



## FROM THE COMMISSIONER

It is with great pleasure that Aotearoa New Zealand presents *Front Door Out Back* by Bill Culbert at la Biennale di Venezia. I know that all who wander through this humbly titled but light-filled sculptural installation will be rewarded. I think of its rooms as a rich extension of 'The Encyclopedic Palace' that is the theme of the 55th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia.

Each time New Zealand contributes to the Biennale, we take pride in revealing the variety of some of our best artists' work. And whether or not—like Culbert—they now reside elsewhere in the world, we embrace this opportunity to show how proud we are of their achievements.

Few New Zealand artists have sustained such a creative practice over so many years to such international acclaim. Culbert's transformation of ordinary and often discarded objects into an extra-ordinary 'otherness' is uplifting, and quite literally so in the case of the suspended sculptures he has fashioned for La Pietà.

Despite its sometimes cheerful air of improvisation, nothing in *Front Door Out Back* is gratuitous. Combining light and things with rare economy, Culbert produces art that is austere, poetic and challenging in the way it invites us to revalue familiar things and focus our perceptions.

I join with the Honourable Christopher Finlayson, New Zealand's Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage, Deputy Commissioner Heather Galbraith and Creative New Zealand the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa in thanking Bill Culbert for his huge commitment to this project. We congratulate him on the marvellous result at la Biennale di Venezia 2013.

**Jenny Harper** New Zealand Commissioner, Venice Biennale 2013

## BIENNALE ARTE 2013 NEW ZEALAND PAVILION

Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà (La Pietà), Riva degli Schiavoni  
1 June – 24 November 2013 | Tuesday to Sunday, 10am–6pm



Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà (La Pietà), Riva degli Schiavoni, Venezia  
Vaporetto: San Zaccaria, La Pietà

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**BILL  
CULBERT**  
**FRONT DOOR OUT BACK**





## HOW TO FURNISH A (LIGHT) HOUSE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

Step into Bill Culbert's *Front Door Out Back* and you enter a living space of an unusual kind, a sculptural meditation, played out through eight connected spaces, on shelter, habitation and dwelling. Everywhere you look in Culbert's exhibition you encounter the furniture and fittings of everyday life: cupboards, tables, bookshelves, dinner trolleys, chairs, glass vessels on a shelf. But this house-load of objects is both unsettled and energised, thwarted and animated, by an unstable force—light.

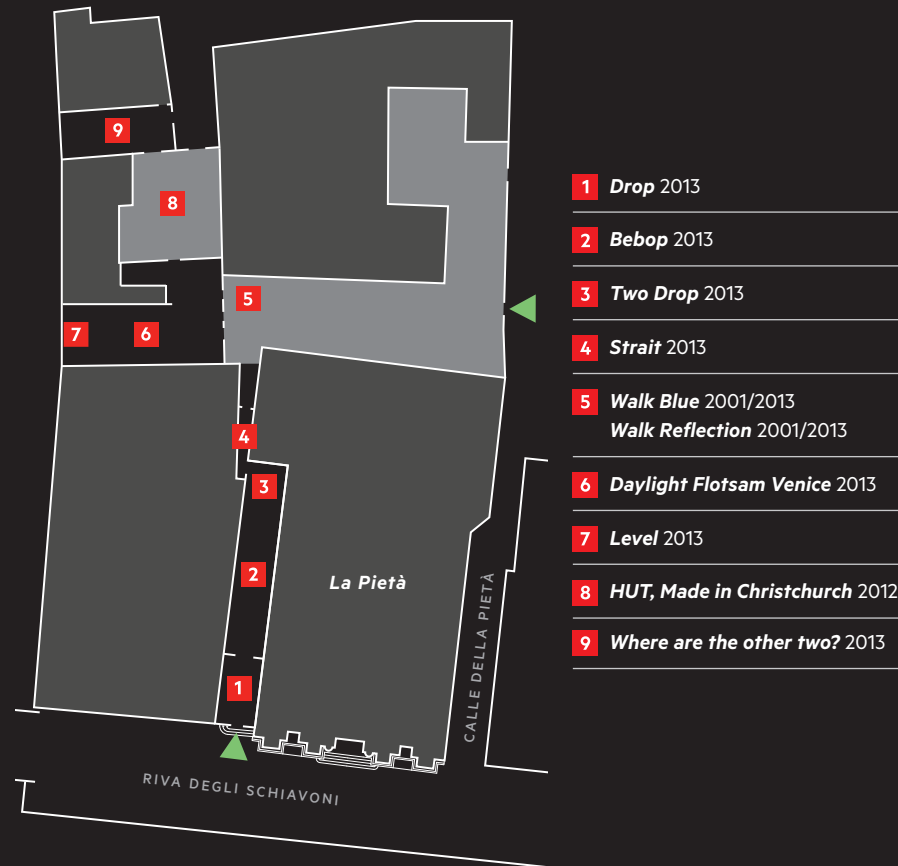
Culbert's major 'unsettling' takes place in the historic entry corridor of the Pietà complex, where fifty second-hand chromed-steel tables and chairs undergo a kind of do-it-yourself transfiguration, each one pierced, lifted and seemingly spun through the space by a single bolt of fluorescent light. In a garden courtyard further in, more light-tubes of this kind pierce the 'bodies' of two bulky wardrobes, turning these emblems of domestic order into unlikely outdoor light-boxes, one reflecting blue sky through the day while the other releases stored blueness through the night. Deeper still within the complex, in a room that opens onto the bordering canal, Culbert feeds 150 fluorescent tubes into a densely packed field of recycled plastic bottles, creating a carpet of colour which, seen against the canal backdrop, also suggests a jostling city poised just above water.

