

Fiona Jack: Living Halls

Rhana Devenport
2011

*The archive is both a physical site – an institutional space enclosed by protective walls – and an imaginative site – a conceptual space that is forever changing. Although etymologically linked to public, historical space, the archive also has links to the essentially private, hermetic spaces of the cloister...*ⁱ

A collaborative archival endeavour, Fiona Jack's *Living Halls* is a project that embraces research, drawing, painting, oral history, conversation and exchange; it spans both islands of Aotearoa New Zealand and around two years of considered attention. Archives exist within this archive with its accumulations of paintings, drawings, photographs, data and audio files. I would like, in this brief essay, to discuss the archive of drawings (by Jack) and the archive of paintings (by others) that were presented as part of the exhibition component of the project alongside other grouped accretions of objects and materials.ⁱⁱ

Following the Second World War, the New Zealand government offered pound-for-pound subsidies to local communities throughout the country for war memorials to be constructed. A strong preference was indicated by the government for the formation of new community spaces as 'living memorials'. This approach contrasted with the earlier desire for memorials as symbolic, sculpturally-based public structures – with their air of finality and edification – favoured by the government after the First World War. Fiona Jack's *Living Halls* project is actively engaged in a re-drafting of history with its uncovering, contesting and reinventing of both empirical data and subjective accounts. The archive's relationship to the formation of history is a critical one. As Charles Merewether outlines:

One of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered. Created as much by state organisations and institutions as by individuals and groups, the archive, as distinct from a collection or library, constitutes a repository or ordered system of documents and records, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from which history is written.ⁱⁱⁱ

Living Halls engages with the historical and conceptual phenomenon of 'living memorials' embraced so fervently by mid-twentieth century New Zealand. The inherent nature of this artwork is informed by an approach not dissimilar to the concept of the living memorial. Jack's is a 'living work'; one that is both collaborative and functional in the sense of being an archive for the production of different knowledge systems associated with the halls. It steps away from the notion of singular authorship and any association with 'dead memorials'. By inviting people inside the work to participate rather than leaving them outside to observe, Jack opens out a space of inquiry and engagement. The project is an expansive one that has involved hundreds of individuals whose participation in, and knowledge of, the story of war memorial halls in Aotearoa is particular, personal, emotionally-charged, often communal and frequently under-appreciated.

Over the course of its mapping, the project has become activated by donations of time, knowledge and skill. Unexpected pathways were revealed as Jack's research at Archives New Zealand in Wellington unearthed rare treasures, her conversations with historians suggested intriguing scenarios, and her exchanges with art societies and individuals across the country proved bountiful. During the summer of 2009/2010 in Taranaki, when she was a Govett-Brewster Artist in Residence, Jack's photographic research rapidly expanded while her time drawing in the studio brought its own results. The *Living Halls* project remains a vast, exploratory and ongoing endeavour. Jack describes her artistic process as one of continuous learning and discovery.

The drawings remain a fundamental and intrinsic element within the project. In the exhibition space, a series of 48 drawings are carefully poised and pinned to a wall. Taking her cue from the visual evidence found in governmental and private archives, Jack, via a conscious re-drawing process, created a new meta-memorial to, in her words, 'a post World War Two moment of public aspiration, when communities engaged in the visionary process of describing what they wanted to become'.^{iv} The initial drawings of memorial halls could be read as imaginings of the possibility of making spaces to remember. Tracing a path from drawing to architectural form, Jack examined how ideas took shape and became part of a larger body or collective socio-cultural whole that stretched across Aotearoa. Jack is critically engaged in, as she notes; 'picturing how communities picture themselves'.^v

Jack's manipulation of watercolour, graphite pencils, ballpoint pens, ink, nib and paper surfaces is itself a gesture of invocation to 'recall' the previous intentions and undertakings of others. How close does Jack get to the emotional state that accompanied the making of the original drawings of several decades past? Is this her pursuit? By creating facsimiles of visible evidence – through faithful reconstructions of smudges, marks, lines, lettering and even mistakes – she considers the original efforts as ciphers of a particularly charged moment in this country's social formation, architectural passage and cultural narrative. Certainly the role that the original drawings played was instructional; the process of re-drawing, however, becomes an act of poetic regeneration in the face of this chain of rather plain, unpretentious and pragmatic buildings. Through re-drawing, Jack brings our attention to the residual marks, these drawn fragments, these traces of a particular moment in history, and thus ensures their new found visibility.

Rarely signed, and often in a different hand from the accompanying letters of request to New Zealand's Department of Internal Affairs, the original drawings remain as factual graphic descriptions of what was imagined by a specific community in the wake of war and bereavement. The proposed name of each building was often inscribed on the drawing in an underlined variant of the handwriting script of the day; insistent and emblematic of the role that each drawing played in a larger formation of place. Each drawing is penetrated by the personality, expertise and discrete charm of its maker, complicating the supposed neutrality of its explanatory and communally aspirational function.

Jack's task of regeneration is knowingly subjective and imperfect and, by their nature, these drawings can never be the same as their precursors. The hand-worked procedure embarked upon involves material becoming another material. Exclusion prevails through a conscious process of editing: the drawings that weren't archived, the drawings Jack did not choose to re-draw and the aspects of the drawing that she chose not to replicate. This new archive of drawings also becomes a reference to a particular history of loss: buildings that were not built, buildings that were built and became disappointments to those who had imagined them, buildings that were built

then neglected over time, and buildings that have since disappeared. As Paul Ricoeur notes in his discussion about the epistemological source of the archive, some discrimination is unavoidable in the determination of what constitutes an archive based on the 'presumed usefulness of the documents and hence the [insitutionalised] activity they stem from'.^{vi} Erasure and reconstruction are simultaneous processes of the archive.

