

# Mythmakers and Meaning Merchants: Poetic Brandscapes in New Zealand

**Roel Wijland**

Senior Teaching Fellow

Marketing Department, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

*Roel Wijland studied languages, worked for international advertising agency networks in Europe and Japan and established an innovative brand consultancy in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He emigrated to New Zealand in 2002, where he currently teaches integrated communication at the School of Business of the University of Otago in Dunedin and is completing a thesis with the working title 'Poetic Brandscapes', supervised by Professor of Marketing Rob Lawson and Emeritus Professor of English Lawrence Jones.*

## **Abstract**

'Every poet who takes language seriously is working against a culture of clear marketable meanings' states New Zealand poet and curator Gregory O'Brien. The understanding of the sourcing of artistic inspiration against a contemporary backdrop of pervasive marketable meaning as residing in contemporary brands and brandscapes seems a fundamental building block in the attitudes of free radical artists towards arts marketing. The document explores the methodological dimensions of an investigation into the brand percepts of New Zealand free radical artists from an action research perspective and envisages to linguistically capture their percepts by eliciting lyrical descriptions from major national poets. The research is situated in New Zealand in 2005; against a backdrop of increasingly purposeful governmental marketing efforts to promote national arts and the creative industries in a period of economic success and inspirational homeplaces in a physical landscape that accommodate the branded signs marketable meaning.

## **Keywords**

Branding, Poetry, Arts Marketing, Action Research, Arts-Based Inquiry.

## **Artists and Arts Marketing Debates in Contemporary New Zealand**

Literary New Zealand magazines contain continued arguments (Corballis 2003; Wevers and Williams 2002) on the relationship between cultural marketing, brands, art and poetry. The review of *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands* by Kevin Roberts (Corballis 2004) indicates the current hegemonic ideas surrounding branding and its practitioners in the writing community. The discussion in part focuses on the use of marketing strategy and its jargon in the promotion of (national) culture as a brandscape and in part on the perceived banality that the ideas, myths and images marketable identities and brands as meaning merchants propose, closing in on the realm of traditional high culture mythmakers, such as artists and in this case specifically, poets. At the same time the New Zealand landscape – traditionally a major source of inspiration for artists - 'there has been an expenditure of intellectual energy on the unbroken landscape' - one critic in the recent past stated (Stead 1981) , is in a state of flux - as property is in a boom cycle and a variety of traditional environments (farmland, coastal campsites, baches, cribs, communal properties etc.) are subdivided in lifestyle blocks. The signs and identities of marketable meaning that mark this process are increasingly visible and present in the inspirational homeplaces of New Zealand artists and the speed of change seems to take local authorities by surprise. At the same time artists themselves may feel they increasingly are 'independents each of whose individuality is claimed in the race for position in the world market'

(Corballis 2003). In a recent series of essays (Williams 2003) New Zealand writers take up the question of the appropriate response to the situation where governmental organization Creative New Zealand 'blends an almost euphoric nationalism with self-evident brand-awareness' (O'Brien 2003). In the local 'on the edge of the world' New Zealand environment there is a renewed urgency to review the interaction between the latest practical marketing ploys and the arts – the involvement of advertising practitioners in the reworking of 'practices, motivations and ideals that are conventionally called 'cultural'' (Cronin 2004). It encompasses notions that advertising practitioners are in a much more powerful position to 'make culture' or determine standards of creativity than traditional high culture. This becomes especially poignant if the 'defenders' of disinterested culture question their ability to defend the 'authentic versus the very banality of this milieu' or admit that they are only in a position to work 'towards a modest relevance' (Corballis 2004).

Poets and critics whose vision of production is traditionally valued by disinterestedness and disinterested consecrating agents (Bourdieu 1993) react in various ways to perceived commodification through branded literary celebrity (Evans 2003). The tension between individual creative subjectivity and collective cultural branding is perhaps best exemplified in an essay titled: 'Going Mad without Noticing' in which the authors indicate a presumed link between a 'lack of excess, provocation and outrageousness' in the New Zealand art scene, and the promotion of a 'creative industry' based on 'cultural projection' and 'economic rationalism' (Wevers and Williams 2002). The pervasive promotion of 'Brand New Zealand' in various guises, seems to create a climate that is a long way from poets' memories of a 1969 'Cultural Liberation Front', that included handouts such as 'Poets Mount an Assault' or 'Poets on war path' as reflected on in the anthology Big Smoke (Brunton et al. 2000).

