OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION OVERBURDEN, BY DAVID COOK
COALFACE GALLERY, GENK, BELGIUM

SPEAKING NOTES
VANGELIS VITALIS, NEW ZEALAND AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO BELGIUM AND THE EUROPEAN UNION
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E nga mana, e nga reo, e nga iwi o te motu
Naumai, haeremai.

Geachte heer Burgemeester, Dames en Heren,

Het is voor mij een grote eer hier aanwezig te zijn voor de opening van deze prachtige tentoonstelling.

In mijn rol van Ambassadeur van Nieuw-Zeeland voor België is het heel belangrijk alle artistieke initiatieven te steunen die de culturele banden tussen België en Nieuw-Zeeland ontwikkelen en sterker maken.

It is my privilege to speak to you this evening as New Zealand’s Ambassador to Belgium and, more particularly, to welcome you to the opening of David Cook’s exhibition ‘Overburden’ here in Genk.

The Burgermeister’s warm words of welcome underline the very distinct place that C-Mine and the Coalface Gallery have at the cultural and artistic heart of this city of Genk.

Given that the Coalface Gallery is at the interface of change – from the industrial to the post-industrial community – it is entirely appropriate that David Cook’s remarkable photographic exhibition ‘Overburden’ is shown here. In fact, his exhibition underlines precisely that kind of change.
My country’s relationship with Belgium is a longstanding one. It spans two World Wars where Belgians and New Zealanders fought and died for a set of indivisible values. But our relationship is not just about commemorating those terrible times. It is about the present. It is also and most importantly about the future.

That is why I think this exhibition is so important. It is about enlarging one another’s horizons and challenging one another – Belgians and New Zealanders - to think about ourselves in different ways – ways we may not have thought of before.

And this is where art and culture matters so much.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, the Franco-American cultural historian Jacques Barzun tells us that ‘art distils sensation and embodies it with enhanced meaning.’

Looking through the exhibition here by David Cook one cannot help but agree.

This art does distil sensation – it does enhance meaning.

I think, however, with all due respect to Barzun, Mr Cook’s art does rather more than that.

For, as Susan Sontag so famously said, real art has to have what she called “the capacity to make us nervous.”

That is precisely the point of art – it confronts. It might make us uncomfortable, it may even unsettle us. But above all, art should shake us in our complacency, make us question what we think; and what we believe.

I think you’ll agree that this exhibition does all this and more.

On one level – this exhibition brings together some stunning imagery of my unique and beautiful country.
But we are used to that. This, after all is New Zealand – and New Zealand is ‘the land of the Long White Cloud’. It is also the land of Lord of the Rings, the country of beef and lamb, milk and butter, of 100% pure and of real kiwifruit. It is clean and green.

But that is just one side of New Zealand.

And this is where this exhibition gets really interesting.

I hope you will agree with me that not only is the imagery stunning, but that it is also very confronting.

For me, this exhibition speaks to the core of an aspect of the New Zealand identity and our conceptualisation of ourselves.

In this regard, the choice of the title ‘Overburden’ is an interesting one.

It can be interpreted in a number of ways. Most obviously – and to a layman like me – over burden refers to ‘over burdened’ as in ‘overburdened’ land.

There are certainly images in David Cook’s exhibition that convey that sense of being ‘over burdened’.

This is of course an unusual thing to associate with New Zealand. Most of us think of New Zealand as a land with wide open and often empty spaces.

And, of course there is a more specific meaning. A meaning that is related to coal mining and one that the people of Genk will know well. For ‘overburden’ is also the rock and the eco-system that lies above a coal seam.

This exhibition captures precisely that dual meaning.

On the one hand New Zealand is a paradise and, on the other hand it can be quite unsettling – there is a dark seam – a coal black seam perhaps running underneath what one New Zealand writer called ‘this lonely lovely land.’
The New Zealand singing duo the Otara Millionaire’s Club (OMC) described the paradise aspect of New Zealand rather well in their song ‘The Land of Plenty’. They said - :

A long white cloud, ancient land, open field sacred ground, Bays of Plenty, the Bluff, the Cape, streaming sands, Boiling place, white water swells, bridges of old, deep clear nights, open shores 

Ladies and gentlemen, David Cook is not simply an artist – he is a visual ethnographer who has followed the changes that took place in a town called Rotowaro – lake of Coal in Maori - from 1984 through to the present day.