The idiosyncratic creases, recreated carefully by Jack, are telltale signs of the transportability of the original drawings, delivered by post or hand. The folds heighten the verisimilitude of the original object; it is one thing to reproduce the image, but another to reproduce the object itself including the micro-destruction of the image that has occurred historically through this necessary process of folding. The folds, Jack explains, paraphrasing Deleuze, could be indicative of the way that there is no basic substance to which everything can be reduced. Matter is instead constantly differentiating; our universe, akin to origami, folds, unfolds and refolds.^{vii} The drawings' folds, in this way, might point to the way these halls are not static memorials to the fact of a war, but are instead spaces in which communities develop by coming together in a myriad of ways.^{viii}

These buildings register civic and familial cycles of gathering and celebration. The form of the buildings – developed sometimes within indicative design guidelines prescribed by the Government Architect of the day – eventually evoked a shared symbolic force within the national landscape and public imagination. Individually, the buildings varied greatly in visual appearance, often adopting the architectural mode of their immediate environment; whether it be the pragmatic vernacular of a shearing shed, the modest sociability of a domestic dwelling or the contained grandeur of a municipal building of hybrid or peculiar architectural lineage.

Elsewhere in the exhibition is a room that houses a series of fifty paintings of the buildings; each is attributed to its maker. Jack's invitation to painters across Aotearoa to make 'portraits' of their war memorial halls provides a compelling and potent avenue of participation within the *Living Halls* project. This is a commissioned collection, an orchestrated venture, an archive of others' cultural production, the invitation was consistent to all painters and all submissions were accepted. Jack's role as commissioner here is an interesting one in terms of the formation of this new archive which temporally catapults the war memorial hall phenomenon into a shared space of today. She has, with considered thought, eschewed the perhaps obvious pull towards documentary photography as a more objective (and possibly melancholic) archiving element within the project, and prefers instead to allocate this series (accumulated via her own camera and from various contributing photographers) to the digital and printed database component. The paintings, quite simply, bring multiple and subjective (even fictive) perspectives into the wider understanding of the buildings and their role. By engaging in the commissioning process Jack embeds these disparate and personal contemporary experiences into this multi-faceted archive. This process is not dissimilar to what Hal Foster describes as a 'gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory' that he outlines in his essay on artists' intervention in the archive. Foster's essay particularly looks at those archives associated with a history that defines itself largely through traumatic events.^{ix} Within Jack's *Living Halls* project, the trauma of war, although many times removed, remains as an echo.

Each painting is connected to an idiosyncratic relationship between painter and building. In bright sunlight, in driving rain, or under moody streetlamps, these buildings are portrayed with intimate care and attention. Sally Smith's painting, for example, depicts one of the country's foremost exemplars of modernist architecture,

the Whanganui War Memorial Hall of 1960, and registers her intimate association with the building that was co-designed by her father, Gordon Smith. Gary Freemantle, meanwhile, painted his portrait of the Paekakariki Memorial Hall from the 'flood mud' he collected beneath the building's floor. No doubt the youngest contributors to the project, Kristy and Tessa Smith, have made paintings of their beloved and local Kapuni and Kaponga War Memorial Halls; buildings now potentially under threat as a result of recent deaccession moves by a local government authority under economic pressure. Each work remains a trace of the connection between Jack and the painter, between the painter and the building portrayed and between the building and its originating purpose.

En masse, these paintings form a powerful collective chronicle of distinctive accords between individuals and architectural form, with attendant personal and social histories and emotional states embedded in the painted surfaces. Attendant too is a pre-modern European landscape and genre painting style; a mode of visual communication easily recognised and shared amongst regional art societies and audiences in twenty-first-century New Zealand. The visual language at play in these paintings is quite removed from the visual language adopted by the original illustrative drawings.

In *Living Halls*, public buildings are examined as portals to private lives lived and shared. Through this project, the buildings are acknowledged as both repositories and archival documents in themselves. Public notions of civic responsibility, architectural functionalism, fiscal exchange and socio-urban planning become inextricably linked with private experiences of aspiration, joy, pride, desire, grief, celebration and remembrance. The role of guardian and interpreter becomes participatory and is distributed amongst all involved with this living archive that continues to exist as a regenerative and imaginative space.

- i. Paul J. Voss and Marta L. Werner, 'Toward a Poetics of the Archive: Introduction' in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Spring 1999, Georgia State University, Atlanta, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3822/is_199904/ai_n8838484/.
- ii. *Fiona Jack: Living Halls*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth 19 June – 5 September 2010. The two other components of the exhibition were a series of 21 hand-carved and lettered timber 'roll of honour' boards that list the war memorial halls identified with each region of New Zealand, and an ever-expanding digital archive presented in printed form in ten folders on reading tables with the facility for visitors to contribute information.
- iii. Charles Merewether, 'Introduction / Art and the Archive' in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Charles Merewether ed., Whitechapel, London and The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006, p.10.
- iv. Fiona Jack in discussion with the author, February 2010.
- v. Fiona Jack in discussion with the author, June 2010.
- vi. Paul Ricoeur, 'Archives, Documents, Traces' [1978] in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Charles Merewether ed., Whitechapel, London and The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006, p.66.
- vii. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004, p.20
- viii. Fiona Jack in discussion with the author, April 2010.

- ix. Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse' [2004] in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Charles Merewether, Whitechapel, London and The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2006, p.144.