

# William Culbert

New Zealander, b. 1935

## Reflections 1

1971, mixed media, 32x32x15 cm

Purchased 1980

Reproduced courtesy of Bill Culbert



### About the work

Bill Culbert is one of New Zealand's most internationally recognised artists. He has worked with light since the 1960s. With *Reflections 1* he is asking the viewer to take a fresh look at an ordinary light bulb.

In Culbert's works light is both the material and the subject - the medium and the metaphor. Using contemporary technology and manufactured products he explores the aesthetic concepts of light, shape, space and energy. He asks the viewer to look again at ordinary prosaic objects and see their potential for interest and beauty.

In *Reflections 1* Culbert considers the act of reflection by placing a single light bulb within a mirrored box, so the viewer sees an apparently un-ending line of reflected bulbs. The work turns a simple, everyday object into a sculpture, exploring a number of important and fundamental art concepts. The reflection in the mirror plays with our perception of space and distance and with reality and illusion. It provides an expansive linear progression back into an illusionary picture space. It also explores the concept and reality of light in an artwork. Here the luminosity, instead of being represented as an illusion, is a reality.

With the fixed position of the mirror, and the moving viewpoint available to the viewer moving in the Gallery spaces, the work also explores the concept of pictorial

movement in which static forms are played off against moving ones. Again the perception of movement is both a reality and an illusion.

The process, however, demands the active participation of the viewer, and a willingness to explore the possibilities and intellectual crossovers the sculpture offers. The bulb is a simple and practical modern symbol for the existence of light. By placing it upright in a square frame, Culbert confronts the viewer with its formal qualities of shape, luminosity and surface texture.

*Reflections 1* is an early example of the many works Culbert made on similar themes in the 1970s. Some years before, while rebuilding a house in rural Southern France, he began to develop an appreciation for the poetic, visual potential of everyday found materials and also an interest in the properties and effects of light. Since the early 1970s he has made works exploring the qualities of light by 'capturing' it within light bulbs, wine glasses, lampshades, window frames, fluorescent tubes and plastic bottles.

The use of common consumer objects relates to the idea of the 'ready-made' pioneered by artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), but also has links to the Italian Arte Povera movement of the 1960s in which three-dimensional art was created from everyday materials.

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## About the artist

Bill Culbert was born in Port Chalmers, Dunedin, in 1935. He studied at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts from 1953 to 1956 and the following year left New Zealand on a National Art Gallery scholarship to study painting at the Royal College of Art, London.

From 1963 until 1965 he was artist in residence at the University of Nottingham and in 1967 became senior lecturer in painting at Nottingham School of Art, a position he held until 1972. Culbert took up a residency at the Museum of Holography, in New York in 1985 and also at the Exploratorium, in San Francisco, in 1989.

He is one of New Zealand's most internationally recognised sculptors and photographers and has exhibited widely in international venues, including the Millennium Dome, London and the Musée Calvert et Cite Guillaume Apollinaire, Avignon, France. In 2000, his major light work, *Blue*, was installed permanently on the façade of the Christchurch Convention Centre.

Since the late 1960s Culbert has sustained two artistic paths: sculpture and photography, both of which deal with the effects of light. The Gallery holds one of his photographic triptych in its collection. He currently lives in London and Croagnes, France, but retains strong exhibition links with New Zealand. Of particular note are his ongoing collaborations with artist Ralph Hotere, such as *PROP*, which consists of corrugated steel coated with reflective automotive paint lit by tubes of fluorescent light.

Culbert's practice is distinctive in New Zealand art, and he has continued to investigate light in different ways, recently using fluorescent beams and light reflected onto black car paint surfaces.

## Other works by the artist in the Collection

### *Celeste*

1970, mixed Media  
Purchased 1980

### *Decharge, Sault*

1991, photograph  
Purchased 1991

## Further reading

*Bright Paradise*, Allan Smith, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2001.

*Toi Toi Toi*, Ed. Gregory Burke, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel/Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 1999.

*Contemporary New Zealand Sculpture*, Priscilla Pitts, David Bateman Ltd, 1998.

*Lightworks: Recent work by Bill Culbert*, Lara Strongman, City Gallery, Wellington, 1997.

