

Georgina White

Report for NZFGW

29 June 2009

The NZFGW scholarship has enabled me to complete the second and final year of the Master's degree in Museum Studies at New York University. This degree includes nine course papers, an internship, and thesis. Broadly speaking, I have learned about the history of the museum as a public educational institution and the ways in which the philosophies of this institution and its relationship to the public have changed since the mid-nineteenth century. Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has greatly influenced the way I think about museums, especially with regard to, what she terms, the 'agency of display'. Throughout the course of my study I have maintained my interest in museums' relationship to their visitors. Where possible, I have linked the subject of a course paper to New Zealand.

In my first year, I compared the inclusion of first-person narratives in two local history exhibitions: "Where is Home?" at the Museum of Chinese in America and "This Was Our Paradise: Spanish Camp, 1929 - Today" at the Staten Island Museum. With reference to the ideas of Michael Baxandall, I considered how similarly sized and funded institutions might interpret and label their objects in order to stimulate visitors' thoughts and encourage further inquiry. I was invited to present my paper at the symposium "Museums and Civic Engagement" hosted by New York University and City University of New York with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

The same year, for Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's course in "World's Fairs," I studied the New Zealand exhibit in the British Pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939/40. This topic presented me with the opportunity to interpret an historic exhibit. I conducted primary research in the special collections of the New York Public Library where I found brochures promoting and describing the British Pavilion and one stereograph depicting the New Zealand exhibit. The Alexander Turnbull Library sent me relevant articles from local newspapers and transcripts of the radio broadcasts of Nola Luxford, who described both the exhibit and New Zealand's participation in the Fair's official opening. During the course of my research, I corresponded with Conal McCarthy (Director of Museum Studies at Victoria University) whose book *Exhibiting Maori* was an invaluable resource.

In several of my second year papers I considered alternative museological practices and became particularly interested in artists who have created work for history museums which often investigate the very concept of a museum. For the course titled "Historic Houses, Cultural Landscapes, and the Politics of Preservation" I researched the ruins of a mid-nineteenth century smallpox hospital on Roosevelt Island in New York City's East River. I proposed that the tragic history of the hospital be interpreted by Canadian sound artist Janet Cardiff whose audio walk through Central Park layers

sound with loose narrative to offer walkers an emotive experience and an acute sensory awareness of the Park. For a second course with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (“Tourist Productions”) I researched the practices of the City Reliquary, a community museum and civic organisation located in Williamsburg (Brooklyn) and run by artists. Once the course was complete, I volunteered at the Reliquary for the remainder of my time in New York.

During the New York summer, I completed a university-credited internship with Local Projects, an independent media design firm for museums and public spaces. Local Projects seeks to create media that facilitates conversations between strangers. It was the firm’s emphasis on storytelling that drew me to it. My internship led to part-time work with the firm. In the role of Content Coordinator and Developer I researched exhibition content and new modes of display for Local Projects’ principal clients including the Museum of Chinese in America (New York City), the National Museum of American Jewish History (Philadelphia), the National Building Museum (Washington DC), and the National September 11th Memorial and Museum (New York City).

My experience with Local Projects then gave me confidence to focus my thesis on Our Space: a multimedia installation at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa which employs the Web 2.0 to enable the public to generate exhibition content. I conducted primary research in December 2008 and January 2009. In my thesis I explored the efficacy of Our Space as a social media forum for discussion and debate on representations of national and cultural identity. My thesis was one of six nominated ‘Best Thesis’ in the Museum Studies department. I am immensely grateful to NZFGW for supporting my study and for enabling me to complete the second and final year of my Master’s degree in Museum Studies at New York University.