

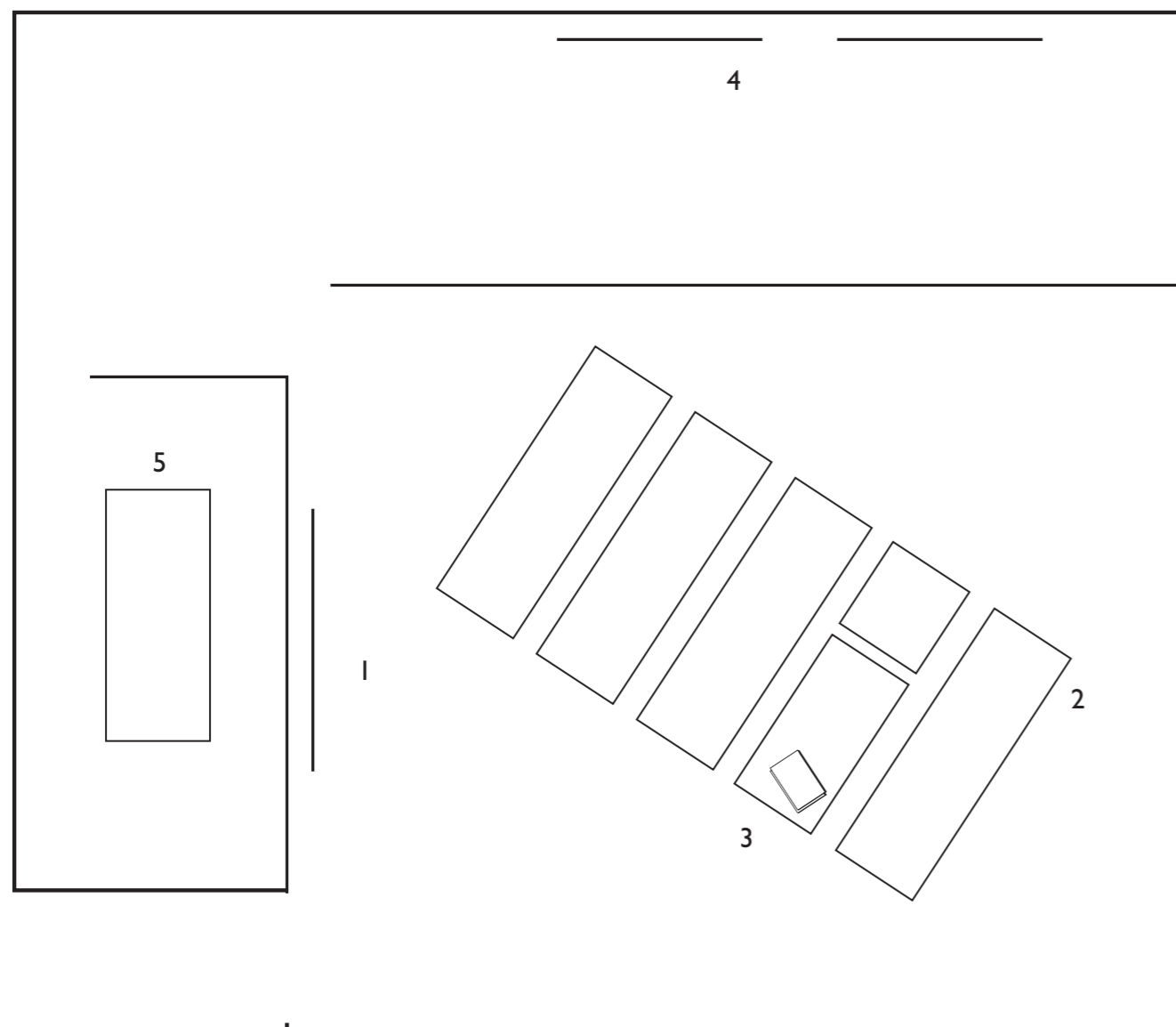
# BEGINNING IN THE ARCHIVE: GIOVANNI INTRA 1989–1996

Curated by Kate Brett Kelly-Chalmers

31 January–28 February 2009

Opening hours: Tue–Fri 10–6pm, Sat 11–4pm  
See [www.artspace.org.nz](http://www.artspace.org.nz) for talks.

## ARTSPACE<sup>nz</sup>



1. **365 Days**, 1991, 365 silver gelatin prints, pins. Collection of Jim Barr and Mary Barr.

2. Giovanni Intra archival material exhibited with the kind permission of Barbara Intra from the E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Additional archival material loaned from Ann Shelton, and Jim Barr and Mary Barr.

