



Give us a sign

- a message, a proclamation, a warning,
a proposition; a way to make things better

Courtenay Place Light Boxes 17 December 2008 – 14 June 2009

While illuminated light boxes have become common currency within art galleries over recent years, they have long been familiar in public space as a site for commercial advertising or public service announcements. *Give us a sign* firmly acknowledges these origins, but does not aim to sell products. Rather the project offers a platform for ideas within a busy retail and entertainment district. The light boxes can be experienced by foot, bicycle or car, and at a range of speeds. The structures themselves were designed as an integral part of the Courtenay Place Urban Park development, and are intended to be used as a space for art in public space—not for advertising.

Seven artists and/or graphic designers have been invited to contribute two or three works responding to the call to 'give us a sign: a message, a proclamation, a warning, a proposition; a way to make things better'. The wording of this invitation is intentionally ambiguous and future-focused. All of the participating artists /designers have responded by making new works.

Each body of work is of a different style, and touches upon subjects that are compelling to the individual artists and designers. The surrounding context has been considered thoughtfully, though not always addressed reverentially. In one of **Sarah Maxey's** works, the social flurry of this 'party-zone' fuelled by intoxicants and sexual tension, is challenged by the confession 'I did this instead of going out', affirming that indeed there are other options for a Friday or Saturday night. **Stanley Nives** suggests that there has been 'Too much too soon too little too late', though qualifies this lament only with a found black and white image of submerged housing, location unspecified.

At the time of writing, turbulent events—political, economic and ecological—are prominent in our minds. While there is still room for artists to respond playfully to a commission like this, the majority have struck a pensive, melancholic chord.

The works:

The hand-drawn alphabet designs of senior Wellington-based typographer **Joseph Churchward** have garnered serious accolades from his contemporaries, but notably in recent years his work has also attracted a substantial following of younger designers, leading to a major resurgence of interest in his work. Among them is **David Bennewith** (who is currently based in Amsterdam). Bennewith is editing and designing a biography on Churchward and his prolific, inspirational practice, which will be launched early 2009.

Churchward has designed, by hand, over 570 alphabets to date, and over the next year he is pressing to hit 600. The volume of his work alone would be impressive but, when considered alongside the inventiveness of Churchward's thinking and his constant dedication to improve and refine his designs, it soon becomes evident that we have a true unsung hero of design in our midst. While Churchward's name may not be a household one, his designs have been a part of the lives of New Zealanders through their use in the title of Te Papa Tongarewa's



exhibition *Tangata o le Moana: The story of Pacific people in New Zealand*, on the cover of the *Speculation* book produced to be an unofficial New Zealand presence at the 2007 Venice Biennale and for artist John Baldessari's Artspace-commissioned billboard in Auckland. Churchward's skill in hand-lettering was also used to help create the masthead for The Evening Post newspaper. David Bennewith has, in collaboration with Churchward, selected three alphabets to feature on the light boxes. Bennewith writes:

'Lorina', 'Maricia' and 'Georgina' are three alphabets designed by Joseph Churchward for three of his daughters. Each alphabet was designed as a writing, a sort of biography; each carries an independent and discreet account of a daughter's life at the time—one that is inextricably tied up in the crafting. Every reproduction of the alphabet conceivably presents an adumbrated, albeit arranged, account of a daughter's story.

Jim Speers' *Big Sea* appears three times, a nod to the high density repetition of commercial advertising campaigns. The title is self explanatory, yet it also provokes a number of questions; which sea is being photographed, from what kind of vessel (it looks large and industrial, or even naval), who is the author of the photograph, etc. etc. The saturated colour of the image, with the inconsistent flash of blue banding down the right hand edge, hints that this photo is not of our time, and that it was taken using a film camera rather than a digital device. We are presented by the artist with a vertical slice of the original image, which turns the volume up on the vertiginous wall of salt water bearing down on top of us, with the white foaming crest of the wave where we would expect to see cloud. The image reeks of danger but also alludes to survival. The camera (and hopefully the photographer) made a safe landing, otherwise the image would not be with us today. This is one of a number of images the artist has used from on-line image archives of ex-service folk, not a 'what I did on my holidays' Flickr stream, but a record of sites where professional soldiers undertook tours of duty.

