



MONASH University

Constant Variables: An Artist-led Curatorial Methodology

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Abstract

This practice-based PhD research, *Constant Variables*, advocates for a responsive and artist-led curatorial methodology. I focus on examples of my experience curating three exhibitions at The Dowse Art Museum in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, working with artists Emma Fitts (Pākehā), Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui) and Ruth Buchanan (Te Ātiawa, Taranaki, Pākehā). Though each practice is distinct, all three artists utilise archives, rewrite histories and apply feminist or decolonising methodologies to their work. I argue that artists require curatorial flexibility to mediate their work in ways that are spatialised, embodied and affective, which I attempted to achieve through strategic use of the gallery collection and exhibition design. While arguably all curatorial practice can be described as “artist-led”, this methodology is under-theorised in curatorial discourse, especially in relation to curators working in institutions. By curating in conversation with artists and in response to the form and content of their work, curators can dynamically support how artists are using archives, research, critique and temporality, to enact a form of curatorial practice that centres art and artists.

Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Introduction: Constant Variables

Across the three chapters of this exegesis I argue for an artist-led curatorial methodology focussed on adapting to the constant variables of artist and context to generate exhibitions that are sensitive and responsive to the artworks they present. While it is taken for granted that curators are responsible for advocating and supporting artists' work, most visibly in an exhibition form, my particular career trajectory through artist-run initiatives prior to public art museums and my ongoing interest in commissioning new work by contemporary artists has solidified my belief in the curatorial role as supportive and in dialogue with artists. When I began this practice-based PhD research six years ago, I was interested in the historical turn in contemporary art and ways to work curatorially with artists using archives to develop exhibitions that enriched the histories they were engaging. Over the subsequent years, I reflected on my experience of working with three artists from Aotearoa New Zealand, Emma Fitts (Pākehā), Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui) and Ruth Buchanan (Te Ātiawa, Taranaki), who were each working with archives.¹ While this thematic link remains an important point of continuity between three art practices that are in many other ways quite different, during the course of this research my focus has shifted from thematic to methodological concerns. This exegesis articulates my curatorial methodology as being flexible and responsive to an artist's practice, which I define as artist-led curating.

For over a decade, curators and artists have written about the need for curatorial practice to be more art- and artist-centric, yet it remains difficult to articulate and perform this approach within institutions. Curator Andrew Renton stated: "[Curating] is responsive, of course, in its relationship to art and to artists, but it may also be proactive in the ways in which it seeks to

¹ Throughout this exegesis I have included in brackets the iwi affiliations for Māori as is common practice in Aotearoa to indicate a person's genealogy and regional connections.

establish spaces and contexts of operation for works and people.”² He goes on to claim:

collections become the sites where new conjunctions might be formed, temporarily, that collapse museums’ histories in favour of an ethics of subjectivity. The collection must be irresponsible, must refuse to retread the territory of the museum, and the curator now faces a unique opportunity to engage with this.³

Renton’s observation on responsive yet proactive curating and the potential use of collections is relevant for the projects I will discuss. As curator Emiliano Valdés writes regarding the possible instrumentalisation of artists by curatorial practice and the need for art’s autonomy,

what we, artists and curators, have failed to understand in the rapid development of the *new* curatorial model, is that as public intellectuals we share responsibility in regard to current social and aesthetic concerns... In the contest between artist and curator, we miss the fact that the issue is not about who has the power but about what that power is for. And it is precisely through collaboration and dialogue that we can, and should, forward artistic thought, research, production, and presentation.⁴

While curator Maria Lind has cautioned against “over-collaborating”⁵, ongoing dialogue between curators and artists is crucial to the effective development, delivery and reception of their work for audiences. Perhaps it is the words of artists such as Slavs and Tatars we should be listening to: “We demand an alchemy from our curators, similar perhaps to that expected from us. Halfway between scenographer and magus, the curator creates synchronous worlds.”⁶ Their statement reveals a desire for sympathetic, dynamic curation of their

² Andrew Renton, “Forms of Practice: Curating in the Academy,” *The Exhibitionist*, No. 4 (June 2011), in Jens Hoffmann, ed., *The Exhibitionist: Journal on Exhibition Making—The First Six Years* (New York: The Exhibitionist, 2017), 276.

³ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁴ Emiliano Valdés, “Who Has the Power?” *The Exhibitionist*, No. 12 (June 2016), in Jens Hoffmann, ed., *The Exhibitionist: Journal on Exhibition Making—The First Six Years* (New York: The Exhibitionist, 2017), 957.

⁵ Maria Lind, “Greenhouse Tomatoes and Outdoor Tomatoes,” *The Exhibitionist*, No. 3 (2011), in Jens Hoffmann, ed., *The Exhibitionist: Journal on Exhibition Making—The First Six Years* (New York: The Exhibitionist, 2017), 203.

⁶ Slavs and Tatars, “The Splits of the Mind, If Not the Legs,” *The Exhibitionist*, No. 12 (June 2016), in Jens Hoffmann, ed., *The Exhibitionist: Journal on Exhibition Making—The First Six Years* (New York: The Exhibitionist, 2017), 962.

work. These few examples stress the need for a responsive, proactive curatorial methodology to generate sensitive and compelling exhibitions. Taking this challenge as a starting point, I set out to provide some examples of how a curator can use an institutional collection and resources while applying an artist-led approach within an art museum setting.

The artists that I discuss in this exegesis utilise archives in distinct ways, requiring different curatorial responses. Charting historical trajectories and connections is one of the core activities of a curator, who often functions as an art historian embedded within an art institution, and exhibition making invariably involves framing works in relation to a relevant cultural milieu. Even curators of contemporary art have found themselves in recent years attending to the past, because contemporary artists were increasingly working with history. The technologies and socio-political context of the late-twentieth century altered how artists approached materials, research, critique and even temporality. Digitisation and the internet made archives more readily available, a broader array of imagery and information could be gathered and compared in new ways and the past, present and future began to be considered simultaneously, as a new concept of time.⁷ There is a strong need for curators working with artists who are revisiting history to be empathetic to their narratives and to help explicate the often complex, sometimes esoteric and potentially opaque references that underpin an artist's work. An artist-led curatorial methodology is therefore particularly appropriate when working with artists who engage histories in their work. However, this methodology can be utilised regardless of whether there is archival content or not, as the focus is on ensuring that the form of the exhibition engages conceptually and has a material resonance with the artwork it presents, that it is both effective and affective.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, where I live and work, the growth of museums in the late-nineteenth century was the result of British colonisation, and this

⁷ Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2010), 193 - 215.

interrelationship and causality presents complex challenges for contemporary artists working at the nexus of history, institutions and collections. As a Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) curator working within an art museum, I am part of those systems that have historically marginalised and misrepresented women, non-binary and Indigenous artists and their practices. In Aotearoa, some artists who work with archives apply feminist and decolonising methodologies to reassess both the historical and ongoing inequity of institutions, rethinking who, what and how we remember. Exhibition making in institutions is a form through which to create or tell histories, whether by reinforcing, revising or critiquing the way the past is framed, and institutions frequently commission artists to provide critical assessments of their collections as an apparently progressive or self-reflexive action. When artists are making histories, the role of the curator to historicise and provide context for the artwork shifts to ensuring the references are comprehensible to audiences, while also situating an artist's work within a relevant contemporary context.

This research explores ways to support artists to develop exhibitions that are responsive and multi-sensory, that are sensitive to the artwork in both form and idea. I draw on a definition of affect from philosopher Brian Massumi that describes affect not as emotion or personal feeling, but the ability for a body to affect or be affected, in the sense of the transition or change in capacity brought about through passing over a threshold.⁸ Writers such as art historian Susan Best have long understood the significance of affect and embodied knowledge for art, and it is this affective quality that artists working with archives can bring to histories to make them feel urgent and relevant, and that I aim to enhance through artist-led curating.⁹ How might a curator work together with an artist to deepen an audience's understanding of their work? What embodied, spatialised and material strategies might a curator deploy to articulate an artist's ideas in an exhibition context, beyond the use of wall texts

⁸ Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2015), 4.

⁹ Susan Best, *Visualising Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

or other written explanations? What kind of creative and critical agency can artists have, after institutional critique and in the context of decolonising museums, and how can curators support this agency?

This exegesis sets out three distinct curatorial strategies—each developed in response to an artist’s work, and my curation of their work for an exhibition at The Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt, Wellington—for working with artists who are reanimating aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand history. These artists use media not commonly associated with the archive; instead they employ weaving, song, poetry and sculpture, media related to touch, the body and the evocation of feeling. My argument is that while each of these artists is engaging history, each requires a different curatorial approach, developed in response to their individual practices and needs. The project therefore has three variables in the practices of three different artists, yet two important constants were also in place: all three exhibitions occurred at The Dowse during my tenure as Senior Curator, and all three engaged that institution’s collection, albeit in different ways. The practice-based research undertaken through my work with artists Emma Fitts, Shannon Te Ao and Ruth Buchanan leads me to articulate the role of the contemporary curator to emphasise the key concerns of the artist through a range of artist-responsive affective and embodied strategies, providing context beyond written text and thereby generating exhibition designs that are responsive to an artist’s work.

My curatorial engagement with Fitts led to an exhibition that brought to light latent histories of women artists through interspersing or weaving textile works from The Dowse collection with Fitts’ large felted works. Te Ao drew on the histories of waiata (song) in his breath-taking video looking at language and intimacy that was installed in view of Nuku Tewhatewha, the pātaka (storehouse) at The Dowse Art Museum, and near to several works by Ralph Hotere (Te Aupōuri, Te Rarawa), expanding associations through adjacent collection objects. Buchanan contributed works to a group exhibition that showed her ability to articulate the sites and mechanisms of power across

the institution, requiring me, as curator, to relinquish power over some decisions and to reconsider how we write histories through the operations of the museum. As this practice-based research demonstrates, while there is no single way to work with artists, I have developed and advocated for an artist-led approach across the museum to enable meaningful interventions, new understandings of our histories and potential transformation of institutions, shifting power towards the artist and their work.

In the following sections of this Introduction, I firstly provide a background for the historical turn in late-twentieth century art practice through a brief review of key texts. This provides context for the artworks described in the subsequent chapters and also for my focus on affective, material and spatial curatorial strategies.¹⁰ I then introduce two theorists who were important for the three artist projects that I curated. German curator and theorist Doreen Mende advocates for subversion of the archive through her idea of the “undutiful daughter” and provides a critical position for the simultaneous belief in and use of archives for those wishing to challenge archival structures and the logic of collecting. The second foundational source is the influential decolonial text *Decolonizing Methodologies* by Māori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou), which articulates how Indigenous knowledge operates differently to Western research, offering examples and advocacy for ways of understanding the world outside Western archival systems. Finally, I elaborate on artist-led curating and offer the work of curator Elena Filipovic as an example of artist-led curatorial practice to compare with my own.

Subsequent chapters of this exegesis examine the three artist projects in depth, exploring the ideas most relevant to each artist’s practice and detailing how the different manifestations of my artist-led curatorial methodology

¹⁰ For an example of the discourse around the affective turn in curating and society more broadly, see *Affect and Curating: Feeling the Curatorial*, at Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2017 hosted by Helena Rickitt and Jennifer Fisher with Lisa Blackman and Nina Wakeford, <https://soundcloud.com/whitechapel-gallery/talk-affect-and-curating>.

developed in response to each. The conclusion draws these together in a comparative analysis, highlighting how each project required a responsive and relational approach, and describes the examination exhibition *Evolution of Galaxies* that features the three artists discussed. Throughout this exegesis I demonstrate how my artist-led curatorial practice is an ongoing conversation with artists that involves flexibility, adaptability and advocacy both for the public and within the institution.

I. Lost Futures and the Historical Turn

For the past thirty years, in increasing numbers and across the globe, artists have delved into archives, bringing to the surface alternative knowledges and counter-histories to challenge hegemonic narratives and address inequalities, both past and present. Several European curators and writers have attempted to name and bring into focus this phenomenon. Curator Mark Godfrey described the artist as historian, curator Dieter Roelstraete compared the artist to an archaeologist digging up the past, critic Jan Verwoert claimed we are living with ghosts and art historian Claire Bishop critiqued the appropriation of history as readymade.¹¹ The socio-political context of the 1990s prompted artists to look to the past; postmodern cultural conditions encouraged the use of widely varied sources; and computers, digitisation and the internet made archival materials more readily available. In historicising this tendency from the vantage point of 2020, art historian David Joselit argued

¹¹ Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October*, Vol. 120 (Spring 2007):140-172; Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art," *e-flux Journal*, No. 4 (March 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>; Jan Verwoert, "Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 2007): 1-7; and Claire Bishop, "History Depletes Itself," *Artforum*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (September 2015): 324-30.

that there was the increased potential for transformative practices that visualise the politics of information.¹²

The use of historical content in art is not new: artists throughout history have turned to historical subjects and themes in their work, depicting past events and narratives or even recreating past artworks. The modernist avant-gardes placed particular value on newness, yet historical or even mythological subject matter was nonetheless present in modernism. However, the historical turn that I am describing is distinct from these previous historical engagements, resulting from a specific set of circumstances at the turn of the last century—including the widespread impact of the internet, the end of the Cold War and triumph of neoliberalism, and a dissatisfaction with canonical art histories. Contemporary artists began to research archival fragments, peripheral or overlooked figures and events, and represent historical material through moving image, text and photography as well as media not usually used for documentation, ranging from performance to textiles. With data and imagery decentralised from archives and a cultural embrace of anachronism, the Western concept of time itself had changed, with the past, present and future perceived to be coterminous rather than a linear progression.¹³

Writing in 2009, at the height of the historical turn, Italian critic and media activist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi declared the imagination of the future to be over.¹⁴ In considering the prevalence of history in contemporary art practice,

¹² David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020): 156-60.

¹³ Art historian Terry Smith described contemporary time as: "Characterized more by the insistent presentness of multiple, often incompatible temporalities accompanied by the failure of all candidates that seek to provide *the* overriding temporal framework—be it modern, historical, spiritual, evolutionary, geological, scientific, globalizing, planetary... Everything about time these days—and therefore about place, subjectivity, and sociality—is at once intensely *here*, is slipping, or has become artifactual." Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, 196.

¹⁴ Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future*, edited by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), 126. Berardi defined a series of twentieth century events—political, economic, ecological and technological shifts—that he believes led to our contemporary malaise. He claimed that in the absence of future hope, it is our task to find a way to exert some kind of social re-composition, offering his own manifesto as a call to arms. More recently, Berardi has problematically argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has shocked the global system and "reactivated the future as a space of possibility". Andreas

unpacking the reasons for this lack of future imagination seems vital to understanding the orientation of artists and society more generally towards the past. In many places globally, the 1980s and 1990s were a grim response to the preceding protest decades, with systematic deregulation and the establishment of an aggressively neoliberal age in economics, politics, technology and culture. In the pivotal year of 1989, unilaterally claimed as “a year that changed the world” with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the apparent conclusion of the Cold War and the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama asked whether this was “The End of History?”¹⁵ and the end, therefore, of utopian dreams for a better, more advanced tomorrow, as liberal democracy had supposedly been achieved.¹⁶ Critically, this was also a period in which the very nature of labour changed, from mechanical industrial labour to that of precarious info-labour, becoming immaterial, linguistic and affective. According to Berardi, this fundamental shift of how we work, a result of technological advancements, globalisation and the information age, underpinned the cynical, depressed state of the early-twenty first century. After Fukuyama’s end of history and Berardi’s end of the future, this left us only the dreadful present.¹⁷ Now, just over a decade on from his text, we are seeing the global impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and burgeoning climate crisis, that are very real and immediate dangers we must face. The future seems to have returned with a vengeance, yet not as optimistic or progressive as it once was.

Petrossiants, “Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi: Pandemic and the Reset of the Global Machine,” *Strelka Mag* (2020), <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/franco-bifo-berardi-pandemic-and-the-reset-of-the-global-machine>.

¹⁵ Drawing on the concept of a linear progress of history towards human freedom from German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he stated: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government...”, Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* (Summer 1989): 1-18.

¹⁶ 1989 has also become the year that we use to define the generation sometimes referred to as “89 Plus”: digital natives who have grown up with neoliberal politics and culture, and who are now coming of age in the art world.

¹⁷ Berardi echoes the words of Gilles Deleuze: “We can see distant spaces, but distant time can no longer be seen... we have entered virtual space.” Berardi, *After the Future*, 40.

The notion of broken time informs the concept of “hauntology” introduced by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, a critique of Marxism that uses a play on “ontology” to consider the haunting of past ideas.¹⁸ Derrida says we must learn to live with ghosts, to relay their presence into the present. While many Indigenous philosophies acknowledge spirituality and spectral presences were common in pre-modern societies, a belief in ghosts contradicts Western secularism. Those spirits that demand to be addressed, Derrida claims, are related to “a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations”, called forth in the name of justice. When thought of in relation to contemporary art practice, these are issues with which artists of the historical turn are directly engaging: the politics of memory, of the archival record, of genealogies, burdens, legacies and inheritance.

Cultural theorist Mark Fisher applied Derrida’s “hauntology” to music and cultural production of the early-twenty first century, using the spectre, who cannot be present but is at once no longer and not yet, as a sort of agency of the virtual, our lost futures.¹⁹ In an influential essay from 2007, “Living with Ghosts”, Jan Verwoert also used Derrida’s ghost to suggest that there has been a decisive shift in appropriation from that of the postmodern re-use of a dead commodity fetish to the invocation of ghosts that live through time. He claims that this reveals a radical transformation of our experience of history, “from a feeling of a general loss of historicity to a current sense of an excessive presence of history, a shift from not enough to too much history or rather too many histories.”²⁰ This echoes the shift of the commodity from an

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York and United Kingdom: Routledge, 1993), xvii.

¹⁹ Writing about music, television and film, Fisher sees the collapsing of time and constant montage or sampling as a ubiquitous trend. The impact of this loss on cultural production is widespread anachronism, nostalgia for modernism, and depression. He states: “What haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate... the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different...” Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Hants: Zero Books, 2014), 46.

²⁰ Verwoert, “Living with Ghosts,” 4.

object to immaterial information between the 1980s and today, and parallels the increased use of archives by artists.

As these writers show, contemporary artists working with historical material are engaging with concepts of time as well as history. Not simply lamenting that we are living in the end times, their work evinces a thoughtful reconsideration of time and speed more generally. With the impending ecological crisis anticipated to climax in 2050, there are desperate calls to slow down our consumption and alter production methods, though we are unsure of how, or are simply unwilling, to begin this process. The past, present and future are experienced and perceived as simultaneous, as contemporary, and this new concept of time is perhaps more in keeping with Indigenous views of time as cyclical, a constellation or a spiral.²¹

Around the same time that Verwoert noticed a change in appropriation, the popularity of twentieth-century theorist Walter Benjamin reached an all-time high in the art world, particularly his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”. Benjamin’s description of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* (1920) was frequently quoted, for example, at *documenta 12* (2007).²² The idea that history is a chaotic piling up of events, or the description of the pearl diver who delves into the unknown, became popular symbols for the widespread rag-picking of history that was taking place. For artists and cultural workers, Benjamin himself seemed to “flash up” in our collective memory, as he proposed in these often-cited words: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’.... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”.²³ What constituted this moment of danger that sparked our desire to rediscover Benjamin and his

²¹ For example, the Māori concept of time that is described later in this Introduction through the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, whereby the present cannot be thought about without a conception of the past.

²² This work featured in the exhibition as part of one the three key curatorial themes, “Is modernism is our antiquity?” *documenta 12* (16 June - 23 September 2007) curated by Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, Kassel, Germany.

²³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the philosophy of history” [1940], Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

non-linear perspective of history? Within the post-Snowden information deluge, with the ever-increasing use of surveillance, the age of big data and WikiLeaks, the stakes have changed from wanting to expand the archive or address the exclusion of marginal and alternative histories, to an imperative to try and work within that endless flow of information to tell specific stories, to attempt to control accessibility and ownership of knowledge. Artists working within the now ubiquitous frame of research and knowledge production use digital data and the conditions of global information systems as material to expose the political tensions inherent to mass data infrastructure. Following the apparent shift in labour to a knowledge-based economy in Western societies, the incentive for artists to work more discursively seems not only understandable but essential.²⁴

Writing at the same time as Berardi, in 2009, curator Dieter Roelstraete claimed in his article “The Way of the Shovel” that artists were driven by an avoidance of the awful present. For him the prevalence of history or historiography in contemporary practice was the result of a post-9/11 world and characteristic of art of the Bush era.²⁵ Roelstraete adopted the metaphor of the artist as archaeologist rather than historian, conjuring up the image of a worker digging up the past with shovel in hand instead of an academic or storyteller, and thus returning material objects to the fore.²⁶ A few years later, in 2012, he curated the exhibition *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago to further develop this argument, including artworks that involved images of literal excavations alongside artists who were revealing alternative histories. His analogy assumes that there are material remains lying beneath the

²⁴ Following the dematerialisation of the art object in the 1960s and ‘70s and the rise of conceptual art, artists are increasingly working with research as readily as they are with other materials, and discursive activities have become integral to contemporary art practice. For example, see the discussion at BAK in The Netherlands on this topic: http://bakonline.org/en/Research/Itineraries/Concerning_Knowledge_Production/Processing_Knowledge_Production_in_Art?parent=Research%2FItineraries%2FConcerning_Knowledge_Production%2FProcessing_Knowledge_Production_in_Art.

²⁵ Roelstraete, “The Way of the Shovel,” np.

²⁶ Using the metaphor of archaeology also refers to Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, A. M. Sheridan Smith, trans. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

ground surface waiting to be reclaimed, rather than focusing on the role we play in reconstructing the past.

Curator Katerina Gregos commented that Roelstraete failed to adequately recognise the political dimension of this digging by artists.²⁷ Though he acknowledged the end of the Cold War as a motivating factor, for example a difference between artists working from the post-socialist context of Eastern Europe to Western Europe, Roelstraete maintained in his catalogue essay that artists were avoiding the present as well as the future, rather than identifying specific contemporary political concerns.²⁸ Gregos' critique shows the necessity to provide a curatorial framework that can adequately account for particular counter-histories and alternative narratives and how, for artists utilising archives, the artworks alone do not always clearly convey the relevancy of the underlying historical references: some do require further mediation or explication.

Critiquing the appropriation of history as a readymade form, the use of narratives found in archives and translated to contemporary art, art historian Claire Bishop has derided what she terms "poetic opacity." For Bishop, the fragmentary and poetic treatment of archival source material prevents audiences from understanding a work's historical context.²⁹ Bishop's criticism focuses on Vietnamese-born Danish artist Dahn Vo and his two exhibitions at the 2015 Venice Biennale: the solo exhibition *mothertongue* at the Danish Pavilion, which was a tightly conceptual installation centred on Vo's family history; and *Slip of the Tongue*, an exhibition Vo curated situating his own work alongside that of 43 others at the Punta della Dogana, the former customs building housing the art collection of Francois Pinault.³⁰ While Bishop

²⁷ Katerina Gregos, *Hidden in Remembrance is the Silent Memory or Our Future* catalogue text, (Belgium: Contour Biennale, 2009).

²⁸ Dieter Roelstraete, "Field Notes," in Sarah Kramer, ed., *The Way of the Shovel: On the archaeological imaginary in art* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2013), 39.

²⁹ Bishop, "History Depletes Itself," 324-30.

³⁰ Vo included works from the fourteenth-century until the present from this extraordinary collection and the exhibition was widely considered one of the highlights of the 2015 Venice Biennale. It featured heavily in industry news. For example, see

thought Vo's perspective on the past was overly personal and focused on aesthetic values, as a visitor I found this elicited surprising, fresh connections between artists or works. For example, a Lee Lozano painting beside a Nairy Baghramian sculpture emphasised the gestures and relationship to the body in each, which were otherwise more latent readings.

In her *Artforum* review, Bishop asserted, "the obliqueness and hermeticism of Vo's exhibition have been hallmarks of artist-curated exhibitions since the turn of the millennium... More generally, contemporary artist-curated shows are characterized by a gnomic, highly subjective allusiveness."³¹ While she recognised Vo's interest in the male body, nature, the iconography of Catholicism and the exhibition's mapping of a genealogy of queer artists, Bishop seemed uneasy with this list of objectives, primarily because it presents "the artist-curator not as a critic."³² Bishop was critical of how contemporary artists use "information as ornament", often merely presenting archival documents and found images rather than interpreting them.³³ Yet it is Vo's artist-curated exhibition *Slip of the Tongue* that she seems to find the most problematic, rather than his artist pavilion *mothertongue*. This reveals that obliqueness is for Bishop a curatorial problem.

Like Roelstraete, Bishop claimed: "we are facing a widespread impulse to take refuge in the past, rather than to mobilise history as a powerful cultural weapon from which we might draw inspiration for present-day battles."³⁴ Yet Roelstraete suggested that the tactility or haptic quality of "archeological" art could counteract the failings of historiographic works, what he deems the irresponsible obsession with the past.³⁵ For him, the recovery and analysis of

<http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/07/at-the-punta-della-dogana-danh-vo-offers-a-moving-selection-of-martin-wongs/>; or <http://www.wmagazine.com/story/danh-vo-danish-pavilion-and-punta-della-dogana>.

³¹ Bishop, "History Depletes Itself," 326.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 325.

³⁴ Ibid., 329.