The marketers' views on the makeability of culture are exemplified by the cultural heroes figuring in the NZ Edge country identity concept represented 'in a single word equity – Edge', and focussed in a 'liberating metaphor' that 'spreads Edge DNA thickly over the culture' (Sweeney 2003). Poets advocate to 'let the (personal) mystery be' and keep a distance from rallies behind affirmative cultural country brands such as NZEdge of 'influential pr evangelists Brain Sweeney and Kevin Roberts' (Price 2003).

## **Free Radicals and Poetry from a Branding Perspective**

One key effect of the information age is an 'inexorable tendency for brand power to shift away from replicated routine producers to the individuals or firms that act as creators and holders of intellectual property such as artists, including musicians, writers and filmmakers' (Mitchell 2001). This tendency leads to an increased attraction for commercial stakeholders to move 'away from thing reproduction to people amplification' (Mitchell 2001). The shift explicitly affects cases 'where the individuals imagination, creativity, knowledge or judgement is for sale; where the individual is the brand (Mitchell 2001), but also leads to an increased interest of either branded companies and even branded countries in creators. Paradoxically risk taking artists cannot do without their own distinctive communication to their niche market and especially not at the stages of gestation and initial re-presentation - although historically poets and critics have accepted the unmarketability of cultural avant-garde, even while accepting the idea of a market beyond the horizon: 'it matters little whether a poet has a large audience in his own time. What matters is that there should always be at least a small audience for him in every generation. There should always be a small vanguard, appreciative of poetry, who are independent...with the more passive readers not lagging more than a generation or so behind' (Eliot 1957). Some maintain that the purposeful cultivation of personal artistic brands increases freedom. 'Often a

brand name certifies creativity rather than uniformity or homogeneity..... The Brand name may be the moniker of a highly creative individual..... Brand names allow artists to experiment with different styles without fear of losing their “in” audience. Picasso changed his style many times, but his buyers still knew they were getting a Picasso. If we imagine a world where artworks were produced under true anonymity (i.e., with no brands), it is not obvious that quality and diversity would improve.’ (Cowen 2002).

The trend of viral marketing, word of mouth and the consequent increased status of ‘connectors’ (Gladwell 2000) affects the relatively recent increasing association of brands and consecrating agents in the field of cultural production as defined by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1993), exemplified in New Zealand poetry by for instance the Montana Wine Awards, the Meridian Energy Katherine Mansfield Memorial Fellowship or the Te Mata Poet Laureate position.

‘Every poet who takes language seriously is working against a culture of clear marketable meaning’ is an initial reaction of New Zealand poet and curator Gregory O’Brien. It poses the question: ‘how does this ‘working against’ imaginatively work? Branding seems to be held responsible for the reductionist processing of meaning to digestible portions; as is reflected in explicit links between branding and commodification: ‘if you can’t understand them, brand them. The Beatniks and the Mass Media between them, succeeded in beclouding most of what was unsettling and thereby valuable, in the idea of Beatness’(Holmes 1988). The concepts of branding may reflect a multitude of sins versus artists, such as creating a perceived environment of linguistic simplicity - ‘the poet dwells in a world of media speak, oppressively uniform in its locutions, idiom, phraseology, word choice and accent’ - (Perloff 1991).

