

A RETROSPECTIVE: The “Virgin in a Condom” Controversy
Research Report: commissioned by Society in 2009

- *What are “community standards” and where are the limits of freedom of expression to be placed with respect to tax-payer funded exhibitions hosted in our Museum of New Zealand – Te Papa - and in other government institutions?*
- *Were Te Papa’s ‘fingers burnt in outrage over ‘condom art’ and are there lessons to be learnt as media reports suggest? If so, what are they?*

Note: Ironically, prior to the opening of our national Museum of New Zealand (MONZ) – known as Te Papa – in Wellington in March 1998 with its offensive ‘show piece’ “A Virgin in a Condom”; an exhibition “On Love” was turned down by officials afraid of having a condom on display. Rejecting the “Love” show they opened wide their arms and wallets to embrace the hosting of the infamous “Virgin in a Condom” - Pictura Britannica exhibition. So what lessons can MONZ officials, politicians, civic leaders and the wider public learn from this debacle that created such outrage and offence? No public apology has ever been issued by the Museum officials, politicians or civic leaders for this offence.

Protestors take their complaints and petition to Governor-General – Sir Michael Hardie-Boys - after exhausting all other channels of redress (see Appendix. P. 14)

In June 1998 over 200 concerned New Zealand citizens signed a petition that was forwarded to the Governor-General, expressing their deep concerns, anger and frustrations over the actions of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (MoNZ) Board which he had appointed “on the recommendation of the Minister of Cultural Affairs” the Hon. Simon Upton (see Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 1992, pp. 4-5).

They were protesting the Board’s actions in support of decisions made by MoNZ C.E.O., Ms Cheryl Sotheran, and chief curator Ian Wedde, in relation to the public exhibition of “blasphemous,” “obscene” and “grossly insulting” ‘art’ works in the *Pictura Britannica* exhibition (1 March to 26 April 1998) at Te Papa, had “outraged us, along with many tens of thousands of other New Zealanders.”

The Board gave full and unanimous approval to the continuing exhibition of the two highly offensive items “Virgin in a Condom” and the artwork “Wrecked”, despite significant nation-wide protests and clear evidence presented to the Minister that the Museum of NZ ... Act (1992) and the Museum of NZ Exhibitions Policy (1992) had been breached by the public display of these ‘art’ works.

Cardinal Thomas S. Williams, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Wellington, first heard about the exhibition “from concerned telephone callers on 1 March” the day it opened (confirmed in a letter 3 June 1998). He wrote letters immediately to the Te Papa CEO, Curator and Communications Manager, Paul Brewer. The CEO contacted him by phone on 6 March asking that he meet her the next day, a Saturday. He informed her that he was not free over the weekend, so they discussed the matter on the phone.

The Cardinal reports that “the discussion was inconclusive *as the CEO was not going to remove the offensive exhibits* and [he] was not going to ask Catholics *not* to protest against the continued inclusion of those exhibits” (emphasis added). The Cardinal left for Rome that same weekend and returned ill, thereby missing the events of the next three to four weeks. However, as he notes: “in [his absence] other Bishops entered the fray”.

On Saturday morning 7 March, in an article entitled “Outrage at Museum of NZ,” the *Dominion* reported that museum chief curator Ian Wedde “had received about 40 letters of protest and several phone calls asking for *Virgin [in a Condom]* ... to be removed from the museum’s *Pictura Britannica* exhibition.” The report notes:

“Mr Wedde said it was extremely unlikely the seven-centimetre statue would be removed, including during Easter. The museum had to be a free space for several kinds of expression, including artistic expression. ‘We have to be, as far as possible, clear of censorship issues of that sort, and while this is an extremely sensitive and emotional subject, the museum has to be available for the expression of divergent and controversial views. Otherwise it simply is not going to be serving its purpose in the community as a place to debate and as a place where disagreement can be managed’”

On Saturday afternoon, on the same day, about 60 Catholics exercised their democratic rights and staged a peaceful three hour prayer-vigil protest at the museum, singing and handing out pamphlets calling for the two “offensive” ‘art’ works to be removed. By Sunday 8 March, two days after Ms Sotheran had tried to gain an assurance from Cardinal Williams that he would ask Catholics not to protest, “the museum had vowed to keep the piece [*Virgin*] on display” and had boosted security to protect the exhibit (NZ Press Assoc. 8 March).

