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Tom Cardy's blog at dompost.co.nz

The Arts

Passion for the pixel

An obsolete toy camera from the 1980s has become an artist's must-have tool. **Tom Cardy** talks with one of its champions, Gerry Fialka.

MORE than 20 years ago, American toy company Fisher-Price produced a toy video camera called a PXL 2000 camcorder, aimed at 10 to 16-year-olds.

Through the eyes of someone in 2008, the plastic PXL 2000 looks like one of the first big and chunky video cameras that the public could buy, which used full-sized video cassettes.

The PXL 2000 in 1987 cost about US\$100. Instead of using videotape, it recorded sound and images to common audio cassettes. The trade-off was lower sound quality, and pictures in black and white comprised of 2000 pixels rather than the 150,000 seen on the average television.

The images have a dream-like look, as if it's an old, fuzzy memory playing back in your head.

About 4000 of the camcorders were made over two years, but few in Fisher-Price's target market embraced the toy and many who got them soon lost interest. But instead of disappearing, the PXL 2000 has become the beloved tool of artists and film-makers, so much so that tomorrow the Film Archive and Massey University's Blow 08 arts festival have brought an international touring film festival, PXL This, to New Zealand.

In tow is the film festival's founder and organiser, American Gerry Fialka, a "media ecologist" who wears many hats.

In Blow 08 last weekend, he also held workshops on fake experimental films and documentaries, and on subversive artists and media pranksters.

To interview Fialka about pixel video films and their rise in the past 20 years, is to take part in a banquet about the history of art, film and the media. The references, quotes and anecdotes come thick and fast, and include media theorist Marshall McLuhan, dramatist and filmmaker Jean Cocteau, impressionist painter Georges-Pierre Seurat, whose pointillist technique eerily prefigures pixels, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and avant-garde rock star Frank Zappa, for whom Fialka worked as an archivist.

Fialka is passionate about pixel films, whether they are less than a minute long or are two-hour features. They range in subject and technique from dramas and music videos, to experimental and documentaries.

Many are by amateurs. The festival includes a simple four-minute film on flowers by eight-year-old Juniper Woodbury.

Established film-makers have incorporated it into mainstream movies, including Michael Almereyda in *Hamlet*, starring Ethan Hawke. Established artists have used them.

A big highlight for Fialka is the inclu-



Dreamy expression: images from pixel films.

Pictures: MAARTEN HOLL

Moving art: Gerry Fialka created the PXL This film festival in 1991 and now gets about 30 new films submitted each year.

Pictures: MAARTEN HOLL

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Gerry Fialka

sion in the festival of pixel films by Massey University creative-arts lecturers Struan Ashby and Roy Pankhurst. The two mix in state-of-the-art digital techniques, which excites Fialka and others, although some purist pixel filmmakers avoid any digital trickery.

Fialka, who at first was unimpressed with the PXL 2000 camera when it was released, began the annual PXL This film festival in 1991. He now gets at least 30 new films submitted a year.

The films have also been considered art since the early 1990s. When Sadie Benning was 15, she got one of the cameras for Christmas from her avant-garde film-maker father. Like Fialka, she wasn't instantly hooked, but later recorded diary-like confessions to camera, years before it became a standard on reality television and YouTube. By her mid 20s, her "pixelvision" films were being shown at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

What Fialka loves about the camera is

its ease of use. Anyone can make a film, as he did himself years ago.

Some pixel films have also been dubbed "moving image art". Fialka doesn't hesitate in defending the label.

"Both Andy Warhol and [Marshall] McLuhan said art is anything you can get away with. Frank Zappa said art was anything you make and sell. So it's this whole thing with words and how we define what words are.

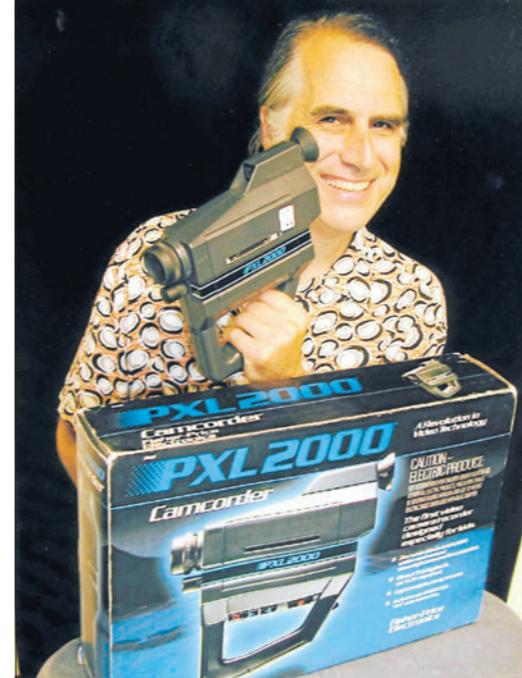
"When you say: how is pixel vision 'moving image art?', it's simply a tool that someone can express themselves with."

"We already have this history of what people do with moving cameras in what we do with motion pictures. The first 20 years of the history of movies in cinema was experimental. Then narrative came along and [Birth of a Nation director] D W Griffiths stuck a copy of Charles Dickens in his back pocket and that's all we've got back. Let's use this medium for what it is — it's moving and it's images. It makes absolute sense that we can call it art, because it's expressing moving images."