## Branding from a Lyrical Perspective

The slowest possible art form is the poem. It does not move. It just lies on the page. It would be hard to imagine anything more at odds with mass marketing and the entertainment business than poetry. This may not be a cheerful prospect for the art; there will be more and more artists in the sense of the word used by the entertainment industry. In the world of the marketed economy, poetry is self evidently useless; you can’t float it on the stock market or sell the advertising between the lines (O’Brien 2002a). It is an unpopular art in absolute terms. Poetry seems as unmarketable as synchronised swimming. Poetry at first sight seems to be unsuited to survive the era of branded art and conceptualised entertainment; poetry is defined by its creators as the ‘opposite of television’ in all respects (O’Brien 2002a) and set apart from the nationalised marketing phenomena of the larger entertainment industry, as for instance the comparison of the canonisation of Peter Jackson (lord of the Rings) and James Baxter (one of New Zealand’s most influential 20<sup>th</sup> century poets): ‘the kind of excess the film industry thrives on, poetry can only suffer beneath’ (O’Brien 2002b). Nevertheless booksellers report a 30% increase in poetry sales (Nolan 1999). Poetry ranks among the top 10 most frequently requested subjects on the Lycos 50 and Robert Frost’s “The road not taken” was incorporated into an advertisement for monster.com featured during Super Bowl XXXIV. Magazines reflect on the increasing sales and feel ‘the zeitgeist must be right for poetry’ (Angel 1998).

The marketing of art and culture in general hinges on the quality of transaction and the forms of exchange that involve some form of creativity in their production, that are concerned with the generation and communication of symbolic meaning, and that in their output embody, at least potentially, some form of intellectual property (Throsby 2001). Strategies for the marketing of performing arts specifically have been evaluated extensively (Kotler 1997), and incorporated in the general body of applied marketing knowledge.

There seems to be a paradox between the *individual subjective percept* of poetry and the *collective objective concept* of branding as distinguished by Marshall McLuhan: 'a percept only becomes a concept when replayed' (Powe 1984); a poet is often, even in the 20th century, romantically referred to as one having access to imaginative wildness, a savant tuned to the barbarous or at the very least to the marginal. Relishing 'magnificent insularity' and 'unpredictable moments of sublimity'. Poets works were massively called upon and poems widely disseminated after the events of September 11, given their ability to subjectively express the 'ineffable'. Poetry is by nature multi-sensational, irresponsible, the product in itself defenceless against over-rationalisation or simplification. It builds upon highly personal perceptions, and only rarely on pre-arranged concepts. Brands on the other hand thrive on concise adherence to 'value propositions that are consistent over time' (Aaker 1996). Brands exist as soon as there is 'perceived risk in the mind of the consumer. Once the risk disappears, the brand no longer has any benefit'(Kapferer 1992). 'The perennial appeal of some brands reminds us that although products are mortal.....brands can escape the effects of time' (Kapferer 1992).

Kitchen table poets are guided to success by American how-to-marketeers: write immediately accessible poetry; deal with a broadly shared human experience, check the marketability of the subject; the poetry should be timely and the poems of manageable length, occupy a recognizable niche, be thematically related and the poet should strive for public visibility (Williams 2002).

Poets express disinterested values that set them apart from the affirmative positivism they associate with marketers: 'One thing still clings to poetry, like one wet piece of litter to the bottom of the bin, that advertising has lost but might yet exploit, the profitless, the nihilism, the truth that hurts, that doesn't want to be heard. If product is evil, sell quagmire, sell intractable moral swamp.'(Ascroft 2003). The relationship between artists and their markets has a history of perceived or real opposing cultures. Marketing and poetry make an uneasy marriage, where poets may feel they have to 'preserve the sanctity of the subjective in the poem by opposing a market where effective branding is mistaken for value' (Howard 2001).

## Qualitative Inquiry and Branding

Providing understanding of a particular part of existence with marketing dimensions by gathering of views through poetic mediation is a return to near pre-history of marketing academia. The challenges that unite writers' responses to a changing environment of 2005 may be deemed as momentous as in the environment of puritan purposefulness of 1951 (Jones 2005), when the towering figure of James Baxter stated that the poet needs to be 'a cell of good living in a corrupt society'. It seems valuable to collect points of view and source these from contemporary poets themselves as the ultimate lyrical respondents and substantiate marketable meaning percepts of present day artists. Poetry has been used widely by researchers of social sciences and there is ample legitimization of the use poetic interpretation by marketers, especially in consumer behavior. The larger part of material related to the creation of brands or monitoring of existing brands is based on *qualitative* research as described in various studies (Carson et al. 2001; Daymon and Holloway 2002; Schultz and Barnes 1999). The character of the research is interpretive, transphenomenological, it unfolds the particular, is experiential, uses multiple methods of discourse, forms of visual anthropology and narrative (Hackley 2003). Franzen lists 73 established methods to valueate 'components of the mental brand response' f.i. brand representations, meaning, attitudes and emotions (Franzen and Bouwman 2001), and

