



DAVID CLEGG  
TO COLLECT OR EXCHANGE

GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY NEW PLYMOUTH  
21 SEPTEMBER – 3 NOVEMBER 1996



## Postcards from the edge

### An exchange with David Clegg

In front of me are pictures of: a telephone, the nape of a businessman's neck, a clutched lunchbag, a street corner with passer-by and a smiling Japanese couple. What is there to say about these unremarkable snapshots? Why have these been selected? What possible connection is there between them and why have they been turned into postcards with space on the back for a message and a stamp? What light do their captions shed and what is the relation between image and text? With none of the usual salutations, these postcards have nevertheless been sent. What am I to do with them? What to make of this gift from an artist, what to make of them as art? In the spirit of Clegg's project, here are my collected thoughts in exchange.

#### 1 The everyday as readymade



Telecom PERT MK 11

Most of us have telephones somewhere in our lives. Most of us don't think too much about their appearance or, more importantly, their placement in the spaces of private and public life. We tend to use, not see, telephones. They are vehicles for communication, a function which is entirely dematerialised. Photographed, however, telephones become things, and framed within the context of an artist's project they demand a particular kind of attention. Now under this more focused scrutiny these objects become categories of form, symbols of human contact, signifiers of the drives of technological innovation and commodification.

David Clegg's selection of this category of object is an instance of his recognition of Marcel Duchamp's originary gesture which transformed an ordinary manufactured item – a bottlerack, a snow shovel, a urinal – into art. He accepts that Duchamp's readymade reconceptualises the definition of art,

to deny uniqueness, facture, beauty, in the zero-degree of chance, choice and context.

For some time now, Clegg has chosen to work exclusively with the banal accoutrements of everyday life. His sculptural practice has consisted of the loose arrangement of such simple materials as coathooks, saw-horses, hats, chairs, eggs, newspapers, icing sugar and Sunlight soap. These register both as things-in-themselves and in combination, as visual and mental conundra, often deriving their meaning in relation to the simple wordplay of their titles or their placement in the real space of the gallery.

Alternatively and in addition, Clegg uses photography and text also as less embodied varieties of "found object". In the former he exploits the photograph's indexical relation to its subject, playing down values of composition and tonal variation. Preferring simple capture and a blandly grey colour register, he emphasises both the idea of the photograph as the site where raw reality has left its imprint and, conversely, of the photograph as a material substitute for that very reality. In the latter, words are lifted from classified advertisements, from instruction manuals for domestic appliances, recipe-books or the coded language of jokes. These take the form of lists or captions, never of fiction or exegesis.

These objects, photographs and words, then, are simply lifted or transposed from their normal life around us, and are rendered strange by being both chosen by the artist and re-categorised in the separate and special context we call art. In so doing, Clegg invites us to recognise boundaries and revisit things that normally hardly register in our conscious life.

#### 2 The museum and the fate of the object

Like Duchamp's readymade, the destiny of Clegg's work has most usually been the art gallery, for it is here that the object's status as art is confirmed. Duchamp proved that it is not the intrinsic nature of the object which determines its claims to be art, but rather the place and form of its presentation. Thus a filled roll and a can of soft-drink might be sustenance on the street, but this function is denied them when they are placed within the frame of the museum.



Lambton Quay, Wellington, 18 January 1996

Clegg's work has always relied on his audience's ability to read and accept this extraordinary transformation. At times he has tested us to the limit. For example, he has not only brought



Collection (telephones) 9 June 1996 –

Collection (pedestrians) 9 June 1996 –

Collection (lunches) 7 June 1996 –

Dates in the titles refer to the receipt of the first object in the collection named.



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everyday objects into the gallery, but he has even used furniture owned by the gallery and simply re-located it as part of his installations (at Artspace in Auckland in 1992 and at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1993). He has therefore required that the viewer recognise this chair *here* as something to sit on, but that identical one *there* as something to be looked at. As a result of these subtle manoeuvres Clegg conspires to charge the space with meaning, and the sensitive viewer may, by questioning what constitutes "the work", begin to play a more active role in defining its boundaries.

Not satisfied with alerting us to what is contained within the frame of the gallery, Clegg has more recently directed his attention to the museum, to question the processes by which objects are collected and organised and, therefore, knowledges gained and enforced. His installation *Collection (disorders)*, for *Art now* at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 1994, consisted of an array of kitchen utensils with official-looking labels attached, texts which bore no relation to the objects they accompanied, and a microfiche which enabled visitors to scan the pages of tabloid newspapers and, simultaneously, to see photographs of the interiors of various public conveniences.

The point here was to upset viewer expectations, to approximate the appearance of the museum display, but to deny its codifying imperatives by refusing to establish any logical relation between object and text, by inserting non-precious and low-art forms into the hallowed realm of the museum and by blurring the boundaries between public and private. To *collect or exchange* continues Clegg's project not only by re-valuing the ordinary and the random, but by further attenuating the processes by which objects are grouped and categorised, bringing into the equation a third party (in addition to artist and institution), another category of codifiers altogether: the audience itself.

### 3 "...towards the spirit of the collective"<sup>1</sup>

Clegg desires to downplay his role in the process of artmaking, constructing a situation in which others may play an active part. The project relies on the artist receiving objects and statements from the many, often randomly chosen recipients who have been invited to respond to the images he has posted. Gathered together, their missives will serve as the content of the work. Its form will derive from their grouping, according to which category of image participants have selected. It is not that Clegg has decided to forego the role of artist, rather that he has opened his practice to the involvement of others and redefined his job to ironically mirror that of the museum professional. No longer originary creator, he is now fieldworker, collection manager, catalogueur, curator and designer.

