

THE EVENT IN TRANSIT PROJECT

Kristin O'Sullivan Peren

I have measured the skies.

Johannes Kepler¹

The Event in Transit Project references the scientific expedition of the *Endeavour* in 1769 to record the transit of Venus on an expedition led by Sir Joseph Banks and captained by Second Lieutenant James Cook.² Their voyages were the stimulus for this venture and for another project, *Free Beauties* (see below). *The Event in Transit Project* (2014) is a stop-motion video (HD) from the series *Semi-Real Photographs*, an ongoing project which captures conjunctions and eclipses of planetary bodies, mega sunsets and the altered state of space light as it enters the earth's atmosphere, creating aurorae.

As a stop-motion piece, *The Event in Transit Project* brings to mind the early attempts by French astronomer Pierre Jules César Janssen to capture the motion of Venus crossing the sun in 1874 through sequence photography, in what is now acknowledged as the precursor to cinematography.³ The footage for the 2012 'Event' of the transit of Venus was captured in the South Island, during the second transit of the 2004 and 2012 pairing, using a mix of old and new technology – a camera obscura and a digital camera.

The recording used in the project captures the very rare moment when the planet Venus travels across the front of the sun, witnessed on earth as a black dot tracking across the sun's disc. Transits of Venus are among the rarest of predictable astronomical phenomena, and are only visible for a brief period and only at certain locations on earth.⁴ In addition, cloudy skies or bad weather on the day means that the phenomenon is rarely seen in person. Thus, awakening on the morning of 6 June 2012 to a forecast of snow and foul weather in Dunedin, I held out little hope. However, the day turned out to be perfect for viewing the transit.

The original footage, reframed as *The Event in Transit Project*, allows participants to experience this once-in-a-lifetime moment and to interact with it, creating their own unique 'Event' by being photographed with the installation and by tagging into a Facebook page. The original footage plus this interactive material are being added to the digital Venus Time Capsule, part of a digital archive that will form part of future Transit of Venus documentation – the planetary alignment next occurs in 2117.

Interrogating the notion of an Event in Transit, what is really happening when some *thing* happens? An Event can be an occurrence that shatters ordinary life, a radical political rupture, the emergence of a religious belief, or an intense experience such as love. After an Event nothing remains the same, even if there are no obvious changes. What remains after the Event is the Archive. An Archive is a collection which holds a selection of works, views and itineraries which can only be read together after the Event. My work deals with both the Event and the importance of the Archive – the Archive as an entity, the integrity of the Archive and the Archive as a means of honest engagement.



Figure 1. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren, *The Event in Transit Project* (2014). The artist's hand follows the transit, Dunedin School of Art, 2014. Photograph: Ted Whittaker.

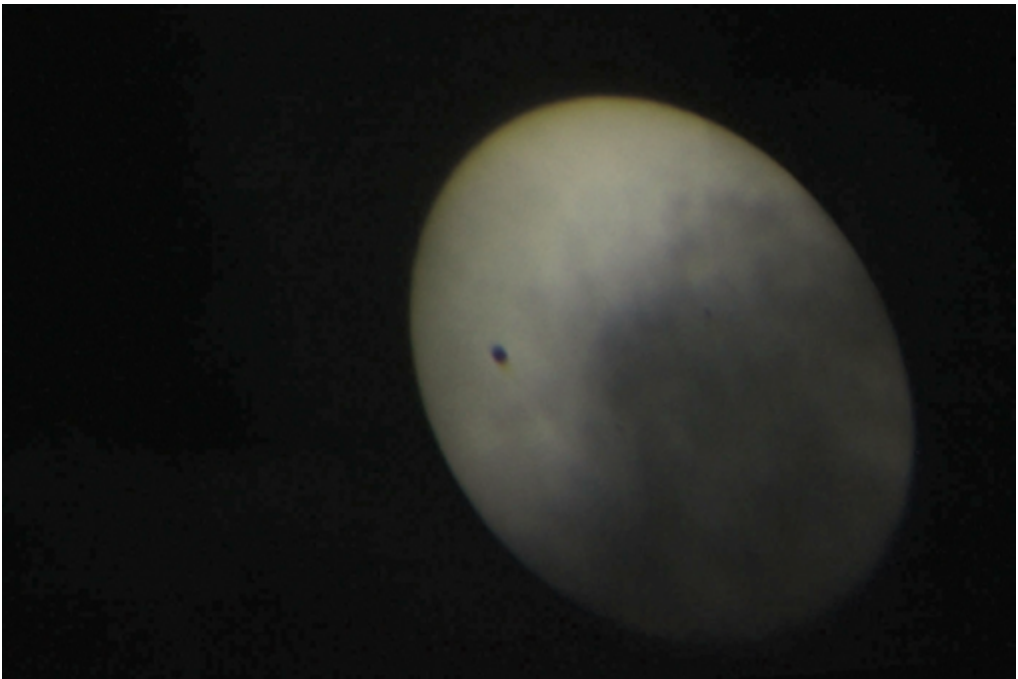


Figure 2. Still from *The Event in Transit Project*. Photograph: Ted Whittaker.



