

First published by The Dominion, 2007

How to Read a Book

From Waitara to War – the Extraordinary Pairing of Ann Shelton and Frederick B. Butler

Mark Amery

A Taranaki amateur historian, collector and insatiable recorder of factual information both private and public, over 60 years Frederick B. Butler clipped articles and images out of newspapers or transcribed them, before then ordering them thematically and pasting them into old upside-down hardback novels and notebooks.

These volumes number at least 3500, and the themes Butler chose move idiosyncratically from the specific and local (Pukerua Park has eight volumes, Don Driver one) through to shelf after shelf devoted to such big themes as War and Birth. There are also those themes that only rate a page or two, leading to almost poetic sequences within one book: Spinal cord, Speech, Spider, Sprain.

This extraordinary library is the source material for a many-layered project by Ann Shelton, three parts of which form A

Library To Scale currently at Govett Brewster Gallery New Plymouth. This is the case of a fine contemporary artist impressively rising to the occasion that a remarkable find of material presents for her practice.

Part One is almost super-real in its gleaming, life-sized photographic re-representation of the shelved volumes as held by Puke Ariki Museum - all 142 shelves of them. These were shown earlier this year at Wellington's Enjoy Gallery. Six shelves remain empty, glinting as if asking us to fill them. Cleverly, they freeze the collection in a contemporary moment: they represent the absence of some volumes for filming digitally – and several of these I believe are the videoworks which make up Part Two of the exhibition, a selection made by Shelton to be read (as much as one can read a film) on screens, turned by someone else's hand, page by page from cover to cover. The blank pages or those containing the book's previous content when the clippings run out are even included.

Part Two appeared last year in Adam Art Gallery exhibition Archiving Fever but here they are better positioned, with the screens laid into tabletops. This gives more of the sense of studying a book whilst denying you the ability to touch or study at your own pace. In A Library to Scale how we read is very much under discussion.

The previously unshown Part Three provides photographs of selected pages from Butler's diaries, full of fascinating biographical clues in the form of confessions, rants and lists. This new element gives the whole project a new biographical and contemporary charge. Reminiscent of the eccentricities of the blog, Part Three brings firmly into consideration how we draw out through art biography from elements beyond a person (here they range from someone's drawing of Butler and a list of

piano pieces he played while he was being drawn, to a list over time of Butler's addresses for the safe return of the diary). It also emphasises how our desire to preserve personal memory publicly rubs up strangely against how it is read across time.

In all three parts Shelton with the camera plays with her ability like Butler to shape and control our reading— just as a documentary photographer framing an image might. Beautifully almost lovingly photographed, in Part One there's a photographic sheen giving seductive luminosity and depth to the detail. It makes you want to step across the gallery black line to get as close to the fictional surface as you can - whilst also step back and admire what illusory tricks the camera plays on the eye. Some familiar artist techniques are masterfully at play.

Denied the book's contents you're instead encouraged to find new readings and the traces of Butler's own biography through considering the spines. It provides powerful consideration of the tension in how, in this world of wikipedia and digital information overload, we freely read selectively across many sources, and yet most of this information is still controlled beyond ourselves.

We're also reminded that a library is as subjective a frame on the world as a photograph is in reflecting a specific location and time. In Butler's lifespan (1904-1982), War and Watersiders take up a large amount of space while Terrorism doesn't feature.

For Shelton as a former Dominion newspaper photographer the boundary between documentary and art is of keen interest. The space between the documenter and artist is charged for both Butler and Shelton here. There's a point where Butler's collection itself could be considered to take the shape of an

artwork. Where in so obsessively trying to take control of the chaos of the world through its cataloging he starts to, like some outsider version of artist On Kawara, change its perception.

Butler's use of an eccentric range of wallpaper designs to cover many of his volumes also sees them as a whole resemble another of Butler's interests - patchwork quilting (a selection of which are on display at Puke Ariki). Like the quilt the scrapbook collection brings the web of the world into the domestic domain.

We record things not just to preserve memory but to locate ourselves somewhere and from that location take some care of the world. The diary detail Shelton selects shows Butler's concern for everything from the Taranaki bushline to the morality of photography. A concern with the camera's location and its relationship with people and their memories – the camera as a transgressor and thief - is something Shelton has explored throughout her practice. In 1929, on discovering that someone has created an x-ray camera Butler writes: "We shall soon be in danger of being photographed and photographed (sic) that we shall not be able to call our souls our own."

As contemporary art looks hard at the value we place in the object and what an artwork actually does in the world, Shelton's own examination of what we value feels most timely. Art is returning closer to libraries and museums. Previously we gave knowledge status by binding it in leather. Butler takes hardbacks, turns them on their head and papers over their pages with his own version of the world. When these volumes are not covered cheaply in wallpaper we see how the original title has been crudely crossed out.

Then Ann Shelton comes along, denies us the actual physical books and elevates these mutilated spines to art. Part One is

like a play on those fake shelves of leatherbound books
designed to give your home status. Except this fake library is to
be read.