On Monday 9 May the *Dominion* reported Te Papa spokesman Paul Brewer as saying that the museum would not remove the artwork “*Virgin in a Condom*” from the exhibition. On 10 May the *Christchurch Press* reported him as saying that the controversy over the two exhibits would not stop the exhibition running its full course. “Nor do we intend withdrawing either exhibit,” he said.

Cardinal Tom William’s sincere pleas to Ms Sotheran, Mr Paul Brewer and Mr Ian Wedde, for the removal of the offensive exhibits were ignored. So were sincere pleas contained in the hundreds of letters that poured into the museum from throughout New

Zealand over the period of the exhibition.

On 14 March about 1500 to 2000 protestors staged a three hour protest rally and prayer-vigil outside the museum. On 16 March the *Dominion* reported that the MoNZ Board Chairman, Sir Ron Trotter, “fully supported museum chief Cheryll Sotheran,” and Board member Jennifer Gibbs, who also endorsed Sotheran’s decision, admitted that the Board “had been aware of debate and controversy the exhibition had created overseas” prior to it being approved for Te Papa.

On 18 March the Board met formally and resolved to have no “open dialogue” with any of those involved in the protest. This decision did not become public knowledge until early April. Throughout March museum spokesman Paul Brewer and senior officials continued to inform the protest leaders and the press that an “open forum” would be staged at Te Papa to allow them, as well as “official” representatives from the Catholic Church, to present their case for the removal of the two exhibits.

It was not until 2 April that the Catholic Communications Office was first advised by Te Papa officials of the 18 March Board decision to withdraw the offer of an “open dialogue”. It was following word of this that Cardinal Williams went public accusing Te Papa of a total “lack of sensitivity” towards Christians.

Over 30,000 New Zealanders signed one petition alone, forwarded by the Catholic Communications Office to the MoNZ Board via Ms Cheryll Sotheran on April 13, calling for the immediate removal of the offending ‘art’ exhibits. It was ignored. Through the course of the exhibition hundreds of protestors wrote and phoned the Human Rights Commission (over 500 recorded in first month) and radio talk-back shows over the matter and hundreds wrote letters to newspaper editors throughout the country, Ministers of the Crown, The Solicitor General, and the MoNZ Board and officials, etc., calling for the immediate removal of the items.

The vast majority of these letters published in newspapers throughout the country from early March onwards, contained well-reasoned and persuasive arguments expressing sincerely held concerns. An *Evening Post* telephone poll (14 & 16 March) involving 4473 individual callers indicated that over 80% of respondents supported the *immediate* removal of the offending items. The 27 ministers and elders representing all Presbyterian and co-operating parishes in South Canterbury, wrote to Ms Sotheran expressing their “dismay and revulsion” at the display of the “Virgin in a Condom” (*The Timaru Herald*, 17 March, p. 3). Hundreds protested outside and inside the museum every Saturday in prayer-vigils from 7 March to 25 April.

A parliamentary motion calling for MoNZ officials to remove the “deeply offensive” *Virgin* statue and an “equally insulting” work called “Wrecked” was proposed by Napier MP Geoff Braybrooke. The motion, which was never put to the vote because Mr Braybrooke had failed to file it in time to give MPs sufficient notice to consider it before

the vote, was supported by the Leader of the House and Wairarapa MP Wyatt Creech in its revised form. Mr Creech had written to the museum passing on the concerns expressed to him by many Wairarapa people. “They find it deeply offensive. This is not a superficial complaint. They find this very, very deeply offensive to their beliefs, “ he said (*Evening Post*, 20 March, p. 3).

United MP Peter Dunne called for the British Council (sponsors of the exhibition) to withdraw the controversial artworks and Wanganui National list MP Peter Gresham spoke out saying the national museum should not display exhibits that cause offence. Four Maori MPs from NZ First – Tukoroirangi Morgan, Tutekawa Wylie, Rana Waitai and Minister of Maori Affairs, Tau Henare - supported calls for the removal of the works (*Evening Post*, 11 March, p. 3). It is noteworthy that Te Papa appears to have breached the Coalition Agreement. The Estimates specifically identify two of the fundamental principles of that agreement as applying to Cultural Affairs:

“to recognise the crucial role of our cultural heritage, our shared history and that differences and diversity have developed which represent both challenge and opportunity...”

“to undertake government in a manner that generates pride in New Zealand values and character, that emphasises the interests of New Zealanders...”