Fialka says he's used to detractors who say: "Oh, all you are doing is taking a cute failed kids' toy and hoicking it up and calling it art".

"I'm doing that, too" he adds, laughing.

"It's all ends of the spectrum. When you see the eight-year-old's piece, it looks like [pioneer photographer] Man Ray's rayographs, where he made photos without a camera. Some of the imagery was like that, and she didn't spend time lighting it to white light."



rayographs, where he made photos without a camera. Some of the imagery was like that, and she didn't spend time lighting it to white light."

"When you shoot in video or film, you spend a lot of time setting up the lighting. With a pixel camera, you just turn on a lamp, and, man, it's amazing how sensitive it is to white light."

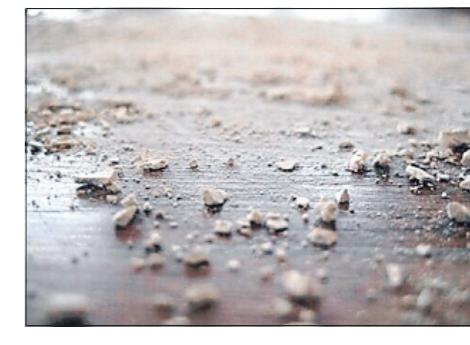
■ The Best of PXL This, Film Archive, tomorrow, 5pm.

Medium of choice: Gerry Fialka with one of the 'toy' pixel cameras released in 1987.



GERMAN **Maria Kliegel** is one of the best-known and revered cellists alive today, with some of the buzz surrounding her reminiscent of Jacqueline du Pre. Being at home with new works as well as the greats has meant the likes of composer Wilhelm Kaiser-Lindermann wrote *Hommage à Nelson M* — dedicated to Nelson Mandela — for her. The composition's success resulted in Kliegel playing a private recital for Mandela. Don't miss an opportunity to see Kliegel play with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Wellington Town Hall on Friday.

THE election is over, but you can relive it in a completely original fashion courtesy of the hit creation by **Helen Moulder** — celebrated opera singer and musical snob Cynthia Fortitude. We get Cynthia not once, but twice — in *Cynthia's Christmas at Circa* tomorrow till Sunday, then each Thursday to Sunday till December 21. The show comprises return seasons of *A Vote for Cynthia* — first staged in July — and *The Legend Returns* with Rose Beauchamp.



ART doesn't get much smaller than some of the mediums used by Auckland artist **Trenton Garratt**, which range from dust-sized particles to larger ceramic pieces. In his new installation *Our house (white indices)*, at Wellington's Enjoy Public Art Gallery tomorrow till December 6, tiny to large pieces are disseminated throughout the gallery so they resemble a mess, but it is in fact calculated.



Dick Frizzell, Gavin Chilcott, Gordon Crook, Ewan McDougall, Wayne Youle, Tom Sladden, MISERY, Annie Hayward, Gail Gauldie, Margaret Elliot, Maurice Bennett, Sam Broad, Stephen Templer, Brian Carmody, Basia Smolnicki, Grant Corbishley, Di Conway, Pat Unger, Chris Moisa, James Acheson, Nigel Brown, Raewyn Atkinson, Jim Cooper, J.S. Parker, the Fantabulous Pablos artists and many many more....



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THE GORDON H. BROWN LECTURE 2008

Mary Kisler

Displaced Legacies

European Art in New Zealand's Public Collections

Mary Kisler, Mackelvie Trust Curator International Art at Auckland Art Gallery, shares her research into the European art held in New Zealand's public galleries. The development of these institutions and their collections has been based on a series of displacements: geographical, political, social and individual.

Outlining the development of these collections and profiling the private and professional individuals who aided their formation, Kisler explores their struggle to balance the art historical values of the Old World with the need to represent the artistic identity of a new nation.

Thursday 20 November, 2008, 6.00pm

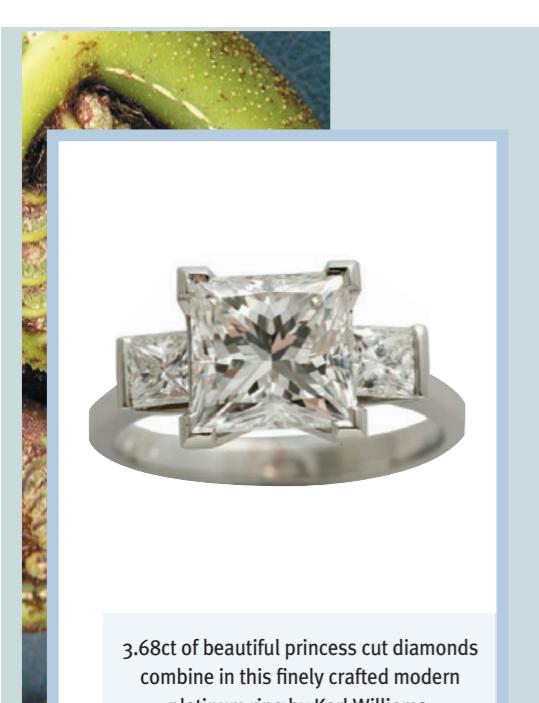
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