³⁵ "The archeological imaginary in art produces not so much an *optics* as it does a *haptics*—it invites us, forces us to intently scratch the surface (of the earth, of time, of the *world*) rather than merely marvel at it in dandified detachment... the alignment of art and archeology

material culture within archaeology, digging in the dirt rather than trawling through archives, redeems these artist projects as it means they are grounded in the material substance of reality.³⁶ The works of the artists discussed in this exegesis are similarly embodied, material translations of archival documents: textiles, song and sculpture, rather than text, photography and filmic media. This tactility makes their work more sensuous and immediate, telling histories in evocative, affective forms that audiences understand bodily.

While Bishop's observations articulate the at times frustrating experience of viewing these types of work—what may appear to be esoteric, unclear or puzzling narratives—she tends to oversimplify and diminish the agency of artists attempting to re-deploy histories in subjective or idiosyncratic ways. She acknowledges that Vo's work is seductive and that artists need to avoid didactic statements, but argues that work will be meaningful only if it goes through a process of "distillation and synthesis", the organising of information and drawing together of strands into a cohesive form.³⁷ It is this prescriptive focus on critical or analytical argumentation as the criterion of quality—the demand that an artist operate like a critic, employing the tools of art criticism or art history—that underpins Bishop's judgment, rather than allowing artists to operate by their own terms and to develop potentially new historiographic modalities.³⁸ She claims "the result is an ambience that you just kind of feel rather than understand."³⁹ Yet instead of seeing this as a failing, I would argue that this communication by feeling is the strength of this type of artistic practice: that art can make you feel, as a way of making you understand. To be seduced by the materiality of Vo's sculptures is far more compelling than a

compensates for the one tragic flaw that clearly cripples the purported critical claims and impact of the current "historiographic turn" in art: its inability to grasp or even look at the present, much less to *excavate the future*." Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel," np.

³⁶ His use of the terms optics and haptics recalls Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905) and the progression from haptic or tactile to optic modes of perception.

³⁷ Bishop, "History Depletes Itself," 329.

³⁸ Bishop does outline several examples of collection exhibitions that were curated to deploy the past in a way that she is arguing for here in her book, *Radical Museology, or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (London: Koenig Books, 2013).

³⁹ Bishop, "History Depletes Itself," 325.

well-written wall label, though these types of artworks may also require curatorial mediation.

II. Undutiful Daughters and the Archive

The curators and art historians writing about the historical turn in art that I have cited so far are predominantly male and from a European and North American context. However, since the mid-twentieth century feminist, queer and Indigenous practitioners have been some of the leading critics regarding the constructed nature of archives, histories and collections. In various ways, artists, curators, art historians and writers have interrogated systemic biases to reveal and reimagine alternative histories and advocate for other forms of knowledge. This and the following section contextualise the work of theorists Doreen Mende and Linda Tuhiwai-Smith in this critical trajectory, demonstrating their central importance to my own practice-based research. In Chapter Three I return to the topic of institutional critique within the context of artistic practice, setting the work of Ruth Buchanan in relation to histories of institutional critique in Aotearoa as well as international practitioners such as Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson.⁴⁰

Since the 1970s, feminist discourse has rethought social, cultural, political and economic structures, including historiography. Writers of wider cultural commentary provided key ideas for critiquing and challenging the archive: the situated knowledges of Donna Haraway; the campaigning for racial justice of activist and scholar Angela Davis; and the writing of self-described "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," Audre Lorde have all been hugely influential.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* at Philadelphia Museum in 1989, and Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992.

⁴¹ Key texts from these authors, for example: Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Feminist Studies, Inc., 1988): 575–99; Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New

Feminist art historians critiqued arts institutions and the gender divide of the art historical canon, with important contributions from Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Lisa Tickner, among many others.⁴² Activists paid similar attention to the underlying patriarchal biases of archives.⁴³ British academic Red Chidgey has tracked how activist memories and resources connect with concerns and conditions of the present, highlighting how one of the key uses of anachronism for feminists continues to be the seizing of past moments and figures to activate the present.⁴⁴ She quotes feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich in the reader *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*: “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”⁴⁵ Current discourse builds on early feminist voices, at times knowingly and sometimes through the need to address a persistent concern. The continued relevance of a critique of history for feminist and other activists is one of these concerns, since to reshape the future the past must also be rewritten and as yet, archives and histories remain dominated by patriarchal, colonial, privileged, heteronormative narratives.⁴⁶

York: Random House, 1981); and Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” 1983.

⁴² For example in key texts such as Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran eds, *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Lisa Tickner, “Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference,” *Genders*, 3 (1988): 92-128.

⁴³ Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014). In *Archive Fever* even Derrida noted the patriarchal underpinnings of the archive, stating: “this archic, in truth patriarchic, function, without which no archive would ever come into play...”, before mentioning the work of French historian Sonia Combe, who questions the writing of history and the “repression” of the archive as masculine. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Red Chidgey, *Feminist Afterlives: Assemblage Memory in Activist Times* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴⁵ Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (London: Virago, 1980), 35, as cited in Red Chidgey, “The Need for the New in Feminist Activist Discourse: Notes Toward a Scene of Anachronism,” in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck, eds (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 25.

⁴⁶ Archivists Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood claim that feminist critique of the archive has not gone far enough: “Within the archival field, engagements with feminist thought and practice have too often been focused narrowly on documenting more women in archives, rather than

It is widely acknowledged that there are deeply problematic aspects to the term feminism—namely the biases and blind spots of the white, straight, middle-class demographic that was predominant in the feminist movement of the 1970s. Yet feminism has since been productively challenged and expanded to include more diverse theories and people.⁴⁷ In Aotearoa New Zealand, feminism was not widely accepted as beneficial for Māori women because of its grounding in settler colonial culture and predominantly Pākehā (New Zealand European) values, as well as a recognition for some that Māori political action must come first. However, the concept of Mana Wahine, which should not be thought of as Māori feminism, advocates for valuing the qualities, roles and strengths of Māori women. As Māori academic Ngahuia Te Awekotuku (Te Arawa, Tūhoe, Waikato) describes it:

It is often said that being Māori and feminist must be a contradiction; that feminism is some imported pākehā idea about being female and being put down for being female, that it has no place in the Māori world, that it imposes a foreign way of seeing, and of being. I disagree, because feminism is what we make it; it's a matter of how we define it for ourselves, in terms of our own oppression as women.⁴⁸

In this view, adapting, redefining and supplementing the diverse ideas and practices of international feminisms provides a rich body of knowledge for ways to rethink and rewrite our past, from viewpoints that are multiple, peripheral, queer and revolutionary.

adopting the critical feminist agenda of dismantling the heteronormative, capitalist, racist patriarchy.” Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, “Critical Feminism in the Archives,” in Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan and T-Kay Sangwand eds, “Critical Archival Studies,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, no. 2 (2017), 8.

⁴⁷ For example, Australian Indigenous academic and activist Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s doctoral thesis and book *Talkin’ up to the white woman: Indigenous women and feminism in Australia* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2000), is a searing critique of the whiteness of western feminism; and American Sandy Stone offered a new way to think of the intersections of gender, embodiment and sexuality with the pioneering manifesto “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” 1992, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle eds (New York: Routledge, 2006), 221–35.

⁴⁸ Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, *Mana Wahine Maori: Selected Writings on Maori Women’s Art, Culture and Politics* (Auckland: New Women’s Press, 1991), 10.

German curator and theorist Doreen Mende has made use of the feminist idea of the “undutiful daughter”, as initially outlined by feminist academic Rosi Braidotti, to describe those who challenge the archive:

the *undutiful daughter* who refuses the paternal law but who also believes in the archive’s futuristic power. She cannot (not) participate in the language of ‘what can be said,’ but she does so in accordance with her own learning processes, vocabularies, and pathways.⁴⁹

For Mende, the term “daughter” applies to all those who exist outside the hegemonic subject: who are of diverse genders, classes and peoples.⁵⁰

Mende notes in this text that twentieth-century feminist critiques of the archive are based on a monocultural idea of “the law” and paternal control, and that many forms of knowledge exist outside this formulation of the archive.

In *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* academic Julietta Singh argues that, “mastery’s obdurate presence necessarily affects how scholars within and beyond the postcolonial project envision their intellectual pursuits today.”⁵¹ In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Singh maps an archive of the body as an infinite history of traces.⁵² As Māori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, histories are stored in diverse forms, landscapes and bodies:

The idea of contested stories and multiple discourses about the past, by different communities, is closely linked to the politics of everyday contemporary Indigenous life. It is very much a part of the fabric of communities that value oral ways of knowing. These contested accounts are stored within genealogies, within the landscape, within weavings and carvings, even within the personal names that many people carried.⁵³

⁴⁹ Doreen Mende, “The Undutiful Daughter’s Concept of Archival Metabolism,” *e-flux Journal*, No. 93 (September 2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215339/the-undutiful-daughter-s-concept-of-archival-metabolism/>.

⁵⁰ The term “Undutiful Daughter” is a play on Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiography *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1959), as used in Gunkel, Nigianni and Söderbäck, *Undutiful Daughters*.

⁵¹ Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

⁵² Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2018).

⁵³ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, second edition (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2012 (first edition 1999)), 34.

The recovery of marginalised histories has at times been a task of reimagining and reading into archival absence, as American scholar Saidiya Hartman has done in researching black lives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, describing worlds that were a radical departure from societal conventions previously assumed and written about.⁵⁴ Hartman shows how material documents of the archive exclude oral histories, embodied knowledge and memories, unless they are transcribed, formatted and translated into the written or image-based structure of the archive. As Portia Malatje writes in relation to South African artistic practices:

While it is useful to think about the archive through materiality and possession, there is an opportunity to account for different forms of knowledge-production, conservation and dissemination. It becomes generative to employ radical imagination and speculative forms of archival practice to assist us in centring different ways of knowing.... Insisting only on physical archives risks the erasure of spiritual and cosmological archival processes.⁵⁵

Those who speak from other languages, positions and knowledge systems are caught in the double logic of needing to learn the language of the archive and to maintain their own unfitting and illegible language. However, the advantage of this double position, Mende argues, is the potential for “monstrous unpredictability” on the part of those speaking from outside the law—it is not known what may emerge and this can be a powerful advantage. Mende’s theory of the archive demonstrates how multiple and contradictory resources may be used to create new readings of existing histories. It is therefore productive for curators and contemporary artists who are working with histories. For example, though a collecting museum is bound to, and even reinforces, the laws of the archive, artists are not and so are free to reclaim fragments, and to use this material with their own understanding of time and context. This can lead to possible friction, with an artist using the collection or institution in ways that contradict a curatorial responsibility to care

⁵⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2019).

⁵⁵ Portia Malatje, “Archive Panic,” *Frieze*, No. 222 (October 2021): 130.

for this archive, despite its failings and omissions; or it can allow for commentaries and discourse that the curator and institution welcome but feel they cannot enact themselves.

All three of the artists that I will elaborate on in the following chapters could be described as “undutiful daughters”, as can I, at once critiquing and believing in the power of the archive. As noted, the strength of working in this way is that it enables unpredictable uses of information or knowledge, the bringing together of narratives from unlikely contexts and the use of archival materials in unconventional ways to generate new histories and perspectives. Emma Fitts attends to the overlooked stories of textile artists, women in the Bauhaus and queer practitioners, exploring textiles as a form of text. Shannon Te Ao combines a waiata (song) from *Ngā Mōteatea*, the songs collected by Sir Āpirana Ngata (Ngāti Porou) over forty years, with an American film from 1978 and a nineteenth-century lament from Aotearoa to create a complex and layered video work addressing ideas of intimacy, language and loss. Ruth Buchanan actively engages in the activities of the institution, articulating how power operates within arts institutions and the histories that we create and maintain.

III. Decolonising Practices in Aotearoa

In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Indigenous knowledge and histories play an important role for many contemporary artists. While the international literature and discourse on decolonising the museum is extensive and of relevance to many artists working globally, for Aotearoa there is also a rich local critical discourse around decolonisation and “reMāorification” of the museum and gallery space.⁵⁶ Many writers and academics are working to

⁵⁶ The term “reMāorification” is preferred by Māori scholar Dr. Moana Jackson (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Porou), as noted by Māori museum professional Puawai Cairns (Ngāti

articulate what decolonisation might look like in Aotearoa and advocating for better institutions and practices, on subjects ranging from public policy, law, broadcasting and education to museums and the arts.⁵⁷

Contemporary art historians, writers and curators have worked to write, exhibit and teach Māori perspectives on art history in Aotearoa, espousing a more diverse range of art practices, greater visibility of Māori artists and advocating Indigenous philosophy, cosmology and language.⁵⁸ Art historian, curator and educator Jonathan Mane-Wheoki (Ngāpuhi, Te Aupōuri, Ngāti Kurī) was a leading voice in the field of art history and museums, an authoritative figure who bridged the worlds of Māori knowledge and culture and Western art history.⁵⁹ Rangihiroa Panoho's 1992 essay "Māori: at the centre, on the margins" was a strident critique of cultural appropriation by Pākehā that shook the art world, and his more recent book on Māori art history offered a fresh perspective, drawing on Māori terminology and ideas to describe and categorise art practices from a Māori worldview.⁶⁰ While curating at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Ngahiraka Mason (Tūhoe, Te Arawa, Ngāti Pango)

Pūkenga, Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) in her blog "Decolonise or indigenise: moving towards sovereign spaces and the Māorification of New Zealand museology," Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand website, 2020, <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2020/02/10/decolonise-or-indigenise-moving-towards-sovereign-spaces-and-the-maorification-of-new-zealand-museology/>.

⁵⁷ For a sample of the contemporary writing around decolonisation in Aotearoa, see Rebecca Kiddle ed., *Imagining Decolonisation* (Wellington: BWB Books, 2020); the authoritative recounting of history from a Māori perspective, Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou (Struggle Without End)* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1990); a collection of writings on Indigenous sexuality: Jessica Hutchings and Clive Aspin, *Sexuality and the Stories of Indigenous People* (Wellington: Huia, 2007); for Māori legal thought and practice, Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths-Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2011); and on education, Jessica Hutchings and Jenny Lee-Morgan eds, *Decolonisation in Aotearoa: Education, Research and Practice* (Wellington: NZCER Press, 2016).

⁵⁸ I have excluded from the following list Sir Āpirana Turupa Ngata (Ngāti Porou, 1874 - 1950), who was a strong advocate for Māori arts and culture in the early-twentieth century, as I am focusing here on contemporary art and discourse. However, in Chapter Two I acknowledge his scholarship on waiata (song).

⁵⁹ For a summary of the legacy of his scholarship see Mark Stocker and Conal McCarthy eds, *Colonial Gothic to Māori Renaissance: Essays in Memory of Jonathan Mane-Wheoki* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017).

⁶⁰ Rangihiroa Panoho, "Māori: at the centre, on the margins," in Mary Barr, ed., *Headlands: Thinking through New Zealand Art* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992); and Rangihiroa Panoho, *MAORI ART: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory* (Auckland: David Bateman Ltd, 2015).

used material culture, old knowledge and new understandings within Indigenous sites of knowledge to generate awareness of the value of Māori culture and bring attention to Māori practitioners. Following on from her, Nigel Borell (Pirirakau, Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi, Te Whakatōhea) recently curated *Toi Tū Toi Ora*, a major retrospective of Māori art, with a publication forthcoming, that presented Māori art history using a Māori framework and cosmology articulated through the artwork selections and exhibition design. Art historians Ngarino Ellis (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou) and Deidre Brown (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu) also have a major publication on Māori art history in production, *Toi Te Mana: a new history of Māori art*, and have contributed significantly to the field of art history for many years by recovering Māori art forms and theories, carving, tattoo and personal adornment, and highlighting the role of Māori architecture, such as the wharehau (meeting house).⁶¹ In 1991, artist Robert Jahnke (Ngāi Taharora, Te Whānau a Iritekura, Te Whānau a Rakairo o Ngāti Porou) established Toioho ki Āpiti, the Māori Visual Arts Programme at Massey University, to offer an educational model grounded in Te Ao Māori (a Māori worldview) that would teach young artists to make work that was relevant to Māori audiences first and foremost.⁶² These practitioners have worked to move their disciplines from the celebration and inclusion of Māori art practices, as in Māori modernism or weaving, to transforming and reinventing institutional structures, bringing a Māori perspective and knowledge to the exhibition, writing and teaching of art.

Māori academic and Professor of Indigenous Education Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou) has had an enormous influence within academic fields both in Aotearoa and internationally. First published in 1999, her now-canonical book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* explains how academic research methods are embedded in

⁶¹ For example, Ngarino Ellis, *A Whakapapa of Tradition: One hundred years of Ngāti Porou carving, 1830-1930* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2016); and Deidre Brown, *Māori Architecture* (Auckland: Penguin Publishing, 2009).

⁶² Bridget Reweti, "Uiuinga #1: A conversation with Robert Jahnke," *CIRCUIT* website (19 May 2019), <https://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/uiuinga-1-a-conversation-with-robert-jahnke>.

imperialism and argues for Indigenous approaches to research and the valuing of Indigenous world views and knowledge. Tuhiwai Smith states:

...what counts as Western research draws from an 'archive' of knowledge and systems, rules and values which stretch beyond the boundaries of Western science to the system now referred to as the West. Stuart Hall makes the point that the West is an idea or concept, a language for imagining a set of complex stories, ideas, historical events and social relationships.⁶³...

This sense of what the idea of the West represents is important here because to a large extent theories about research are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race. ...Systems of classification and representation enable different traditions or fragments of traditions to be retrieved and reformulated in different contexts as discourses, and then to be played out in systems of power and domination, with real material consequences for colonized peoples.⁶⁴

This description of the foundations of institutional knowledge as formulated from the cultural position of the West is critical for artists who are interrogating and rewriting history, and also crucial for the practice of artist-led curating, particularly for a Pākehā institutional curator working with Indigenous artists.

Tuhiwai Smith proposes that Western critiques of history and theory, such as Poststructuralism or Western feminism, remain grounded in the ideas of progress motivating the eighteenth century Enlightenment and twentieth century modernism, and therefore do not structurally challenge these value systems or attitudes.⁶⁵ She writes that simply reclaiming histories will not alter the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples or shift the power embedded in history. Nonetheless, she argues, "To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of

⁶³ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 44.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

doing things.”⁶⁶ Tuhiwai Smith’s writing has been important for a range of researchers, including visual artists, as it acknowledges that there are multiple ways of researching and understanding the world, and that Indigenous concepts such as embodied knowledge or whakapapa (genealogy) are vital to learning about and sharing our stories of the present and past; for Māori, Pākehā and all other cultures.

Tuhiwai Smith also articulates how different conceptions of time are part of te ao Māori (the Māori world view).⁶⁷ “Ka mua, ka muri” is a frequently cited proverb that describes how the past is in front of us and we walk backwards into the future, an idea that acknowledges the importance of our ancestors and those who have gone before. For many Indigenous cultures, concepts of time are profoundly non-linear; bringing to light these different ways of understanding temporality is key to thinking about how artists from other viewpoints or knowledge systems might be looking at “the past” or “history”.

While Shannon Te Ao may be interested in Western writers and concepts, such as Mark Fisher and his idea of “hauntology”, Te Ao’s work is also clearly influenced by te ao Māori. His work *Ka Mua Ka Muri* (2020) eloquently relates to both these disruptions of linear time and of being carried in the present moment by points gone and yet to come. Chapter Two of this exegesis elaborates further on Te Ao’s project *my life as a tunnel* for The Dowse Art Museum: here I simply acknowledge that across his practice the past is seen as living and part of the present. Te Ao brings multiple references together to generate new ways of seeing a moment, from many directions at once and not following the bounds of linear time.

As I describe in Chapter Three, Ruth Buchanan is also indebted to the scholarship of *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Buchanan invited Tuhiwai Smith to be a keynote speaker at *Uneven Bodies*, the symposium that she

⁶⁶ Ibid., 35 and 168.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 57.

coordinated with the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 2020. Tuhiwai Smith does not usually participate in contemporary art events and it was refreshing to hear her reflect on her ideas in relation to art and its institutions. Her comments on our ability to decolonise our institutions had a strong impact on the day of the symposium, when she simply asked whether or not these are the institutions that Māori want or need. Her focus was not on working with what is already powerful, but on looking holistically at situations and not accepting that how things are is how they should be.

As the discourse around decolonisation in Aotearoa continues to grow, artists such as Te Ao and Buchanan are drawing on the work of scholars like Tuhiwai Smith, as they test their own decolonising strategies. To work as a curator alongside them means to work responsively to provide resources and space, and to remain aware of the ongoing power structures within art institutions.

IV. An Artist-led Curatorial Practice

In one sense, all curatorial practice can be described as “artist-led”, in that curating involves listening and responding to the needs of artists; supporting the development, display and interpretation of artwork according to the artist’s concerns and requirements; advocating for artists, often beyond the confines of a single exhibition; and mediating their work for and to a public. Veteran French curator and museum director Suzanne Pagé claims that the curator exists to help artists make ambitious and even radical projects to become public: “Artists should be given maximum freedom to make their visions clear to others, and to exceed the limits. That is my role, my real power.”⁶⁸ Her claim, made in 1998, reveals that Pagé is a curator sensitive to art and artists.

⁶⁸ Suzanne Pagé in 1998 *Artforum* interview with Daniel Birnbaum, “The Archeology of Things to Come,” in Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP | Ringier, 2007), 236.

However, this view is at odds with how curatorial practice of the 1990s has been characterised, as an era of heightened visibility and pronounced authorship for curators. Paul O'Neill summarised:

Within discussions around art, there has been a clear shift away from an artist-centered cultural hierarchy toward a postproductive discourse, in which the function of curating has become another recognized part of the expanded field of art making.⁶⁹

The changing role of the art curator over the twentieth century, from that of caretaker of a collection to creative practitioner and commissioner of contemporary art, is well documented in curatorial discourse so I will not elaborate it here,⁷⁰ except to note, these shifts in curating were generally associated with the need to mediate new developments in artistic practice, whether that be dematerialised conceptual art, new media or relational aesthetics.⁷¹ Nor will I dwell here on any supposed opposition between artist and curator, the artist-as-curator, or the curator-as-artist, on which a good deal of scholarship already exists.⁷² My focus instead is on curators who work to empower artists in their exhibition making and who allow the form of the exhibition to echo and enhance the artworks presented. As curator Elena Filipovic identified:

the responsibility to attend to artworks in a way that is adequate to the risks that they take... The exhibitions (whether organized by an artist or a professional curator) I've admired most and have found most engaging and thought provoking seem to have developed their methodology and form from

⁶⁹ O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating*, 103.

⁷⁰ Since the 1990s, numerous symposia and publications have been dedicated to writing a history of exhibitions and curatorial practice, and this was disseminated through the burgeoning curatorial studies programmes. See for example Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2012), 38.

⁷¹ For example, as Terry Smith surmised in relation to contemporary curating: "It is no surprise that innovations in the time-bound arts should serve as models for rethinking temporary exhibitions nor that the frenetic swapping between artistic mediums that was occurring at the time (the transmedial condition) should have impacted upon the shaping of exhibitions. All of these changes have continued to resonate within curatorial practice across the spectrum." Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 132.

⁷² See for example Elena Filipovic, ed. *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology* (Milan and London: Mousse Publishing and Koenig Books, 2017); or Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2018).

the material intelligence and risk of the artworks brought together. In these, the artwork was generative of the exhibition itself.⁷³

In other words, curatorial practice that is responsive, proactive and artist-led.

Over a decade ago, curator Maria Lind claimed that there needed to be a shift in attention from the curator to the artwork and a distinction made between the act of curating and the radical potential of “the curatorial”—a similar distinction to that which Chantal Mouffe pointed out in the difference between politics and the political.⁷⁴ Theorist and curator Irit Rogoff described “the curatorial” as a bringing together and testing of different forms of knowledge.⁷⁵ This notion of “the curatorial” proposes that a curator has broader scope, and also responsibilities, to connect art not only with art history but also cultural, social and political events, within a wider discourse, and to use this position strategically. Or, as curatorial theorist Beatrice von Bismarck claims, the curator’s purpose is to acknowledge the interrelationships of the activity of curating, the subject position of the curator and the resulting exhibition, to maintain flexibility.⁷⁶ Each of these views identifies a need to return focus to art and uses “the curatorial” as a way of facilitating discursive practices, political agency and engagement with fields outside art in order to generate unpredictable, high-quality outcomes.

Artist and founder of e-flux Anton Vidokle is critical of this approach though for the apparent omission or oversight of artists. He stated in 2010:

⁷³ Elena Filipovic, “What Is An Exhibition?”, in Jens Hoffmann, ed., *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating* (Milan: Mouse Publishing, 2013), 72.

⁷⁴ Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” *Artforum International*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (October 2009), <https://www.artforum.com/print/200908/the-curatorial-23737>.

⁷⁵ “In the realm of “the curatorial” we see various principles that might not be associated with displaying works of art; principles of the production of knowledge, of activism, of cultural circulations and translations that begin to shape and determine other forms by which arts can engage. In a sense “the curatorial” is thought and critical thought at that, that does not rush to embody itself, does not rush to concretise itself, but allows us to stay with the questions until they point us in some direction we might have not been able to predict.” Irit Rogoff, “Smuggling: An Embodied Criticality,” *Transversal* (2006), https://xenopraxis.net/readings/rogoff_smuggling.pdf.