With their inexpensive, store-bought components and their mostly exposed wiring and switches, these works might be seen as Culbert's subversive response to the cult of Venetian light. Instead of Turner's sublime sunset light or Tintoretto's heavenly beams, he gives us the down-to-earth dazzle, the everyday sublime, of lights that plug in at the wall. His field of recycled containers might likewise be seen as a 'poor' retort to Murano glass, reminding us that splendour is as likely to surface in a local dump or landfill as it is in a tourist boutique. But *Front Door Out Back* responds especially to the improbability of Venice in architectural terms, the sense of a culture raised up like a mirage above the sandbanks of the lagoon, and preserved there, in an age of rising water levels, for who knows how much longer.

Culbert's central meditation on human presence and impermanence is the work called *HUT, Made in Christchurch*, which sits even deeper within the Pietà complex in a second open courtyard. A bare-boned structure made entirely from pillars and rails of fluorescent light, it recalls the historic image of 'Adam's hut in paradise'—the dwelling that supposedly originated all dwellings. And the way this light-house stands on sheet glass, and thus its own reflection, recalls any number of canal-side Venetian palaces. But it is also, as the work's sub-title reminds us, a work 'made in Christchurch', the New Zealand city where many buildings were destroyed by recent earthquakes. While making no direct or polemical comment on that event—Culbert's touch, always, is lighter—*HUT* is a fragile but vibrant homage to the human habit of making shelter.

Since his earliest experiments with light and perception in the late 1960s, Culbert has been an artist of dark rooms and light boxes. In Venice it is we viewers who find ourselves 'in camera', moving through shadowy spaces where disused objects do fresh work as 'transporters and stoppages' for light. What emerges is a building filled, not with 'personal effects', but with phenomenal and poetic ones: effects of flux, inversion, reflection, substitution, dazzle and shine. If this is a dwelling, it is one turned, as the title suggests, back to front and upside down—a space where tables and chairs float above you and the floor is carpeted with light. A house furnished with paradox.

**Justin Paton** Curator, *Bill Culbert: Front Door Out Back*, 2013



## BILL CULBERT

Born in Port Chalmers in 1935, Bill Culbert lived in New Zealand until 1957, when he received a scholarship to study at the Royal College of Art in London. Having emerged to acclaim as a painter in the 1960s, he then began to experiment with the electrical light which remains at the heart of his practice today.

Culbert lives and works in London and Croagnes, France, returning to New Zealand regularly. He has had solo exhibitions and been included in group exhibitions around the world, and is also renowned for a number of public commissions, several in collaboration with his friend and fellow artist, the late Ralph Hotere. He was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Fine Arts by the University of Canterbury NZ in April 2013.

LEFT: Bill Culbert *Where are the other two?* 2013 (detail from a work in ten parts). Furniture and fluorescent lights. Photography: Bill Culbert

OVERLEAF: Bill Culbert *Where are the other two?* 2013 (details from a work in ten parts). Furniture and fluorescent lights. Photography: ©jc.Lett