now! A conversation with Bill Culbert’ in *Bill Culbert Front Door Out Back Exhibition Readings*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, 2013, p8.

Level





Level

BACKGROUND

Level is made up of a row of glass jars half-filled with water. The sculpture is suspended in an open doorway looking out to the canal, at the end of the room in which *Daylight Flotsam Venice* is exhibited. The jars capture light and distort reflections of their surroundings – ancient buildings, the canal, and passing boats and people. Each jar has been placed at a jaunty angle, but the water line remains level inside them.

QUESTIONS

- 1** *Level* is the only sculpture in *Front Door Out Back* not to use electric light; instead, it captures surrounding light. Consider what personal associations electric light and natural light have for you. In what ways are these light sources different? How does each affect the way we see things? How do these associations influence your interpretation of this work?
- 2** Describe the ways in which *Level*'s physical surroundings impact on the work, and influence what you associate with it. If the work were exhibited in a different context, how might that change the way you experience and read it?
- 3** Think about the connotations of the word 'level'. A spirit level, for example, is used to determine a true horizontal line. What other phrases do you associate with the word?
- 4** Climate change is associated with rising sea levels. How may the work's title have been influenced by the context of Venice?

HUT, Made in Christchurch





HUT, Made in Christchurch

BACKGROUND

HUT, Made in Christchurch is enclosed by the ancient walls and ornate windows of a courtyard, which is exposed to the elements. Its stark modern frame contrasts with its surroundings. The shape of the sculpture is like a house or whareniui (meeting house). The sculpture is big enough to walk into – approximately the size of a traditional Māori whare (house), garage, tent, basic bush hut, boat shed, or garden shed. Culbert has said of this work:

*It's basically a refuge. Whether you make one up a mountain or in the bush or on a beach, a hut is about shelter. A light bulb is a bit like that too – elemental.*³

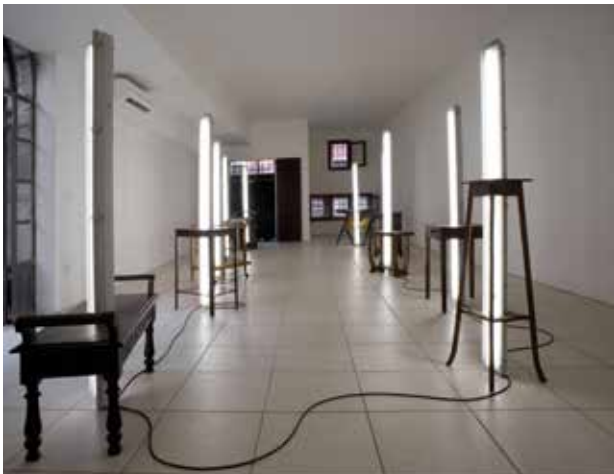
QUESTIONS

- 1 This sculpture relates to two different geographical contexts: the place it was made (Christchurch, New Zealand) and the place it is being exhibited (Venice, Italy). What connections do you make between this sculpture and these two contexts? How does the physical environment of the ancient courtyard change the way you view it?
- 2 After the Christchurch earthquakes, many people's homes were damaged or destroyed. How does the way you view the sculpture change if you consider it in this context?
- 3 Discuss ideas that you associate with light and shelter. Why are they both such important elements in life? What would life be like without them? Compare the types of light and shelter we have today with what was available to people 500 or 1,000 years ago. How would these differences have affected people's lives?
- 4 The sculpture's title has many possible connotations. Describe some things the word 'hut' makes you think about. What is the effect of using the word 'hut' to describe a structure that has no roof or walls, and offers no shelter from the elements? Why might Culbert have chosen this title for his work?

³ Quoted in Justin Paton, 'There, Now! A conversation with Bill Culbert' in *Bill Culbert Front Door Out Back Exhibition Readings*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, 2013, p10.

Where are the other two?





Where are the other two?

BACKGROUND

Where are the other two? is an installation made from 10 small tables or desks, each of which has a fluorescent light tube running vertically through it. The objects are joined together as a group by their connecting black electrical leads. They stand in a loose circle on the tiled floor of a small, low-ceilinged room. This is the final room of the exhibition, accessed via a courtyard. It has a door that opens out to the canal.

QUESTIONS

- 1** Culbert sourced second-hand tables and desks for this sculpture. What might each object's former use have been? How have their original forms and functions been altered? How does this change the way you think about them?
- 2** Look at the way the different elements of the installation have been positioned within the room. How else could Culbert have chosen to arrange them? What does their current placement remind you of? Why do you think they have been linked together with their electric cords?
- 3** Reflect on the work's title, *Where are the other two?* What could it refer to? Why do you think Culbert chose to ask a question? What does it make you think about?