



# Fact or Fiction: Meditations on Mary

## Finger

## V. P. Lumb



The celebrated Australian curator, writer, and art critic, Veevee Palumbo, was recently a guest lecturer at The Physics Room Contemporary Art Project Space in Christchurch. Ms Palumbo was lecturing on the work of the relatively unknown NZ artist, Mary Finger.

This was a rare opportunity to hear one of Australia's most highly regarded freelance art critics, well known for her curatorial work on Sydney's famous *Hate Mail* exhibition at the Fakir gallery, and also for her immensely popular essay, *Art isn't dead, it was just waiting for some mouth to mouth from a Bondi lifesaver*. Palumbo is currently in NZ on a Trans-Tasman fellowship. She is curating *Finger: A Retrospective* (which will travel to Australia), and completing the research on her forthcoming publication, *The Finger and Me*, the first in-depth work on Finger's life and art.

In her lecture entitled, *Fact or Fiction: Meditations on Mary Finger* (the third in the *Arnotts Iced Vovo Biscuit Lecture Series*), Ms Palumbo shared some special insights regarding Finger's unusual painting techniques, in particular her 'rollover' method of paint application.

I interviewed Veevee in The Physics Room after her first lecture:

**ME: GOOD EVENING VEEVEE AND WELCOME TO AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND. PLEASE TELL US, WHO IS MARY FINGER?**

VEEVEE: (*pouring herself a beer and shifting in her seat*) Mary Finger is a relatively unknown NZ artist who has yet to be validated within the discourse of NZ art history. Finger tended to be very reclusive and that is why so few people have heard of her. But I intend to change all that. I am using my lecture to introduce her work to the many New Zealanders who have probably never heard of Finger's name before. In return I have an expectation that my words will strike a resonance within the audience, and that Finger's work will touch everyone as much as it has touched me. (*clearing her throat, drinking, licking her lips*)

**WHAT WAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH MARY FINGER?**

(*looking bored*) I was privileged to actually meet Mary during her short lifetime. I embraced Finger's work, and eventually Finger granted permission to myself and the German film maker, Dieter Bleach, to come and video her actually producing one of her rollover paintings. I'd

love another beer. (*reaching past her*)

**WHAT ELSE CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT MARY'S WORK?**

Finger created her own sexualised zone of expression. It could have potentially resulted in ambiguity and contradiction, but in Finger's hands the work was always articulate, dynamic, defined. And these corporeal executions that Dieter and I got on video can never be repeated in exactly the same way again. Their intangible existence within the structure of producing these rollovers really defies the concept of monetary value. (*thinking, looking very thoughtful*) In fact that probably makes this video worth a whole lot more. Oh, but I don't look at it that way... I see this video as an important National Treasure. (*pause*) A taonga. (*pause*) Is that right? (*opening a packet of pretzels*)

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND MONEY HAS ALWAYS BEEN A TENUOUS ONE. HOW DID THIS AFFECT FINGER?**

Finger refused to be handcuffed by the commodities market. For her, the production of the rollover was more important in many ways than the finished or residual product (which has been consistently assigned more value within our socio-historical context). Anyway I threw a few bucks her way after she let us do the video and that seemed to shut her up for a while. (*Veevee pours another beer.*) Would you like one of these pretzels?

**YOU END YOUR LECTURE BY MAKING SOME FASCINATING PARALLELS BETWEEN FINGER AND MCCAHON. COULD YOU ELABORATE?**

There are indeed some fascinating parallels here. Firstly, Finger lived near a beach for a while. She was also a sign writer for Woolworth's Supermarkets. Some people claim Finger's work to be very painterly, but both myself and the NZ art critic, Florian Merkel, believe there is a definite scripto-centric element to the canvases.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARTIST AND CRITIC CAN BE VERY SYMBIOTIC. COULD YOU COMMENT?**

Within the framework of my lecture I delve into the penetrating correlation that developed between Finger and myself. I also present a rather minimalist piece of biography text that Finger... er... gifted... to me. But what does anyone really know of herself? How legitimate is autobiography? Or has the real world that Finger wrote about only been truly imagined? These are some of the questions that I pose. And now that Finger is dead, I feel it my duty to share these things with not only the NZ public, but with the wider global public. (*Veevee sucks the salt off a pretzel.*) This

sharing is extended by the use of a comprehensive merchandising catalogue that is designed to accompany my lecture. Lest we forget the order form. (*Veevee laughs and swigs down her beer.*)

**Set of six postcards presented in gift box.** Features Mary's only series: Sombrero and Other Hats. Veevee says: *Write Home!* **\$10.00**

**Joke Finger.** Especially for the kids! A fake rubber finger that fits over your real one! Fool your friends! Get up to all sorts of tricks! Veevee says: *Teach the kids small limb appropriation!* **\$15.00**

**Tea towel, pure Irish linen.** Black and white, printed with one of Mary's lesser-known rollovers, *Beast*. Veevee says: *Introduce your Aunt to Art! An absolute bargain.* **\$18.00**

**Cassette tape recording.** Of the second lecture in this series, *Identity and all that Jazz*. (Lecture One and Three sold out.) Veevee says: *A Must for any Student!* **\$40.00**

**Calendar.** Twelve of Mary's best, printed on handmade organic flax paper. Includes all the favourites: *Tantrum*, *Spermataria*, *Beast*, *Omphalitis*, *Ambidexterous*, *Hoop*, *Sombrero*, and others. Exquisite! Veevee says: *Great for overseas gifts!* **\$70.00**

**Rug, 250 X 130 cm.** *Spermataria* reproduced on a woollen rug. Handcrafted in woollen mills somewhere in the South Island. Breathtaking. Veevee says: *A real Collector's Piece!* **\$2242.00 (includes GST)**

These wonderful NZ art gifts aren't even available yet at the Te Papa shop! Only available by ordering direct off Palumbo's website: <http://www.finger.co.nz>.

V.P. Lumb (also known as Vivienne Plumb) is a Voice Loader and writer living in Wellington. Born in Sydney, land of Ern Malley, Helen Demidenko, convicts, and other rorts. Which probably explains this interview with Veevee Palumbo. Lumb (Plumb) is related to Joe Byrne (one of Ned Kelly's gang) on her (Aussie) Dad's side. Look for her novella out this year, *The Diary as a Positive in Female Adult Behaviour* (HeadworX).

In May this year Vivienne Plumb staged a series of performances at The Physics Room where she was, for the duration, the "esteemed Australian curator, Veevee Palumbo". She "lectured" on the career of Mary Finger, an "unsung hero of New Zealand art history". Finger was represented in the form of "archival" video footage which was played during the "lectures". The video was shot by "the German filmmaker Dieter Bleach", an apparently very close colleague of L. Budd.