Sarah Maxey has made two works utilising hand-drawn text. 'One day all this will be yours' is the artist's lyrical response to pressure to write a will. Within this context the sentence, with the addition of 'Lucky' speaks more to the idea of a broader societal inheritance, and our ensuing responsibilities. Do we want it? What are we going to do with it?

'I did this instead of going out' acknowledges the Courtenay Place's stretch and its tributary roads as 'party central'. Whether the destination is a bar, the theatre, a café or a strip club, this area heaves with people out on the town, in various states of euphoria and despair, sobriety and intoxication. The fastidious quality of the pen-work tells of hours of concentrating, labouring away, and proposes a more domestic, solitary and introspective alternative to pounding the promenade, or propping up a bar.

Each of **Gavin Hipkins'** images brings together two distinct visual languages; one pictorial and one abstract. This juxtaposition is complicated further by the fact that the abstract forms (the black square, the white square and the black circle) are also objects – embroidered patches most commonly seen on a Metaller's denim, or sewn onto a tourist's travel rug. They reference both pictorial and abstract traditions. While 'empty' of text or images, these blank shapes point to the work of Russian artist Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), who fostered a new art movement Suprematism (not to be confused with Supremicisim), which championed the potency of non-objective (abstract) art to communicate feeling of its own accord, on its own terms, without resorting to figurative references or picturing 'things'.

The pictorial images draw upon the tradition of the illustrated bible story, using fragments from an illustrated New Testament for children published in 1968. These illustrations of events in the life of Christ, in contrast to the abstract forms, directly reference narrative accounts from a sacred text, and while they will have different meanings to people of different faiths, they are instantly recognisable as ecclesiastical. The manipulation of the colours within the images takes us slightly off-guard and encourages us to examine them more closely.



Within these three works an intriguing material, aesthetic and contextual tension brews; between the epic nature of the pictorial imagery and the humdrum domestic patch, and between the 'quotations' from a religious movement and a passionately-argued early 20th century art movement.

Stanley Nives (the pseudonym Kelvin Soh has assumed for this project) presents us with two works in high-key colours. Their boldness at first partially distracts us from their more tender and sombre content. Each features a text on a bright background with radiating lines that brings to mind the structure of a mind map diagram, but it has no qualifiers, it is a framework without conclusions or aspirations. Instead the words 'For reasons of affection' invites us to consider what the 'reasons' might be, who or what is the 'object of affection', and the ways reason can sometimes influence or interfere with our emotions. A more maudlin 'Too much too soon too little too late' occupies the partner work. Both works feature black and white images of a flooded subdivision alluding to an unexpected deluge, a disruption of the domestic and a very direct and tactile challenge to the idiom of 'home sweet home'.

The three works by **Kate Newby** each depict a passage of fabric that has been dipped in pigment, hanging over a window with golden light penetrating from behind. These are literally and metaphorically 'internal' works, with the hand drawn texts reading more like thoughts than statements. However, it would be presumptuous to interpret these statements as autobiographical.

While their titles—*Thursday evening*, *Saturday evening* and *Yesterday evening*—give us a clue as to the time of day they were taken, we do not know whose lounge or bedroom the fabrics are shading, whose voice pronounces 'I'm so tired', or the more uplifting 'Try! Try!'. Newby uses materials that are to hand and locations that are 'everyday'. She has described her working process:

As a starting point, my projects take our common potential to reappropriate the spaces we inhabit and to reinvent our relation to the urban environment. The things themselves are explorations into thinking, feeling, communicating and relating. Often I see the art I make as things that look or sound familiar and that wait for the viewer to understand and develop them further.

The 'Give us a sign' works temporarily occupy this public space, inviting us to consider our relationship to that place anew. In an environment of high-density visual stimulus they offer an opportunity to stop and pause, and create a space for speculative thought, which is arguably an unusual and optimistic sign in itself.

Heather Galbraith, Senior Curator / Manager Curatorial Programmes
City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi

The Courtenay Place Light Boxes were unveiled in May 2007. The first suite of sixteen works displayed was curated by Simon Bush-King and Andy Palmer and featured eight Wellington artists working with photography. Each exhibition lasts for six months and the second and third cycles in the series will be generated by City Gallery Wellington as part of its off-site programme during the building development and seismic strengthening of the gallery building (from late October 2008 – Spring 2009).