There never has been any public apology for the “obscene affront” under the guise of “art” foisted on the New Zealand public, from either Ms Sotheran, who protestors held directly responsible, or from the Board (which was directly responsible for her actions), or the Minister who was responsible for Board member appointments and their adherence to clearly defined “performance functions” (see 1992 Act, pp. 4-5).

“In recommending persons for appointment as members of the Board, the Minister of Cultural Affairs ... [b] Shall have regard, in particular, to – [ii] The need for members to have knowledge and experience of, and commitment to, *the functions of the Board*, and the specific activities of the Museum” (emphasis added). These “Performance of functions” are spelt out clearly under section 8 of the Act. “The Board shall –

- (a) Have regard to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the people of New Zealand, and the contribution they have made and continue to make to New Zealand’s cultural life and the fabric of New Zealand society:
- (b) Endeavour to ensure both that the Museum expresses and recognises the mana and significance of Maori, European, and other major traditions and cultural heritages, and that the Museum provides the means for every such culture to contribute effectively to the Museum as a statement of New Zealand’s identity:
- (c) Endeavour to ensure that the Museum is a source of pride for all New Zealanders.”

It was the petitioners' contention (as expressed in letters of 6 April and 14 May sent to the Hon. Simon Upton) that the Museum Board and management had breached the "performance of functions" as outlined in the 1992 Act and that the Minister of Cultural Affairs was accountable to the N.Z. public for this breach. (The Minister's reply to a letter of complaint dated 6 April confirmed his unwillingness to get involved in the dispute. In a further letter dated 14 May, his "neglect of duties" as guardian of the Museum of NZ legislation was noted).

The petitioners considered it trite to suggest as MoNZ Board member and Wellington Festival of the Arts executive chairman David Gascoigne had, that because the decision made by Cheryl Sotheran was within her guidelines, any intervention by the board would be quite wrong and would raise basic issues about freedom of expression and censorship. The writer of *The Daily News* editorial (18 March, p. 6) called Gascoigne's view "nonsense" adding: "No freedoms are absolute. Even the most liberal of countries have a raft of laws that ensure they are not."

The MoNZ Board did not ensure that the "mana and significance" of a major tradition – namely Christianity – which has shaped "cultural life and the fabric of New Zealand society" was upheld so that "the Museum is a source of pride for all New Zealanders". Rather, by allowing the items to remain on exhibit throughout the course of the exhibition despite nation-wide protests, they deliberately chose to insult Christians and vilify and denigrate Christian belief.

The issue is not whether or not an "offence" was *intended* by the artists, as the Te Papa staff maintain (they claim the artists are innocent of any *intended* offence). But rather, the issue is that offence has been taken and deeply felt by tens of thousands of New Zealanders. There is a principle of law that one intends the natural and probable consequences of one's actions. It is therefore idle for Tania Kovats, who produced "Virgin in a Condom", to claim that she did not intend to give offence when it was patently obvious that would happen.

Only an ignorant and naïve person would *defend* himself/herself against the charge of using "obscene language" or serious "racial slurs" as defined in the law, by pleading: "Your Honour - no offence was intended"! (Cf. recent case of the South African rugby prop, Toks van der Linde, insulting a black Christchurch woman by calling her a "koffer" in a public bar. See *Evening Post*, 21 April. p. 2).

Vigorous and controversial parliamentary debates in the House of Representatives can only proceed if ground rules ("standing orders") are agreed to and followed. All MP's agree to this under oath. When an MP directs a recognised insult at a fellow member the debate stops immediately at the command of the Speaker of the House. The perpetrator of the insult is ordered to apologise to the victim and withdraw the remark. If he/she refuses, he/she is ordered from the chamber so that the free flow of ideas and proper

debate can proceed.

The MoNZ CEO, Board and management kept telling protestors that Te Papa was designed for the purpose of being a “forum for controversial ideas”. However, by insulting tens of thousands of New Zealanders they had broken the ground rules set out in the Museum Act of 1992 and their own policy defined in the Museum Exhibitions Policy 1992 (section 3.12). The latter states:

“The Museum assumes responsibility for the form and content of any exhibition displayed on its premises. *Any aspect of an exhibition which may be controversial or offensive should be identified* in the planning stages, discussed fully and approved at the appropriate level” (emphasis added).

In a letter of 8 June 1998, written in response to the Ombudsman’s enquiry into their refusal to release official information to protestors, the Museum admitted its full responsibility for the “form and contents” of the *Pictura Britannica* exhibition. The following question was put to Cheryl Sotheran in a letter of 4 May:

Which items from this Exhibition, if any, were identified as being possibly “controversial or offensive” during the “planning stages” for the exhibition?