⁷⁶ This will be argued in her forthcoming publication: Beatrice von Bismarck, *The Curatorial Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022).

The necessity of going ‘beyond the making of exhibitions’ should not become a justification for the work of curators to supersede the work of artists, nor a reinforcement of authorial claims that render artists and artworks merely actors and props for illustrating curatorial concepts. Movement in such a direction runs a serious risk of diminishing the space of art by undermining the agency of its producers: artists.⁷⁷

His article “Art Without Artists?” outlines a concern with the growing gap between curatorial theory and the power relations inherent to the culture industry, emphasising how the curator remains the protagonist in “the curatorial”, rather than giving agency to artists. Vidokle reminds us that art related events, discourse and forms of engagement, are simply not possible without artists.

Lind also criticised the apparent use of artists by curators. Writing in *The Exhibitionist* about curatorial programmes and the tendencies of young curators, she mused:

A laudable ambition here is often to make new work come about and to facilitate the needs of the artists... [A]s a tendency it turns out to be more artist-centric than art-centric. I like to think of this as the ‘over-collaboration’ within curating.... It is hard not to wonder where art is in this—in what looks like curating’s own formalism. Where are the artists, outside of the collaborations? And where is the surrounding reality?⁷⁸

Yet I would argue that for a curator to work closely or responsively with an artist is not necessarily collaboration but the process of attending to the mediation of their work. As I will elaborate when discussing the exhibitions curated for this PhD research, working with an artist in an ongoing

⁷⁷ Anton Vidokle, “Art Without Artists?” *e-flux Journal*, No. 16 (May 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61285/art-without-artists/>.

⁷⁸ Lind, “Greenhouse Tomatoes and Outdoor Tomatoes,” 203. Mia Jankowicz, a graduate of de Appel Curatorial Programme, retorted: “the kind of curator you are during your curatorial program (quite possibly a “narcissistic apparatchik”) is, thank God, most certainly not the kind you are in more sensible contexts.” Jankowicz argued that these sorts of curatorial programme teach students to be “dilettantes”, to reach out as amateurs to the social sciences and other fields, to generate projects that work with artists and others and this can lead to surprising, witty, fascinating exhibitions, in comparison to the academic expert who asserts a thesis through artworks. Mia Jankowicz, “Curator with a Capital C or dilettante with a small d,” *The Exhibitionist*, No. 4 (June 2011), in Jens Hoffmann, ed., *The Exhibitionist: Journal on Exhibition Making—The First Six Years* (New York: The Exhibitionist, 2017), 307.

conversation may lead to shared decisions in exhibition making, yet my curatorial focus is on making the work more accessible for audiences while ensuring the exhibition is sympathetic to the artworks.

More recently, in 2021, Lind reflected on the past decade and how she sees practitioners progressing their agenda through the notion of “the curatorial” towards an art-centric counterhegemony:

Trying to situate the curatorial in the context of Tensta Konsthall, as its director from 2011 to 2018, meant emphasizing the mediation between artworks and people, driven by a sense that much of what a given artwork has to offer is rarely tapped into sufficiently.... Maybe these are, in fact, modest and searching moves towards building a counterhegemony—an art-centric one.⁷⁹

Lind’s description of the mediation, learning, education or public programming that her team have undertaken at Tensta Konsthall is inspiring, yet it is her comment that there is more to tap into with an artwork that resonates with my own desire to support and expand an artist’s work—though I propose this is undertaken in ongoing dialogue with the artist.

While there has been plenty of talk about contemporary curating, ranging from research and education to decolonisation, sustainability and infrastructure, there is less publishing on the histories and practices of institutional curators.⁸⁰ Many of the key writers on curating do so from academic positions and this contributes towards a more theoretical than practice-based discourse. While some curators still occupy high profile roles or create exhibitions with a recognisable signature, there are also contemporary curators who privilege the artist and who work sensitively to deliver projects that enhance and resonate with artworks. That there is less writing around these art- and artist-

⁷⁹ Maria Lind, “Situating the Curatorial,” *e-flux Journal*, No. 16 (March 2021), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/116/378689/situating-the-curatorial/>.

⁸⁰ I refer here to curators who work for and within institutions, rather than institutional critique, which I discuss briefly in Chapter Three, or New Institutionalism. For an example of writing on the relationships between institutions and curating see: Paul O’Neill, Lucy Steeds and Mick Wilson, eds, *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017).

centred curatorial practices could be a result of the stepping back and making space that is required. Celebrated curators such as Pagé express the strength, and satisfaction, of choosing to “illuminate the backstage,” but supporting, responding and being in dialogue with an artist is by definition a less evident or identifiable way of working.⁸¹ In 2011, Andrew Renton proposed:

A non-curating, or minor curating, then, that resists the monumental in favor of a temporary critique. Curating as problem solving, sketching out the territory. Often invisible, its effect is incremental and highly localized... this is a curating of temporality, always in motion, barely observable, but embedded within the practices of art making.⁸²

I believe an argument needs to be made for a curatorial practice of this nature that foregrounds and advocates for the interests of the artist within art institutions and exhibition making.

In my current position as a curator at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, a municipal art museum with a collection, it is my ambition to engage deeply with art and artists, to work closely and listen carefully, and to create exhibition contexts that are sympathetic to or reflective of the underlying structure or motivations of artistic practice. While it should be taken for granted that this is possible and even expected in a museum setting, I have met resistance and anxiety in my colleagues when suggesting the potential for artists, or even art, to drive programming or ways of working. There is a preference for following established processes, logistical ease and institutional standards: rigid freight schedules, time constraints, budgets, assumed audience responses, demands for high visitation, limited invigilation and so on are all considered more important. In spite of this, the exhibitions described in this exegesis are intended to show that institutions can accommodate artist-led projects, despite the misgivings, if the curator works to advocate, negotiate and mediate within the institution as well as for the public.

⁸¹ Pagé, *Artforum*, 235.

⁸² Renton, “Forms of Practice,” 279.

From 2002 until 2016, I was employed in various artist-run or contemporary art project spaces around Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, always working closely with artists and operating from within institutions that see themselves as artist-centred. Though not without their challenges and institutional politics, these sorts of exhibition spaces exist to encourage experimental and innovative art practices, foster emergent and non-commercial artists, and support the development of artists and arts professionals at the core of all activities. This particular career path has engrained in me a belief in the value of artistic practices that use the available resources of the institution yet maintain a critical view of the rules, systems and structures that govern them.

Working as a curator in the twenty-first century, I have observed art and artist-centric curatorial practice become more evident, with contemporary art curators adapting to mediate the discursive nature of contemporary practice. As just one example, Eva Birkenstock, now director of Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen, made a point of primarily curating solo exhibitions while she was director of the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, to ensure that the artist's vision could be more fully achieved and communicated than in large group exhibitions. The curatorial duo Aileen Burns and Johan Lundh also privilege artists within their practice: able to meet the demand of "alchemy" when curating Slavs and Tatars's exhibition *Mirrors for Princes* at Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane in 2015, and placing their trust in artist Ruth Buchanan to curate the 50th anniversary of the institution they were directing at the time, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth.

Elena Filipovic has consistently operated with what might be deemed an artist-led curatorial practice, as evidenced through her exhibitions, writing and editing of publications such as *The Artist as Curator*.⁸³ One example of her approach is the exhibition *Work/Travail/Arbeid* that she curated for WIELS

⁸³ Elena Filipovic, ed., *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology* (Milan and London: Mouse Publishing and Koenig Books, 2017).

Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels in 2015 on the work of Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker. The format of the exhibition revolved around the question: can choreography be performed in the form of an exhibition? Filipovic sensitively adapted the choreography of De Keersmaecker from the conditions of a theatre to that of the gallery, by expanding the hour-long performance to over nine hours duration, and splitting the dance across the gallery spaces to focus on the individual movements and critical relationship to music that is central to this choreographer's work. When I visited the exhibition in 2015, I was impressed by how this act of translating De Keersmaecker's work to the gallery allowed for closer audience engagement, in that viewers could literally walk around and within it, instead of seeing it from a fixed, seated position of the theatre. I felt pulled into the piece, drawn through the galleries as the dance unfolded, as though moving my own body was part of the experience. It was extremely sensory: I could smell the sweat of the dancers and hear their breathing, and I was free to wander and sit where I thought I might have the best view. To stage this exhibition Filipovic could have simply presented video documentation of performances, drawings of stage designs and dance preparations perhaps, or organised a series of live stage performances. But instead, she worked closely with the choreographer and attended to the core ideas and materials of her work to generate an exhibition that retained the concept of the piece and presented it physically through choreography of bodies in the gallery space and time, ensuring the exhibition followed the ethos of the artist and artwork.

One of the best examples of Filipovic's artist-led approach is the retrospective exhibition *Félix González-Torres: Specific Objects Without Specific Form* that she curated for three different institutions in 2010 and 2011. Taking inspiration from the work of González-Torres (1957 - 1996), for whom nothing was a reliable constant, objective or absolute, Filipovic evolved the travelling exhibition for each venue and each time also invited a new artist to re-curate

or reimagine the installation halfway through the show's duration. She explains:

I attempted to inscribe into the very structure of the retrospective a crucial protocol, intuited from Gonzalez-Torres's expansive sense of responsibility and reciprocity, and inspired by the structure of his own *Every Week There Is Something Different*. The exhibition I conceived was to be, by definition and structure, resolutely mutable, and the interpretative work so central to the making of a retrospective would not be mine alone.⁸⁴

This resulted in a total of six different iterations and diverse perspectives on the work of González-Torres, rather than an authoritative or static retrospective. Working with Danh Vo (at WIELS, Brussels), Carol Bove (at the Fondation Beyeler, Basel) and Tino Sehgal (at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main), Filipovic had built into the format the central concerns of the works of González-Torres, a sense of fragility, the passage of time, ongoing change and renewal, reinforcing how an exhibition is a form that can adapt and respond an artist's practice. With each exhibition Filipovic learned more about how his works could be exhibited and read, observing the responses of the artists and also audiences. She used the variables of the selection of works, placement, lighting, density of hang and interpretative materials to tell a new story each time.⁸⁵

Each venue provided different parameters. At WIELS, the galleries were spacious, with works installed in the entranceway, silo and restrooms too; at Fondation Beyeler in Basel the exhibition was installed within and amongst the main collection galleries, adjacent to a wide range of other collection artworks; and at MMK in Frankfurt, there was a totally different institution and audience to contend with. Each artist that Filipovic invited to intervene was influenced by particular aspects of González-Torres' works, and responded accordingly. Vo's install was very sparse and did not include early works but

⁸⁴ Elena Filipovic, "Specific Objects Without Specific Form," in Elena Filipovic and Andrea Rosen, eds, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects Without Specific Form* (London: Koenig Books, 2016), 21.

⁸⁵ WIELS, e-flux announcement (January 4, 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/37342/felix-gonzalez-torres-specific-objects-without-specific-form/>.

focused instead on the titles of works and on creating an experience specific to an intended audience—so much so that one work was installed outside a gallery technician’s house in the countryside. Bove made many minor adjustments to the install and enacted constant maintenance to the works, as well as re-creating the exhibition *Every Week There Is Something Different* (Andrea Rosen Gallery, 1991) with its four iterations over a month, highlighting how the install of these works is an act of interpretation. Seghal made an entirely new selection of works and enacted constant changes to the exhibition, making a choreographed score of six parts in which objects were moved every hour, so that each day around six very different groupings of objects were on display, embracing the variability in Gonzalez-Torres’ work.

In the subsequent publication on the exhibition, Filipovic includes documentation of all iterations and describes in detail the subjective nature of the project, her reflections on each version and how this approach undermines any given understanding of a retrospective:

It was, we thought, the only adequate way of recognising the radical particularity of Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre: to make a retrospective whose very form and ethos took as its model the ideas behind an oeuvre that eschews being eternally fixed, unflappably solid, commanding, unassailable, authoritative.⁸⁶

Reviews not only celebrated the exhibition with regard to the conceptual alignment of artworks and exhibition, but also because the structure meant there was a material resonance that elicited an emotional response, also in keeping with the artist’s practice. “What this compelling show accentuated is that learning by rote is no substitute for experience.”⁸⁷ With all six iterations, a distinct methodology was applied to evoke new readings of González-Torres’s works and oeuvre. That three of these were from Filipovic and three from different practitioners shows that both curator and artist can

⁸⁶ Filipovic, “Specific Objects,” 24.

⁸⁷ Amanda Coulson, “Reviews”, *Frieze*, April 2011, <https://www.frieze.com/article/f%C3%A9lix-gonz%C3%A1lez-torres>.

have a responsive approach to works and that there is no single way of making a retrospective or exhibiting an artist's work.

The curatorial methodology of *Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Specific Objects Without Specific Form*, with its evolving structure, provides a model to compare with the three artist projects that I have undertaken across this PhD research and encapsulates my desire for the exhibition format to respond to the artist and artwork in material and multi-sensory ways. I similarly mobilise all the elements of the exhibition that are available, from wall colour to collection works, layout and sound. However, unlike Filipovic, I am also attuned to the highly specific history and politics embedded in the institutional context within which I am working with the artists, and this awareness also shapes my practice. Working in Aotearoa, I am constantly considering local decolonising practices and histories of institutional critique, as artists are adeptly engaging with these areas.

The three projects that I discuss in the following chapters were all undertaken at The Dowse Art Museum. As a curator working in the institution, rather than independently, I found my role was one of constant negotiation with both the practical and ideological limits. My colleagues were generous professionals, but there are defined gallery spaces, budgets and other resources, and certain stories that they are committed to maintaining, such as the ongoing prominence of senior artists, or aspects of an institutional identity, which in the case of The Dowse is a strong reputation for craft. Fortunately this museum has been filled with radical artists for many years, so, while these three exhibitions were challenging histories of art and society, it was for the most part a shared endeavour with the gallery. Yet, there are always small differences in priorities. For example, in the case of Ruth Buchanan, we all wanted to ensure the artwork was beautifully presented, but those working front of house raised concerns regarding safety and accessibility: will a chain curtain over the doorway discourage people from walking through it? If this is an artwork, what if it gets damaged? How will people in wheelchairs feel? In

advocating for the artist, following a belief that artists are innovative thinkers, the outcome is the best possible and can even have surprising benefits. In this case, we found that people in wheelchairs loved the chain curtains since they felt included and for once could participate in an interactive work, when most often “engaging” works are designed for the able-bodied. Artists might not always resolve things in a predictable or straightforward way, but an artist-led curatorial methodology holds that their ideas are what should drive an exhibition, rather than other curatorial or institutional aims.

Emma Fitts brought to light overlooked histories of textile artists and women, in modernism and within The Dowse’s own collection; Shannon Te Ao evoked a new perspective on how we think of colonial history and contemporary society in Aotearoa through the use of *mōteatea* (songs of lament); and Ruth Buchanan called for an embodied approach to history, challenging any simplified reading of connections between artists and times, institutional languages and infrastructure. These artists invoked different ghosts, archival fragments and histories in their works. The following chapters describe each artist’s project and, in turn, my own curatorial practice, which seeks to offer responsive and sensitive contexts for the artist.

Earlier in this introduction, I described how my PhD research evolved out of an interest in the historical turn and grew from an exploration into curating exhibitions that had a material resonance with archival artworks and artist projects, into a focus on artist-led curating. In looking at different strategies for working with artists, I found that an artist-led curatorial methodology is especially relevant for our contemporary moment, returning agency and power to artists that the 1990s curatorial mode had diminished, and rebalancing the discursive and collaborative elements of curating. Artists have increasingly sourced found images, objects or narratives and recombined these aspects within their work as a kind of curatorial storyteller, and this method of working demands an empathetic approach in which the curatorial role is responsive, providing space and resources as well as contributing to projects through

exhibition design and use of collections. The focus on a material, affective, embodied and multi-sensory curatorial contribution to projects, rather than relying solely on didactic interpretation, grew from the critique of history as readymade, to emphasise feeling, though this subsequently relates to all artistic practice. The feminist, queer and decolonising methodologies that artists utilise for their work can thus also feed into the exhibition. With artists and contemporary culture once again addressing the future, the argument for an artist-led curatorial methodology is critical to enable the ambitious new worlds and imaginative possibilities that artists propose to be expanded and seen with greater clarity.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ For examples of recent artistic practice looking towards the future, see Eric C.H. De Bruyn and Sven Lütticken, eds., *The Futurity Report* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020); and András Szántó, *The Future of the Museum: 28 Dialogues* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2021). For an example of political commentary on the future, see Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

Chapter One: Emma Fitts and Curatorial Weaving

Just as it is possible to go from any place to any other, so also, starting from a defined and specialized field, can one arrive at a realization of ever-extending relationships. Thus tangential subjects come into view. The thoughts, however, can, I believe, be traced back to the event of a thread.⁸⁹

In this chapter I argue that weaving can be an artist-led curatorial method, an argument I arrive at based on a 2017 exhibition that I curated with New Zealand artist Emma Fitts (Pākehā), which I describe and analyse in depth in what follows. The practice of weaving involves the use of at least two distinct threads that are manipulated in a variety of ways to make a textile. Different techniques and fibres lead to a certain form and pattern, and through the materials used a textile may embody various narratives that speak of social histories and political context. As a metaphor for curating, weaving acknowledges that an exhibition brings together multiple and even contradictory stories and practices to form an experience that highlights a pattern or concept, and often conveys narrative components.

In 2016 when I started as Senior Curator at The Dowse, I was aware of the strong legacy of craft for the institution and knew that the collection included a number of rarely seen textile works. Part of my motivation for inviting Fitts to have a solo exhibition was to connect with this craft history, and my interest in and knowledge of this area grew through our discussions about her research and textile sculptures. As I will describe, our conversations led to my inclusion of textiles from the collection alongside Fitts' work, as this seemed an appropriate response to her concerns. I brought the tactility and structure of weaving as an organisational system into my curatorial practice as a way to work with Fitts, to foreground the materiality of her work within the exhibition, to follow the threads to tangential subjects and ever-extending relationships, and to acknowledge the social, political and economic context of production

⁸⁹ Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, New expanded edition (first published 1965; this expanded edition New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017), xi.

as embedded in the materials and techniques of weaving, as well as exhibition making.

Drawing on both anecdotal and archival research, Fitts recalls and revalues the histories of women and textiles through her sculptural works, sharing stories that might otherwise be ignored since they are often not part of the historical record. For the exhibition I will discuss in this chapter, *From Pressure to Vibration: The event of a thread*, her works were made with felting, sewing and found fabrics, although her formal education had been in painting. Using the image of curating as weaving in response to Fitts' practice, for the exhibition I interspersed a range of textile works from The Dowse Collection with Fitts' sculptural textiles, and together we created the exhibition design. The exhibition provided visibility for several women artists whose work had not been shown for many years, celebrating a chorus of narratives and establishing a tangible historical background that addressed different aspects of weaving in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rather than relying on written text alone, this history of textiles and women artists from Aotearoa was communicated texturally through the various collection artworks that were clustered in thematic groupings, enabling the tactile and sensory responses that these textiles evoke to be a part of the exhibition experience. The particular stories and social histories of the artists were woven in by means of the wall labels, providing a context and support for Fitts' contemporary textile practice. In this chapter I will describe and elaborate on the exhibition and explore the idea of textile as text to consider how weaving can be used as a curatorial method and show that while this could be applied in different circumstances, in this case it was undertaken in response to the particular concerns and aesthetic of Fitts as the exhibiting artist.

I. The exhibition *From Pressure to Vibration: The event of a thread*

From Pressure to Vibration: The Event of a Thread (24 March - 2 July 2017) was an exhibition of new work commissioned for The Dowse, which has a strong background in collecting and exhibiting ceramics, jewellery and textiles as well as contemporary art. In her research process, Fitts explored several histories associated with textiles, including the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop and key women involved with this, the various uses of textiles in architecture, garment design and pattern making, and the role of weaving and weavers in modernism. To expand on and illuminate these aspects of Fitts' work for the exhibition's audiences, I curated a range of textile pieces from The Dowse Collection into the installation—weaving and fibre art from Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1970s, when it was at its most popular—in order to provide tangible reference points for the ideas Fitts was considering. This was intended to enhance connections to New Zealand's architectural history, modernism, social histories and stories that were latent in her work.

Fitts made six large felted works that were hung as dividing curtains throughout the gallery space and the collection works were interspersed within and around these (fig. 1-6). Working closely with Fitts I introduced her to local textile pieces in the collection and invited her to respond to them, providing her with access to research and interviews that I undertook with collection artists who are almost absent from New Zealand art history, including Margery Blackman (b. 1930), Judy Patience (b. 1939) and Joan Calvert. In keeping with both Fitts' interest in Bauhaus weaving as a form of modern design and the influence of Bauhaus weaver and teacher Anni Albers (1899 - 1994) on a number of New Zealand weavers in the 1970s, we used several key Bauhaus ideas as guiding principles to structure the exhibition.

The second part of the exhibition title, "the event of a thread", was taken from the preface of Anni Albers' 1965 book *On Weaving*, in which she describes

weaving as a way of potentially considering much more expansive ideas, like industrialisation, how we spend our time, house ourselves, and work, or what drives innovation.⁹⁰ The first part of the title, *From Pressure to Vibration*, introduced the tactile exercises that Hungarian painter, photographer and Bauhaus professor László Moholy-Nagy (1895 - 1946) used in his teaching in 1927/28.⁹¹ Enlarging on early twentieth century debates around the privileging of optics over haptics, Moholy-Nagy developed a curriculum for the Bauhaus that stressed touch as the essential sensory experience. In these tactile exercises, materiality and texture were to be analysed through different sensory qualities, such as pressure, pricking, rubbing, pain, temperature and vibration, to encourage students to actively investigate the limits of touch and vision. One published example of how these exercises were interpreted by students can be seen in the work of Bauhaus weaver Otti Berger.⁹² Her *Tasttafel* (touch panel) from 1928 (Bauhaus-Archive Berlin) consisted of a long strip of metal mesh with a series of woven triangles, each created using threads of different thicknesses and texture, including silk, cotton, rayon, wool and velvet, placed over squares of coloured paper. The juxtaposition of these materials and colours enhanced and contrasted their tactile qualities, emphasising touch or texture and its relation to vision.⁹³

Learning of these tactile exercises through the writing of scholar T'ai Smith, Fitts wrote her own notes about each of the Moholy-Nagy sense exercises that Smith had described. Making these notes while on a camping holiday in Northern Scotland, Fitts considered materials in the landscape and imagined narratives relating to potential inhabitants, as well as the artists' own temporary nomadic occupation and making processes that she was undertaking on site. This process led to imaginative descriptions of how a sense could relate to materials. For example, she wrote:

⁹⁰ Albers, *On Weaving*, xi.

⁹¹ T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (University of Minnesota: Minneapolis, 2014), 93.

⁹² Ibid., 95.

⁹³ T'ai Smith, "Limits of the Tactile and the Optical: Bauhaus Fabric in the Frame of Photography," *Grey Room*, 25 (Fall 2006): 6-31.

(Pricking): The purse that was found buried with the man in the peat is dated from the 1600s and is now a dull brown colour, but was probably a natural mixed grey, with a pattern of red and white. The wool is soft and has a coarse fibre mixed with it. You're wearing a shirt, skirt, leggings and a cap with a peak. There's a mixture of wool and cotton, flat colour and pattern in your garments. The canvas that you hold is a mixture of oranges, blues, greens, brown and yellows. The pattern is loose.⁹⁴

These exercises and descriptions informed Fitts' ongoing works. For The Dowse exhibition, these early research explorations evolved into new large-scale felted wool works, each of which incorporated a material Fitts considered had some resonance with the tactile exercises. Corduroy, cotton, silk, wool, rayon and velvet were used in response to each of Moholy-Nagy's six sensory terms: pressure, pricking, rubbing, pain, temperature and vibration. These soft textiles encompassed an array of textures, emulating Berger's work in an abstract way, and exemplifying Albers' use of textiles within architecture as not only practically and historically important, but also providing a rich sensory experience: "...something that is warm to the touch, quite possibly color, the soft play of folds and the luster of fuzz of fibres in contrast to flat, hard, and cool surfaces."⁹⁵ Different thicknesses of felted wool were used in Fitts' works, all natural hues but from various breeds of sheep, and these were contrasted with sections of coloured fabrics, again of varying surface texture. In Aotearoa, wool has special significance as both a part of our primary industries and a farming practice that was introduced with colonisation, adding further layers of meaning to its use.

Appropriating weaving from Fitts' established artistic process to apply as the curatorial methodology and exhibition design, continuing her own borrowing of weaving from the Bauhaus, I was keen to incorporate another layer, or thread, of context into the project in order to generate an insistently local narrative

⁹⁴ Emma Fitts, "Sensory Ground: Tactile exercises in conversation," (2016), <http://www.emmafitts.com/index.php?/current/sensory-ground/>.

⁹⁵ Anni Albers, "The Pliable Plane: Textiles in Architecture," *Perspecta*, Vol. 4 (1957): 40.

with which Fitts' works could interact. To do this, I also responded to the tactile exercises, researching and assigning an aspect of Aotearoa New Zealand's textile history to each of the sensory terms. The Dowse Collection acquired key textile pieces from the 1970s due to its role as host for some of the period's competitive textile exhibitions and the focus on craft that was driven by the director at this time, James Mack (1941 - 2004). Paying close attention to the history, aesthetic and material qualities of each of the important pieces that are in The Dowse collection, I clustered works into six sections that I defined as: textiles in architecture; weaving and modernism; off-the-loom fibre art and 1970s counterculture; the carrier bag theory of fiction and weaving; the textile industry and notation systems; and raranga (Māori weaving). This was not intended as an all-encompassing history, but rather to provide background and introduce several local weavers, their works and concerns.