For Rotowaro was once a mining township. In the late 1980s, however, some 400 miners and their families were moved and Rotowaro was demolished to allow a mining company to expand the existing opencast mine.

Put simply, Rotowaro no longer exists. And this dramatic change is what David Cook shows us through his photographs

David Cook has captured in his photographs the beauty of our land and also I think that darker undercurrent – of something rather more unsettling – something that goes to the social, environmental and above all human impact of change – the shift from the industrial to the post-industrial – something that this city of Genk understands very well.

Let me explain what I mean perhaps with reference to the work of our New Zealand poet, Kapka Kassabova. She has written movingly about the complicated and unnerving feelings that our ‘paradise’ can evoke.

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In her poem ‘Coming to Paradise’ she wrote:

We came and found paradise but something was missing in the water, in the sky, in the movement of hands that couldn't embrace or punish…

We came looking for paradise and paradise we found, but it wasn't enough so we wept and talked about leaving and never left.²

This New Zealand land of ours is vast, beautiful, the light is clear and sharp and it is in many ways utterly unlike “old Europe.”

And as the Pike River Mining disaster and then the Christchurch earthquake has so brutally reminded us, with natural beauty there can be a terrible danger.

The exhibition assembled here in Genk speaks to that element in the New Zealand psyche, that unsettlingly clear, harsh beauty, but also that equally unsettling sense of danger of being at the mercy of nature or in this case, being at the mercy of decisions taken far away – in Huntly, in Wellington anywhere but Rotowaro.

There is a vivid and important mining history in New Zealand – a history which has impacted on our country’s social and economic development in significant ways – right back to the township of Blackball’s role in the creation of, for instance, the New Zealand Labour Party following the 1908 ten week miners’ strike.

The New Zealand playwright, Mervyn Thompson’s play ‘Coal Town Blues’ nicely captures the decline of mining in our country. The words of the title song I think could have been written for Rotowaro Township:

Hoppers full of coal go runnin’ down that line
Headin’ for those tunnels and the faraway sunshine
I’m not on one.3

This is what happened to Rotowaro – the Hoppers kept rollin’ down that line, but the people of Rotowaro were not that line anymore.

When a town ceases to exist something strange happens to people’s memories.

One of the locals who grew up in Rotowaro told David Cook that:

“Rotowaro is what I would consider to be my papakainga, my home and my birthplace… It’s where my childhood memories began….but as each day goes by it gets harder and harder to remember them…”4

David Cook’s exhibition therefore puts a moving and very human face on change and asks, what happens when a community quite literally loses the ground beneath its feet?

This exhibition offers us no answers. Nor should it. That is not the role of art. What it does so successfully, however, is to provide a poignant and thought provoking insight into what change means.

What does this exhibition tell you about New Zealand?

I hope it tells you something and nothing. For New Zealand defies easy description.

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New Zealand is a complicated place and we are a complicated people. I hope tonight that you come away from this exhibition understanding just how complex a country we are.

Let me conclude by thanking you Burgermeister Dries, the staff here at the Coal Face Gallery in particular, not least your commitment to exhibiting such an important contemporary New Zealand work. Thank you also to my staff for working with the organisers to prepare this function tonight, particularly our Public Affairs Manager Corinne Tjampens.

And finally, please join me as we raise a toast – of New Zealand wine - also to our absent artist, David Cook. It is his work that we honour tonight – and his moving insights into a township that has vanished that we should acknowledge.

The song ‘Welcome home’ by Dave Dobbyn is I think a good note on which we can open this exhibition:

“As a cloud the full length of these isles,
just playing chase with the sun
And it’s black and it’s white and it’s wild.5

Thank you.

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

ENDS.

5 Dave Dobbyn, ‘Welcome Home’, The Great New Zealand Songbook, Thom Music (Sony)