The Museum replied in its revised response on 8 June:

“No specific works were identified as being ‘controversial’. The Chief Executive, on the advice of Te Papa’s Programming Team, reviewed the contents of the exhibition on the basis of the catalogue and concluded that *Pictura Britannica* was an exhibition that fitted within the Museum’s policy and concept. This is consistent with the Museum’s standard process for exhibition selection and development.”

The Chief Executive together with the Kaihau authority were “delegated ... the authority to approve short term exhibitions” by the Board (see letter of 8 June, Q.7).

Following nation-wide protests over the “controversial and offensive” items in the exhibition during the first two weeks of March, the MoNZ Board closed the door on “open dialogue” with the offended parties, in a decision made at its Board meeting of 18 March. Earlier that month both Ms Sotheran and Ian Wedde were reported in the papers as stating that the Museum would not under any circumstance remove the items, even over Easter (e.g. *Sunday Star Times* 15 March, p. 5).

The Board did not communicate its March 18 decision to the Catholic Bishops (one of the major ‘protest’ groups seeking dialogue) until 2 April (fax). Cardinal Thomas Williams, Archbishop of Wellington, went public following this ‘revelation,’ accusing the Board of being totally “insensitive” to Christians.

It is noteworthy that protestors' well-publicised concerns over Te Papa management and their request that they give a forthright moral lead to resolve this dispute that has divided the country, was not out of character with the moral leadership displayed by Sir Michael Hardie-Boys at the time. It was consistent with his recent forthright public criticisms of the suggestion by the Hon. Deborah Morris, Youth Affairs Minister, that condom machines be installed in every secondary school in New Zealand.

Sir Michael rightly argued that such an action funded by the N.Z. tax-payer would not address the real roots of the problem of unwanted pregnancies and STD's among young people.

Petitioners who wrote to Sir Michael, applauded his courage to address *the real moral issues* which they said "lie at the heart of these problems". They praised his willingness to challenge a Minister of the Crown who he clearly believed, was not only seriously mistaken, but giving a faulty lead on this matter which is crucial to public moral well-being.

Moral matters, argued the petitioners, were at the very heart of the Government's call for all New Zealanders to implement the suggested "Social Code of Responsibility". In a meeting with the Minister of Social Welfare, the Hon. Roger Sowry on 15 April, protestors pointed out that the code's guidelines must be both a call to individuals *outside* of Government and those *within* – in particular the Minister of Cultural Affairs – Mr Sowry's close colleague in Cabinet – the Hon. Simon Upton.

Directors of a publicly-funded national cultural institution who allow large numbers of New Zealanders to be insulted week after week, as we have seen at Te Papa, and make money out of the exercise, should resign or be directed to resign by a competent Minister who must accept responsibility for their actions.

The protestors concerns over Te Papa management addressed to the Hon. Simon Upton in an "open letter" of 6 April 1998, reported in the media (e.g. *Dominion* 7 & 8 April).

The issue involving the insulting use of a condom in a tax-payer funded exhibition and the blasphemous portrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ, the central figure of the Christian faith, as a bare-breasted female stripper surrounded by boozing revelling 'apostles', raises legal and moral issues which have created outrage, division, vigorous debate etc. throughout the country. The so-called "art" exhibits in question are "Virgin in a Condom" (1996) by Tania Kovats and Sam Taylor-Woods exhibit called *Wrecked* (1996)– a "reconstruction" of 'The Last Supper' painting by Leonardo da Vinci.

These so-called "art" works and their public exhibition at Te Papa were vigorously defended by Te Papa C.E.O. Ms Cheryl Sotheran, chief curator Ian Wedde, and the Board of Te Papa (e.g. see *Dominion* March 16, p. 1). These officials have recognised that they have caused great offence to tens of thousands of New Zealanders, in particular

many Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, those from other religions (including Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Ringatu and Sikh), religious agnostics and atheists (e.g. media correspondents Frank Haden and Alan Duff).

Members of Wellington's Faith in Action group – representing a number of non-Christian faiths, wrote to Ms Sotheran objecting to the exhibits. The Iranian ambassador Mohammed Sazegara, was the first signatory to a joint statement from the Wellington and Muslim communities deploring the two “art” works. An embassy spokesman, Reza Ghadami, said the ambassador wanted Te Papa officials to remove the pieces. “[Mr Sazegara] would wish Te Papa people to... apologise for what they have done and the insult they have caused to Muslims and Christians.” He called on the Government to intervene and force curators to apologise for the insult to both communities (*NZ Herald*, 14 March).