Fitts and I interpreted Moholy-Nagy's tactile terms, pressure, pricking, rubbing, pain, temperature and vibration, with our own individual responses or understanding of these sensations, then aligned these with materials or works we thought might elicit a comparable reaction for the gallery audiences. We each made subjective choices and this personal correspondence to the tactile exercises provided a system of organising the wide-ranging themes of textile histories in Aotearoa and encouraging a sensory engagement with them. I asked if we should colour the walls, Fitts agreed, and we decided to paint the walls of the gallery in six subtly different shades and textures of a pale yellow/green colour, contrasting gloss paint with low sheen or matte, and using a variation of the full tone and diluted tints to create six individual paint applications. This variation was not immediately perceptible to visitors; rather, there were slight differences in how the paint would feel if you were to touch it, a parallel to the way Berger treated the tactile exercises.

Berger's essay "Fabric in Space" (1930) was another reference for Fitts' exhibition, reinforcing our decision to hang the works like floating walls, to

divide the space into several areas, in order to accentuate tactility and control the way viewers could navigate the gallery and works. Albers had also produced fabric hangings as dividers, and wrote in her text “The Pliable Plane; Textiles in Architecture” of how textiles may be used in gallery installation.⁹⁶ She stated, “A Museum, to give a large scale example, could set up textile panels instead of rigid ones, to provide for the many subdivisions and backgrounds it needs.” Her exhibition *Anni Albers: Textiles* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1949 exhibited works that showed how this could operate, using a range of rigid and soft unconventional materials as room dividers.⁹⁷ Not merely aesthetic, her works proposed other practical functions for textiles, as a way of contributing to the atmosphere of spaces by absorbing sound or reflecting light.

In a forerunner to The Dowse exhibition, Fitts first used fabric hangings as spatial dividers for her installation *Fit Out for Olivia Spencer Bower* at the Ilam School of Fine Arts Gallery in Christchurch in 2015 (fig. 7). Olivia Spencer Bower (1905 - 1982) was a painter based in Christchurch for most of her life who exhibited with the influential art association The Group in the 1930s. Towards the end of her career, she established a year-long award for emerging female artists through the sale of her art. Fitts was the 2014 fellowship recipient and became curious about the artist-patron who established the award.⁹⁸ Histories of architecture, textiles and their social context began to enter Fitts’ practice at this time, an interest area that has seen more scholarship in recent years, and that for her started with garments, the relationship of modernism to the body, then shifted towards textile materials themselves. Silk, linen, leather, denim, cotton, rayon, felt; designs

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Brenda Danilowitz, “Anni Albers: Free-Hanging Room Divider,” in Helen Molesworth ed., *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957* (New Haven and London: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and Yale University Press, 2015), 176.

⁹⁸ The Olivia Spencer Bower Fellowship is a year long residency with a focus on research for emergent female artists from New Zealand, providing a stipend and studio in the artist’s hometown of Christchurch. Bower established the residency with funds from the sale of her own work and it is now administered by a trust.

for houses and patterns for garments that suggested ways of living; histories shared through forms that are evocative, evasive and sensual.

Fit Out for Olivia Spencer Bower included a series of fabric banners that Fitts installed to replicate the architectural layout of Spencer Bower's modernist Christchurch home, indicated through the basic plan on the invitation card available at the gallery entrance. Playing on the term "outfit" a garment but also a group of people and on "fit out", meaning to furnish a space, each "room" of the house was divided with a hanging that featured several layers of found fabric—silk scarves, linen, leather, denim and so on—including the two-dimensional pattern for a potential piece of clothing, such as a jacket or blouse. Earlier works by Fitts that I had seen were projects based on documentary forms—photography, video and archival objects—that mixed fact and fiction. Walking through this gallery installation I was acutely aware of my bodily relationship to the work, reenacting Bower's movements around her home and studio as I traversed the space, surrounded by and seeing the works from multiple perspectives.

At the time I compared my experience of the work to that of encountering a mid-century scent because I felt it was extremely sensory yet hard to define or pinpoint. Smell, as associated with the elusiveness of memories, seemed a useful metaphor to conjure the attitude of many women from the time:

...a musky perfume of their bold attitude lingers on. It is a fragrant woody scent, strong and rebellious, that blends single notes of bergamot, sandalwood, oud or vetiver; Rata, Rhona, Ngaio, Louise and Olivia. They are an aromatic moment to sensually recollect, a subtle redolence in the air...⁹⁹

In retrospect, this was my way of describing the visual, tactile and embodied nature of the work; how it encompassed the viewer as they navigated the space. It reinforced the alignment of architecture and the body as a consistent thread in Fitts' practice, through both her works and the treatment of the installation space.

⁹⁹ Melanie Oliver, "Silk, linen, leather, denim, grass, cotton, felt," *Fit Out for Olivia Spencer Bower* exhibition catalogue, Ilam Campus Gallery, Christchurch, 2015.

In drawing attention to Spencer Bower, Fitts was bringing to light the role of a female practitioner in New Zealand modernism who is often marginalised in relation to her male counterparts, or at least considered less seriously. Other female New Zealand artists who were her contemporaries, Rita Angus, Rata Lovell-Smith and Louise Henderson, share this lack of attention when compared to artists such as Toss Wollaston or Colin McCahon. Fitts evoked a sensual recollection of the attitude and lifestyle that was required to operate within this masculine art scene through the bold, large scale collages and the use of soft architecture to physically divide the space, disrupting the hegemonic version of New Zealand art history that is based on male-dominated nationalist painting, instead focusing on the media of textiles.

The exhibition layout of *From Pressure to Vibration* followed another architectural pattern, the spatial design of German architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich for their Café Samt & Seide (velvet and silk café) that was constructed in 1927 for a fashion industry expo in Berlin.¹⁰⁰ Inspired by their architectural plan as a template of straight and rounded curtains to divide the room, Fitts used it as a model to make several curved walls using felt. We decided to overlay the café design on top of The Dowse gallery space, scaling the plan down to fit but maintaining the number of curtains, shapes and height differentiation by hanging Fitts' felted walls as well as some of the collection works. Our working relationship was collaborative, a case brainstorming together over the exhibition plans. I encouraged Fitts to realise her spatial ideas and enthusiastically convinced the exhibition team that this would be straightforward to install and safe for the collection works that were to be hung away from the wall. The Collections Manager was understandably worried that this would lead to more touching of the collection works by curious viewers, and this indeed happened—several weavers could not resist examining the construction of the works with their hands over the duration of the show. However, I tried to dissuade physical interaction as much as possible,

¹⁰⁰ Albers, "The Pliable Plane," 36-41.

incorporating several vinyl “no touching” symbols and including at the entrance some touchable samples of the felting that Fitts had used to construct the walls, in the hope that this would reinforce the message that the remaining works were not to be handled. Through the risk assessment for the exhibition, we tried to strike a balance between protecting the collection while enabling people to see details of works up close and retaining an appearance of tactility.

Fitts’ felted walls often obscured sightlines across the room, generating a sense of discovery for the audience as they navigated the space, and staging a more intimate experience with the collection works because of the limited vantage points. Works were necessarily read as groups due to their close proximity to each other, sometimes seen through a felted screen or encountered only when enclosed by a wall of felt. The fabric softened the space, bringing a warmth to the typical hard edges of the institution, similar to how textiles were commonly used for exhibitions in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Fitts incorporated into her works the pattern shapes for a morning dress—an architectural form for the body—that was also designed by Reich.¹⁰²

Works from The Dowse collection were used to express particular aspects of textiles and act as discussion points. For example, the largest weaving in the collection is a wall hanging by Wellington weaver Judy Patience that was designed for The Dowse entrance foyer and on display from 1974 until renovations in the 1990s. Patience was an architectural draughtsperson before taking up weaving, and she undertook several significant weaving commissions for public buildings, such as the Supreme Court in Wellington. Brutalist architecture was popular in New Zealand from the 1950s to 1980s, and it was common for textile works to be commissioned to bring colour and

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Robin Schuldenfrei, “Introduction”, *West 86th*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 2014), Annika Fisher trans. <http://www.west86th.bgc.bard.edu/translatedtext/questions-of-fashion-by-lilly-reich/>.

warmth to complement the bold use of concrete, wood and metal. The lines and angular blocks of the patterns in Patience's weavings often reflect their surrounding architecture and incorporate three-dimensional perspective to create a spatial quality. The functional and decorative role of textiles in relation to architecture was highlighted through the inclusion of this wall hanging, given its style, provenance and large scale (3600 x 2600mm). I connected architecture with the tactile exercise of "pressure" since this relates to perpendicular planes in building and measures of weight. Fitts' nearby felted work incorporated linen, a fabric with an obvious weave, into a large rounded hanging at the gallery entrance, one of the most extreme architectural interventions to the space.

I considered the term "pricking" to be a pointed force like modernism and so connected it with the relationship of textiles to modernism and how the function, form and abstract nature of weaving lent itself to modernist ideals. The key collection textile in this section was *From Aramoana* (1981) by Dunedin-based weaver Margery Blackman, a work made at the same time as protests against an aluminium smelter proposed for Otago Peninsula. This ecological issue is an important part of New Zealand art history because of the major work *Black Window—Towards Aramoana* (1981) by painter Ralph Hotere (Te Aupōuri), who was part of the modernist art movement of the 1960s. Blackman's textile work is also strongly modernist, with an experimental use of line and pattern, and a strong emphasis on process and technique. She stated:

The essentials of weaving are fibre, yarn and the interlacing of warp and weft. Seeking to understand the characteristics of these elements and exploring a design in terms of weaving so that the weaving process makes a contribution to the design perhaps summarises the dual nature of this craft.¹⁰³

Blackman was a keen follower of Albers, and this reinforces the sustained connection to modernism and the Bauhaus. Blackman is also a specialist at identifying Māori weaving patterns and contributed significantly to scholarship

¹⁰³ Doreen Blumhardt and Brian Brake, eds, *Craft New Zealand: The art of the craftsman* (Auckland: A.H. & A.W. Reed. 1981), 280.

at the Otago Museum for Māori collections of kakahu (cloaks). *From Aramoana* adapts a particular tāniko weaving pattern of horizontal zigzags that are identified as Aramoana (pathway of the sea) and this also shows the subtle influence of Māori weaving designs on Pākehā artists.

In Aotearoa New Zealand there are two main histories of weaving: raranga (Māori weaving) based on Indigenous knowledge and the use of harakeke (New Zealand flax); and Pākehā weaving based on European traditions and the abundance of New Zealand-raised wool.¹⁰⁴ For *From Pressure to Vibration*, raranga was aligned with the tactile exercise “vibration” for the importance of music, performance and vibrant abstract designs embedded within Māori culture, and Fitts utilised a lush velvet fabric on her associated work. Raranga has its own life force, rich in symbolism and embodying spiritual values and beliefs. It has a rich and varied history around Aotearoa, with te whare pora (the house of weaving) ensuring the teaching and learning of raranga is seen as a holistic practice involving all aspects of Indigenous knowledge and tikanga (customs and values deeply embedded in social context). The main forms are: tāniko (a strong intricate type of decorative weaving), tukutuku (ornamental weaving using reed latticework), whatu (finger-weaving) mainly for kākahu (cloaks), whāriki (woven mats), whiri (plaiting), or raranga. All these convey a complex language of visual symbols, narratives and meaning.¹⁰⁵ Waiwhetū weaver Erenora Puketapu-Hetet (Te Āti Awa, 1941 - 2006) was an extraordinarily accomplished weaver and a gifted and encouraging teacher. She also addressed critical issues through her work:

I enjoy pushing the boundaries as I am certain many weavers of the past did.
I enjoy the freedom to make statements about current issues that affect our
Māori people. Weaving is a vehicle to reflect my views, my thinking, my

¹⁰⁴ Harakeke (a native flax) is the material most popularly used for raranga, or muka (prepared flax fibre), though other plant fibres are also common, such as pīngao or kiekie, and feathers, wool, or other materials can be used too.

¹⁰⁵ Erenora Puketapu-Hetet, *Māori Weaving with Erenora Puketapu-Hetet* (Wellington: Hetet Press, 2016).

feelings. The weavings reflect our tupuna, our iwi, hapū and whānau which is an essential part of my being.¹⁰⁶

Included in the exhibition were her works *Tuku Mana Whakahaere* (1990), made using tāniko, a technique used to decorate the borders of garments and often incorporating geometric patterns. The text that features on the cone forms reads: E ara ra, Eoho (to stir and wake up); Maranga (to get up, new opportunity); Kokiri (to advance and move forward on a number of fronts); and Iwi, te tai, tu tangata (for people to be upstanding and proud). These works were made in relation to debates at the time around Māori funding and development agencies and show a powerful balance of customary and contemporary concerns.

Textiles were an important part of the studio craft movement in Aotearoa too and led to the development of three-dimensional fibre art. I utilised the exercise “rubbing” for its implication that this could be part of a looser form of fabric art, such as felting, and weavers drawing inspiration from nature, as you would if making a rubbing of a surface texture. For this exercise, Fitts added a beautiful yellow silk into her work. In the 1970s, inspired by international trends and personal experimentation, weavers began working off-the-loom to create large sculptural works and explored the potential of new methods and ways of using fibre. This was undertaken as part of an era of bohemianism in Aotearoa (roughly 1960 - 1975), when a thirst for handmade goods combined with international trade barriers enabled local craft practices to flourish. By the late-1980s, changes to trade restrictions led to an influx of imported goods, the beginnings of globalisation along with the 1987 stock market crash, and this brought an end to the widespread popularity of handweaving and fibre art. The work *Roving* (1977) by Auckland weaver Zena Abbott (1922 - 1993) was striking in *From Pressure to Vibration* because of its large-scale, chunky materials and elevated suspension—essentially a giant looming black button made from sisal and rope. Abbott was one of Aotearoa New Zealand’s most prolific and important weavers. She developed her weaving as a sculptural art

¹⁰⁶ Megan Tamiti Quennell, *Pūmanawa: A celebration of whatu, raranga and tāniko* (Wellington: Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 1993), 16.

form in the later stages of her career, creating many large works such as *Roving*, which takes as its title a term meaning both a twisted bundle of fibre from the process of making spun yarn, and to wander or roam.

I chose loose woven baskets by artist Ruth Castle (1931 -) and kete (baskets) by Puketapu-Hetet to provide examples of weaving with a functional aesthetic. Alluding to Ursula Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986) that claims the bag rather than the spear was the first tool, technology for gathering rather than hunting, I identified this section with the exercise "pain" for the storytelling capacity of weaving and Fitts responded to the same exercise with the material wool for its significance throughout history. In her essay "The Pliable Plane" (1957), Albers highlights how the textile carrier bag was critical for early nomadic lives, and this pre-history of weaving was linked into the exhibition through these pieces. As colloquial phrases like 'to weave a story' demonstrate, text and textile are etymologically linked, and many woven forms are imbued with narrative. The kete by Puketapu-Hetet are particularly significant because of the story kete o te wānanga, the three baskets of knowledge that were brought to earth: te kete tuauri (sacred knowledge), te kete tuatea (ancestral knowledge of memory, ritual and prayer) and te kete aronui (life's knowledge). Māori and Pākehā weaving are rarely brought together for exhibition, being more commonly seen as separate fields of work, and I wanted to question this apparent disconnection by presenting Castle and Puketapu-Hetet's natural fibre works together, as well as to highlight the narrative aspects of functional design.

I connected the sensory exercise of "temperature" to the history of the industrialisation of textile production and the development of synthetic fabrics made with heat and chemical treatment and Fitts elected to use polyester in her response, an industrial fabric. Women's labour is historically connected to the textile and garment-making industries as well as domestic crafts. As Wellington weaver Sheila Reimann (1939 - 2006) commented:

It seems to me that the history of the world can be seen through cloth. In today's 'throw-away' society, with so much mass-produced cloth available, I feel that handmade cloth provides a link with that past... I continue to be fascinated by this craft and its unique blend of mathematics and art.¹⁰⁷

I selected many small sample pieces of Reimann's weaving along with her accompanying pattern notes to include as an example of experimentation and the popularity of hand-loom weaving in the 1970s and '80s, emphasising the stories around this relationship of hand weaving to industrial textile production. Reimann was known for her unusual style of weaving that used a combination of shrinking and bubble effects, a result she achieved from heat techniques that she tried on different types of wool.

In displaying Reimann's work I also wanted to introduce the role that notation plays for weavers, as both a design template and the documentation of the process, as many of her notebooks had detailed sketches, descriptions, samples and gridded notation maps. The notation system for sharing the weaving process is a coded language, a series of shaded squares on a grid that indicates the movement of the warp and weft threads. Like a musical score, it can be read, interpreted and performed to generate a woven work that will blend the original design and the maker's translation of this, including subtle variations due to technique or materials.

Fitts' large felted hangings at times echoed the patterns, colours and details of the collection works and vice versa, but also created a soft woollen backdrop for their appreciation. In the wall labels, I privileged the voice of the weaver whenever I could, including many of the quotes used above, and emphasising the importance of these women for art history in Aotearoa. A collection show and an artist project woven together, it was a vibrant, sensory experience for visitors and prompted new associations between artists, works and time periods; a constellation of histories that are not definitive or critical, but sensory, embodied and tactile.

¹⁰⁷ Biographical notes, The Dowse Art Museum Collection object files, unpublished.

II. Anecdotal Histories and Collaboration with the Past

From my previous experiences of her work, I knew that Fitts seeks to both share and collaborate with feminist histories. Within the context of this exhibition, I assisted her to tell stories through textiles, unfolding various relationships to architecture, modernism and the female body, as described above. During the development of *From Pressure to Vibration*, the lives of the weavers that we were encountering through the collection became an increasingly important part of her research and subsequently informed the production of new works. I visited Margery Blackman and Judy Patience to learn more about their work, and passed on to Fitts what they told me about their weaving inspirations and lives. The art historical importance of these women who had been neglected from mainstream histories was significant, but Fitts was also interested in the more mundane details, in real or imagined collaborations with them, and this benefitted our own collaborative artist-curator relationship.¹⁰⁸

Over her career Fitts has established several ongoing collaborative partnerships as well as an independent practice, such as the duo Fitts & Holderness with Julia Holderness (2001 - 2010), and Victor & Hester with Amelia Bywater.¹⁰⁹ Working in dialogue with other artists reflects her interest in showing the social aspects of the histories she is engaging and the conversational research process that she undertakes that is then channelled into material objects. Working with unfamiliar histories, Fitts embarks on a dialogue with living artists when possible, and with the artists' works, writing, biography or surviving family, when not. For example, while researching towards *From Pressure to Vibration*, Fitts contacted Louise Henderson's

¹⁰⁸ For example, the New Zealand education specialist Sylvia Ashton Warner for her work *Where did feeling come from?* in the exhibition *Embodying the Archive* at The Physics Room in 2015, or the figures Marilyn Waring, Marlow Moss and Rowena Cade for the online project *What (Was) Is Happening*, 2016, <https://whatwasishappening.tumblr.com>.

¹⁰⁹ Fitts completed a Bachelor of Fine Art at the University of Canterbury in 2002 and Masters of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art in 2010.

daughters to view and discuss the textile work that Henderson designed and Zena Abbott wove.

While Fitts respects and appreciates the contributions that individual women made to the New Zealand art scene, she is not revisiting the past to insert particular artists into the dominant art historical narrative in a methodical or comprehensive way as an art historian would. Rather, she approaches these histories as an artist and considers her process a collaboration of sorts. She is interested in women's thoughts, feelings and social interactions as weavers and fellow artists. Fitts aims to learn from female creative practices and celebrate this genealogy, from a personal viewpoint. She incorporates idiosyncratic details and anecdotes, an approach to storytelling that is based on sparse archives and rumour for the creation of atmosphere rather than historical specificity—what Claire Bishop would deem merely feeling, but that I believe lends the account accessibility and power. For example, with *Fit Out for Olivia Spencer Bower*, the flowers that an old friend had mentioned Spencer Bower loved most in her garden were planted outside the gallery for the duration of the exhibition, a minor anecdotal detail given material form, and allowed to literally grow and change. However, there is still the curatorial challenge of ensuring that visitors can engage with Fitts' references through this affective or sensorial register, to attend to the textiles as a way of thinking about women's labour, modernism, architecture, and so on. My inclusion of collection artworks was to provide some anchor points that could link her works to tangible examples, to visually support her project rather than simply describe it with wall text.

Albers and Berger, both influential figures at the Bauhaus, reflected on the ways modernism was manifested in weaving, which they defined in terms of the loom as a tool, and using the language otherwise applied to modern design at the school.¹¹⁰ In my discussions with some of the key New Zealand

¹¹⁰ T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

weavers of the 1970s, Blackman and Patience in particular both claimed Albers was a significant model for their work and they talked about their own tapestry and weaving in similar terms, as modern design, related to architectural practices and ambitious ideas. *From Pressure to Vibration* was an opportunity to make this connection known, as it had not been previously, without being prescriptive.¹¹¹

This exhibition did not present a resolved or complete history of textiles.¹¹² Using an artist-led curatorial methodology meant this was an artist-focused history that attended to materials, techniques and personal stories, rather than a conventional art historical account of categories, artist biographies and lists of works. However, by paying attention to overlooked fragments and producers of this history, alongside the social relations and conditions of production, Fitts' exhibition enabled audiences to reconsider this period of New Zealand art and craft and several of the artists involved, counterbalancing the dominant, masculine history of painting. Bringing together disparate histories to find the common ground or underlying concerns, the works were presented as relevant and fitting for the present moment, especially since there is currently a resurgence of interest in and scholarship on textile practices. Moreover, through the interrelationship of Fitts' artworks and the collection, the exhibition layout and the tactile exercise prompts, the curatorial framework conveyed historical knowledge through textiles themselves, rather than written text.

¹¹¹ In conversation with Margery Blackman in Dunedin 11 November 2016 and Judy Patience in Wellington, 12 December 2016.

¹¹² This is in contradiction to Claire Bishop's claim that, "Without the work of distillation and synthesis, the past can't be turned into meaning for today," in "History Depletes."

III. Textile as Text

As mentioned above, the terms text, textile and texture are etymologically related, and, due to the everyday use of textiles for basic needs like shelter and clothing, there was a universal tactile association for the exhibition audiences. Textiles are laden with multiple cultural readings from their many and diverse roles, from home crafts to industrial production, Indigenous weaving to modern design; and Fitts' choice of textiles stems from a desire to harness these multifarious associations; to delve into the lives of women through their significant roles in the production and consumption of textiles. A multifaceted, non-linear approach to history is foundational for many contemporary artists considering the past, and the use of textiles with which to do so is an increasingly common way of bringing in several narratives simultaneously without blurring their specificity. In *Cultural Threads*, British academic Jessica Hemmings describes how textiles can tell complex cultural perspectives:

the ways in which objects, rather than texts, manifest these ideas is of primary concern... [avoiding] the somewhat overtextualised and often impenetrable tone of postcolonial discourse by focusing on contemporary versions of some of the very objects that were central to the agenda of colonisation.¹¹³

While the writing on decolonising artistic and curatorial practice is vital and expansive with regard to cultural forms that began as a way to retain oral histories, it is important to privilege objects and performative practices rather than rely solely on written text. Weaving is one of these forms, as it holds narratives, genealogy and symbolic meaning in certain patterns and techniques, in particular for Māori and Indigenous weaving practices. In *Cultural Threads*, Pākehā weaver Margaret White describes her experience of living in between Māori and Pākehā cultures, and how each has distinct histories of textile production and exchange. Her engagement with each culture was undertaken through the practice of weaving, and this experience

¹¹³ Jessica Hemmings, *Cultural Threads* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 24.

of learning through the hands, making with different social expectations, tools and spiritual understandings, is through the language of weaving, is arguably a more profound way of discovering the past than merely reading or hearing about it.

The portability, functionality and ancient history of textiles within all cultures contribute to their ability to convey multiple and complex stories. Fitts' focus on textiles began with an interest in fabric as a sensory material easily related to by everyone. She has spoken about trying to convey the texture of a person's character, the feeling of them, and claimed that, "textiles are close to us, but hard to pin down."¹¹⁴ This ability to hold multiple narratives and to allow for ambiguity or contradiction was attractive to her as it meant she could work these into her own creative practice, inserting and distorting to generate new readings. Since her early works, Fitts has undertaken further research into the connections of textiles with architecture, conceptual art and modernism. While these histories inform her work they are not always immediately apparent to audiences.

