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*“Fly by the Seat of your Pants”:
Building Resilience Through Collective
Narrative at the Christchurch Art Gallery
2006-2013*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates a changing relationship between an art institution and artists, and an art institution and its public, at a time when institutions seek to engage their constituents through new forms. My work charts a single change narrative, that of the Christchurch Art Gallery, focusing on the period 2006–2013. My research asks, how has a change in the institution's sense of self-identity altered its relationship with artists and audience? I have drawn on organisational management literature to understand this research, framed within the conceptual foundation of Pierre Bourdieu's three major themes, habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1990).

The research examines two major periods of development at the Gallery, the 2006 *Paradigm Shift* change management process and the Canterbury earthquakes (2010–2011). These periods of organisational upheaval are understood through the study of publicly available articles and documents, internal documents and interviews with selected staff. This case study concludes that Gallery staff have exposed the back room operations of the institution to the public in new ways. In doing so, they have also opened up their own lives to audiences, offering a more personalised experience. In addition, their approach to working with artists has changed significantly, creating working connections that are more informal and collaborative. Boundaries have also broken down between staff, due partly to the leveling effect of a natural disaster, and the resulting changes to workplace layouts and systems.

While both periods of change have been pivotal to the institution's change, to a significant extent the strategies and actions deployed by the institution during the later period are the result of practices developed in the first. In particular, this thesis argues that powerful collective narratives (Reissner, 2008) were developed through the leadership of key institutional entrepreneurs (Fligstein, 1997). These leaders brought individual habitus coupled with cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990), enabling the Gallery to articulate its identity as informal, adaptive and outwardly focused.

Following the *Paradigm Shift* change process, the earthquakes have contributed to the intensification of staff culture. While these shifts in practice reflect the direct experiences of the institution, they also express a changing dynamic within museum practice around the world. Therefore, this thesis contends, the *Paradigm Shift* was an important catalyst for the institution, providing the Gallery with an internal and external narrative of resilience.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Prologue</i>	<i>v</i>

Chapter One: Introduction

Background	1
Research Objectives	1
Methodology	2
Conceptual Foundation	4
Documentation and Archives	7
Ethics	8
Limitations	9
Chapter Summary	10

Chapter Two: The Context for Change

Introduction	13
New Museology	14
New Institutionalism	18
New Zealand Museums in a State of Change	23
Conclusion	25

Chapter Three: Case Study, the Christchurch Art Gallery

Introduction	27
The Robert McDougall Art Gallery	28
A Conservative Beginning	29
Antagonism	31
An External Focus	32
A Growing Professionalism	33
The Establishment of an Off-site Gallery	35
The Drive for Expansion	36
The Christchurch Art Gallery	37
A Backlash	38
The Political Context	39
A Call for Change	41
External Change	43
Summary	44
Conclusion	46

Chapter Four. A Changing Organisation

Introduction	49
Exhibitions and Artists: Opening Up	50
A New Engagement with Audience	57
The Organisational Field	60
Diagram of Collective Narratives	64
Strategic Documentation	65
Conclusion	69

Chapter Five: A Collective Narrative

Introduction	73
Systems and Structures: Informality Encouraged	75
Audience Engagement: Reaching Out	79
Artist Engagement: Shared Endeavours	86
Conclusion	89

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Introduction	91
Organisational Resilience	92
Collective Narratives	93
A More Transparent Organisation	94
Conclusion	95
Final Speculation	97

Appendices

Interview Questions for Christchurch Art Gallery Staff	101
List of Acronyms	102

References	103
Unpublished Documents	119
Social Media	121
Theses	122
Audio Documents	123

PROLOGUE

When the Christchurch Art Gallery opened with a flourish in 2003 I, like many in the arts sector, flew to the city from my home in Wellington to attend the opening celebrations. Like many others, I also had high expectations. Initially I felt buoyed by the possibilities but, increasingly felt the institution had not lived up to the anticipation. Where was the charge, the impetus one expected? Why did the Gallery not assert itself, make predictions for the future and stake a claim for the now? I lost interest in the Gallery somewhat. A few years passed, and the Gallery started to infiltrate my consciousness again. There was momentum, people were talking. It seemed like an institution with an attitude. What had changed?

*

After the Canterbury earthquake of February 22nd 2011, I, like many people outside of the city, struggled to make sense of what had happened, what was happening. How could I possibly help? It seemed the fabric of the city was torn apart, and, as a former resident of Christchurch, I wanted, needed, to understand. The first time I went back, I was shocked. Parts of the city were intact, as though nothing had happened. Turn the corner and the city was wrecked.

*

I have experienced change management in my professional life four times, once as an employee of a restructured institution, three times as a member of a management team that undertook change. The first example saw one person lose their job in a process that felt degrading to all and ultimately unrewarding for the organisation. The second and third times someone also lost a job. Again it was tough and at times I felt compromised, but this time I understood the purpose and believed strongly in the outcome. The fourth time the gallery transformed, no one lost their job, but there was a series of fissures and jolts felt throughout the transition.

*

These tales are all about change, from this to that, from known to unknown. A desire to understand the change process has brought me to write this thesis. In writing about my professional colleagues I've sought to understand my own experiences and confront my own preconceptions. The narrative of change told to me by staff at the Christchurch Art Gallery has been a compelling one. This thesis seeks to tell their stories, but also to dig deeper. In trying to understand critically I wanted to reveal the power of storytelling in building and maintaining community within an institution.