The exhibit involving the juxtapositioning of a condom and a cheap statuette of Mary the mother of Jesus (the original statuette was stolen from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in the wake of protests about the exhibition. It was never found. Kovats, who created the work as a multiple supplied another) has been described in the publication *Pictura Britannica: Art From Britain* (a 230-plus page exhibition catalogue on sale at the Te Papa bookshop, complete with foreword by the British Council) in the following terms:

“Kovat’s use of the Virgin could be considered fetishistic – particularly when she dresses it in a condom. The combination of the two originated as a formal accident but has subsequently acquired more intrigue via anecdote. The piece has emerged as a controversial talisman, eloquently encapsulating issues surrounding Catholicism, contraception, abortion and sexual identity. The divine female [Mary Mother of Jesus], swathed in multi-layered, vagina-like robes *is made phallic*. It is suffocated beneath a temporary, delicate, but nevertheless loaded symbol of male potency, rendering the object reminiscent of the *crucifix-cum-dildo* in *The Exorcist*. However, to suggest that it is merely blasphemous limits its potential as an art work. Kovats reproduced the piece as a multiple, the [British] Arts Council bought one and now refuses to exhibit it. She was shocked and amused to realise she had created what amounts to a piece of political propaganda ...” (p. 222 quote from *Art Monthly*, Oct. 1995). (Emphasis in italics added).

The description of the “Virgin in a Condom” as “fetishistic” is used here in its modern, “psycho-sexual” sense. In *A Gentleman’s Collection* (Te Papa Press, 1998), a booklet which went on sale at Te Papa on Good Friday and contains 32 “pornographic postcards” of nude French women, including prostitutes, Te Papa art curator Jillian Lloyd, co-author of the booklet, defines the term “fetishistic”. In her essay in the booklet, which was submitted to the Chief Censor for consideration for classification on April 17 because of the prurient nature of its material, she states:

“Fetishes added even more piquancy to turn-of-the-century nude photography. The word ‘fetishism’ itself had only recently begun to be used in its modern, psycho-sexual sense, in Alfred Binet’s ‘La Fetichisme dans l’amour’ which was published in *Revue philosophique* in 1887. Sexual fetishism is a complex phenomenon, but in the context of ‘naughty’ postcards it might suffice to define fetishes as signifiers of the sexual woman, be they silk panties, black stockings, bottoms or breasts. These become the focus of the image, to the point that they can stand in for the woman, and themselves become the objects of desire” (p. 45)

Thus, according to the exhibition catalogue the “Virgin in a Condom” exhibit can be “considered” a “signifier of the sexual woman”. The condom is representative of the vaginal lining and the figure of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is rendered a “phallic” object – a “loaded symbol of male potency”. The complete item, seen in this context, is “reminiscent of the crucifix-cum-dildo in *The Exorcist*.” (A dildo is a sex toy shaped like a male sex organ which can come complete with vibrator unit). The quoted ‘explanation’ of the exhibit admits that it is at least in part “blasphemous” (“...to suggest that it is merely blasphemous...”).

The sexually explicit word ‘images’ defining the ‘meaning’ of the exhibit to the public were presented via the official exhibition catalogue, and tape commentary supplied to exhibition visitors. The catalogue introduces Kovat’s exhibit in the following terms:

[It] “is a multiple work, poetic and potent with social tension. It condenses a range of social questions within Catholicism that are historically resonant and nagging as the sculpture is tiny and smooth in its caul of latex – a haplessly secular, aprotropaic emblem of modern times!” (p. 47)

The blasphemous nature of the “Virgin in a Condom” and *Wrecked* exhibits formed the basis of a praiseworthy and courageous attempt by the Hon. John Banks M.P. and Fr. Meuli of Mt St Mary’s, Auckland, to bring criminal charges against the Museum of New Zealand under sections 124(1) of the Crimes Act 1961. However, the Solicitor-General, John McGrath Q.C., ruled against proceeding with a prosecution based on the charge of “public blasphemy,” arguing that the “value” of “freedom of expression” (safeguarded, he said, under the Bill of Rights) was more important than the fact that the ‘art’ exhibits were deemed by many tens of thousands of Christians to be “blasphemous” and an “obscene affront” to their beliefs, and that many of them had appealed to the Museum officials for their removal.

