

CAUCASIA

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Selling New Zealand at the 1970 Japan World Expo

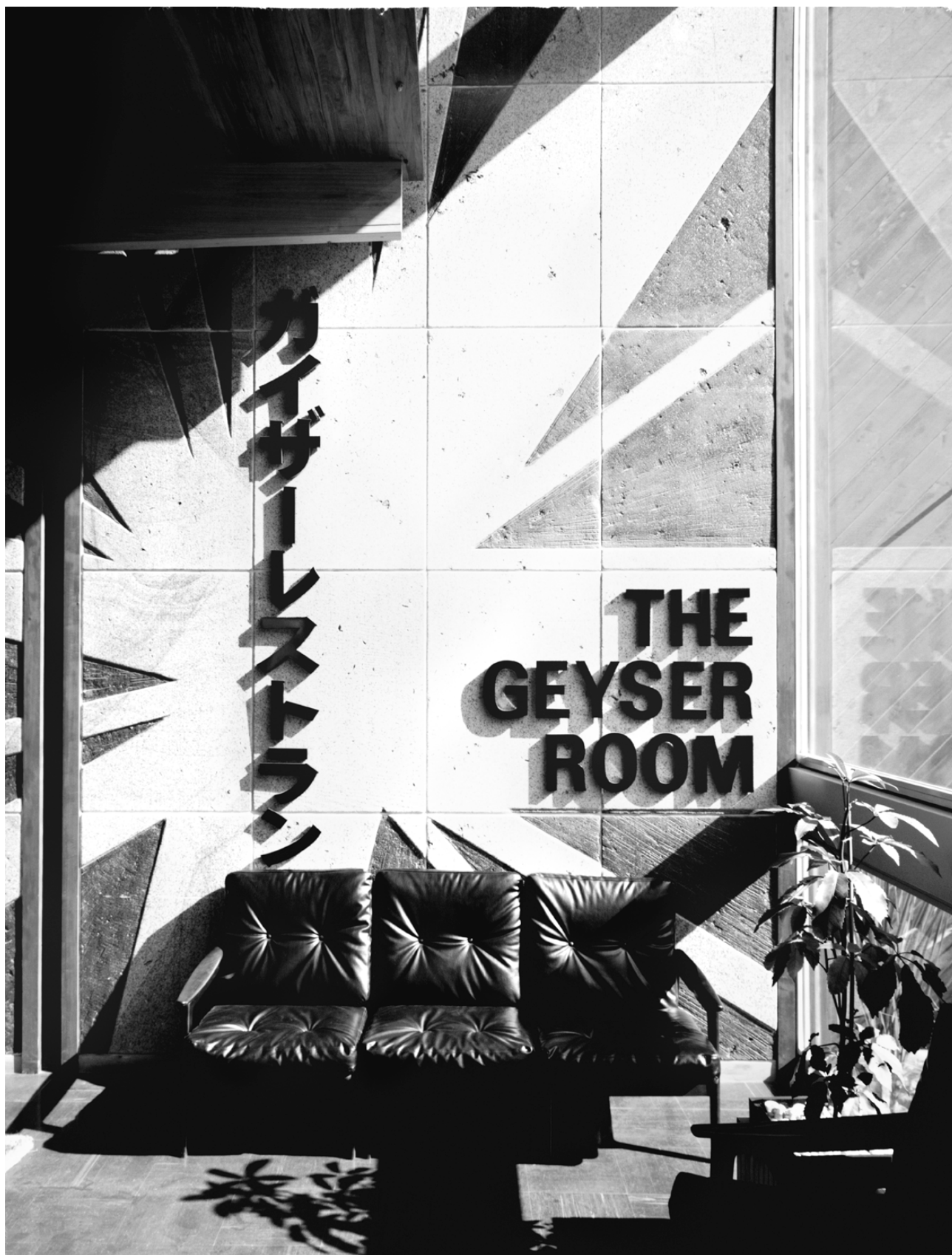


The 1970 Japan World Exposition was then the largest exhibition of its kind, with a record number of participating countries, companies and organisations, and with visitor numbers surpassed only by the recent 2010 Shanghai Expo.

The utopic theme of Expo '70 proclaimed "progress and harmony for mankind," the organising committees promising to achieve this vision through a celebration of cultural diversity and technological innovation. Expo '70 marked a shift in focus away from traditional world fairs which promoted the fruits of industrial innovation and labour, and the didactic education of citizens and consumers, toward the ideological project of national image building.

Ambiguous promises of tomorrow still resound from the establishment of world fairs in the mid Nineteenth Century, emerging from vested interests within diverse political and cultural economies. Though such promises and their material communication at times sit uncomfortably alongside one another (just as national pavilions sat alongside their tobacco, steel and Mormon counterparts at Expo '70, for example), all are somehow contained within a vast physical site and ideological umbrella, collectively promoting edutainment of the highest order.

The hosting of Expo'70 was utilised by Japanese authorities to reposition Japan's national image both in the hearts and minds of its citizens, and others internationally, with a particular focus on the West.