Give us a sign will be on display next February when a major international typography conference TYPESHED II takes place in Wellington (11-15 February 2009). www.typhedll.co.nz



biographies

David Bennewith was born in New Zealand, and he lives and works in Amsterdam. He is an MA graduate in Typographic and Graphic Design from the Werkplaats Typografie, Arnhem, NL and is currently a researcher in design at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, NL. Bennewith works and collaborates as a freelance designer on various projects—mostly in the cultural sector—in New Zealand and Europe. Often working under the monicker Colophon (an extrinsic enterprise in progress) Bennewith produces and publishes non-commissioned work. He has lectured and given workshops at educational institutions including: The Royal College of Art, London; Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam and Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland. More recently he has begun to produce commissioned and own writing on the subject of design. His current focus is the development of a research project surrounding the work of New Zealand type designer Joseph Churchward; resulting in a book to be published in 2008.

Joseph Churchward is a Samoan-born graphic designer based in Wellington. Churchward was born in Samoa in 1933 and he is from the 'aiga (family) Sā Anae and the villages of Faleasiu and Tufulele. In 1946, when he was 13, Churchward left Samoa to attend Miramar South School in Wellington, New Zealand.

Two years later he gained an Art Distinction Award in Lettering from Wellington Technical College and, shortly after, began work as a commercial artist. In 1969, he founded Churchward International Typefaces, which became New Zealand's largest typesetting firm. A leading German company, Berthold Fototypes, accepted some of his fonts for international distribution, and they were soon in use throughout the world. To date, Churchward has handcrafted over 570 original typefaces and his fonts feature on billboards, record sleeves, newspapers, and in digital media. Recent uses of his typefaces include the title of Te Papa Tongarewa's exhibition *Tangata o le Moana: The story of Pacific people in New Zealand*, the cover of the *Speculation* book produced for the Venice Biennale 2007 and artist John Baldessari's Artspace-commissioned billboard in Auckland. Churchward's skill in hand-lettering was also used to help create the masthead for The Evening Post newspaper. Churchward's typefaces are now digitally distributed and have ongoing international appeal. Now aged 75, he still continues to create new fonts. A biography of his extraordinary life and work edited and designed by David Bennewith is due for release early 2009.

Gavin Hipkins graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland in 1993 and has exhibited steadily since

then. From 2000-2002, he studied at The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, gaining a Master of Fine Arts. He is a senior lecturer at Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland. The recipient of numerous prestigious awards, Hipkins has exhibited widely in New Zealand and internationally. Highlights include: participation in the *25th Sao Paulo Biennale*, Brazil, 2002; being a finalist in the inaugural *Walters Prize*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2002; participation in *Flight Patterns*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, United States, 2000; participation in *Guarene Arte 2000*, Turin, Italy; Supreme Award for contemporary art in the *Art Waikato National Art Competition*, 2000; participation in the *11th Biennale of Sydney*, Australia, 1998, inclusion within *Picturing Eden*, a touring group exhibition initiated by the International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, New York, United States, 2006; and *Tell Me a Story: Narrative Photography Now* at San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, United States, 2007.

Sarah Maxey has a degree majoring in textile design, but has worked as a bookseller, magazine designer and book designer. She spent two very formative years as Design Manager at Bloomsbury Publishing in the UK in the mid-nineties. Since returning to New Zealand she has established her

own studio, Sarah Maxey Design, providing thoughtful design and print solutions for the publishing industry and arts related projects. She is most known for her award-winning work on literary book covers, often using her own illustration and hand-lettering. Of late, she has been focusing on personal hand-lettering projects, exhibiting her work in galleries in Wellington and Auckland. She is also busy building up her own imprint publishing fine stationery and small limited edition books.

Kate Newby is an artist currently based in Auckland. She has exhibited throughout New Zealand, Australia, Europe and the USA as well as working on, initiating and contributing to several print-based projects. Newby graduated with her MA (Fine Art) from Elam School of Fine Art, Auckland University in 2007 with the project 'My Poetry, for example'. Newby is also a founding member of the gallery Gambia Castle, Auckland. Recent exhibitions include *Brussels Biennial*, Brussels (2008) *Thinking with your body*, Gambia Castle, Auckland (2008), *Academy*, TCB, Melbourne (2008) and *Many directions, as much as possible, all over the country*, I301 PE, Los Angeles (2008). Newby publishes consistently as a part of her practice. Recent publications include *Holding onto it only makes you sick* (2008) and *Architecture for Specific People* (2007).