Such an ironical appropriation of other guises, combined with a desire to engage the viewer more actively in the formulation and construction of the work, has a long and now established history. This can be traced from Duchamp's assertion that it is the viewer who completes the work; to the belief held by Fluxus artists in the 1960s that creativity is available to anyone and inherent in any activity; to the 1970s and conceptual artists – like Hans Haacke, On Kawara and Billy Apple – who implicitly

and explicitly made their audiences the subject of the work; to recent artists like Christian Boltanski, who brings to attention the overlooked lives of the anonymous, and Andrea Fraser, who poses as a museum professional to expose the processes at work in the institution.

Clegg's work, then, can be situated within a history and a problematic of critical practice. He is less interested in making objects for aesthetic contemplation than he is in questioning what it means to be an artist and how he might work with the stuff of his life in ways which involve rather than alienate his audience, in situations where the contexts and occasions for artmaking are likewise called up for attention.

### 4 "Real-time systems are double agents"<sup>2</sup>

But who can say how Clegg's recipients will respond? What significance will one give, say, to this pedestrian as he rounds the corner of that building and to the strange, parenthetical conversation that is already going on in the form of the image's caption? Collected together, of what will the elements of this work eventually consist? Hans Haacke's description of the systems Clegg invokes as "double-agents" aptly conveys that sense of risk involved when an artist hands over an aspect of their work to chance.



She watches him closely.  
He turns away.  
(...'I've got to sound as though I've thought about what I'm saying...')  
She said 'That's pretty funny isn't it?'  
He said 'I don't know, I haven't thought about it.'

Chance has certainly played a role in Clegg's work, from his random samplings and juxtapositions of found texts to his deferral to the fate of icing sugar as it turns grey or is walked through a space over the course of an installation's life. But now, more than before, the fate of the work is happenstance. That third party, the audience, is now not only called upon to do the work of interpretation nor to merely register as an absent presence (in the form of a smear or footprint), but is required to provide the content of the work. This increased emphasis on the viewer (as absent recipient) shifts the locus of interest

from artist, object and validating context to a new nexus somewhere outside of and prior to the object's physical destination.

What Clegg seeks to foreground is not the character of the objects and images either he or his recipients have selected, but rather the nature of a transaction. It is a transaction based on shared systems and behaviours which are as much social as they are cultural. Observation, conversation and the exchange of gifts, these are common gestures open to and available for any number of participants and situations.

### 5 "The end of a postal epoch is doubtless also the end of literature"<sup>3</sup>

I am left with two images. A smiling Japanese couple and the back of a businessman's head. These generate a troubling sense of unease, as if any certainty, traditionally embodied in the supposed "truth" of the photograph and the actuality of the postcard, is undercut. For if Clegg's tourists seek to commemorate a particular moment, recorded by means of the conventions of portrait photography, then why is this image not secure in someone's holiday album? Surely it is not the sender who is memorialised in a postcard, but rather some special or scenic feature of the place in which they are a visitor? Conversely, what information can possibly be conveyed by a picture of the back of someone's head?



Two people from Tokyo, Japan, visit Queenstown, New Zealand, during January 1996.

These figures are caught in positions which signal Clegg's subversive usurpation of the role of the photograph and the function of the postcard. They serve as clues to the fact that Clegg is interested in these media not merely as representations (of places or people) which an audience would traditionally passively view, but rather as the basis from which to initiate a different order of communication which allows for a new, more interactive response.

Though the photograph and the postcard are turned into readymades by their appropriation into the field of art, they

nevertheless do not languish there. They are refashioned as a means to another end. Refusing to conform to the rules of the game, Clegg uses these newly dysfunctional media as the basis upon which transaction and engagement between artist and audience can occur, not only in the space of consumption (the gallery) but also across the many temporal and spatial trajectories mapped out in the process of the project's gestation.



What do a computer and an Australian have in common?  
You have to punch the information into both of them.

Redefined thus, Clegg's seemingly mundane images are given potent life as actual vehicles – rather than mere metaphors – for the traffic between things and their meaning, between people and places, between personal memories and collective history, between an artist and his audience. Clegg helps us to see that there is more to be said about telephones, lunchbags and assorted passers-by.

Christina Barton

- 1 From a letter to Tomas Schmit from George Maciunas, the founder of the Fluxus movement, January 1964, quoted in Stefan Germer, "Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys", *October* 45, Summer 1988, p 69. The sentence reads "Secondly, Fluxus is against art as a medium for the artist's ego... and tends therefore towards the spirit of the collective, to anonymity and ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM..."
- 2 Hans Haacke, from an interview in 1971, quoted in Germer, *ibid*, p 65.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *The postcard from Socrates to Freud and beyond*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980/87, p 104.

### DAVID CLEGG

Born New Plymouth 1953

#### Recent exhibitions

- 1991 *Contra-dictionary* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
- 1992 *personal hygiene, self esteem\** Artspace, Auckland 1980-87
- 1993 *Remedies to both kinds of luck\** Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
- Looking good* Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
- 1994 *Art now* Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

\* One person exhibitions

#### Bibliography

- David Eggleton "Delivery systems for a consumer paradise" *South Island Art Projects newsletter* No 13, 13 July 1994.
- Christina Barton "Marking out the terrain" *Art now* Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 1994, pp 7-11.





▲ To collect or exchange (installation of collections)

◀ Catalogue to collections:  
Collection (lunches) 7 June 1996 –  
Collections (backs) 2 June 1996 –

▶ Collection (tourists) 22 May 1996 –

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