Textiles are a form of text, in that they use a combination of materials, techniques and patterns to convey meaning. Narratives and ideas are embodied in different types of weaving, and those with an understanding of the practice can "read" textiles, though meaning may shift across time and cultures. An important example of textile practice from Aotearoa New Zealand is tukutuku, a customary Māori weaving art form used to create lattice wall panels that feature patterns made from dyed and natural strips of harakeke flax, and other organic materials. These panels are found in wharehū (meeting houses), typically positioned along the walls between the poupou (carved poles). Tukutuku are important for both the decorative element and visual language of wharehū—like many of the diverse art forms found within ancestral houses—and feature distinctive patterns that convey various narratives or concepts, symbolically iterating the stories of the wharehū, iwi or

¹¹⁴ Conversation with Emma Fitts, 5 September 2015.

hapu (tribal and family groupings) through pictographic representations. Tukutuku share important elements of whakapapa (genealogy) and honour the ancestors and atua (gods) specific to that house. Evolving over several hundreds of years, te reo Māori was initially an oral language without written form: symbolic meaning was embodied in arts such as weaving, carving or knot work, as well as architecture, tattoo, song and dance. This is just one example of how weaving operates as a text to be read, among many other examples across diverse cultures.

It takes some expertise to understand or read woven textiles, but they can be seen as documents that share the conditions of other forms of archival documentation. For example, Blackman adapted a tāniko pattern for *From Aramoana* that means “pathway to the sea”, the site of her political protest, and I explained this in the wall label, but some visitors would have understood the pattern without requiring my elaboration. I chose to include the innovative works of Puketapu-Hetet that included Māori phrases as a bridge between weaving patterns and written text, and felt that other works would be more easily understood, such as Patience’s architectural lines or the very organic-looking work by Joan Calvert that was obviously of the 1970s hippie era. A textile is usually authored by a weaver or group of weavers from a certain perspective and cultural background, from a particular place and time, with the intent of sharing knowledge from this position. Although not based on words, weaving is created from the language of pattern, colour and most of all technique that is a distinctive shared approach across a group of weavers. Because of its symbolic qualities weaving can convey multiple narratives. Because textiles are part of our everyday lives, they can become the bearers of memories, complex narratives and layered histories. Written text, poetry or prose, can encompass multiple meanings too, but for Hemmings, textiles are even more open, as they are able to embody plurality and tactility.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Hemmings, *Cultural Threads*, 24.

The “irreducible” plurality of the text (and, by extension, the textile) is also insisted upon by Roland Barthes in his influential 1971 essay “From Work to Text.” Barthes writes:

The plural of the Text depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric)... woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony.¹¹⁶

As Barthes notes, the etymology of the term textile is related to both texture and to text, and identifies this fundamental relationship of the textile with touch, feeling and also to language. This can be seen in the colloquial terms that we commonly use that are associated with weaving: to weave a story, to follow a thread of meaning, or to spin a yarn.

Writing on the work of Cecilia Vicuña, Juliet Lynd argues that textiles can be associated with the unwritten stories of women, feminist and Indigenous practices:

The writing of poetry finds parallels in the semiotics of weaving, a textile textual practice that alludes to the unspoken, unwritten stories of women and of the indigenous. Feminist scholars have likened weaving, a devalued form of textuality, to language, interpreting it as a blank page that contains the untold story of women. Weaving thus effectively references the strength of material cultural practices resistant to the forces of modernization...¹¹⁷

The construction of a weaving is seen as important for storytelling because of the special way in which the weaver manipulates the warp thread along the weft rows using a chosen technique, in addition to the ability for patterns and the choice of materials to bear abstract meaning. Even though only those familiar with the language and practice of weaving are equipped to interpret the final work exactly, the tactility, familiarity and sensual quality of textiles are

¹¹⁶ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” 1971, http://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/handouts/8500/barthes_work_to_text.pdf, accessed 7/6/2017.

¹¹⁷ Juliet Lynd, “Precarious Resistance: Weaving Opposition in the Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña,” *Modern Language Association*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (Oct., 2005): 1588-1607.

relatable for all viewers and meaning is evoked through sensation. Weaving encapsulates coded histories that are produced materially, and as a text that is resistant to definitive meaning it communicates an abundance of references regarding cultures, histories and relationships.

IV. Curatorial Practice as Weaving

Anni Albers is admired for the clarity with which she articulated the structural principles of weaving, elaborating on the various ways of achieving certain patterns and qualities through different movements of warp and weft threads. She claimed: "...weaving is primarily a process of structural organization...", and she believed the form equally espoused histories, materials, techniques and concepts.¹¹⁸ As I have shown in this example, the tactility and structure of weaving as an organisational system can be brought into curatorial practice as a way to work with artworks or artists, to foreground the materiality in an exhibition, to follow warp and weft threads to tangential subjects and ever-extending relationships, and to acknowledge the social, political and economic context of production as embedded in the materials and techniques.

Two key examples of the relationship between textiles and curatorial practice are Viennese curator Alois Riegl (1858 - 1905) and conceptual art dealer and curator Seth Siegelaub (1941 - 2013). Riegl was director of the textiles department at the Imperial-Royal Austrian Museum for Art and Industry, and is known for identifying the integrated relationship of style and cultural history or technical developments for art history, the inseparability of aesthetic concerns and functionality.¹¹⁹ Departing from the art historical narrative of growth towards the Renaissance and subsequent decline into Baroque decadence,

¹¹⁸ Albers, "The Pliable Plane," 36.

¹¹⁹ Rike Frank, "Materials at an Exhibition," in Rike Frank and Grant Watson, eds, *Textiles: Open Letter* (Vienna and Monchengladbach: Sternberg Press, Generali Foundation and Museum Abteiberg, 2015), 24.

he proposed the theory of *Kunstwollen* that appreciated the characteristics of each epoch's aesthetic and creative drive as transcending practicalities or available materials and technologies. This was explained through the decorative arts, seeing the overarching style of a period as evident across disciplines, from architecture to textiles, design and painting. As mentioned briefly in my introduction, the distinction between haptic and optic modes of representation that Riegl advanced through the text *Late Roman Art Industry* (1893) was a dialogical ideal he believed developed over time and in relation to the contemporary sensibility or worldview. He brought his knowledge of textile crafts to the discipline of art history to emphasise how artworks are products of the culture in which they are made, rather than dependent on merely technical developments, and the tactility of textiles, the varying designs, materials and motifs, informed his thinking and practice as a curator and art historian.¹²⁰ In my own curatorial practice, I am also interested in revisiting art history to bring marginal histories to light and to reconsider master narratives, and, in the case of Fitts' exhibition, drawing on textile craft as part of the style and attitude of a time.

In the 1960s and '70s, American-born art dealer, curator, researcher and publisher Seth Siegelaub worked with conceptual artists in New York, completely rethinking formats of exhibiting, such as his advocacy for the book-as-exhibition. Siegelaub then moved to France where he archived mass media and also amassed an extraordinary collection of books about textiles. In 1986, he established the Center for Social Research on Old Textiles (CSROT), and expanded his personal collection of textiles.¹²¹ Siegelaub's aims for CSROT were to map the literature of textile history, and thereby "to contribute to a more critical understanding of the history of textiles, and of early craft production in general by situating them within the context of social,

¹²⁰ Alois Riegl, "Leading Characteristics of the Late Roman 'Kunstwollen'," (1893), in Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 169-76.

¹²¹ Leontine Coelewij and Sara Martinetti, eds., *Seth Siegelaub Beyond Conceptual Art* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2016), 360.

economic and cultural history, and the history of creativity.”¹²² While Siegelauub claimed that his interest areas—conceptual art, mass media and textiles—were coincidental, there was an underlying relationship that gradually became more obvious as a particular approach to the mediation and dissemination of information, coalescing around his commitment to the form of printed matter, but that could also have been achieved through textiles. He reflected:

the metaphor of textiles—weaving a story—is pervasive in many people’s writings. It’s also part of physics, when you get down to a certain scale - what would be called fundamental properties of matter and things like this. So it’s very, very common. And when I went about publishing the bibliography of textiles, I took great pains to give an idea of how formidable the idea of textiles is insofar as it is reflected in several languages.¹²³

Siegelauub knew that textiles were an example of how motifs could travel and culture could move, and that the body of literature on textiles encapsulated the histories of society and creativity. The extraordinary publication *Bibliographica Textilia Historiae: Towards a General Bibliography on the History of Textiles Based on the Library and Archives of the Center for Social Research on Old Textiles* that he produced in 1997 was a culmination of many years of research, an expansive and detailed bibliography of books on textiles as well as the technologies and social histories around their production.

Bibliographica Textilia Historiae continues his innovative formulation of the catalogue-as-exhibition for conceptual art, and similarly his ongoing examination of mass media and communication in relation to politics of the left. Researcher and curator Sara Marinetti used the metaphor of patchwork fabric to show the strong connections between Siegelauub’s interests, pointing out that he described his bibliography as a loom on which he was weaving the entire “fabric” of the literature of the history of textiles, and how he engaged the book as a way to facilitate the mediation and mobility of art.¹²⁴ While *Bibliographica Textilia Historiae* is a network of information, the fact that it is

¹²² Ibid., 361.

¹²³ Seth Siegelauub in Conversation with Rike Frank and Grant Watson, *Textiles: Open Letter*, 225.

¹²⁴ Sara Martinetti, “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor,” in Leontine Coelewij and Sara Martinetti, *Seth Siegelauub: Beyond Conceptual Art*, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2016):16-19.

about textiles is critical in that it reflects Siegelau's ongoing concern with the intersections of labour, industry and art, presenting the socio-economic aspects along with the artistic. His strong connection of conceptual art and textiles emboldened my use of the textile collection for Fitts exhibition.

The examples of both Reigl and Siegelau show the alliance of textiles to social history and how the study of textiles has been used as a structuring principle or form of organising for art history and curating. In these curatorial practices weaving was literally used as a way to expand on the interrelationships of art, industry and technology, but they also considered the structure of weaving as a guiding principle, the bringing together of disparate threads, privileging close analysis as the key to meaningful discourse, and locating materials, techniques, histories and concepts equally within their work.

The exhibition *From Pressure to Vibration* was similarly a weaving together of ideas, works, histories and conversations that resulted in a cohesive textural exhibition. Fitts' large felted works resonated with patterns, colours and details of The Dowse collection works that I had selected, and these historical textiles acted as prompts toward a range of histories, though they also always led back to Fitts' concept and work. The project was grounded in ongoing dialogue and a shared interest in how textiles could tell broader histories, with a focus on overlooked artists.

In most art institutions, the exhibition design and interpretative materials conform to certain curatorial formats that have evolved over time and that audiences are familiar with. Individual works are conventionally hung to be read from left to right clockwise around the room, accompanied by wall labels and wall texts or brochures that connect them. Yet a different kind of exhibition experience could be envisioned if the focus was on interpreting an artists' work using weaving as a metaphor, with multiple intersecting threads offering a background or structure for the works and used as the reference for

how to guide bodies through the gallery space, stressing material or embodied experiences over vision. *From Pressure to Vibration* encouraged visitors to navigate the space without a linear pathway, requiring viewers to cross the room, duck into and behind works, with several art histories being alluded to at once, from Modernism to rāranga, and wall texts that privileged the maker's voice instead of defining an overarching art history. The sightlines through and across the central areas, created several vantages for works: from a distance, seen through another work, or in very close intimacy. I considered these as lines of thread too, that looped, wove and intersected.

The idea of using weaving for the process of framing an artist's work when the artist is working with historical materials and textiles reflects the constant renegotiation and interpretation of materials in the retelling of histories. Artists using archival documents are reiterating, adapting and repeating histories to convey these in a new form or from a certain perspective, just as histories have always been relayed. In the case of *From Pressure to Vibration*, there was palpable warmth within the space that the colour and softness of the textiles contributed to, a reciprocal and productive connection between Fitts and the collection. Observing visitor behaviour in the space, I noted that people would often cluster in small groups to talk, a reflection on the intimate sociability of the exhibition and its content. In this sense, my adopting weaving as a methodology for curatorial practice brought to the fore the relationships of textiles and histories through the weaving of ideas and tactile responses, exhibition design that framed the gallery space as loom, and the integration of textile works from the collection with Fitts's sculptures.

Chapter Two: Shannon Te Ao and Curatorial Vocal Harmony

“Ka mua, ka muri” is a well-known Māori proverb that means walking backwards into the future.¹²⁵ It is often quoted to acknowledge how integral ancestors and history are for contemporary Māori life and how the past constantly informs the present and future in a Māori worldview. Artist Shannon Te Ao (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Wairangi, Te Pāpaka-a-Māui) incorporates in his work historical narratives that have been passed down through Māori oral traditions of waiata (song), combining these with recent histories from film, literature and his own life. Te Ao is also interested in Mark Fisher’s “hauntology” and the notion of non-linear time, how “the very distinction between past and present is breaking down.... [C]ultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity.”¹²⁶ His work is frequently iterative, each project involving reworking or developing earlier versions, becoming cyclical both in content and form.

This chapter discusses an exhibition that I curated with Te Ao in 2018 for The Dowse Art Museum, *my life as a tunnel*. It explores aspects of his practice and ways I responded to enhance its interpretation. I stress the importance of waiata, whakapapa (genealogy) and whanaungatanga (relationships) for comprehending the complex, multi-layered historical associations that are relevant for Te Ao’s work, using the metaphor of singing harmony as a methodology for curatorial practice (supplementing an existing melody with additional notes that fit the underlying chord structure). I also address the complexity of working with Māori artists and Indigenous knowledge as a Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) curator within a Western art museum in Aotearoa New Zealand.

¹²⁵ “Mua” is a location word that means both in front of and the past, while “muri” is both behind and the future. This concept of time is quite different to a Western idea of walking forwards into the future. Instead, one stands still while the past and ancestors travel through into the future. Time is momentary.

¹²⁶ Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 30.

Oral history plays a critical role for many Indigenous cultures as it traditionally sustains a breadth of knowledge. Within te ao Māori (the Māori world), oral forms such as waiata, karakia (prayer), karanga (calling), whakatauki (proverbs) and whaikorero (formal speaking) are critically important for culture, the building of identity and establishing iwi (tribal) connections, that in turn relate to land rights and sovereignty. Māori was exclusively a spoken language until writing and printing processes became available in the nineteenth century, so songs, chants and sayings were an important way of passing on whakapapa and sharing significant histories, connections and knowledge. As Māori language specialist Jane Mcrae states:

Oral tradition, memory and voice are the primary means of storing and communicating knowledge. For Māori, the genealogies, tribal history and customs, instruction in arts, craft and cultivation, songs, chants and sayings comprised an enormous store of knowledge to be passed on through generations.¹²⁷

In developing a curatorial approach for this exhibition, I knew I could not use the method of weaving as I had with Fitts, since Te Ao's practice is vastly different in form and content. Instead, I thought of the centrality of singing in Te Ao's work and how other voices could be introduced in harmony to support his work and to situate his exhibition within the institution. I identified a few works from The Dowse collection that could provide analogous Indigenous voices to connect with Te Ao: firstly a model for his working process through the well-known practice of artist Ralph Hotere (Te Aupōuri, 1931 - 2013); and then the era of Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history that partly inspired Te Ao's work by doing further research into Nuku Tewhawa, a nineteenth century pātaka (storehouse) that is on permanent display, and programming the exhibition to sit adjacent to this structure. Because I am a Pākehā curator, Indigenous histories are not mine to explain, so including other Indigenous artworks that already exist in the institution was a strategy I adopted to enhance context within the exhibition without interpreting Indigenous

¹²⁷ Jane Mcrae, with Heni Jacob, trans., *Ngā Mōteatea: he kupu arataki, An Introduction* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011), 65.

knowledge solely through descriptive wall labels, a strategy that I will return to throughout this chapter.¹²⁸ For the audience members who regularly visit The Dowse and other similar institutions, their familiarity with these works situated Te Ao within an existing discourse and enabled greater insight to the period of history that informs his work.

I. Making Whanaungatanga

The histories that Te Ao draws from are multi-layered, complex and richly detailed, and some relate to te ao Māori (the Māori world), tikanga (traditions) and stories. That is not to say that it is essential to know this information to experience his work, but providing links to the surrounding body of knowledge can evoke memories, relationships and broader connections for audiences. As curator of Te Ao's exhibition *my life as a tunnel*, I used The Dowse collection to bring his work into conversation with a local context, the institution and its communities in order to offer additional pathways into the historical material that he works with.

Following Te Ao accepting my invitation to exhibit and our initial planning discussions, I selected some works that link to both art history and to Māori history and invited Te Ao to respond to or work alongside these. This led Te Ao to propose a further commission of a text work, from artist Kurt Komene (Te Ātiawa, Taranaki Whānui) who has whakapapa links to Te Awa Kairangi region where the museum is located. In this way, relationships between Te Ao, the gallery, and mana whenua (the Indigenous people of the area) were extended—a form of whanaungatanga that is culturally important when working outside your own region.

¹²⁸ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction," Denzin, Lincoln and Linda Tuhiwai Smith eds, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (California, New Delhi, London and Singapore: SAGE, 2008), 6.

This chapter will detail some of the histories Te Ao negotiates, but first, I would like to narrate an aspect of the institution's history by describing Nuku Tewhatewha, an artwork that is permanently situated at The Dowse and with which artists and curators alike must contend. This object's history intersected with Te Ao's exhibition in ways that were both intentional and accidental.

For anyone working in The Dowse's exhibition spaces, it is impossible to ignore the presence of the carved pātaka (a small building traditionally used as a storehouse), known as Nuku Tewhatewha. It is located at the heart of The Dowse, and was the first and most significant collection work to be brought into conversation with Te Ao's exhibition as I programmed the exhibition into galleries on either side so visitors had to pass this structure to see the exhibition components. Nuku Tewhatewha is the only collection work that is on constant display at the Museum. The story of its production and journey around the region is important for the institution, demonstrating the need for an ongoing relationship with mana whenua. It is an honour to act as its kaitiaki (guardian), a role that is comparable to that of a collection curator.

Nuku Tewhatewha has never been used for storing food, though this is a pataka's customary use. Rather, it was created in 1856 as a symbol of support for the Kingitanga movement, which was an Indigenous response to colonisation whereby Māori from around Aotearoa came together to elect a king who they believed could advocate for land rights and negotiate with the Crown.¹²⁹ Nuku Tewhatewha is one of eight pātaka that were carved across the country, described as Ngā Pou o te Kingitanga (Pillars of the Kingdom), and it is the only remaining pātaka of the eight that is still intact. A pātaka is

¹²⁹ Nuku Tewhatewha was commissioned by Wi Tako Ngatata (who has tribal affiliations of Te Atiawa, Ngāti Ruanui and Taranaki iwi) and originally was built at his home in Naenae, a suburb close to The Dowse. It was subsequently transferred to the care of an English family, the Beethams, who moved it to another site in Wellington before it was relocated to their farm in a nearby region over a mountain range, in the Wairarapa. Nuku Tewhatewha was brought back to Lower Hutt in 1982 to ensure its preservation and has been housed at the museum ever since.

not commonly decorated with elaborate carving and kowhaiwhai (painting), since it is a storage house rather than a wharehau (meeting house). The adornment of this pātaka with carving and painting displays the mana (esteem) placed on this building as a physical endorsement of tino rangatiratanga (right to self-governance) or te mana Māori motuhake (the independent authority of Māori). It is a symbol of the ongoing struggle for Māori to have their Treaty of Waitangi rights recognised.

The lead carver of Nuku Tewhatewha was Te Heuheu Tūkino IV (Horonuku) of the Ngāti Tūwharetoa iwi (tribe)—the same iwi as Shannon Te Ao—and the carving style is commonly recognised as that of Ngāti Tūwharetoa. Locating Te Ao's exhibition in the galleries that are on either side of the pātaka brought Nuku Tewhatewha into a relationship with Te Ao's work both physically and conceptually. The decision to continue the exhibition across the spaces acknowledged its history as part of the whakapapa for Te Ao's work: that of a genealogical connection through Ngāti Tūwharetoa iwi, and also an alignment with political values of resistance and support for Māori sovereignty. We discussed the sightlines and how from one side of the gallery, both the pātaka and Te Ao's video could be seen simultaneously, bringing past and present together.

In addition to this, and perhaps because of the shared iwi relationship, we discovered in the process of developing the exhibition that the inspiration for one of Te Ao's earlier works is also closely linked to Nuku Tewhatewha. Te Rohu, the composer of a waiata that inspired Te Ao's video work *Untitled (Malady)* (2016), was the sister of Horonuku, the lead carver of the pātaka. Te Ao did not want the genealogical connection between Nuku Tewhatewha and the exhibition *my life as a tunnel* to be outlined in the wall text as this was not directly related to his work, but by programming his work next to the pātaka, I felt this expressed a kinship materially, that the mana and meaning of the pātaka spoke to his work and that audiences would understand some of the history that is a given for Te Ao's practice through viewing and reading

about Nuku Tewhatewha before or after seeing his main video work, *my life as a tunnel* (2018).

This particular pātaka acts as a constant reminder of colonisation, of resistance, and of ongoing treaty negotiations. It also casts a wide net of whanaungatanga (potential relationships) through its history of journeying to various sites, the many hands involved in the making of the pātaka, and also the part it plays in the national story of the Kingitanga movement. While there are iwi connections, it is also more broadly emblematic of Māori and Pākehā relations, given the story of its ownership over the years, going from its commissioner Wiremu Tako Ngātata (Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngā Ruahinerangi, Ngā iwi o Taranaki) to the Beethams, an English family, and then returning to Te Awa Kairangi to be cared for at The Dowse.

The other Dowse collection works that I included alongside the exhibition were by Ralph Hotere (Te Aupōuri, 1931-2013). Hotere is one of New Zealand's most celebrated artists, known for his modernist paintings as well as politically driven works. The first iteration of Te Ao's most recent video series is called *Untitled (Malady)* (2016), so it seemed fitting to exhibit the Hotere *Malady* publication that he made with poet Bill Manhire, based on a poem by Manhire also titled *Malady*. Poetry was important to Hotere, a way of building in meaning without being prescriptive, and he frequently incorporated references to poetry or music within his work, as well as collaborating with a number of writers. Hotere is known for reticence to explain his work, and using the words of others enabled him to retain openness and flexibility. A longstanding friendship with Manhire led to the pair producing the *Malady* publication, with Hotere interpreting Manhire's poem visually. In addition to this, Hotere included words from Manhire poems in several other paintings, and two of these were also included in the exhibition: *Black Painting* (1969) and *Black Painting from Malady, a Poem by Bill Manhire* (1970).

I wanted to draw a comparison between the artistic processes of Hotere and Te Ao, to show that both incorporated lyrical forms in their work and both at times worked in a form of collaboration. Hotere is a major figure in the art history of Aotearoa and so this is a complimentary comparison to make, one that Te Ao might not have chosen to make about himself, and that serves to highlight his relationship to language and use of other texts. Te Ao has previously commissioned other artists or translators to participate as part of his work, and often responds to existing songs, films and literature. In response to my inclusion of Hotere, for the wall opposite the paintings and the *Malady* publication Te Ao commissioned colleague and friend Kurt Komene to creatively translate some of Te Ao's writing from English into Māori, bringing te reo Māori (the Māori language) into the gallery space and introducing tribal affiliations that are relevant for the region (those that are recognised as mana whenua). This made Te Ao's use of text more prominent than in previous exhibitions of his work, where a text work might be applied to the wall of a darkened gallery space.

Artists are frequently invited by museums to respond to works in institutional collections, to remediate these works, as curator Clémentine Deliss puts it (after anthropologist Paul Rabinow).¹³⁰ However, the inclusion of Hotere's work here was a reciprocal response, a way to offer another historical figure that audiences already know as a way to frame Te Ao. In speaking of an experimental use of their collection for the project *Play Van Abbe* (2009-2011), Steven ten Thije, Research Curator at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, explained,

If you start to see works themselves as contexts, then each work starts to be not just a story of itself, but to offer a perspective on the world—a different background against which things can be ordered.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Clémentine Deliss, *Son[i]a* Radio Web MACBA, No. 205 (20 April 2015), <https://rwm.macba.cat/en/sonia/sonia-205-clementine-deliss>.

¹³¹ Latitudes (Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna), "From One History to a Plurality of Histories: An Interview with Steven ten Thije," *#OpenCurating*, 2013, https://issuu.com/latitudes/docs/opencurating_stevententhije/18.

It was my hope that these few collection works would convey a relationship with Ngāti Tuwharetoa and other Māori artistic voices that could situate Te Ao's work and build a broader context or lines of connection that would be apparent to both Māori and Pākehā audiences.

II. The exhibition *my life as a tunnel*

As though hearing a karanga (welcome call) ringing out across the marae (courtyard in front of a meeting house), the audience was called into the gallery space through song: male voices singing a lament in te reo Māori (the Māori language). Warm and low, their song invited visitors to enter the darkened space where a large, double-sided video projection filled the centre of the room (fig. 8 - 10). Presented in black and white, the video visually introduced the singers: Tola Newberry (Tūhoe) and Scotty Cotter (Tainui, Fijian). The couple held each other in an embrace, and both their grasp and the camera were kept at an intimate proximity. It was dramatic, poignant and emotionally powerful due to both the scale and content. Each side of the screen focused on one of the pair as they interacted: one figure set against the backdrop of an outdoor garden, the other within a greenhouse.

Each of the two-channels, presented back-to-back on the screen, was louder at different times, encouraging visitors to move around the space and explore each side as the pair gently moved in a sort of dance, though visitors often settled to watch one side for an extended period of time. The screen dominated the gallery, slightly off-centre, with the speakers mounted so as to project the sound from the singers. The lament speaks of whenua (land), aroha (love) and kaumātua (elders). While only those who speak Māori could understand the full meaning of the song, these few words are common in Aotearoa New Zealand, and easily recognisable. It was mesmerising, contemplative, and as a heartfelt song of loss and longing, deeply affecting.