The blasphemous and offensive nature of Sam Taylor-Wood’s version of Leonardo’s ‘The Last Supper’ is evident from the official *Britannica* description of this exhibit:

“Taylor Wood’s fascination with the elongated landscape format photograph is wittily used in *Wrecked* (1996), a reconstruction of Leonardo’s painting ‘The Last Supper’. Placing it in a contemporary setting using friends as apostles and

modern-day props implying a booze-up more than a sedate supper, ... Christ is portrayed as a woman, but Taylor-Wood shuns the obvious tactic of inserting a woman in a 'feminist' stance, instead Christ becomes something between a naked 'angel' and a stripper. She stands outstretched, behind the seated 'apostles' who ignore her, suggesting that she lies outside their space. The effect is similar to that of adding opera in some of her other works, that is to say, a high art moment is ambiguously grounded in an image of more mundane characteristics. Again what seems expressive of emotion and joy even, is out of reach, lying beyond the shadowed space of the drunken revellers, but nevertheless at the centre of the image, and as such, suggesting some kind of redemption. Taylor-Wood's rendering of the 'Last Supper' denotes her wide-ranging approach to Western culture." (pp. 228-29)

This insulting "reconstruction" of a famous painting portraying Christ's last meal before His agonising Crucifixion and death on behalf of sinful humanity – a meal which is the basis of the Mass in Roman Catholic teaching and the Eucharist/Lord's Supper in Protestant teaching – is a blasphemy against the Person and the Work of Lord Jesus Christ.

Te Papa relied on Stuart McKenzie, a theologian/film writer, to defend its decision not to remove the two controversial items, in a live TV debate screened on TV 3 (Monday 13 April). McKenzie conceded that the two items were "undoubtedly blasphemous," qualifying this by adding that they were "necessary sacrilege" by one from within the Roman Church. Here he was quite wrong, as Kovats, while having attended a Catholic school in her youth, is not a practising Roman Catholic.

Protestors believed that the Hon. Simon Upton was ultimately responsible for the offensive actions of the Board – actions that were in breach of its "Performance of functions" as defined in the 1992 Museum Act. They contended that he had more than sufficient time to examine the case against the Board and senior Te Papa officials and call them to account.

Those who petitioned Sir Michael, requested that he advise the Board of Te Papa and in particular C.E.O. Cheryll Sotheran to apologise to the tens of thousands of New Zealanders they had insulted through their management decisions which have led to breaches of the 1992 Act. They noted that Simon Upton had failed to instruct the Te Papa Board and directors to apologise.

Those who petitioned Sir Michael sent him a copy of an article from *The Spectator* by Roger Kimball, forewarning of the future types of exhibits that may well be on show at Te Papa if the present Board, C.E.O. and chief curator retain their well-paid positions and maintain their 'enlightened' philosophy of using the 'justification' of "freedom of expression" to insult Christian faith, while at the same time tip-toeing 'softly-softly' in the name of "political correctness" and "cultural sensitivity" when it comes to

potentially offensive items from other cultural groups/religions (e.g. Maori).

Next on the menu of “coming attractions” at Te Papa they pointed out, may well be Andres Serrano’s work “Piss Christ” a crucifix immersed in the artist’s urine and presented as an “art work”. This blasphemous item exhibited in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1997 was defended as “art” by the Museum’s curator, Ms Bernice Murphy, the same woman who was commissioned by the British Art Council to act as curator for the *Pictura Britannica* exhibition. The “Piss Christ” exhibit featured on the Paul Holmes T.V. One programme in N.Z. in 1997 and was vigorously defended as art.

As the *Spectator* article notes, Andres Serrano exhibited another of his extraordinarily ‘challenging’ ‘artistic’ marvels in a New York gallery recently – “a group exhibition proudly devoted to the grotesque.... Among the advertised attractions were a photograph (by Andres Serrano...) depicting a man having sex with a dwarf, a photograph of a naked woman in bondage with her nipples pierced, a ‘Herculean wax sculpture the colour of ground meat’, a painting of ‘pigs and nudes feasting on each other with hot-dogs everywhere’, and ‘masks in plexi-boxes symbolising the atrocities being committed in Africa and other Third World countries’... Yawn.”