streams brand research into various beliefs: researchers who see brands as an associative network, researchers who see brands as a holistic concept and others who ascribe an important role to social interaction and culture when meaning is given to objects. Franzen also distinguishes perspective of brand research: consumer perspective, producer perspective or as the brand manifests itself in society (semiotic). The techniques applied in the method are rooted in qualitative account planning, treat brands as holistic cultural concepts and have a semiotic producer perspective. Brand research may focus on a wide range of aspects, but in the project the focus is on brand image and brand representation and will single out aesthetic aspects rather than ethical ones. Apart from the semi-structured approach in the interviews that would make responses internally coherent, the technique enables a form of guided 'chain conversation' (Franzen and Bouwman 2001) whereby subsequent poets independently add written or visual material to the response base in order to make the knowledge process cumulative, self induced and reflexive. At the end the result should be fully constituted by poets' own choices of words and visuals should constitute a panoptical view of brandscapes that influence artistic creation. As a result it also represents more wide ranging 'scaping' qualities than individual views and lends the argument connective buoyancy.

## Research Objective and Questions

*Mythmakers and meaning merchants* is a methodological framework review of a larger research project titled '**Poetic Brandscapes**'. The project aims to investigate and conceptualize aesthetic scenarios employed by individual artists to imaginatively and practically sustain independence from commodification (Sherry 2003), specifically in their inspirational interaction with brand concepts. Artists and especially poets are seen by some commentators as a post-autistic rebut of marketable meaning - and meaning in their poetic work is there 'for it's own sake, not because is manipulating us to buy, vote or spend time' (Boyle 2003). Marketers increasingly initiate innovative connections of their knowledge of marketing in general, of arts branding for organisations and the individual branding of non-artistic celebrities (Colbert 2001; Montoya 2002; Rentschler 1999; Vieceli and McDonald 2004; Weintraub 2003).

The research seeks to interpret the application of individual artistic brandscapes that originate in artistic percepts rather than marketing concepts and in the process add to linguistic and conceptual innovation. If there is a 'marketisation of art' and an 'artification of marketing' (Brown and Patterson 2000a), what are the individual artist's brand discourse perceptions in the overlap? The research looks at the cohabitation of brands and individual artists and describes their positions as contemporary mythmakers and meaning merchants - using poetic interpretation. It may be that arts marketing doesn't so much profit from describing art in marketing terms (and marketing jargon) but in describing marketable meaning and identities from an art perspective. What role do brand perceptions play in the sourcing of inspiration of individual artists amidst other exposure considerations such as 'scoping an audience, crafting an artistic 'self' and expressing an artistic attitude' (Weintraub 2003)? Weintraub's fluent evasion of marketing jargon, while describing the strategic process of 'the making' of free radical stature seems to offer an excellent linguistic framework, that chronologically begins with the fundamental question of 'the sourcing of inspiration'. Evaluation of marketable meaning in the sourcing of inspiration requires a methodological design that authentically registers the sensitised percepts of lyrical artists and describes the aesthetic refraction in their art.



## Applied Collaborative Action Research and Arts-Based Inquiry

Arts-based inquiry uses art 'to disturb commonplace assumptions' (Finley 2003). It is useful to apply the qualities proposed by the author to assess arts-based qualitative inquiry. Not only does a collaborative formatting of research a suitable construct of 'action inquiry'. It accentuates the formidable strengths of including creative artists in a research design, rather than solidify their position as objects in the larger field of arts marketing. In order to successfully explore the benefits of fusing qualitative methods the research has to fulfill a number of requirements, such as: choosing an appropriate form of discourse for the collaborators, allowing for an open 'heuristic' text in an 'open' space', is there natural tendency for open and visceral representation, and from an collaborative action research perspective: does it create opportunities for communion among collaborators and reconnect different locations?