Figure 3. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren, *Free Beauties* at LUX, Wellington, 2013.

FREE BEAUTIES

Following Cook's unsuccessful mission to record the 1769 transit, he received a second set of instructions from Banks to go on a further voyage to discover the Terra Australis Incognita or "unknown land of the South."⁵

You can not see light unless there is darkness.

A second work, *Free Beauties*, is a light work that once again picks up on the voyage of the *Endeavour*, but this time relates to the second part of Cook's mission. It marks a moment in time, from the sighting of land in October 1769 and the gathering of flora and fauna by expedition naturalists Banks and Daniel Solander at Tolaga Bay. *Free Beauties* is a homage to a unique moment in *time* and *habitat* captured in the original botanical pressings, which were preserved between printed sheets of a critique of John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost* by Joseph Addison.⁶ These specimens eventually came to rest in specially prepared 'solander' boxes in museums in Britain and New Zealand. In this way, they have become their own time capsules, signifying this moment of engagement in the newly discovered environment.

In *Free Beauties*, the pressed flora become part of the metamorphosis between the two worlds – Banks's and our own – as reinterpreted in the light work. *Free Beauties* is an epoxy resin, LED light sculpture which illuminates the viewer's space through a pulsating, shifting light, digitally directing the narrative across the tides of centuries. An algorithm extracted from the story, and using the historical and botanical sources (including the marks left on the pages between which the specimens were pressed), structures the pulsing of the lights.

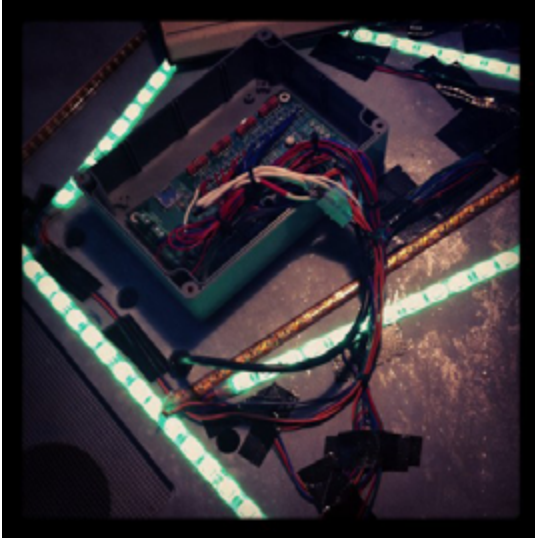


Figure 4. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren, *Free Beauties* (2013), detail of the technology used.

Free Beauties explores the Archive in search of the modern sublime. The 'beauties' named in the title of the work can be read in the layers of shifting light as an element which covers and hides the structure of the sculpture, as well as the materials and new technologies used in the making of the object. Through altered states, format shifts and innovations in technology, the piece questions how these in turn might create social change. It is a contemporary response to ecological concerns and identity in postcolonial New Zealand. When the Archive is lacking or 'disobedient,' as an historical source it is a disruptive element as it engages in sleight of hand with our histories. Historically, manufactured utopian states are the product of societies that pursue their 'progressive' ideals at the expense of a lost paradise. My light work explores the notion of 'paradise' found and lost, post the voyage of the *Endeavour* and asks the question, "Is it what we have now or what we have lost?"

My two projects deal with the illusion of the Archive. *Free Beauties* is a rebellion against the role of the Archive and its selective memory in the postcolonial history of New Zealand, whereas the digital markings recorded for *The Event in Transit Project* form the starting point for a 'softer' Archive. With its digital recording of altered states of space light, *The Event in Transit Project* presents a starting point comparable to the original pressings collected by Banks and Solander for the Banks and Cook *Florilegium*. The content of the perceived Archive changes as new archival material is "discovered" and released.



Figure 5. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren, *Free Beauties* (2013), stills from video by Ted Whitaker.