As Kimball points out; “... if you confine yourself to the official precincts of the trendy galleries and museums devoted to contemporary art, it sometimes seems that the entire lot has descended to the realm of the depraved, the moronic, the grotesque.... I am not saying the exhibition devoted to the grotesque was bad. It was not good enough or substantial enough to be judged bad. It was unpleasant, the way a nasty smell is unpleasant; but mostly it was just boring: a tired agglomeration of the tedious and futile, depressing the way a ragged homeless person is depressing....The truth is that the prevailing situation [in the world of contemporary art] is one that is good for cultural hucksters but bad for art – and for artists.”

Protestors called on senior MoNZ officials, in particular Cheryll Sotheran and Ian Wedde, and the Board to be held accountable for their “neglect of duties” and breach of the Museum Act 1992. They called for the resignation of these officials.

Throughout the “planning process” leading up to the exhibition, Cheryll Sotheran failed to show any “cultural sensitivity” whatsoever in terms of consulting with representatives from the “major tradition” (Christianity in particular) who she knew, coming herself from a Roman Catholic background, would be morally outraged and incensed by the two “art” works in question. By approving the exhibition of “Virgin in a Condom” and “Wrecked” she and the Board, who later endorsed her decision, *knowingly* breached section 8 (a-c) of the Museum of NZ...Act 1992.

Ms Sotheran and Ian Wedde knew that the exhibition of these items in overseas galleries had created outrage among the Christian community, before they approved the

exhibition, for this had been widely reported in the media (*Dominion*, 17 March, p. 6). Wedde admitted to their knowledge of these facts to Jenny Anderson on Radio Pacific in March after the protests began. The *Pictura Britannica* catalogue as noted, which Sotheran reviewed prior to her approval of the exhibition, states clearly: "... the [British] Arts Council bought [Tania Kovat's "Virgin in a Condom"] and now refuses to exhibit it." Jennifer Gibbs, one of the Board members admitted that the Board had been aware of the debate and controversy the exhibition had created overseas (*Sunday Star Times* 15 March, p. 5).

Many New Zealanders have concluded that Cheryll Sotheran and Ian Wedde approved these "art" works believing that the "controversy" would be good for drawing the crowds to Te Papa to see "what all the fuss was about". As one correspondent put it:

"It is my opinion that the market-driven, promotionally proactive management of Te Papa have deliberately contrived this controversy for the explicit purpose of fomenting ongoing interest in the museum. Te Papa got widespread coverage of its opening and now the plan must be to keep "our place" in the media spotlight to maintain public interest. We should see the whole issue for what it is – a publicity stunt" (Ron Resnick, *Nelson Mail*, 16 March, p. 9).

Insulting Christians may have been central to their marketing strategy and the MoNZ Board whole-heartedly approved this strategy by refusing to remove the "art" exhibits and endorsing Cheryll Sotheran's decision. The Museum officially 'justifies' such insults under the heading "risk-taking" and "freedom of expression". A recent official Te Papa promotional on the internet (copy encl.) states:

"The new museum will hopefully encourage *greater risk-taking* – as witnessed by the controversial *Pictura Britannica* exhibition" (emphasis added).

(<http://www.artnewsnewzealandand.gen.nz/museum.htm>)

It was the double standards of the CEO, chief curator, and Board that so angered and frustrated protestors. They contended that these officials would not dare experiment with "risk-taking" and offend Maori or so-called "Animal Rights" groups. For example, Waikato Museum director Jenny Cave cancelled the Auckland Dick Frizell's Exhibition, Portrait of A Serious Artiste, after Tainui kaumatua objected to it on the grounds that it deeply offended "Maori spirituality." (*Dominion* 10 March, p. 12). MoNZ officials would have undoubtedly responded in the same way to Tainui concerns. MoNZ officials had just recently approved a policy prohibiting the display of Egyptian mummies out of concerns for offending some minority groups.

The *Pictura Britannica* exhibition had already been 'censored' before it reached Wellington from the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art (*Sunday Star Times*, 15 March, p. 5). Curator Bernice Murphy had deliberately left out "obvious works" that would have caused offence to "Animal Rights" groups, works such as Damien Hirst's

pickled animals (*Evening Post* 10 March, p. 3).

MoNZ officials demonstrated their utter hypocrisy when they claimed that: (1) the removal of “Virgin in a Condom” and “Wrecked” following nation-wide protests would be an act of “censorship” incompatible with a free and open society, (2) items could not be removed because MoNZ was under a contract to deliver an “all or nothing” exhibition, and (3) they should not withdraw the items on principle because protests had only come from a “*minority group*”.