Photographic reproductions by Jennifer French, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

3. Reproductions of bound volumes of photocopied drawings

*Liquid Light*, 1994  
*Yellow Light*, 1994

4. Duplicate slides from the E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

5. Giovanni Intra ephemera exhibited with the kind permission of Barbara Intra from the E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Additional archival material loaned from Ann Shelton, and Jim Barr and Mary Barr.

Catalogues and publications from the Giovanni Intra estate held at ARTSPACE.

## NOTES ON THE FUTURE: BEGINNING IN THE ARCHIVE

Beginning in the archive presents a seductive possibility. It holds the promise of finding material traces of memory and myth, of uncovering forgotten meanings and determining new interpretations. Beginning in the archive suggests a conceptual folly. The archive is always beginning; it is always starting again each time it is witnessed by new eyes. The beginning is not a singular moment and the archive is not a singular form. There are many archives that form many beginnings. Beginning in the archive is a mythological pursuit. It is to be seduced by story, narrative and anecdote, to be convinced that fragmentary articles form greater and more significant meaning in a collective whole. Beginning in the archive is to believe that a collection of fragmentary material can speak of that which is no longer present. Beginning in the archive presents a certain impossibility, but a seductive impossibility, nonetheless.

The origins of this exhibition of Giovanni Intra's archival material at ARTSPACE begin not with an archive, but with a box of the late artist's catalogues and publications. Intra died in New York in 2002 and in late 2005, his mother Barbara Intra sent ARTSPACE a small collection of publications packed into a cardboard box. The quiet appearance of this box at the gallery belied the more complex and interesting problem that it presented: what does a non-collecting, contemporary art institution do with a box of catalogues belonging to an artist who has recently died? Or, more specifically, what does ARTSPACE do with a box of catalogues once belonging to Giovanni Intra, an artist whose reputation as a charming, erudite, shrewd and ambitious young art practitioner still lingers, however near or far, within contemporary New Zealand art discourses?

From his involvement in the influential Auckland artist initiative Teststrip, to his work as a writer and curator,

Giovanni Intra (1968–2002) remains a fascinating figure not only for his clever and challenging art practice, but for the agility and ambition with which he moved across these different modes of artistic activity. In addition to ARTSPACE's box of publications, a collection of ephemeral material relating to Intra's multiple artistic practices is housed at the E. H. McCormick Research Library at the Auckland Art Gallery. Taking the form of an "archive", this collection unites a diverse range of remnant material including photographs, contact sheets, test-strips, drawings, videos, slides, photographic documentation, notes, research pieces, newspaper clippings, postcards, original writing, correspondence and clothing. Intra left this material with his mother when leaving New Zealand for California in 1996, and the collection enjoys a somewhat haphazard arrangement, remaining largely uncatalogued or recorded<sup>1</sup>. The archive has a captivating appeal that lies in its zeitgeist quality; the potential for this collection to somehow capture the nexus of 1990's activity and argument that fed into Intra's multiple practices and those of his peers.

Giovanni Intra's art practice, although brief and youthful, was multifarious and, at times, provocative. He was interested in the potential and cultural value of transgressive gestures and mined the language of avant-garde movements including Surrealism and Punk for material. Intra's practice involved a well read, knowing and witty insurrection; an 'elegant radicalism'<sup>2</sup> that was versed, amongst a suite of other theoretical readings, in the base materialism of dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille.

Notebooks full of stylishly linear or furiously marked sketches, 'years of skinny drawings of fleeting ideas'<sup>3</sup> are inundated with possibilities; a constant dialogue of concepts and visual languages. Intra was moving

Thank you to the major lender E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

There are many people we extend our thanks to for their support of this exhibition. We would especially like to thank Barbara Intra for her kind permission to borrow her son Giovanni Intra's archival material; Catherine Hammond and Caroline McBride at the E. H. McCormick Research Library; Natasha Conland and Jennifer French at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki; Judy Darragh; Daniel Malone; Jim Barr and Mary Barr; Ann Shelton; Anna Parlane; Kah Bee Chow; Sam Hartnett; Sasha Savtchenko-Belskaia; Brian Butler and ARTSPACE's wonderful team of volunteers

through ideas at a pace. Artist and friend Daniel Malone described his mode of examination as a ‘spectre of scholarship; a force of enquiry and obsession, it is a sickness that desires to know too much.’<sup>4</sup> From medical wisdoms and religious ritual to historical legacies, corporate institutions, and the social discourses of 1990’s post-crash New Zealand, Intra engaged with a number of arguments and discussions. Systems of power and knowledge were taken apart and left undone.