Definitions used in the research proposal to collaborating artists are: brandscapes are visual or spatial images and atmospheric connotations related to brands (man-made identities that facilitate transactional exchange). The research seeks to describe the influence of brandscapes on the imagination of New Zealand artists by interviewing poets, eliciting new poetic descriptions and visualising artistic environments. The essence of involving poets as mediators to describe the branded artistic inspirational environment is to maximise all elements of their ability to semiotically formulate the 'ineffable' in order to capture the impact of brand representations. There will be a variety of views of different poetic voices and denominations, but no attempt to mould idiosyncrasies into a single minded view of brandscapes. This is neither relevant to the lyrical response nor the objective of the project. One of the initial dimensions that separate poets in their ability to appeal to (sizeable) audiences may be their social engagement or disengagement, as older New Zealand poets of current public repute seem to have made at least part of their artistic self through engaging in public issues that are an intrinsic part of the wider shared New Zealand culture. Established poets seem think engagement is 'what a writer ought to do' and lament the lack of 'young activists' (Frame 2003). Younger poets seem more inclined to firmly locate poetry within the 'mystery of the self' and wish that 'a number of writers had remained silent' in reactions to the events of September 11 (Price 2003). In this respect revolutionary or countercultural profiling may, paradoxically be one of the most successful marketing techniques. Representations are likely to contain a variety of brandscape typologies (ideological, cultural, commercial etc.) and a similar variety of styles and aesthetic treatments. The applied methodology involves four consecutive stages:

**'initial interview'** - with the primary objective of locating idiosyncratic sourcing of inspiration in images. The process involves semi-structured interviews – with the possibility of exploring new ideas, but also to touch on subjects across all interviews in order to get structured information, not with the goal of confirming or converging opinions, mainly in order to maximize relevance of the interview in the context of the thesis. The objective is to locate specific hunting grounds of creative inspiration ('refracted spaces') that are essential to the artist. Idiosyncratic spatial imagery might be pre-dominantly mined from creative spaces such as (randomly): landscapes, relationships, emotions, language itself, ideas, sensory perceptions, history, family, society, structures, physical experiences or art. It is not relevant whether all spatial imagery from a single poet is comprehensively mined; exploring individually particular brandscape percepts add insight. The concept is to locate these on the basis of existing poetry and the interview, and question the influence of commodification (as specifically represented by branded identities) on that creative 'hunting ground'. The individualised quest is not about interaction with just any brandscape; it is about branded identities that populate their chosen, particularized or traditional sources of inspiration. The concept of the interviews is to locate those brandscapes - visual,

spatial, atmospheric connotations that influence inspiration - that affect the essence of their individual creativity. Questions are prompted by exploration of existing poetry, both with regards to themes and styles.

**'field visuals'** - black and white photography of inspirational spaces and 'ugly and beautiful' brandscapes. It is lyrically appropriate to talk about imagery in words, but it is insightful to expand the imagery with artistic impressions on location. It makes the research creative on the part of the researcher, maximises the fantastic aspect of the physicality of the research journey and tangentially adds to the credibility of the project. Visual research (Collier and Collier 1986) is an accepted method of representation in scientific research, and the recycling of visuals for reactions of participants is an obvious strengthening of the reflexive aspect of peer assessment. Some researchers concentrate on articulating how images work, how brand images are conceptualized and are sensitive to ethical issues surrounding identity and images (Schroeder 2002). 'Imagining' marketing from a perspective of arts, aesthetics and the avant-garde is an accepted and exciting academic pursuit (Brown and Patterson 2000b).

Photographic representation may be more or less artistically directed – both are accepted (Bateson and Mead 1942). Reflexivity (Pink 2003) - the influence of the author on the visual - fits the action research agenda, as does staging visualisations - as a collaborative effort between participant and researcher. Gregory Bateson is a suitable link between visual representation - in his cooperation with Margaret Mead - and as a 'father' of action research and is credited for giving new emphasis to approaches (including aesthetic ones) that have become central to action research (Hawkins 2004), such as:

- studying the connecting patterns rather than the parts;
- attending to the aesthetic and presentational aspects of knowing as well cognitive and propositional knowing;
- questioning one's assumptions from outside of the frame in which they were formulated;
- working with creative dichotomies;
- seeing oneself as part of the field that is being studied;
- questioning power and conscious purposefulness, which is trying to increase control over a wider system.