Christians were perceived as “soft targets” by MoNZ officials such as Cheryl Sotheran and Ian Wedde, targets that can be easily exploited for financial gain. *The Sunday Star Times* (15 March, p. 5) reported that “Mr Ian Wedde said he pushed for the [British] show as he believed the museum needed a *challenging* exhibition just after its launch. ‘I thought a controversial contemporary exhibition early in the museum’s agenda’ would be a good idea, he said.

However, if controversial ideas are presented, surely they can be presented in a way that is not offensive and insulting to museum visitors beliefs and traditions. The Museum of NZ...Act 1992 enshrines the very principles (see section 8a-c) that safeguard against the Museum becoming a repository of items that are “obscene affronts” to decent-minded New Zealanders.

The petitioners, all committed Christians in this case, concluded by stating: “We are seriously concerned not only about our rights to protection against the vilification and denigration of our religious beliefs in a tax-payer funded national institution, but those of all New Zealanders in our pluralistic society.”

Researchers: David Lane and John Mills SPCS

Appendix: OPEN LETTER TO THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF NEW ZEALAND
His Excellency the Rt. Hon. Sir Michael Hardie Boys

(see below p. 14)

OPEN LETTER TO THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF NEW ZEALAND
His Excellency the Rt. Hon. Sir Michael Hardie Boys

His Excellency the Rt. Hon. Sir Michael Hardie Boys,
Governor-General of New Zealand,
Government House,
Private Bag,
Wellington.

16 June 1998

Your Excellency,

“We, the undersigned, are requesting that the Governor-General of N.Z. assist us in resolving the dispute that we, the undersigned, along with tens of thousands of other New Zealanders, have with the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (MoNZ) Chief Executive, Ms Cheryl Sotheran, chief curator, Ian Wedde and other senior management staff, and the Board, over the “controversial” and grossly “offensive” contents of the recent Pictura Britannica exhibition (1 March – 26 April), for the following reasons:

- (1) the moral dimension.
- (2) the breach of the legislative requirements by the MoNZ senior management and Board.
- (3) failure by the guardians of such legislation.

Our key concerns are:

(a) Failure by Ms Sotheran and the Board to meet their requirements under the Museum of NZ...Act 1992 (sections 4 & 8a-c), Museum Exhibitions Policy 1992 (section 3.12) and MoNZ “mission” and “policy” statements. The stated “mission” of MoNZ, (based on section 4 of the 1992 Act), is:

“The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa is a forum for the nation to present, explore, and preserve the heritage of its cultures and knowledge of the natural environment in order to better understand and treasure the past, enrich the present and meet the challenges of the future.”

MoNZ’s stated principle of customer satisfaction is:

“Te Papa is customer focused – The needs and expectations of the customer are put

first and Te Papa will earn an international reputation for services and visitor satisfaction.”

- (b) failure by the Minister, the Hon. Simon Upton, to monitor or take action over this;
- (c) the moral implications.

Conclusion: We maintain that since the Governor-General appoints the MoNZ Board on the recommendation of the Minister, that it is appropriate for the reasons given, that he engage himself in resolving this dispute. We recommend a full public apology from the MoNZ CEO, Board and senior management, for the gross insult directed knowingly at a significant section of the NZ population – in particular Christians – who represent one of the “major traditions and cultural heritages” (as defined in the Museum of NZ ... Act section 8b) in our country, and hold in high honour Mary the mother of Jesus and worship her Son the Lord Jesus Christ – the Second Person of the Blessed Holy Trinity – as Divine.

Special note: No specific works were ever identified from the Pictura Britannica exhibition by Ms Cheryl Sotheran, as being “controversial” during the three month planning stages leading up to its opening (see letter of 8 June by MoNZ senior adviser encl.). She reviewed the contents based on the exhibition catalogue which contains material clearly identifying the items “Virgin in a Condom” and “Wrecked” as highly controversial and offensive. It states that the first item could be seen as “blasphemous” and was considered so controversial that “the British [Arts] Council now refuses to exhibit it”. The curator of the exhibition authorised the removal of some items from the exhibition “for space reasons”. The Board delegated to the CEO the authority to approve all Short Term Exhibitions. The Museum maintains that “no documentary record” exists of any discussions by Board members or management staff, relating to the contents of the exhibition prior to its opening. We have documentary proof that there has been a clear case of “neglect of duty” by Ms Sotheran and the MoNZ Board.

Petitioners [Signed below in original document]