Yet, Intra’s practice of “subversion” was laced with an engaging lightness, a stylish arrangement of critical theory and pun-scattered humour. Intra read avidly and drew into this practice an understanding of an academic encapsulation of social disorder. He wrote: ‘It’s all appropriated language, deliberately so. A ransacking of ‘subversive’ or ‘transgressive’ acts. I’m interested in gestures like ‘the fingers’, and how they work in culture. But I hope my interest isn’t contaminated too much either by revivalism, fetishism or historical pedagogy, although I admit it has elements of all of the above.’<sup>5</sup>

Intra was part of and propelled a mode of critical engagement with contemporary art practices that prospered with Teststrip, the Auckland artist run space he founded along with a group of artists and friends in 1992<sup>6</sup>. Teststrip offered artists an alternative exhibition space to the existing commercial or government funded galleries, but it also offered a critically switched-on dialogue, a chaotic yet committed engagement with contemporary art discourses. Driven by a collective energy and playfully harnessing the defunct language of the avant-garde (the collective’s theatrically posed group portraits were often orchestrated by Intra), Teststrip developed an autonomous context for practising artists and, basically, made things happen.

It was with a similar collectively independent spirit that Intra established the hugely successful Los Angeles dealership China Art Objects, once more with a group of people he had become friends with at Pasadena’s Art Center College

of Design<sup>7</sup>. In taking up a Fulbright scholarship to study a master’s degree in Theory and Criticism at the Art Center in 1996, Intra never wholly returned to his art practice. But he continued to pursue with similar energy and pace its trajectory of ideas and developed a highly regarded career as an art critic and writer (he was the West Coast editor of *Art and Text* and contributor to journals *Artforum* and *Flash Art*). The kernel of his sharp, astute and sometimes brash voice as a writer is evident in the early articles held in the archive as well as the professional and personal correspondence he filed away.

In that they end with his departure from the country in 1996, the archives housed by the E. H. McCormick Research Library offer an appealing pocket of time, a frame with which to look at the New Zealand based art practice and the life of Giovanni Intra. This exhibition makes a selection of material loosely beginning with the later years of Intra’s undergraduate degree at Elam School of Fine Arts (1987-1990) to the year he left for Los Angeles. However, the archive will never be an easily bracketed form or a conclusive collection of articles. As much as the relationship between Intra’s art practice, writing career and life was characterised by a certain permeability—artworks like the infamous ‘Studded Suit’, an op-shop outfit riddled with neo-Punkish studs for the Elam Ball, were worn and gifted to friends—so too the archive maintains a porous structure. As I write, additional deposits are being made to the collection at the research library where friends and associates of Intra see fit to have his ephemera made publicly accessible. There are also pockets of material held privately—a diverse range of items that means different things to different people.

As an arrangement of things from the past, the archive is buffeted by the variability of these meanings and how they anchor themselves in its form. How we begin to interpret and ‘speak of’ this collection of materials, how we determine its significance and contemporary worth without the guidance

of the artist who produced it, are questions that will continually remain part of its character. In essence, the archive is a concept, an organising principle whose relevance and shape shifts according to the contemporary moment. It is founded in the impulse to look retrospectively—a complex temporal movement between fragments of memory and their correlation to documentation and conceptions of authenticity and truth.

Much like Intra’s *365 Days*, 1991, a photographic series that was reputedly executed in one night, the archive is a concept that turns in on itself. As Jacques Derrida writes, the process of archiving material ‘produces as much as it records the event.’<sup>8</sup> The archive becomes entangled in its potential to authentically speak of the past. But as a vessel for imparting knowledge in the present, the archive has the slippery function of both confirming and prompting memory, validating and instigating the process of recollection.

The scientific method of analysis that *365 Days* parodies, a reliance on the tangible link film-based photography made between the moment captured and the material used to capture it<sup>9</sup>, pinpoints the authenticating promise of the archive. Intra identified this pseudo-scientific mode of presenting information in some conceptual art practices. He said of *365 Days*: ‘In that type of (conceptual) work the high serious ontological tone is absurd when you consider the banality of the act itself. The rigorous morality of this kind of conceptual work, the ethic of truthfulness, its scientific feel, all of it is so easy to manipulate, and quite manipulative in itself. I faked it.’<sup>10</sup>

Easy to manipulate and quite manipulative, an archive occupies a problematic landscape and has the capacity to house contention. This exhibition has been shaped by a curatorial desire to make Intra’s collection of material accessible to a public audience, and in doing so it places his archive onto a highly visible platform. A number of conservation and copyright restric-

tions have been made to the display of Intra’s archival material, but the greatest of these impositions has been the forced movement this collection has made from the private domain, through institutional jurisdictions and finally to the public realm of the exhibition space. We organise our lives around conceptions of the public, personal and institutional, yet the archive has been asked to cross the boundaries that demarcate them.