Figure 6. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren, *Free Beauties* (2013), stills from video by Ted Whitaker:



Figure 7. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren, *Free Beauties* (2013), stills from video by Ted Whitaker:

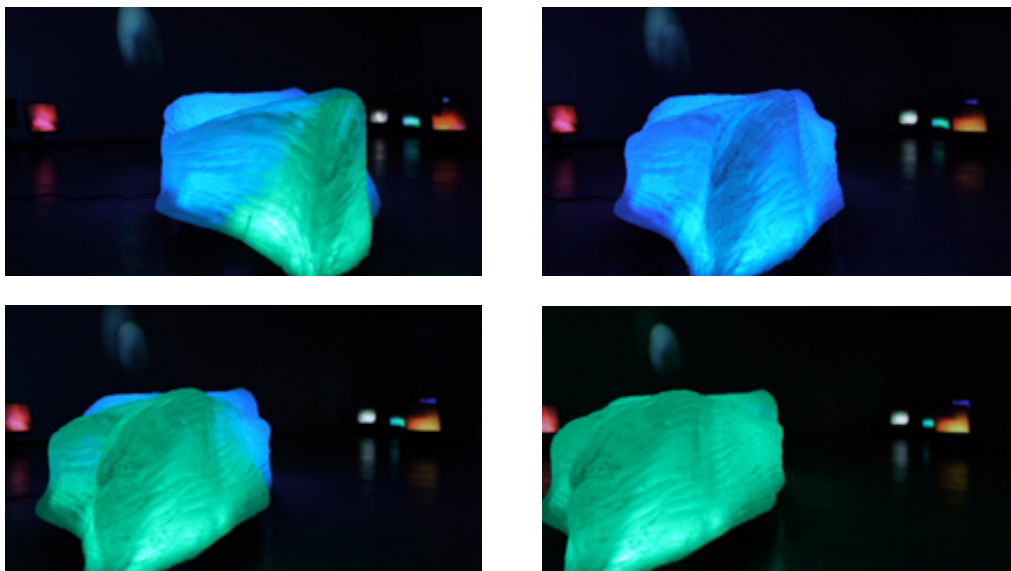


Figure 8. Kristin O'Sullivan Peren, *Free Beauties* (2013), stills from video by Ted Whitaker:

As a multimedia artist, **Kristin O'Sullivan Peren** responds to extremities of land, language and object. Her work has grown out of her background as a printmaker and has developed through working with hands-on materials and processes. Her large-scale projects have included photographic, sculptural and electronic materials, using both digital and analogue technologies. Recent large-scale works have involved a unique process using LED lighting and cast resin. Kristin exhibits locally and internationally in public spaces and contemporary project galleries and has participated in international art projects, residencies and festivals. Kristin completed a MFA at the Dunedin School of Art in 2014. *Free Beauties* was shown at the LUX 2013 light festival in Wellington.

- 1 *Mensus eram coelos, nunc terrae metior umbras! Mens coelestis erat, corporis umbra iacet.* "I measured the skies, now the shadows I measure! Skybound was the mind, earthbound the body rests." Arthur Koestler; *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 247.
- 2 Historically, the transit of Venus was important for mapping and in particular naval navigation. In the eighteenth century, longitude was difficult to determine. Accurate observations and measurements taken during each pair of transits increased

the accuracy and calculation of solar distance, essential for establishing longitude. The transit pairing which occurred in 1874 and 1882 coincided in Aotearoa New Zealand with a period of increased European settlement and extensive surveying of land. Into this context of pushing back the known frontiers of the land from an original *terra incognita*, international astronomers arrived once again, this time equipped with state-of-the-art technology with which to survey the skies.

- 3 Luke McKernan, "The Transit of Venus," *The Bioscope*, <http://thebioscope.net/category/pre-cinema>. The motion recorded by Pierre Jules César Janssen was revisited by Simon Starling in his film *Black Drop* (2012), in which Starling plotted Janssen's recording, hampered by the "black drop" effect, which occurs when Venus's edges smear those of the sun's, making accurate observation impossible. See "Excerpt of Black Drop – Simon Starling," <https://vimeo.com/67220997>.
- 4 The next transit of Venus will appear in New Zealand skies on 10-11 December 2117, making it unlikely that anyone alive today will be able to witness this historic event. For a complete list, see NASA's *Six Millennium Catalog of Venus Transits: 2000 BCE to 4000 CE*, <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/transit/catalog/VenusCatalog.html>.
- 5 Rex and Thea Rienits, *The Voyages of Captain Cook* (London: Hamlyn, 1976), 28.
- 6 Nigel Clark, "Infectious Rhythms", in Allan Smith (ed.), *Bright Paradise*, the 1st Auckland Triennial, March–April 2001 (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 2001), 25-32, http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/media/6166886/triennial_2001.pdf [accessed 24 June 2015].