To the audience, the figures could stand for any number of relationships between whānau (family and friends): siblings, lovers, old friends, new encounters. They can also represent more metaphorical relationships between two entities, such as that of two iwi (tribes); or even convey the exploration of a single person, thinking about the self at different moments in time.

In addition to this major video installation, the exhibition included several other works and was designed to be experienced across four gallery spaces at The Dowse Art Museum, situated around Nuku Tewhatewha (as described above) (fig. 11). To access the main installation, visitors could enter from two directions—passing through either another video work by the artist, *a torch and a light (cover)* (2015), or via Nuku Tewhatewha, the selection of works from The Dowse Collection and Kurt Komene’s wall text (fig. 12 and 13). In this way the exhibition followed a Māori concept of time, “ka mua, ka muri”, the new work surrounded by past work, that was designed to be encountered first and kept in mind.

Initially I suggested to Te Ao that we include a previous iteration of his new work, *Untitled (Malady)*, to offer another perspective on this scene as it features two women, and he decided that the first inspiration for the trilogy of works that followed would be best. Thus the video *a torch and a light (cover)* greeted visitors in the clockwise entrance to the exhibition (fig. 14). This work is a conceptual sketch for *my life as a tunnel*, and the forerunner to his ongoing project based on one film scene of a couple dancing. It demonstrates the cyclical nature of Te Ao’s practice and how his works are recursive, looping back, building and developing their own histories. *a torch and a light (cover)* consists of three parts: a sequence of Te Ao sculpting with wet towels; a slow panning shot taken in a former abattoir; and the reading of an English translation of a poetic waiata from the nineteenth century:

Sparkling brightly on high
Are a hundred stars of early morn;

Would ye' together were my spouse
I would then enclasp ye all in close embrace.
I would savour unto satiety
This woman's longing within,
Rather than the fleeting caress
Of thee, O thou chilling breeze.¹³²

We have in these few lines the inception of the next iteration of this project, *Untitled (Malady)*: the dawn light, a close embrace and desire for intimacy. After seeing the abattoir used in *a torch and a light (cover)*, academic Martin Patrick recommended Te Ao watch Charles Burnett's film *Killer of Sheep* (1978) that is set in a slaughterhouse, and this became a key starting point for the artist's subsequent works. *a torch and a light (cover)* raised several questions for Te Ao that he has subsequently returned to, looking at them from a range of different perspectives: how does one represent trauma? How do we grieve loss? And how does intimacy exist between us?

Untitled (Malady) brought together two references, a waiata and a particular scene from *Killer of Sheep*. *He waiata mo te mate ngerengere* (Song for a leprous malady), was written in approximately 1846 by Te Rohu, a woman from the tribe Ngāti Tuwharetoa who is said to have contracted leprosy from Te Whetu, a suitor and potential husband who was deemed unworthy of her.¹³³ A contemporary of Te Rohu, Te Taite Te Tomo, wrote that the waiata was authored not only after the tragic loss of her father in a landslide, but also soon after initial colonial contact. Aotearoa New Zealand in the mid-nineteenth century was still a battlefield, and this waiata was written at the height of tensions and conflict between Māori and Pākehā.

The film *Killer of Sheep* follows the lead character Stan as he struggles to balance the demands of work, family and life, and his desire for autonomy and social mobility in the African American ghetto neighborhood of Watts,

¹³² Āpriana Ngata, ed., and Pei Te Hurinui Jones, trans, *Ngā Mōteatea: The Songs*, Part II (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005), 79.

¹³³ <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1t77/te-rohu>.

California. Stan works at the local slaughterhouse, and the ennui of his life opens up a comparison of Stan with the sheep that he kills, as both are shown to be the unfortunate and helpless subjects of a bigger system of production and consumption. In one especially touching scene, Stan dances with his wife to Dinah Washington's rendition of the song *This Bitter Earth*, a slow and awkward embrace that eventually Stan pulls away from, revealing the troubled emotions affecting their relationship.

By drawing on these two separate references and their contexts, Te Rohu's waiata and the scene from *Killer of Sheep*, the focus shifts from the specific details of each historical situation and towards the shared sense of tension, grief and longing that underpins them. Rather than speaking directly to these other works, Te Ao compares and emphasises the emotional content, foregrounding his interest in language, intimacy and the human condition. The juxtaposition of these diverse threads enables the creation of a new work with transformative potential, generating a productive association of multiple layers and narratives towards Te Ao's own socio-political context. Te Ao explains, "Burnett's film and the waiata do similar things: they're grounded in very intimate relationships but they do reach out to the social politics of their times".¹³⁴ It is a way of showing the human impact of circumstances and events, the trauma and affect, but also using this as a broader perspective on the public, collective ordeal of class structures and racial divides.

Untitled (Malady) is a remake of the film scene of the couple dancing, though a few significant details differ (fig. 15). First, it is not a heterosexual couple that is shown in Te Ao's work; instead two women are shown in a close embrace. Also, *This Bitter Earth* soundtrack is no longer there as accompaniment, replaced by the sound of the dancers' feet on the timber floor as they gently shuffle around the room. These shifts are part of the conflation of the source texts. The video literally brings the two historical narratives into

¹³⁴ Megan Dunn, "A Wakeful Vigil: Profile of Shannon Te Ao," *ArtAsiaPacific* Blog, 25 August 2017.

conversation by proposing that each of the dancing figures could represent one of the women in the stories—Te Rohu and Stan’s wife (whose name we never learn). It becomes a dance across time, space and cultural contexts, intended to show the raw emotions of love, regret, suffering and hope.

Te Rohu wrote her waiata at a time when leprosy, one of the harmful diseases introduced to the country through colonisation, meant being isolated and shunned from a community: “The unsightliness of my body, now covered with sores. See now what leprosy has done (to me)... O friends, what purpose is there (in living)?”¹³⁵ This malady is echoed in the lyrics of *This Bitter Earth*, “What good is love, That no one shares... What good am I?” Te Rohu’s words could also be used to describe the women dancing in Te Ao’s film: “the contours of my back now cast by single light, speaking the rolling prominence and shingles, defined by the small field between my shoulder blades.”¹³⁶ In both of the texts the body is made a metaphor for trauma of a much larger scale, enacted on a people and a land.

Reflections on gender and domestic situations are not uncommon in Te Ao’s work. Echoing the shirtless attire of Stan in the *Killer of Sheep* film scene, in *Untitled (Malady)* the woman whose face remains hidden from view is also topless as the couple dance. It is not overtly sexual, but implies a potential romantic relationship between the women, as well as a sense of vulnerability or reliance on each other. It reminds us that in each of the historical references, the situation these women find themselves in is dictated by the men involved—either as husband, father, or would-be-suitor—and they have very little agency or ability to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives.

There are other loose connections between the socio-political contexts. For example, the struggle of Stan at the slaughterhouse recalls the situation of many Māori in the mid-twentieth century employed at meat processing plants

¹³⁵ Ngata and Jones, *Ngā Mōteatea*, 189.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

around the country. During the 1980s, the majority of these closed due to changes in legislature and declining stock numbers.¹³⁷ Whole towns became unemployed as a result of their reliance on one of the primary industries of New Zealand and this had a dramatic impact on many Māori communities. Te Ao alludes to the disenfranchisement, susceptibility to and dependence on a dominant market as a shared concern across the United States and New Zealand.

Following on from *Untitled (Malady)*, Te Ao reshot the same film scene, this time outdoors in a field of hemp, and combined this with another channel of footage taken near the Desert Road, a landscape familiar to his iwi Ngāti Tuwharetoa (fig. 16). The resulting work, *with the sun aglow, I have my pensive moods* (2017), has a different sense of space or atmosphere, and is more directly connected to the land, an iteration that extended and built on the initial work as Te Ao intuitively reflected on its meaning. “It’s becoming more and more clear to me,” he explains, “that the things that I make are born of the other things that I have made. The work itself has satisfied many of my questions, but it opened up a whole bunch more.”¹³⁸

My life as a tunnel (2018) shifted even further away from the historical references in *Untitled (Malady)*, but was a reworking that drew on all of the previous versions. The waiata of Te Rohu is replaced with a new waiata, a Māori translation of Dinah Washington’s *This Bitter Earth*, that transports the work to a new context. The couple dancing were recast as two men, inviting an exploration of intimacy and masculinity. Across the three iterations, various details change: the gender of the dancers, the soundtrack, the setting, as either inside or in the landscape, and the components of the video installation. What remains central, or is extended and enhanced, is that it is always two figures holding each other in an embrace; and there is an enduring connection to waiata. Placing *a torch and a light (cover)* at one entrance to the exhibition

¹³⁷ <https://teara.govt.nz/en/cartoon/25193/meat-works-closures>, cited 27 February 2019.

¹³⁸ Shannon Te Ao interview with Nathan Pohio, “A Torch and a Light,” *Bulletin* (Christchurch: Christchurch Art Gallery), No. 187 (March 2017), 37.

brought the history of this work into play, and some of the layers of interpretation bound to previous readings, as a forerunner to the intimacy and song that drive the subsequent works.

The other entrance to the exhibition was through a gallery with the collection works by Hotere and the commissioned wall text by Komene, and also past Nuku Tewhatewha. As previously mentioned, Te Ao asked Komene to translate a piece of his writing into te reo Māori. Te Ao's original text poetically describes his artistic process and the concepts that underpin his practice more broadly; and it also provides the title for the exhibition and new video:

She said:

To use my life as a tunnel

a place where talented people can happen through me.

Thinking about

how driving is the same as walking.

Minerals cluster to form islands.

Islands shift in the wake of large water mammals.

Thinking about moving.

From here to there,

freely and quickly.

From this we can take that Te Ao sees life as a tunnel, a conduit or pathway for others: other artists, writers and makers, of waiata, literature and film. Perhaps he was also thinking of Māori creation stories, the legendary journeys undertaken by atua (gods) and ancestors across Aotearoa New Zealand that shaped the land, and the resonance of these narratives. Te Ao's poetry sometimes resembles whakatauki (proverbs), also a consistent feature of his work, and this text talks of leaping across space and time, "freely and quickly" to bring together unexpected references. The exhibition structure expresses a Māori view of history as constantly present, to be observed as one walks backwards into the future (ka mua, ka muri), since entering the central gallery to see the new video work meant traveling inwards, and from either direction the layout required viewers to see previous works first.

III. Revisiting Waiata

Waiata succinctly convey Māori culture and historical narratives, incorporating traditional practices, religion, philosophy and tribal history in poetry and song. However, as Sir Āpirana Ngata, the key documenter of waiata in Aotearoa New Zealand, wrote, to understand these songs requires knowledge about the composer, song types and tribal contexts, as well as Māori language, history, traditions and cosmogony.¹³⁹ *Ngā Mōteatea*, the four volumes of waiata collected and documented by Ngata from the 1920s, represent an extraordinary effort to preserve and inspire waiata, and his publications gave as much context to the songs as possible. While they generally follow conventional patterns, the composers used evocative language to produce intense expressions of personal feeling that can also be delivered publicly to take on communal meaning. The waiata collected in the *Ngā Mōteatea* volumes take two main forms: waiata tangi (songs of grief or sadness) and waiata aroha (songs of love or longing).¹⁴⁰

Oral traditions may vary across Indigenous cultures, yet song consistently plays an important role in the telling of Indigenous histories. For example, as Grace Koch and others have discussed, singing is a crucial part of Australian Indigenous cultures as the land and song were intimately tied and property rights or title deeds held and passed on through certain songs.¹⁴¹ Exhibitions like *Songlines* at the National Museum of Australia (2017-18) stress how stories relating to the land, ancestral journeys and creation law were embodied in song and other art forms, and used to communicate ownership, governance and policy.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ McRae, *Ngā Mōteatea*, 11.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴¹ Grace Koch, "We Have the Song So We Have the Land: song and ceremony as proof of ownership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land claims," AIATSIS research discussion paper, *AIATSIS Research Publications*, Canberra, No. 33 (2013), https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/products/discussion_paper/we-have-the-song-so-we-have-the-land_0.pdf.

¹⁴² <http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/songlines>.

Te Ao has researched and applied to his practice the values of waiata, whakataukī and karakia (spiritual incantation), seeing these as the foundational components of a Māori perspective.¹⁴³ In writing about another of his video works, *Follow the party of the whale* (2013), a response to the story of Parihaka pacifist prisoners who were exiled and incarcerated in Dunedin in the nineteenth-century, Te Ao references Māori activist Te Miringa Hohaia's assertion that oral traditions contribute to an enriched linguistic potential.

Te Ao wrote:

The oral traditions grounded in this knowledge—found in karakia, waiata and whakataukī—as Hohaia describes were fundamental in establishing a 'strong classical language'. Through a formalised language—with poetics at its core—entailed potential for social solidarity, cultural extension and empowerment.¹⁴⁴

Waiata have subsequently become important source documents for many of Te Ao's works, such as *two shoots that stretch far out* (2013-14), *a torch and a light (cover)* and the subsequent series of works. Te Ao draws on not just the lyrical language but also the context from within which these waiata have come, the backstory of their composition and reception, the whakapapa and historical events that they convey.

My life as a tunnel essentially began with a song written in English. Otis Redding's *This Bitter Earth* was composed in 1964 and most popularly sung by Dinah Washington. Te Ao had this translated into Māori, and thus it became a new waiata, carrying the emotive content of the original song:

This bitter earth
Well, What fruit it bears
What good is love
That no one shares
And if my life

¹⁴³ Correspondence with the artist.

¹⁴⁴ Te Miringa Hohaia, "Ngā Pūtaketanga Korero Mō Parihaka," in Te Miringa Hohaia, Gregory O'Brien and Lara Strongman eds, *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance* (Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, Victoria University Press, Parihaka Pā Trustees, 2001), 43-65.

is like the dust
That hides the glow of a rose
What good am I
Heaven only knows
Lord, this bitter Earth
Yes, can be so cold
Today you are young
Too soon you're old
But while a voice
Within me cries
I'm sure someone
may answer my call
And this bitter earth
May not, be so bitter after all

The song lyrics share cross-cultural concerns: connection to the land, feelings of love, loneliness and desire, though in shifting to the Māori language a more specific context is brought to bear on these terms. For example, the word *whenua* means both the land and a placenta, directly connecting the birth of a child and the earth, with the placenta customarily being buried beneath the roots of a tree. However, the use of *whenua* also brings to mind the violent dispossession of land for Māori during and following the nineteenth-century colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand by the English, a new lens on “this bitter earth”, but one that shares in the common desire to feel grounded.

In addition to the lyrical content, there is also the physical and political power of the men's voices that are being raised in song in Te Ao's work. According to Slovene cultural theorist Mladen Dolar, there are three ways of considering voice: as a vehicle of meaning; as an aesthetic form; and lastly the voice as an object that is a lever of thought, to be grasped linguistically, ethically, metaphysically, bodily and politically.¹⁴⁵ It is this third reading of voice, what Dolar calls the “object voice”, that can be applied to Te Ao's work. Singing gives aesthetic attention to voice, and Dolar explains how the evocative

¹⁴⁵ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

nature of singing as a visceral, bodily experience can deliver us directly to emotions. However, he also describes the layers of understanding that can be derived from voice if it is able to be appreciated as more than just a song, but also ethical, metaphysical and political. When the voices emanate from Māori men singing a sombre lament, the political underpinnings are elevated and the power of the message enforced: it becomes a song of resistance and strength, as well as love and longing.

Song is also used as a trigger for memory, a strategy adopted by several artists, such as Scottish sound artist Susan Philipsz. Many of her works draw on history, and also connect to the architecture of a space. For example, in *The Lost Reflection* (2007) presented under a bridge for the outdoor event Sculpture Project Münster, Philipsz mounted speakers on either side of Lake Aa, playing back two parts of a barcarole from Jacques Offenbach's opera *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1880). Hauntingly beautiful, the song echoed back faintly from each side, a familiar aria that was exceptionally touching and that revealed the power of a singing voice to arouse deep emotions.

Australian artist Angelica Mesiti explores physical rather than verbal languages in her work; dance, music and other sounds used as a form of communication are ongoing explorations within her practice.¹⁴⁶ In a work such as *The Calling* (2013-14), Mesiti focuses on whistling as a form of communication, a slowly dying system in some remote rural communities including villages in northern Turkey and the Canary Islands, that Mesiti captures as it transitions from an everyday activity to a performed cultural form. Since her works are non-verbal, Mesiti elevates the language of movements and sounds in place of words. Her works communicate directly, viscerally, bodily, and use the emotional connection we have with those corollaries and associative aspects of song. Her work shows that dance, movement and music are highly affective in themselves.

¹⁴⁶ Tom Jeffreys, "How We Speak," *Frieze*, Issue 192 (Dec 2017), <https://frieze.com/article/how-we-speak>.

When compared to Te Ao's *my life as a tunnel* and the slow dance interaction of the men, even though the words are only understandable for te reo Māori speakers, there is both a force of affect and a political lever of thought. Meaning is delivered through verbal language, but also these other affective qualities of singing: timbre, feel, tempo and tone. In Te Ao's own words:

Physical impetus forms the beginning to understanding very complex ideas... I always come back to that initial physical response as a moment in which one might start to engage with complex, conflated, multi-layered and often contradictory social situations, ideas or historical events. The singular embodied moment is a recurring motif in my work.¹⁴⁷

Waiata plays a significant role beyond just communication, as it is used for ceremonies and traditional forms of interaction, such as within the structure of a formal welcome. Art historian Deidre Brown wrote: "...Māori architectural space may not necessarily be physically anchored to a marae, but could be something more portable, even acoustic, related to remembered, and shared, visual and aural experiences."¹⁴⁸ Song carries with it memories and histories, that are foundational to experiences of Māori culture and contemporary life. As I will elaborate on below, the use of te reo Māori (Māori language) underlines the importance of Indigenous language for Aotearoa; and Te Ao's use of waiata intentionally explores this context.

IV. Translation, Language and Text

In the process of working with the film *Killer of Sheep*, Te Ao commissioned a range of different te reo Māori speakers to interpret the song *This Bitter Earth*. The resulting iterations vary in length and style of language: some were more

¹⁴⁷ Pohio, "A Torch," 33.

¹⁴⁸ Deirdre Brown, "The Whare on Exhibition," in Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers, eds, *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies* (Wellington: Victoria University, 2004), 67.

directly translated, while others focused on the original intent of the passage, or on the metaphors and imagery. This highlights the interpretative aspect of translation, particularly in relation to poetic text. The Māori language has multiple meanings for individual words, and as with many languages understanding is often deduced through context and also the genealogy of a word. History is incorporated into everyday speech and individual words. Particularly for waiata, which are a succinct form of oral history, the poetic language must be interpreted with some knowledge of its composer, and Indigenous knowledge.

For *my life as a tunnel*, Te Ao provided several translations to the two actors and they selected a version by Krissi Jerram (Pākehā), *Te pūkawa rā o te whenua* (2017), as the one that they related to most strongly and were confident to sing.

Te pūkawa rā o te whenua
Ai auē, anā te hua
He aha te take o te aroha
Ki te kore e tohaina
Ā, me he puehu
Taku noho i te ao
E ārai ana I te rōhi mumura
He aha te take o aku mahi
Ko wai ka hua
Ae ha, te pūkawa o te whenua
Kātahi te mākinakina
Ka tani te pītoitoi he pēpi tonu
Ka tō te rā kua kaumātua
Ahakoa e tangi tonu nei a Roto
Kia mau kit e whakaaro
Ka whakahokia mai pea he reo anō
Kāti rā, ko te pūkawa o te whenua
E kore rā e pūkawa i te mutunga

In her review of the exhibition, Matariki Williams (Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Hauti, Taranaki), Curator Matauranga Māori at Te Papa Tongarewa at the time, responded to the role of language, or what she calls “The Singing Word”, claiming:

It is with our language that we simply, and beautifully, articulate our world....
[W]e have someone whose work both layers and unpacks the world with language. Choosing to use te reo Māori in his work is pointed, highlighting the staggering loss of language experienced by Māori...¹⁴⁹

For Māori, language is culture. As part of the colonisation process, Māori were discouraged from using their native language from the late-nineteenth century, and by the early-twentieth century it was forbidden in schools. This had an overwhelmingly negative impact on Māori cultural identity and wellbeing.¹⁵⁰ Following World War II, there was a dramatic increase in the urbanisation of Māori as they moved to the cities for work, and the number of people speaking Māori as a first language declined further. The 1970s and ‘80s saw the growth of a revitalisation movement that demanded acknowledgement of the importance of language for all aspects of Māori culture and fought for recognition and learning opportunities, but it is a long battle to recover a language. In choosing to use a waiata, Te Ao laments the loss of the Māori language and the impact this has on all aspects of Māori communities, the wealth of knowledge, identity and pride that is lost at the same time as language. However, the singing in *my life as a tunnel* also offers a subtle, positive assertion of te ao Māori despite the traumatic and ongoing violence of New Zealand’s colonial history. Paul Diamond (Ngāti Haua, Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi), Curator Māori at The National Library of New Zealand, stated in his response to the work:

my life as a tunnel provokes us to think about the state of Te Reo Maori in 2018. It's well-known that the language is in a vulnerable state: it's now one of 592 "vulnerable" languages on UNESCO's endangered languages list. The research is showing that it's rare for Maori to be spoken exclusively or mostly outside the home. So we need to think about ways the language can have

¹⁴⁹ Matariki Williams, “The Singing Word,” *Pantograph Punch* (June 2018), <https://pantograph-punch.com/post/singing-word>.

¹⁵⁰ <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/maori-language-week/history-of-the-maori-language>.

utility in different parts of our lives. One of the things which intrigues me about Te Ao's work is the way he plays with language in inventive ways, creating new domains for the language to be enjoyed and experienced.¹⁵¹

He went on to quote from Charles Royal:

If one considers the arts of the Māori world, waiata is surely the art which carries the inner ancestral depth and meaning of its subject matter. Whatever the content, be it a reply to jealousies, a love song or a eulogy, song-poetry is adept at conveying the inner-most thoughts of the Māori composer. Through waiata one can sense the way our ancestors saw their world, a world that will never be seen again, as we live in a very different landscape from the one they inhabited.¹⁵²

Waiata singing was at the heart of the exhibition, but also loud enough that it permeated throughout this half of the building. The work was heard before it was seen, and announced to visitors that this was an assertion of Māori culture and identity.

V. Remaking Film

While waiata enables the deep emotional connections that Te Ao seeks to create, it is also significant that he uses the medium of video. Following French film theorist Christian Metz, critic Erika Balsom describes two possible forms for narrativity, *histoire* (story) and *discours* (discourse), claiming that experimental film first provided the potential for a return to narrative that insists on acknowledging the position of the speaker, as socio-historically located:

Artists delve into the past, turning to narrative as a way of organizing time and event so as to challenge official accounts or point to their silences and gaps,

¹⁵¹ Paul Diamond, public talk at The Dowse Art Museum, Wellington, Saturday 22 July 2018.

¹⁵² Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, *Kāti au i konei: a collection of songs from Ngāti Toarangatira and Ngāti Raukawa* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 1994), 11.

thereby questioning the inherent relation to law suggested by the very etymology of the word “archive”.¹⁵³

Te Ao's *my life as a tunnel* holds together a loose narrative in precisely this way, with a focus on the socio-political subject and the emotional content, rather than a traditional story arc as such. The tactility of voice, the embodied moment that is created for the audience spending time with these dancers in the dark, expressed a powerful sense of urgency for Māori culture and identity.

Many artists have remade films or scenes, unpicking the cinematic language of an iconic film and harnessing these storytelling devices towards their own ends. Te Ao is interested in the theatricality of the *Killer of Sheep* dance scene, remaking this moment multiple times to explore the tension that is generated between the characters through cinematic tropes. Croatian artist David Maljković in the work *Recalling Frames* (2010) spliced together images of modernist buildings from film locations in Zagreb that were part of Orson Welles' film *The Trial* from 1962. Decades of political and urban change are condensed in these photomontages, arriving at a new installation that questions the modernist heritage of Croatia. Te Ao similarly plays on the role of architecture with the scene he is remaking, shifting through various backdrops to identify what impact this has on the figures and our reading of the relationship.

At other times artists look beyond the cinematic frame, as in Pierre Huyghe's project *The Third Memory* (2000) that tests the gap between an individual's memory of an event, the reportage that it received and a cinematic interpretation of it. Huyghe reenacted the 1972 scene of a hold-up at a Brooklyn bank made infamous from Sidney Lumet's film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), inviting the heist's protagonist John Wojtowicz to relate his version of the day through a reconstruction. The work reveals that Wojtowicz was

¹⁵³ Erika Balsom, “Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Narrativity)” in Ana Teixeira Pinto, ed., *The Reluctant Narrator* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2015), 116.

himself heavily influenced by the film, showing the unreliability of memory and the persuasiveness of cinema.

Te Ao's use of *Killer of Sheep* is driven by his identification with the emotional state of the character Stan, and by an appreciation for the main narrative of family and working life as comparable with some aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's history. The decision to blend this reference with a waiata draws the film into conversation with the history of Aotearoa and also a meditation on romantic relationships, the complexity of love and situations out of one's control. Using two reference texts enables Te Ao to manipulate these further, setting up a dialogue between the multiple narratives, instead of just responding to a single text. This also means he can avoid relaying the complete picture of each, and focus instead on the points of convergence, what Martin Patrick has called Te Ao's "precarious balance between ambiguity and specificity."¹⁵⁴ That a video work can be screened in the gallery on a loop is also useful for Te Ao, allowing him to establish a meditative, contemplative space that can be entered at any point, reinforces time as cyclical and encourages durational viewing.

