

## Summing up a young artist's short life

By [Adam Gifford](#)

4:00 AM Saturday Feb 14, 2009

A young man goes to art school. He has energy, charm, an exotic name and an appetite for art theory. He proves adept at turning out ideas for theory-drenched conceptual pieces, which appeal to a certain faction of the New Zealand art world of the early 1990s.

He's even better at organising, networking, writing about the work of other artists, writing thank you notes, and all those other important things required to build an art career.

After art school he and some of his peers start an art gallery where other young artists can show their reifications of theory. (If you need to look that word up, you haven't read enough theory.)

He has a fascination for surrealist photography, particularly that of Jacques-Andre Boiffard, whose day job was medical photography. He explores medical themes in his work, always a giveaway sign of an unhealthy interest in recreational chemistry.

He gets a scholarship and enrolls for postgraduate study at a good California art school, which leads to the creation of a similar artist-run space in Los Angeles' Chinatown. He becomes a prominent writer and art critic for word soup journals such as *Art and Text*, *Semiotexte*, *Artforum* and *Flash Art*. Then he dies at the age of 34, overdosing during a visit to New York in 2002, where street drugs are stronger. That's the same age as Phil Clairmont was when he died almost

two decades before, but the volume of Giovanni Intra's art output was a mere fraction of the painter's – a few pieces in private and public collections. His sketchbooks, correspondence and collections of exhibition invites, posters, pamphlets and tracts are donated to various archives, including a boxload dropped off at Artspace.

The box sits under a desk until curatorial intern Kate Brett Kelly-Chalmers decides it might illuminate part of the country's recent art history.

"He was a fascinating and interesting person, not only for his art practice, which was really significant at the time, but for his other modes as writer, curator and for Teststrip, which was a significant artist-run space," says Brett Kelly-Chalmers. "He was a nexus of activity and discussion and in a way came to sum up a shift in contemporary New Zealand art.

"What people have said to me was when [Intra] was at Elam, there was this idea that theory sat external to the work. Intra and his contemporaries spent a long time looking for contemporary art theory that they fed back into their practice."

That's the perspective of the curator, who is trying to unpack this box of tatty fragments as cultural history. I try to unpack it as memory. I never met Intra, and never found the doorway in K Rd leading to Teststrip. When I first heard of him I thought the name was a construct, like the names his colleague



Giovanni Intra became a critic and gallerist.  
Photo / Jennifer French

Merilyn Tweedie uses to project her theory-laden contrivances.

By the time Intra got to Elam, the debate between regionalism and internationalism was well worn here. Intra chose, or was drawn to, the school of thought that art should be part of an international dialogue, so the same scattering of objects on a gallery floor could have been produced in Auckland or Amsterdam. His take on surrealism owes nothing to the curious southern Gothic strain which has infused the regional art DNA.

His story is like that of many young people who make their way to art schools, rather than study law or accounting. They learn some foundations, either practical or theoretical, shape some sense of identity, try making art for a while, then go off and do something else with their lives.

They provide an informed audience for the arts and, if they shift into more lucrative careers, support those who persevered by buying their work.

Intra stopped making art and became a critic and gallerist. Whether he would have returned to contribute to the arts in New Zealand will forever remain an unanswered question.

It's a bit like trying to do a show on Hamish Keith with a cutoff point at age 34. But as Keith's recent memoir shows, that's when he was probably just getting into his stride as a shaper of and contributor to the country's cultural life. As it was, Tweedie as Et Al got to represent this country at the Venice Biennale three years after Intra's death, marking the high point for that particular strain of strained conceptualism.

And up the road, Objectspace's annual *Best in Show*, which draws on the end-of-year shows at the country's craft and design schools, indicates the prominence of critical theory in the way the arts are now taught.

## **Exhibition**

**What:** Beginning in the Archive: Giovanni Intra 1989–1996. **Where and when:** Artspace, 300 Karangahape Rd, to Feb 28.

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