Japanese authorities wished to re-position its image as a powerful independent economy in order to benefit from stronger connections to the West, and to shake off a negative self image from their defeat in World War Two. Expo '70 would stimulate the Japanese economy, build and strengthen international trade, and promote mutual understanding in order to foster diplomatic and other relationships. Of course, the other participating countries were motivated by similar objectives, yet with their own individual agendas. In such contexts where nations are explicitly on display, culture, commerce and politics are inseparable.

Expo '70 marked New Zealand's first participation in an international fair since the Second World War, a turning point in New Zealanders' image of themselves in a global context. Participation was motivated by a range of cultural, economic and political imperatives, and achieved through the cooperation of a wide range of state agencies. The New Zealand Pavilion, the National Film Unit three screen spectacular *This is New Zealand*, and our wider contribution to Expo '70 events were celebrated as an international success.

CAUCASIA is a presentation of a suite of digitally restored official New Zealand Government Publicity photographs documenting the 1970 New Zealand Pavilion. These artifacts have been unburied and selected from Archives New Zealand's collections, and timed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the Pavilion and the highly popular national tour of *This is New Zealand*. The restored photographs are accompanied by a screening of the National Film Unit documentary *This is Expo*.

The New Zealand Pavilion's presentation of Aotearoa as a modern Western paradise in the South Pacific was pitched to an international, primarily Japanese audience. The promotion of international trade and tourism were central to these representations of New Zealand's landscape, cultures and people. CAUCASIA revisits this moment and its performance of national identity on an international stage.

Efficacious representations were key to New Zealand's own national image building project. Though the images utilised within the Pavilion's photographic displays reflect the daily life of many New Zealanders from diverse cultures, their formal presentations evoke an idealised Pakeha-oriented Western outlook.

The odd Maori face peers out from a sea of images on an industrially fabricated lightbox in a display hall complete with wool carpeted floor and ceiling. A.W. Reed's *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Maori Life*, along with other texts on Maori, share space with Walters' appropriative prints from the limited edition Barry Lett series, sheepskin slippers and sets of stamps for sale in the gift shop. The Pavilion restaurant, *The Geyser Room* contained a stylized water feature constructed of transparent polythene pipes which emerged from a cavity in the centre of the room, through which water burst up toward and across the ceiling, trickling back down the interior walls into the bowels of the building below. While international diplomacy was conducted from the style and comfort of Michael Payne's commissioned Expo '70 chairs, and accompanied by choice New Zealand export wines and produce delivered on similarly themed Crown Lynn pottery, the commentary to *This is Expo* notes the geyser's hidden mechanics were constantly springing leaks and flooding the machine room below. One may perhaps perceive an ironic metaphor here in the Western desire, yet ultimate inability, to contain and commercially exploit New Zealand's wild and often spectacular natural resources, its geothermal regions unstable ground upon which Maori have been historically positioned as exoticised tour guides.

Yet the modes of the Pavilion's architectural, interior and photographic display design also evidence an acute awareness of their Japanese audience. The innovative photosculptures at times evoke origami forms, or paper lanterns and screens. The celebrated Antipodean pottery on display was heavily influenced by Japanese traditions and cultural exchanges with New Zealand, and its arrangement perhaps also evocative of a terraced zen garden. The sign for *The Geyser Room* may evoke an Eastern rising sun motif or a fractured Union Jack for some, or remain an empty design element for others.

The selected photographs of CAUCASIA, as greyscale Government documents of the empty Pavilion, enlarged uniformly to expose their at times awkward framing, exist in tension with the rich visual and material signs of nationalist self promotion contained within them. One part spectacular, two parts banal. These images confront viewers with contestable representations of how New Zealanders saw and sold themselves as a nation, and ask us to reconsider how we do so now.



Similarly staged photographic and cinematic tropes abound in the 100% Pure Campaign, and one can only anticipate their re-deployment in New Zealand's hosting of the 2011 Rugby World Cup.

Though these photographs may have been taken for use in later national publicity projects, no publishing record exists; they are attributed only to the National Publicity Studios, emphasising a more generalised governmental portrayal. They were located within a modest photo album quietly hidden deep within Archives New Zealand's secure storage, to which I have come to lovingly refer as 'the national basement.' Their somewhat anonymous quality echoes the authorship of the multitude of photographs deployed in the displays which feature within some of these images. The decision was made not to individually attribute the thousands of images supplied by a number of New Zealand photographers alongside those taken by the National Publicity Studio themselves, but to credit these in auxiliary documentation. To represent such photographs of photographs is to engage in a take on a take on a take.

The images individually and collectively speak to photography's multidimensional role in bridging and enhancing distance. They document an empty Pavilion, replete with the signs of thousands of daily visitors: the markings on the wall, the stains on the carpet. They document a designed experience delivered to an Asian audience which few New Zealanders ever traversed in person, just as few of the artifacts were exhibited in New Zealand prior to, or following the Expo. Viewers of CAUCASIA may be compelled to reconstruct the experience of Expo '70 from these photographs and the spaces between and within them. Yet any reconstruction can only ever be partial, fragmentary, mediated through images, and existing only in memory. CAUCASIA then, perhaps best occupies a space in the mind.

Emil McAvoy

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