VI. Curatorial Practice as Singing Harmony

While historical context is a concern for many contemporary artists, for Māori artists this also aligns with a Māori worldview and concept of time, ensuring that the past is shown to be constantly informing the present and future. As I have shown in this chapter, the memory and genealogy encapsulated within waiata is crucial to Te Ao's artistic practice, with song being used to convey the emotional and narrative components that underpin his work *my life as a tunnel*.

¹⁵⁴ Martin Patrick, "Shannon Te Ao: A torch and a light (cover)," Rebecca Lal, ed., *Unstuck in Time* (Auckland: Te Tuhi, 2015), 55.

For me as a Pākehā curator working in an institution in Aotearoa, it is especially important to generate space, resources and support for Māori artists. When working with Te Ao on this exhibition, my intention was to apply an artist-led methodology of vocal harmony, supplementing and supporting his project through the addition of parts that could add depth, feeling and texture. To do this I arranged for the exhibition to be spread across the Nuku Tewhatewha gallery and to include extra works from artists Hotere and Komene that could offer whanāungatanga and productive associations to the histories of Ngāti Tuwharetoa, Te Atiawa and Taranaki Whānui, connecting with historical Māori artistic practice and resistance to colonisation. Te Ao transcended these histories, creating a beautiful, powerful work that reflects on intimacy, love and loss.

Chapter 3: Ruth Buchanan and Institutional Body Language

Over the past few years, Berlin-based artist Ruth Buchanan (Te Ātiawa, Taranaki, Pākehā) has expanded her interest in art institutions, collections and curating to include close examination of systems and methods for artwork acquisition, display and interpretation. This chapter situates Buchanan within the history of institutional critique and ongoing feminist and decolonising practices in Aotearoa New Zealand in order to describe her unique approach to what she terms “infrastructural transformation.”¹⁵⁵ Looking at several exhibitions, including the group exhibition *Can Tame Anything* that I curated at The Dowse Art Museum in 2018, I describe how Buchanan works with the history of an institution, examining policies, architecture, display mechanisms and interpretation, as well as the role of the institutional curator, which I then held at The Dowse. As her practice involves interrogating the structures and asymmetries of power, hers is a particular kind of exploration into historiography that challenges the foundations of art institutions as well as the conventional understanding of what a curator does, and how they work with artists. Usually the curator is responsible for narrating art histories, even if that is an act of proposing multiple, alternative or rewritten histories, and undertakes the framing of works, ideas and trajectories. When working with Buchanan, these parts of the curatorial role come under her remit, and collections and history are investigated as sites of power inherently connected to curatorial practice.

Buchanan goes as far as to appropriate certain aspects of the curatorial, such as how other artists' work will be shown or even who will be included, and asks insightful questions of curators as a necessary part of developing her work and exhibitions. For example, in *Bad Visual Systems* (2016), curated by Director of the Adam Art Gallery Christina Barton, Buchanan invited other artists to exhibit in her solo exhibition, and in *Can Tame Anything*, she

¹⁵⁵ Ruth Buchanan, *Where does my body belong? From institutional critique to infrastructural transformation Or Standards and Mothers* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 2021), np.

provided the title, as well as reading area design, sculptural interventions and a display structure for another artist in the group exhibition. Buchanan's bold reconsideration of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery collection for *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* (2019) emphasised how institutional critique in Aotearoa is intrinsically tied to the ongoing and vexed process of decolonising, and emphasised the critical agency and impact that an artist can still have, despite the absorption of institutional critique into art institutions. Rather than adopting the role of curator, Buchanan retains the "intimacy of scrutiny" that makes a curator focus on practical aspects to support her exhibition concept and artistic direction, stressing how all decisions and practicalities have a critical impact.¹⁵⁶ She advocates that analysing, intervening in, augmenting, accentuating and subverting infrastructure or systems is essential—working from within and with the institution to transform, rather than substitute or overthrow.

Commissioning and working with an artist who is seeking to upend the institutional infrastructure is both an exciting and challenging opportunity, putting all norms of selection, display, interpretation and storytelling under review. The artist and curatorial relationship in this scenario is treated as part of Buchanan's project: from the initial invitation, negotiation, listening and supporting, to being a participant in the broad and all-encompassing scope of Buchanan's work. There is no other option than to follow an artist-led curatorial methodology for her practice, as Buchanan demands critical reflection on the curatorial role as well as institutional structures and works fluidly across all aspects of exhibition making, from selection of works to architecture, display and interpretation. The experience of working with Buchanan on *Can Tame Anything* complicated my curatorial methodology of being guided by the artist and the materiality of their artwork, as she was literally questioning the physical and conceptual parameters of the institution

¹⁵⁶ Buchanan refers to Audre Lorde's "intimacy of scrutiny" from the poem "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" in her introduction to the exhibition guide for *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2019). See: Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," (1977), in Roxane Gay, *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 3.

and exhibition framework, requiring instead that I relinquish control and incorporate her insight and interventions as an external consultant.

In this chapter I demonstrate that in her engagement with the institution, Buchanan acts much like Doreen Mende's 'undutiful daughter' figure who: refuses the paternal law but who also believes in the archive's futuristic power. She cannot (not) participate in the language of 'what can be said,' but she does so in accordance with her own learning processes, vocabularies, and pathways.¹⁵⁷

As presented in my introduction, this approach is built on feminist thinking, using the term 'daughter' for all those who exist outside the hegemonic subject.¹⁵⁸ While those who speak from other languages, positions and knowledge systems are caught in the double logic of needing to learn the language of the archive and to maintain their own unfitting language, there is the potential for unpredictable and wild disruption, which I will argue Buchanan enacts through her practice.

As well as the substantial history of institutional critique—artists using the museum, its collection and institutional structures as material to comment on and disrupt the inherent inequalities—institutional collections remain a useful resource for contemporary practice. Alongside a resurgence of interest in archives, histories and the objects that make up our understanding of the past, the collection has renewed attention as the storehouse of evidence for transitions in culture.¹⁵⁹ Buchanan draws on her knowledge of both international and New Zealand examples of institutional critique as she makes her own contribution to the field, incorporating feminist and decolonising theories and practices.

In the following sections I will first very briefly describe the well-documented history of international institutional critique and then bring this into focus with a

¹⁵⁷ Mende, "The Undutiful Daughter's Concept of Archival Metabolism," np.

¹⁵⁸ Gunkel, Nigianni and Söderbäck, *Undutiful Daughters*.

¹⁵⁹ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology* (Köln: Walther König, 2014), 23.

distinctly New Zealand context: that of the interrelationship of museums and collecting to the processes of colonisation for Aotearoa New Zealand. This unique history has led to an interesting intersection of Indigenous uses of the museum, particularly since the 1970s, with Māori and Pacific artists challenging the museum as a Western structure as well as working with collections in British institutions. Māori art history is a flourishing field, with curators and writers articulating the history of exhibitions, including those that have critiqued institutions, and the ways in which Indigenous art practices are being repositioned in terms of architecture, language, performance and genealogy. I will summarise a few of the field's key moments as forerunners and context for Buchanan.

In the next section I describe some of Buchanan's recent exhibitions and discuss my experience of curating *Can Tame Anything*. Lastly, I focus on *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* and the importance of this exhibition for institutional critique in Aotearoa as a bringing together of institutional interventions, decolonising methodologies and a view of the museum as a living body. Throughout these projects, Buchanan has focused on the systems of institutions, the structures, languages and forms that have become standard ways of operating, and in doing so, she forces us to reflect on the curatorial role as still integral to the uneven distribution of power within institutions. The histories that she is utilising in her practice are not only those of institutions and collections, but also of the individuals who formed them. As a curator, I found myself implicated in the very histories that Buchanan was challenging, which reinforced the need for an artist-led curatorial method and flexibility. Acknowledging that I am embedded within the institution, working with Buchanan thereby involves handing over some decision-making power in order to facilitate her disruption of institutional processes.

I. Artists and the Institution of Critique

The expansive literature on artists organising and curating exhibitions spans more than two centuries and covers a broad array of approaches, from artists working within institutions to alternative exhibition spaces, undertaking interventions, commissioned projects or curatorial work. In *The Artist as Curator*, curator Elena Filipovic separates these types of practices into several categories, amongst them political-activist exhibitions, the rearranging of museum collections, and exhibitions as sensorial experiences. Yet the one characteristic that they all share is a challenging of established ideas of the exhibition: the architectural, political, art historical, hierarchical framing of art within an established structure.¹⁶⁰ From Gustave Courbet presenting his own paintings in an alternative site during the 1855 Salon in Paris to the historicising of critique within institutions with the Museum of Modern Art's 1998 survey *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* in New York, the structure and conditions of the exhibition have been contested and productive territory for artists since the establishment of the first public museums in the eighteenth century. However, the majority of these artist projects are responding to the modernist white cube gallery conditions as eviscerated by Brian O'Doherty in 1976, and that still dominate today:

The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light... The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take on its own life."¹⁶¹

A brief summary of what we now term institutional critique has forerunners in the late-1960s and 1970s as part of the conceptual art movement, when artists were questioning the role of the art object and the institution. Some key examples include Andy Warhol's influential *Raid the Icebox* (1969), that featured an idiosyncratic range of objects from the art museum collection at

¹⁶⁰ Elena Filipovic, ed., *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology* (London: Mouse Publishing and Koenig Books, 2017), 8.

¹⁶¹ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), 15.

the Rhode Island School of Design, eschewing the idea of selecting beautiful works in favour of a quantitative approach that suggested curatorial decisions are arbitrary and pointless. Warhol picked things he liked: an entire shoe collection, 56 umbrellas, chairs, paintings, sculptures, wallpapers; not critiquing the institution as such, but celebrating randomly chosen items and thereby disrupting the notion that curatorial selection needs to be attentive.¹⁶²

Marcel Broodthaers created his own museum, an artistic parody of the institution, *Musée de l'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 1968-72); Hans Haacke exhibited an audience interactive poll at MOMA that dramatised the intricate connection of art and politics (1970); Michael Asher's *Installation* at Pomona College physically opened the gallery up to the street by removing the door, highlighting the architectural parameters and social conditions of a gallery space (1970); and Daniel Buren in *documenta 5* (1972) presented striped surfaces throughout the exhibition for other artworks to be hung on, reinforcing that no surface is neutral. These works are significant examples of the artist subverting the expectations of the museum and challenging the institution's claim to be an impartial space separate from life or politics.¹⁶³ In the 1980s and '90s, a more directed interrogation of the museum as a Western patriarchal structure took place, realising institutional critique as a product of postmodern and postcolonial theory. In *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), artist Andrea Fraser conducted a tour of the museum as the docent character Jane Castleton, performing a script that included unconventional elements, such as her thoughts on the building's toilets or an exit sign, alongside the more usual description of the history of the institution and its collection.¹⁶⁴ Joseph Kosuth curated *The Play of the Unmentionable*

¹⁶² Anthony Huberman, "Andy Warhol, *Raid the Icebox 1*, with Andy Warhol, 1969," in *The Artist As Curator #7*, an insert in *Mousse Magazine*, No. 48 (April 2015), in Elena Filipovic, ed., *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology* (Milan and London: Mousse Publishing and Koenig Books, 2017), 87-104.

¹⁶³ Contemporaneous with these artist critiques was the rise of the curated thematic exhibition, the best known being Harald Szeemann's *Live In Your Head. When Attitudes become Form: Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information* (1969-70) at Kunsthalle Bern, which argued for the curator-as-author rather than simply caretaker.

¹⁶⁴ Alexander Alberro, ed., *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

(1990) at the Brooklyn Museum, selecting around 100 works from the Museum's collection that had been deemed objectionable at some time, either in the past or present, addressing issues of censorship and acceptability. Fred Wilson's ground-breaking *Mining the Museum* (1992) was a powerful re-contextualisation of the Maryland Historical Society's collection, highlighting the absence of African American history and the institutional bias that underlies historical exhibitions.¹⁶⁵ These confrontational and transformative exhibitions have been written about extensively (and so are only briefly mentioned here) as key moments in which the power of the institution to control public narratives and sanction a canonical version of history was revealed and called into question—by artists.¹⁶⁶

This critique, however, was quickly absorbed into the institution, becoming part of exhibition programming, symposia and publications, and curators also adopted a self-reflexive model. In her 2005 *Artforum* essay "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique", Fraser describes how artists and institutions appropriated these critical practices, diminishing the efficacy of their claims, and observed that they were always performed from a compromised position within the museum, essentially making them continuous with, rather than outside, the art world. She states:

Now, when we need it most, institutional critique is dead, a victim of its success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against. ... We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution...¹⁶⁷

Or in the words of artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, writing about how critical practices changed over time:

¹⁶⁵ Lisa Corrin, "Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves," in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader* (London: Ridinghouse, 2011).

¹⁶⁶ See: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009); Julia Bryan-Wilson, "A Curriculum of Institutional Critique," in Jonas Ekeberg, ed., *New Institutionalism* (Oslo: OCA/verksted, 2003), 89-109; Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, 55 (1999), 105-143; and James Meyer, *What Happened to the Institutional Critique?* (New York: American Fine Arts, Co. and Paula Cooper Gallery), reprinted in Peter Weibel, ed., *Kontext Kunst* (Cologne: Dumont, 1993), 239-256.

¹⁶⁷ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum International*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2005): 278-85.

It wasn't so much different from the point of view of the artists or those who tried to challenge and criticize the institutions which, in their view, were still authoritarian. Rather, the main problem was that they had been overtaken by a right-wing form of bourgeois institutional criticism, precisely the one which Marx and Engels described and which melts down everything which is solid.¹⁶⁸

Steyerl here aligns later institutional critique to Marx and Engels' description of the absorption of the revolutionary methods of the bourgeoisie into the capitalist system, acknowledging that power remains with the institution despite, and even because of, critique.

From the mid-1990s, a more self-reflexive curatorial approach is evident regarding the institution and its parameters, and an increase in curatorial discourse around those practices that challenge the institutional structure and its limitations can be seen. In 2003, Jonas Ekeberg coined the term "New Institutionalism" to describe those practices that were supposedly undertaking radical changes towards a new type of contemporary art institution. He included models that positioned the institution as a laboratory, discursive, experimental or socially engaged, though the term was criticised by contemporary curators for again categorising and canonising their practices.¹⁶⁹

More recently, institutional critique has developed into a nuanced discussion around the decolonisation of institutions;¹⁷⁰ issues of sustainability;¹⁷¹ and of

¹⁶⁸ Hito Steyerl, "The Institution of Critique," *Transversal* (2006), <https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/steyerl/en>.

¹⁶⁹ Jonas Ekeberg, ed., *New Institutionalism*, Verksted #1 (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003); Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger, "New Institutionalism Revisited," *On Curating*, Issue 21, https://www.on-curating.org/issue-21-reader/new-institutionalism-revisited.html#.X_9R_ugzaUk.

¹⁷⁰ The investigation of decolonisation and museums is expansive, growing and draws on a broad range of theorists and writers. Some key texts include: Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018); Ronald Kolb and Dorothee Richter, eds., "De-Colonizing Art Institutions," *On Curating*, no. 35 (December, 2017); Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, "Transforming Whiteness in Art Institutions," *e-flux Journal*, no. 93 (September, 2018); https://www.internationaleonline.org/library/#decolonising_archives.

infrastructure.¹⁷² Those working within institutions are more aware of broader cultural, political and environmental concerns, such as escalating climate change, the continuation of racism and inequalities within the processes for art production and its display that affects how museums can operate in a contemporary situation. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and widespread protests around institutional racism in museums, it is obvious that institutions are still not as equitable, accessible or self-reflexive as they might have liked to believe. However, there are slow changes, such as the recent renaming of The Netherlands organisation Witte de With to Kunstinstituut Melly, removing the colonial naval officer's name – Witte Corneliszoon de With of the Dutch East India Company—and replacing it with a reference to the work *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1990) by Canadian artist Ken Lum, that is permanently installed on the side of the building.¹⁷³ This photographic billboard of tired office worker Melly Shum, a woman of East Asian descent, is much-loved by the surrounding community as it reflects everyday lived experience, a complex intersection of discrimination, and is a monument for all people who hate their jobs, rather than Dutch colonial exploration.

It is from this international context that then Govett-Brewster Art Gallery directors Aileen Burns and Johan Lundh invited Buchanan to work with the collection to celebrate the museum's 50th anniversary in 2020, an invitation that advocated for a critical review of the collection and reflection on its history. The exhibition was a working together of artist and institution, and both directors and artist were well versed in the institutional critique of Europe and North America.

¹⁷¹ For example, see Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, "For Slow Institutions," *e-flux Journal*, no. 85 (October 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/>.

¹⁷² For example, see Irit Rogoff, "Infrastructure", key note lecture for Former West (20 March 2013), <https://formerwest.org/DocumentsConstellationsProspects/Contributions/Infrastructure>.

¹⁷³ <https://hyperallergic.com/591828/kunstinstituut-melly-formerly-known-as-witte-de-with-center/>.

In addition to this international context, the Gallery has a very particular local context and history with which to contend. Firstly, the institution is in the provincial city of New Plymouth, a city very close to Parihaka, a pan-tribal Māori settlement that was the site of passive resistance during the New Zealand Land Wars.¹⁷⁴ Set up in 1866 by spiritual and political leaders Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi, the pā was invaded in 1881 by British armed troops, the surrounding lands confiscated and men from the community imprisoned without trial. Of all the stories of dispossession and disenfranchisement in Aotearoa, Parihaka stands out as one of the most painful episodes and an example of resistance that has ongoing resonance for today. As Buchanan's sister and historian Rachel Buchanan writes: "the invasion of Parihaka had become an important but tenuous foundational moment in oral, written, visual and performative historical storytelling in New Zealand."¹⁷⁵ This history is personal for the Buchanan family, who are of Te Ātiawa and Taranaki iwi (tribal) affiliations as well as Pākehā (New Zealand European), and so have whakapapa (genealogical) links to the region. The history of Parihaka remains prominent in Taranaki and nationally, with recent apologies from the Crown and announcement of funding for a Parihaka visitor centre. This history remains a necessary consideration for the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in its relationships with mana whenua (the Indigenous people who are from the region).¹⁷⁶

In addition, the history of institutional critique in Aotearoa New Zealand is complicated by the nineteenth century colonisation of the country, with museums and collections closely linked to the colonial project.¹⁷⁷ Museums in

¹⁷⁴ For an historical account of Parihaka see Dick Scott, *Ask That Mountain: The Story of Parihaka* (Auckland: Heinemann/ Southern Cross, 1975) and an exhibition of commemoration is documented in: Te Miringa Hohaia, Gregory O'Brien and Lara Strongman, eds, *Parihaka: The Art of Passive Resistance* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005).

¹⁷⁵ Rachel Buchanan, *Ko Taranaki Te Maunga* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ltd, 2018): 10.

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/stratford-press/news/pgf-hands-out-funding-for-new-visitor-centre-for-parihaka/IBEMY46GFBZPEGL7ICDKABZA4E/>.

¹⁷⁷ As art historian Roger Blackley states: "At the same time as they annexed the actual Māori land, European settlers appropriated the distinctive history and culture of Māori, both for a ready-made ancient history of the islands and as a unique decorative signifier for an inchoate

Aotearoa were established from the mid- to late-nineteenth century and became a way of collecting Māori art and taonga (treasures), such as different forms of weaving, carving, musical instruments, adornment pieces, tools, architecture and so on, that were acquired by Pākehā as part of the colonisation process: as gifts, trade or by theft.¹⁷⁸ Ethnological collecting was seen as a political tool of governorship. From the late-nineteenth century, art galleries operated in New Zealand to exhibit European painting and sculpture as well as works from the settler coloniser art societies that had formed around the country from 1869. These institutions were also introduced as part of the colonial project, an assertion of European culture, and this situates institutional critique as a conversation foregrounded by and complicit with colonisation.¹⁷⁹

As a contemporary art museum established in 1970 through a private benefactor, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery was an effort to bring modern culture and art appreciation to the rural region. A critical gesture itself, this makes it more amenable to hosting avant-garde institutional critique. Public art galleries were being built around New Zealand at this time, including The Dowse Art Museum in 1971, and these new institutions exhibited contemporary art with a focus on public engagement.¹⁸⁰ The history of museum development in New Zealand is beyond the scope of this exegesis, but I will briefly describe some of the key challenges to the institution and shifts in expectations for curatorial practice as some background for how Buchanan's own approach to the institution relates to this broader history.

settler identity." Roger Blackley, *Galleries of Māoriland: Artists, Collectors and the Māori World, 1880-1910* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2018): 14.

¹⁷⁸ Historian Anne Salmond details how artefacts and taonga were dispersed to overseas collections from the point of contact, used as traded commodities, or as strategic gifts intended to strengthen relationships. Anne Salmond, *Tears of Rangi: Experiments Across Worlds* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2017).

¹⁷⁹ Conal McCarthy, *Museums and Māori: Heritage Professionals, Indigenous Collections, Current Practice* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011).

¹⁸⁰ Athol McCredie, *Going Public: New Zealand Art Museums in the 1970s* (MA Thesis: Massey University, 1999), <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10179/250/02whole.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=>.

Conceptual artist Billy Apple (born Barrie Bates, 1935-2021) is a key figure for institutional critique in Aotearoa New Zealand, though his practice was formed through his education and experiences in London and New York.¹⁸¹ Importantly, he made return trips to New Zealand in 1975 and 1979-80, exhibiting the series *The Given as an Art Political Statement* in galleries throughout the country. This involved “alterations” and “subtractions” to the architecture of gallery spaces, based on Apple’s recommendations for how the space could be improved. In one instance, *Towards the Centre* at Sarjeant Art Gallery in 1979, *The Wrestlers*, a replica of a Greek sculpture, was displaced from the middle of the gallery, a controversial move that literally shifted the European model out from the heart of the institution. Another project involved the widening of the staircase at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery to enable new sightlines, an alteration that was reinstated at the time of *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* by reopening the original front entranceway that had been blocked off in recent renovations.¹⁸² Though most of Apple’s changes were not retained permanently, they served to highlight the social, political and physical framework of the gallery environment. Apple had exhibited with international contemporaries such as Warhol and he remains an important artist for Aotearoa and beyond, with a long career of projects that challenge the institution in various ways.

Post-object artists of the 1970s similarly critiqued arts institutions by rejecting the art object and aspects of the gallery framework, employing ephemeral materials in site-specific and time-based projects that brought art into conversation with societal issues. For example, David Mealing’s week-long exhibition *Jumble Sale* (1975) at Auckland Art Gallery invited stallholders to come and sell their second-hand wares in the gallery, pitching this marketplace as a form to observe and also reflect on art’s relationships to

¹⁸¹ Christina Barton, *Billy Apple: Life/Work* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2020).

¹⁸² The closing of the front door of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery as part of the renovations to incorporate the new Len Lye Centre building was controversial for many artists and arts professionals, including Billy Apple, as this blocked off direct access to the Gallery and required visitors to enter from small doorways at the side.

financial systems. Or Bruce Barber's *Stocks and Bonds* (1975), where the artist had himself shackled inside the Auckland Art Gallery for three days while the public watched on from outside on closed circuit television, exposing the divide between the art institution and public participation.

Concurrent with the growth of contemporary art galleries, conceptual and post-object art that contributed to local institutional critique, Māori art, language, culture and activism were flourishing. Art and architectural historian Deidre Brown describes how since the 1970s the gallery as a site for reflection on culture has also been acculturated by Māori: "... to reflect Maori concerns and concepts, most often expressed through the creation of exhibitions that reference the whare [house], an important signifier of cultural identity".¹⁸³ Tracing the shift in exhibition of Māori architecture as ethnological object in colonial museums or contexts, to the acceptance of customary and contemporary Māori art in art galleries from the 1980s, Brown notes an increased interest in curators and artists making architecture for the gallery and the use of aspects of the whare as a transportable Māori space that encompasses ideas of home and identity.¹⁸⁴ Brown goes on to say the white cube gallery is seen as:

... in conflict with the Maori belief that all actions leave a trace of their presence on their environments through the accumulation of wairua [spirit] supported by korero [dialogue]. It is, therefore, not surprising that Maori artists

¹⁸³ Deidre Brown, "The Whare on Exhibition," in Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers, eds, *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004), 65.