In their inception, items in Intra’s archive were not intended to have the overt public presence of his art works. Rather, this collection of material sat at the margins of his publicly visible practice and contains all the dud photographic prints, research notes, faxes to friends and associates, published and unpublished writing and other items that were kept for private reference. In this regard, the archive and any possible meanings we distil from its contents will always be consumed in a play of concealment and revelation.

Questions will be asked of what was not exhibited, what was not kept or meant to be displayed, what was not given space for meanings to develop. The archive accommodates a duality: its untapped archival form suggests the romantically dusty possibility of uncovering a story or interpretation that strays from the official record. Yet, away from the private realm and in an institutional residence the archive becomes the means of this record. As Derrida writes ‘There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.’<sup>11</sup>

There are some items that would have been included in this exhibition of Giovanni Intra’s archival material had copyright holders permitted their public display. I was initially disappointed at these restrictions, but have come to see that the exclusion of this material is part of the archive’s play of concealment

and revelation. This prohibition falls into the well-worn cliché that illicit material is all the more exciting and appealing for its taboo character. It is a social more that Intra took advantage of. He said: ‘Everyone who makes work has to live out the production of their own fantasy... There are aspects of my life where I do participate in areas which may be regarded by some as transgressive. But really what is transgression? It has to rely on the concept of a boundary, but culture isn’t just a wall and transgression isn’t just the act of breaking it. What’s to say the boundary isn’t a fantasy in itself?’<sup>12</sup>

In many ways, Intra’s archive works to continue and amplify the enigmatic impression that surrounds his memory. He had a perceptive awareness of himself, the social position of an artist and the mythology it tapped into. The funny nicknames Intra gave himself and others were just the face of his innate ability to make and maintain connections, weaving people into a playful and astute narrative that bridged any boundary between life and art. He once wrote to the publishers of a catalogue he was included in: ‘I appreciate being known as a ‘bad boy intellectual’ but would prefer to be historicised as ‘a polyglot born in May ‘68’<sup>13</sup>. It is this clever and intriguing, yet somewhat distant assortment of anecdotes surrounding Intra’s memory that made a small cardboard box of books and catalogues posted to ARTSPACE much more than the sum of its parts. It is the anecdotal mythology floating about Intra that meant that this box stayed under the desk of the ARTSPACE Curatorial Intern for three years, because we just couldn’t figure out a meaningful way of dealing with it. It is a mythology that is not demystified by this exhibition of Intra’s archival material, rather it is amplified and perpetuated. This exhibition is not a story about the past, or a tribute to Giovanni Intra, an artist who is dead. It is a story about his memory and how it will work its way into the future.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Leonard gives a great account of Intra’s archival material held at the E. H. McCormick Research Library and its relation to his practice in “Archives Become Him: The Giovanni Intra Archive.” *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture*, no. 2 (2008): 170-185

<sup>2</sup> Laird, Tessa. “A Tribute to Giovanni Intra, 1968-2002”. *Listener*, no. 1031 (2003): 54.

<sup>3</sup> Malone, Daniel. William McAloon eds. *Home and away: Contemporary Australian and New Zealand art from the Chartwell Collection* (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 1999), 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Intra, Giovanni in an interview with Barbara Blake “Germ-Free Adolescence”, *Art New Zealand*, no. 70 Autumn (1994): 71-73.

<sup>6</sup> Testrip ran from 1992-1997 in spaces in Vulcan Lane and Karangahape Road. Over these years the gallery’s board included Judy Darragh, merit grötting, Daniel Malone, Kirsty Cameron, Denise Kum, Simon Cumming, Susan Hillery, Guy Treadgold, Lucy Macdonald, Gail Haffern and Ralph Paine.

<sup>7</sup> Intra started China Art Objects with Steve Hanson, Mark Heffernan, Peter Kim and Amy Yao.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, Jacque. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Tran. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1995) 17.

<sup>9</sup> Intra once described scientific photography and the medical camera as "...a scopic butterfly net which was mated with language to form the empirical possibility of the clinical text." "Discourse on the paucity of clinical reality." *Midwest*, No.7. (1995): 41.

<sup>10</sup> Blake, “Germ-Free Adolescence”, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Blake, “Germ-Free Adolescence”, 109.

<sup>13</sup> Quote taken from a piece of archival correspondence and “Over The Net And Under The Table”. Barr, Jim & Barr, Mary <http://overthenet.blogspot.com> (accessed 05/01/2009).