Kelvin Soh (operating under the pseudonym **Stanley Nives**) is interested in an expanded view of graphic design that juggles real-world commissions with projects

that 'inhabit spaces of fiction'—where 'use value' is displaced by an intimate but 'other' kind of relationship with the world—and finds form in projects such as *Tween*, an on-going poster series in collaboration with Artspace Auckland, and *Breathing Spaces* curated by David Bennewith. Kelvin was responsible for curating group design exhibitions such as *Everyday* and *Terms of Use* at the St Paul ST Gallery and works collaboratively as part of The Wilderness design group on commercial projects such as the identity and packaging for 420 Spring Water, the creation of Tiger Beer's *Translate* international arts platform, and designing print communications for New Zealand's presence at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Soh has a Bachelor of Graphic Design Degree from AUT (1996) and a Post-Graduate Diploma of Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts (2006).

Jim Speers attended the University of Canterbury, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1992. In 1998 was invited to participate in the prestigious Sydney Biennale. He produced a radiant corridor filled with light boxes inspired by everyday sights—fashion motifs, advertising hoardings and illuminated restaurant signs. Speer's recent solo exhibitions include *Brazil is Fine*, Jeffrey (as Frances Hodgkins Fellow 2000), Hocken Library, Dunedin; Forrester Gallery Oamaru (2001); *Plans for a New Island*, Jensen Gallery, Auckland; *Ghost Trail Services*, Kunstverein,

Ludwigsburg, Germany and *Raider Lodge*, St Paul St Gallery, Auckland (2005) and Jensen Gallery (2006); and group exhibitions such as *High Tide: New currents in art from Australia and New Zealand*, Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Poland and C.A.C, Vilnius, Lithuania (2006), and *Past, Present, Place, Video Art from New Zealand*, Heidelberger, Germany (2008-09). Speers received the Olivia Spencer Bower Award in 1998 and was the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at the University of Otago in 2000, and was the recipient of the Wallace Art Award in 2004. He currently lectures at Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland.

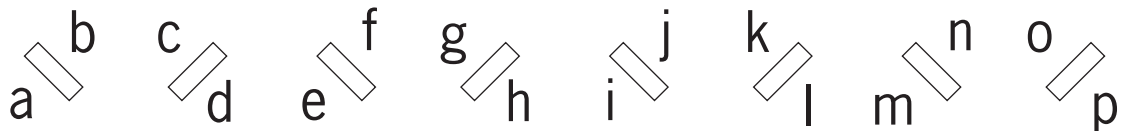
Give us a sign has been commissioned by City Gallery Wellington, supported by the Wellington City Council Public Art Fund. City Gallery Wellington is managed by the Wellington Museums Trust with major funding from the Wellington City Council. City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi is temporarily closed for a major addition to its building. The enlarged new-look Gallery will reopen in Spring 2009 with three exciting new gallery spaces and a state-of-the-art auditorium. Walk-through access from Harris St. to Civic Square will also be added. Keep up to date with news and progress on www.citygallery.org.nz





List of works:

- Light box a Jim Speers, *Big Sea*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box b Kate Newby, *Saturday evening*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box c Kate Newby, *Thursday evening*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box d Kate Newby, *Yesterday evening*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box e Jim Speers, *Big Sea*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box f Stanley Nives, *Too much too soon too little too late*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box g Stanley Nives, *For reasons of affection*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box h David Bennewith and Joseph Churchward, *3 Daughters, Maricia* [*Churchward, Maricia Shadow Italic, c.1970*], 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box i David Bennewith and Joseph Churchward, *3 Daughters, Lorina* [*Churchward, Lorina Light, 1996*], 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box j Sarah Maxey, *One day all this will be yours*, 2008. Digital print on vinyl from pencil and ink on paper.
- Light box k Gavin Hipkins, *Bible Studies (River)*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box l David Bennewith and Joseph Churchward, *3 Daughters, GEORGINA* [*Churchward, Georgina Light Italic, c.1975*], 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box m Sarah Maxey, *I did this instead of going out*, 2008. Digital print on vinyl from ink on paper.
- Light box n Gavin Hipkins, *Bible Studies (Sea)*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box o Gavin Hipkins, *Bible Studies (Preacher)*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.
- Light box p Jim Speers, *Big Sea*, 2008. Digital on vinyl.



ROAD