Photographic representation is the visual version of field notes, a subjective element providing analytic ideas and inferences (Lofland 1971) about the master theme or middle level chunks of analyses and personal impressions and feelings. This seems a logical and valuable addition to more formal interviews.

**'the epic'** - the main aspirational element of poetic interpretation of the interaction between artists and their brandscapes - the commissioning new poetry inspired by 'ugly and beautiful' brandscapes as part of a multi-voiced epic.

An epic [ἐπῖκ] is a long narrative poem recounting in elevated style the deeds of a legendary hero, esp. one originating in oral folk tradition. The succession of contemporary New Zealand poets compose part of the poem. The narrative will describes the impressions of a fictional artist and the lyrical description of the most beautiful and the ugliest contemporary brandscapes (mostly specific proper nouns) that have influenced the artists' sourcing of imagination in 2005. The 'hero' will be brought to life by the different, geographically dispersed and independent local poets; it's a chain incantation of what poets perceive to be experiences of an individual who confronts the experiential world by means of a craft, without exerting any conscious conceptual

influence and who draws on it to create something new. The epic provides narrative focus, the poets form an interpretive community united by singular craft – poets are requested to compose maximum 600 word or two page lyrical representations, independently and without prior knowledge of stanzas from other participating poets. The fragmented fictionalisation of this universal/contemporary character provides the literary equivalent of a ‘generalisation’ in social sciences. There is no convergence of outcomes, but there is a unified, multi-voiced and authentic representation.

**‘digital communion’** – representing the visuals and the epic - collaborating artists will not see the contributions of their peers until the full first ‘spiral’ of data gathering is completed, but will be requested to react to the completed final product. A communion of outcomes (interviews, epic and visuals) is an essential part of the action research and will be organized through a representation of artistic impressions on a ‘poetic brandscapes’ website, where collaborators will, for the first time, see who has cooperated, what brandscapes have prompted the lyrical response and what styles and aesthetic forms have been used by fellow collaborators to particularize their percepts of brandscapes.

### **Authenticity of Lyrical Representation of Brandscapes**

Poetry as an interpretive medium has been used by marketing researchers, either by researchers who adopt lyrical self reflection to evoke dense meaning or by requesting consumers to capture ideas in poetic formats (Sherry and Schouten 2002). A research concept to commission established poets to linguistically capture artistic percepts of brandscapes as identities of marketable meaning may be novel.

The lyrical refraction of brandscapes by a collaborative group of renowned artists accepts multiple constructed realities inherent to artistic representation. It includes member checks and transferability of poetic representation to other individual arts. It applies dimensions of methodological authenticity: fairness (from a range of different realities of different poets); an ontological perspective (the research should help collaborators understand brandscape concepts; it promotes catalytic authenticity (it stimulates collaborators to act); there is educative authenticity (the researcher has to be shown to have helped collaborators to appreciate the viewpoints of other collaborators) and tactical authenticity (the researcher has empowered artistic collaborators to act – write the epic fragment, help locate visual representations of brandscapes, react to the final versions of the epic) (Seale 1999) - all while applying their chosen craft. Obviously this research perspective cannot be substantiated by positivist notions of validity and reliability – its needs another checklist and jargon for ‘good’ academic practice. The most appropriate replacement for this in qualitative literature is authenticity (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Within the objective of encouraging the creation of an experimental and multi-voiced artistic text ‘trustworthiness’ does not seem to be a useful concept, all the more so because qualitative researchers confirm that the acceptance of ‘multiple constructed realities’ and ‘trustworthiness’ are incompatible (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In contrast ‘authenticity’ is a fitting concept within the poetic and artistic credibility of the community of participants and qualitative methodology, and coincidentally a suitably commendable attribute of contemporary brands (Boyle 2003).

### **Presenting Initial Findings July 2005**



This conference preview of research outcomes catches the field research upon it's conclusion – the initial stage of the research has been conducted on a nation wide actual research journey throughout New Zealand between February and end of May 2005. The presentation will contain visuals of initial findings, in particular descriptions of a narrative of experiences with the methodology of mediating and sensitising concepts on the basis of collaborative precepts of nationally acclaimed poets.

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