¹⁸⁴ Customary Māori art gained widespread respect following the significant exhibition *Te Māori* that travelled to the United States in 1984 and was toured around New Zealand on its return. Although not without its problems, including a lack of representation of women's work and view of Māori culture as static, it shifted common perspectives around the status of customary practices such as carving, framing it as art rather than ethnographic object, and asserted the need for Māori to care for and interpret taonga. From the late-1960s, exhibitions of contemporary Māori art were held in galleries across New Zealand, especially promoting Māori modernists such as Arnold Wilson (Ngāi Tūhoe, Te Arawa, 1928 - 2012) and Selwyn Muru (Ngāti Kuri, Te Aupōuri, 1939 -). Maintaining a relationship with customary practice, they drew on examples of European modernists to forge a new form of nationalist Māori art that they believed addressed the contemporary milieu of Aotearoa; that had continuity with the past, and was modern and innovative. Yet this was still subject to the confines of Pākehā art galleries and discourse.

and curators have attempted to acculturate galleries, so that they become Maori spaces, or express their underlying histories.¹⁸⁵

A reMāorification or indigenisation of art spaces has been proposed recently in Aotearoa as an alternative to decolonising practices, a point that I will pick up later in this chapter.¹⁸⁶

Into the 1980s and '90s, there were a number of self-reflexive exhibitions that critiqued the museum or art history.¹⁸⁷ For example, the exhibition *Bottled Ocean* (1995) curated by artist Jim Vivieaere (Cook Island Māori), problematised the idea of “Pacific Islandness” and what Polynesian art should look like, with cheeky and poignant disruptions to standard methods of display. Art historian Peter Brunt (Sāmoa) wrote of the exhibition:

‘Bottled Ocean’ made the ‘arrival’ of contemporary Pacific art in the elite galleries of the New Zealand art world a problem to be reflected upon, rather than simply a triumph to celebrate.... Vivieaere turned the exhibition into something of an installation, a work of art in its own right, in which he used various exhibitionary devices to make the desire for “cultural difference” and “otherness”, which had become broadly topical in the art world, the implicit subject of the exhibition.¹⁸⁸

The understanding of contemporary Māori art shifted gear with two controversial exhibitions curated by George Hubbard: *Choice!* at Artspace, Auckland in 1990; and then *Korurangi: New Maori Art* at Auckland Art Gallery

¹⁸⁵ A key example of this type of use of the gallery is the *Parihaka* exhibition from artist Selwyn Muru at The Dowse Art Museum (1979): the gallery was treated as a whare for the opening night, with a welcome ceremony and mats for sitting or sleeping on placed beside the artworks, in keeping with the practices in a Māori meeting house. Brown, “The Whare,” 69.

¹⁸⁶ Mātauranga Māori specialist at Te Papa Tongarewa National Museum of New Zealand Puawai Cairns believes that decolonising in institutions is dangerous in that it continues to centre the coloniser and is exhausting for Indigenous staff, yet Māorification places the emphasis on starting from an Indigenous worldview. Puawai Cairns, “Decolonise or indigenise: moving towards sovereign spaces and the Māorification of New Zealand museology,” February 2020, Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2020/02/10/decolonise-or-indigenise-moving-towards-sovereign-spaces-and-the-maorification-of-new-zealand-museology/>.

¹⁸⁷ Some other examples to include here would be *After McCahon: Some Configurations in Recent Art* (1989) curated by Christina Barton for Auckland Art Gallery, and *Sex and Sign* at City Gallery Wellington in 1988, curated by writer and critic Wystan Curnow.

¹⁸⁸ Peter Brunt, “Contemporary Pacific Art and its Globalization,” in Peter Brunt and Nicholas Thomas, eds, *Art in Oceania: A New History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 432.

Toi o Tāmaki (1995). As curators Anna-Marie White (Te Ātiawa) and Robert Leonard have observed, *Choice!* upset the celebratory vision of contemporary Māori art as a continuum with customary practice and critiqued the then-fashionable model of biculturalism, whereas the difficult project *Korurangi* saw this youthful antagonism and set of artists adopted by the institution.¹⁸⁹ As Brunt described the artists in *Choice!*:

They asserted a different order of subjectivity that embraced its ethnic formation through the experience of diaspora and dispersal and *in the colonial culture*, rather than, like the first Maori modernists, seeking to recover and revitalise a culture or identity denigrated under colonialism through the redemptive aesthetics of modernism and the political agency of the nation.

Brunt also observes that this rebellion was quickly institutionalised and brought into the narrative of continuity with the past:

The new artistic sensibility was quickly affirmed, institutionalised and marketed....Since 1995 there has been a kind of resurgent traditionalism – a ‘call to order’ – in the curatorial framing of the ‘new Maori art’ as the first paradigm finally asserted control, which it did not by opposing the ‘new Maori art’ (which was clearly a burgeoning unstoppable phenomenon) but by wresting it from its conceptual framing in the likes of ‘*Choice!*’ in order to restage it under its own, more legitimate, guidance.¹⁹⁰

The focus on a reconciliation of customary and contemporary within the institution continues to the present day, with the focus on asserting a Māori worldview and ways of operating. Writing on the Auckland Art Gallery exhibition *Pūrangiāho: Seeing Clearly, Casting light on the legacy of tradition in contemporary Māori art* (2001) that was curated by Ngahiraka Mason, Ngarino Ellis and Kahutoi Te Kanawa in the wake of *Korurangi* and sought to show the importance of whakapapa (genealogy), Māori curator Nigel Borell notes:

¹⁸⁹ Anna-Marie White and Robert Leonard, “George Hubbard: The Hand that Rocked the Cradle,” in *Reading Room*, No. 08 (2018).

¹⁹⁰ Peter Brunt, “Since ‘*Choice!*’” in Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers, eds, *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004), 235.

... sections highlighted the importance of Māori knowledge in seeing contemporary Māori art within the context of Māori culture first and foremost, as opposed to privileging and speaking strictly to the history of fine arts and the Western canon. This was a bold assertion within the site of the 'art institution'.¹⁹¹

Further to institutional critique and reMāorification of the museum in Aotearoa, several significant artist projects have been undertaken in British museums with collections of toi Māori (Māori art) and taonga (treasures) taken by European travellers. European curator Clémentine Deliss describes the ethno-colonial museum as a receptacle for objects acquired through colonisation and exploration for trade, claiming that collections established in the nineteenth century were: "entwined with anthropological methods with which to measure, compare, depict, identify, classify, and exhibit people as if they were goods."¹⁹² While not all of these objects are considered essential to return, the repatriation of some taonga from international institutions continues to be advocated for by Māori arts professionals, in particular in relation to toi moko (preserved tattooed heads).¹⁹³

Working in this context, artists are concerned for taonga that are severed from the stories they belong to, separated from the iwi (people) that they whakapapa to (have genealogical ties with). For example, curated by artist Rosanna Raymond with anthropologist Amiria Salmond, *Pasifika Styles* (2006) was a two-year project of residencies, a festival and an exhibition that was a critical intervention by New Zealand artists into the University of

¹⁹¹ Nigel Borell, "Curating Contemporary Māori Art: From the Margins to the Centre," in Julie Nagam, Carly Lane and Megan Tamati-Quennell, eds, *Becoming Our Future: Global Indigenous Curatorial Practice* (Canada: ARP Books, 2020), 55. Borell's own expansive exhibition *Toi Tū Toi Ora: Contemporary Māori Art* (2020), a survey of Māori art from the 1950s to the present, also maintains these links between the generations of artists and foregrounds Māori creation stories as the curatorial framing for divergent contemporary practices. Unfortunately, Borell's experience of curating this major show within Auckland Art Gallery led him to resign, citing the ongoing institutional racism of the gallery as too much to bear, a clear example of the urgent need for decolonisation within Aotearoa.

¹⁹² Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020): 94.

¹⁹³ Amber Aranui, "Toi moko in Toi Art: A Harbinger for a Conversation," *Pantograph Punch* (October 2018), <https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/toi-moko-toi-art>.

Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It included numerous artworks, such as Lisa Reihana's (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine) work *He Tautoko* (2006), that provided ancestral carved figures with a soundtrack of waiata (songs) to keep them company and acknowledge the wairua of the sculptures. *Pasifika Styles* was a major project that shows how institutional critique is linked with that of the colonial project, rather than just the limitations of the gallery space.¹⁹⁴

Contemporary artists have continued to respond to and critique the institution in various ways, critically engaging art institutions as part of broader socio-political power structures. For example, the collective Et Al have consistently tackled all forms of institutional structure, or Peter Robinson's (Ngāi Tahu) provocative *Strategic Plan* works (mid-1990s to 2002) are emblazoned with witty critique of the global art world and the cultural fluidity demanded of Indigenous artists.

I have sketched here this incomplete history of institutional critique and Māori uses of the museum in order to share something of the complex setting in Aotearoa for artists and curators working with institutions and collections today. There is an ongoing relationship between institutions and our colonial history, and a complicated background for the different ways that Māori art has been defined and positioned over time: from ethnographical to art form, from customary practice and knowledge to contemporary art that is informed by Māori culture, urban experience and international models.

New Zealand artists have always travelled and kept up to date with international developments, with many spending extended periods of time in

¹⁹⁴ Another example is that of Maureen Lander (Ngāpuhi, Te Hikutu) and Christine Hellyar who undertook a project at Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford in 2002-03 called *Mrs Cook's Kete*. In this they assembled collection objects that they imagined that the wife of James Cook may have taken with her as mementos of Aotearoa if she had travelled with her husband, a selection that was part of everyday domestic life and often produced by women, such as small harakeke kete (carrying bags made from New Zealand flax). Areta Wilkinson (Ngāi Tahu) and Mark Adams collaborated on a series of photograms while at Pitt Rivers, 'repatriating' the wairua (spirit) of collection items like Moa bones through capturing their presence on photographic paper—a shadow form that acknowledges the aura of the objects.

Europe or Britain to study, live and work. While retaining strong connections to Aotearoa New Zealand, Buchanan has been based in Berlin for many years, so she brings knowledge of European discourse and design to her work. When coming back to work with institutions in Aotearoa, there is also this history of Māori and Pacific artists to connect with. These few examples of exhibitions in Aotearoa provide a rough outline of this context, a setting that is informed by international discourse merged with a unique history of Māori and Pacific artists applying decolonising methodologies and asserting their agency within the institution.

II. Ruth Buchanan *Can Tame Anything*

In her characterisation of the “undutiful daughter”, Doreen Mende describes the ruling structure of the archive as “power’s ontological principle for structuring narrative, history, and privilege.”¹⁹⁵ Buchanan’s institutional interventions show that the artist is deeply aware of this reality. Yet Mende asserts the daughter’s ability to speak in a language outside of, or indecipherable to, the rigid systems of the law in operation. She asks:

What if the disqualified, the subjugated, and the marginal do not want to speak from a position of oppression but instead from lived experiences of resistance and emancipation coupled with the desire to occupy institutional positions?

This statement resonates with Buchanan’s desire to claim institutional space and speak with new unknown languages, and perhaps reflects the “reMāorification” advocated by Māori curators such as Puawai Cairns. As Rosi Braidotti states, the goal would be “to redistribute the power relations rhizomatically, asymmetrically, and unpredictably.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Mende, “Undutiful Daughters,” np.

¹⁹⁶ Rosi Braidotti, “Preface: The Society of Undutiful Daughters,” in Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck, eds, *Undutiful daughters: new directions in feminist thought and practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): xviii.

Buchanan claims that her work is about locating power, though she is committed to working with and within the institution rather than against it, and is invited in by curators to perform this task—an alignment of her critical perspective with that of institutional staff. She has developed a pragmatic approach to shifting authority through interventions that include sculptures or display furniture—screens, tables, plinths—large-scale timelines, guided tours, text works, audio and, increasingly, curatorial strategies such as the use of collection works. She uses these forms to override and undermine the standard language of the institution and to reveal the implicit institutional structures, shifting the power towards those ideas, experiences and people generally overlooked. Her interest in systems, of acquisition, display and interpretation, enables close analysis of institutional structures and the ideologies underpinning them, to reconfigure the institution from within.

In 2016, Christina Barton, director of Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi in Wellington, commissioned a new project from Buchanan.¹⁹⁷ Buchanan responded to the invitation to have a solo exhibition by asking two German artists to exhibit alongside her, Marianne Wex (b. 1937) and Judith Hopf (b. 1969), leading to a mix of architectural interventions and interpretative forms. Each of these women had personal connections that were important to Buchanan, as well as being able to draw out and expand elements of her own work, particularly in relation to the body and architecture. Buchanan enlisted these artists as a way to position herself within a feminist history and discourse, as well as to make space for voices that she thinks are underrepresented. In an interview related to the exhibition, Buchanan explained her approach:

It's not as straightforward as saying I'm 'challenging the system' ... I saw [feminist theorist] Judith Butler speak a couple of weeks ago and she said, 'It's about living out the tensions, but remaining inside.' For me, that's a much more useful idea. It's about understanding that the reality of our institutions is complicated, and it's our job to question them, but we also want to participate

¹⁹⁷ This exhibition was redeveloped for the Walter's Prize at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2018) and subsequently won this major award.

in the conversation within the field where that conversation happens. One of the things feminism has given us is the power to reconfigure, deform, stretch, change all those normative structures.¹⁹⁸

This acknowledgement that institutions are part of a field and conversation echoes artist Andrea Fraser's assertion that artists, arts workers and institutions share the responsibility of questioning the values our institutions espouse.¹⁹⁹ Buchanan similarly wants to transform the institution from within. She proposes the inclusion of artists that she wants to be associated with and the art historical connections for her work, designs the exhibition layout and furniture, and contributes to the interpretative materials—all key institutional activities that she does not dispense with, but takes control of.

The exhibition title, *Bad Visual Systems*, was taken from feminist theorist Donna Haraway's comment, "self-identity is a bad visual system."²⁰⁰ Buchanan appropriated it here to acknowledge her role in defining her own identity, and to unravel the boundaries of the self or solo artist, to suggest that we exist in communities of practice, dialogue and exchange. This position has several feminist precedents, such as the German artist Rosemary Trockel's retrospective *A Cosmos* that was staged at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid in 2012, before travelling to the New Museum, New York and Serpentine, London, whereby the artist included other artists and objects in an overarching world of references, influences and cultural interests.

Artists are always aware of how they are being positioned by institutions, but Buchanan thinks extremely carefully about curatorial framing and how her work is being described and defined. She makes the broader institutional

¹⁹⁸ Ruth Buchanan quoted by Anthony Byrt, "Artist Ruth Buchanan's Walter Prize nomination well overdue," *Metro* (8 August 2018), <https://www.metro.co.nz/arts/arts-art-city/artist-ruth-buchanans-walters-prize-nomination-well-overdue>.

¹⁹⁹ Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* (New York, Vol. 44, Issue 1, 2005): 278-85.

²⁰⁰ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."

conventions part of her work, giving her practice a wider scope. As Barton wrote:

Unlike conventional art history, the links she forged with these artists were personal, professional and ideological. She allowed biography and happenstance, narrative and positionality to operate, conceiving a history that was partial, situated and pointed. And this took place not in exegesis but in the physical experience of the exhibition...²⁰¹

Wex had previously lived in Wellington and her *Let's Take Back Our Space: Female and Male Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures* (1977) is a touchstone for Buchanan, featuring series of photographs that categorised male and female body postures, such as “leg and feet position of people sitting”, a case study of how different bodies move through public spaces. In *Bad Visual Systems*, Buchanan installed these photographs on large turquoise and purple screens along the centre of the long galleries with a large mirror at the end wall of one, reflecting the viewer back to themselves as they looked and walked along, reinforcing body language in the gallery space. A vinyl timeline ran along the wall, with some of the simple descriptive terms Buchanan picked up again for her later project at the Govett-Brewster: “Legs”, “Female” and “Male”. Hopf, who currently lives near Buchanan in Berlin, looks at architectural forms in a poetic and imaginative way in her practice, and the selection of films and sculptures that Buchanan included shows a deep engagement with her work in terms of how we occupy buildings.

While the Wellington connection was personal and coincidental, Wex's photographs also reinforce Buchanan's focus on the body as a language and how bodies move through spaces. Hopf may be a neighbour in Berlin, but her works are also close in proximity to Buchanan's ideas about architecture and psychology. Audio descriptions of the artworks written by Buchanan conveyed information not as fact, but poetic, indirect explanations, and colourful curtains lent a purple glowing warmth or fleshy peach aspect to the gallery space.

²⁰¹ Christina Barton, “Postscript,” *Bad Visual Systems* (Wellington: Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi, 2017).

Sprawling across the whole institution, the experience was not methodical but clearly articulated through the exhibition design those aspects of her peers that were important to her own work and art historical context.

Having seen Buchanan's approach to art history in this exhibition, in 2018 I invited her to participate in a group exhibition of contemporary artists that I was curating for The Dowse Art Museum in conjunction with *Embodied Knowledge*, a concurrent exhibition on 1980s feminist practice in Aotearoa. I knew of Buchanan's interest in recovering women artists from several of her earlier projects, and saw some of the senior figures I was including in *Embodied Knowledge* as forerunners for artists like Buchanan, so I anticipated that she might feel a kinship with the older artists and this moment in history. My initial communication with Buchanan was very open—an explanation of the premise and invitation to be involved—so I was not sure what works she would contribute to the exhibition. Perhaps I expected text works or display furniture, based on the forms of her previous projects, and I mentioned that I was keen to have a reading area in one of the transitional spaces. I thought Buchanan would bring a strong aesthetic to the exhibition, her characteristic visual language, and assumed she would have a shared appreciation of the concerns around installation practices, the body and language, and so expand on the links that I was proposing.

In addition to creating two large sculptural chain curtain works and a piece of exhibition furniture, a timeline and the design for a reading room area, Buchanan surprised me a little when she suggested the title for the exhibition, *Can Tame Anything*, since this is something I assumed I would choose, as the curator. However, it was clear from her communication that these gestures, whether sculptural or conceptual, artistic or curatorial, were highly considered, generous responses to the context as well as to the work of her fellow exhibitors, and that the offer of the title, based on one of her own textile works, was not only fitting but also an example of the porosity of her practice. In accepting this title, I had to think through the politics of the naming of

exhibitions. It is not uncommon for a curator to take as a group show title the name of a single artist's work, so why was it unusual for an artist to suggest this? Buchanan had subtly identified the power of the curator within the institution, with the ability to give names, frameworks and selections that are then fixed in art history. Perhaps Buchanan was suggesting with the title that she could harness this power too. There are often institutional pressures on curatorial decisions, for example from the marketing advisor who wants a short and easily understood title. When I initially said we would use the full title of Buchanan's original work, *Can tame anything, tables, tables, doors, blinds, bodies* (2016), our marketing coordinator was a bit perplexed and asked if it need to be quite so long, but since it was an artwork she was also willing to accept it. Buchanan troubled the institutional processes: her work sat alongside, usurped, questioned and contributed to the curatorial framework, making visible the gallery architecture and language in simple yet important ways and identifying myself, the curator, as part of the institutional structure.

The name Buchanan contributed to the exhibition, *Can Tame Anything*, grouped herself and contemporaries Alicia Frankovich, Sriwhana Spong and Mata Aho Collective. As an overarching claim for the exhibition, it is hopeful but ambiguous. There is the optimistic suggestion that these artists can bring things wild and unruly under control; yet also it can be read as an acknowledgement of dominant, homogenising forces at play, including within the art institution itself. The phrase *Can Tame Anything* suggests that one can have agency over anything—history, patriarchy, language or science—however the subject of the sentence is not named, and we are left wondering—who is doing the taming?

Buchanan installed purple and pink metallic chain curtains over the entranceways to the exhibitions *Embodied Knowledge* and *Can Tame Anything*, allowing glimpses of the galleries beyond, but creating a physical

threshold to be pushed apart by visitors.²⁰² Titled *Break, break, break. Broke* (2018), these interventions distinguished the two exhibitions that were located on opposite sides of The Dowse Art Museum, aligned through the bold colours (fig. 17 - 18). With this simple sculptural gesture, Buchanan acknowledged the curatorial proposition of a shared aesthetic across the shows, yet also accentuated the split in time between the practices from the 1980s in *Embodied Knowledge* and the work of her peers in *Can Tame Anything*. I wanted to show connections, yet Buchanan made these curtains as barriers, emphasising the difference and break not only in time, but intention and cultural context too. She offered resistance towards my simple pairing and introduced complexity to the association.

I curated *Embodied Knowledge* to celebrate 1980s feminism, critical theory and installation art in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many of the works had not been shown since the '80s, such as the large-scale installation from Pauline Rhodes, *Extensum/Extensor* (1982) that features a room full of green metal rod structures, carefully balanced across long lengths of paper that fall from the ceiling across the gallery floor. Works from The Estate of L. Budd were reconceived in another space, sculptures and wall-based erasure pieces that involve objects covered in white paint and then scrawled with new texts. Maureen Lander (Ngāpuhi, Te Hikutu) created an installation inspired by her early ephemeral works of the mid-80s, a mixture of customary weaving and new materials such as nylon; several Christine Hellyar works from The Dowse collection were included; and an installation from Vivian Lynn, *Lamella Lamina* (1983), a cluster of columns made from architectural tracing paper. These are not works one might think of as activist art, but these artists share a radical

²⁰² Like the beaded curtains of American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, these works require a passing through. As described by Taylor Worley: "The most important aspect of the installation instructions, as specified in the certificates for the artworks, is the curtains' strategic placement in the gallery or museum space. All curtains must bisect some entryway or transitional space in the gallery. To move forward, visitors must move through the curtains. In this respect, the beaded curtains remain the artist's most confrontational work." Pleasingly, this action is also agreeable for the audience. Taylor Worley, "From Hostility to Hospitality," *Curator Magazine* (18 May 2015), <https://www.curatormagazine.com/taylorworley/play-at-your-own-risk/>.

approach to making that is informed by the body, language and the environment. Using ephemeral materials, site-specific and performative or process-based practices, they introduce subjective experiences and alternative histories, and interrogate our relationships to the land and its resources. They challenge many aspects of dominant social, cultural and institutional structures, ideas that are explored through the innovative materiality of their works. My curatorial proposition was that these were the precedents for contemporary installation practice in Aotearoa and that the debate on essentialism from the mid-1980s was an overlooked feminist art history.

Buchanan engaged with the premise of the show as an artist with a deep understanding of how history operates and the ways in which institutional structures need to be challenged. Rather than interpret, retell, expand or respond to the historical connections I was interested in, she provided frameworks that supported the other artists and revealed the infrastructure of exhibition making: the title, a reading area and timeline. As with the mirror Buchanan had installed for *Bad Visual Systems*, my curatorial body language and subjectivity were reflected back at me, and I was forced to re-look at the history I was trying to make through joining these exhibitions. Buchanan often absorbs curatorial methodology and manipulates institutional structures in her own work, so to invite her participation alongside an art historical exhibition led to key questions in keeping with curatorial practice: how do you want the exhibition to be encountered? What are the relationships and differences between these artists, across the two exhibitions? My thinking for the exhibition was motivated by a desire to exhibit artists and works that I felt had been under-appreciated within our local art history. Buchanan brought a material understanding to the project and contributed significantly to the feel of the show, but looking back on this experience, I think she also would have pushed and unravelled the very idea of art history if there had been the opportunity for greater control.

Working with Buchanan, the curator is acutely aware of being part of the institutional fabric, and curatorial tasks taken on as part of her artistic practice highlight how those practical aspects and decisions are subjective and ideological. As an artist, she is comfortable working across many aspects of the gallery system: graphic design, exhibition layout, interpretation and invigilation. In bringing her own distinct visual language to these structures, including a particular colour palette of purple, turquoise and peach or pink, forms of display furniture and text elements or timelines, she amplifies and accentuates these exhibition features that we normally treat as standard and highlights the potential for them to be altered—from demure, black and white modernist forms to bold interventions that prompt emotional responses. Buchanan’s entranceway curtains, title, reading area and display furniture convey another important aspect of her practice. She emphasises art’s context, framing devices, gallery buildings and language, but always in relation to bodies: bodies moving through space, text, structure and time. The sight of works beyond *Break, break, break. Broke*, either sculptural installations from Hellyar and Lander, or the works of Frankovich and Spong, at once drew visitors through the chains to the gallery beyond, forcing them to touch the work, and reinforced the transition into the exhibition space proper, making the audience active and aware in their role as viewers. Buchanan has developed a language of colours, forms and design elements that she says “turn the volume up”, and elicit an emotional response from audiences, since colour is an easy thing to understand or like, adapting these to the specificities of a site, wrapping around and intervening in the existing architecture.²⁰³ Peach, purple, pink, turquoise, grid, wave, or line, are used to call attention to the white cube museum norms.

The unusual layout of The Dowse Art Museum meant that the two exhibitions were separated with another gallery in between, the one that houses the pātākā (storehouse) Nuku Tewhatewha described in the previous chapter

²⁰³ Ruth Buchanan’s description of her visual language and use of colour is from an interview with the artist, 29 September 2020.

(fig. 19). While this building was carved in support of the Kingitanga movement and is symbolic of the struggle for Māori sovereignty and self-determination, a political narrative that was distinct from the adjacent exhibitions in this instance, Buchanan is from Taranaki and Te Ātiawa whakapapa, the same iwi (tribe) as Wi Tako, the commissioner of the pātākā, so she worked with this whanaungatanga (relationship) and background in mind. The chain curtain separation of *Break, break, break. Broke* could also therefore be seen as a divider that offered Nuku Tewhatewha the opportunity to be in its own room, encountered independently and without distraction of other artworks: a sign of respect for the pātākā as the significant, ongoing resident of The Dowse.

Also situated between the exhibition spaces was a corridor gallery that I wanted to use as a reading area for artist publications relating to both shows and to provide access to hard-to-find materials about feminist histories in Aotearoa (fig. 20 and 21). Knowing that Buchanan had previously designed reading rooms, I invited her to adapt this area. She created an encompassing space, with a dark pink paint applied to the lower half of the walls and a timeline poem, *Epoch* (2018), which stretched along the full length of one wall. The timeline read:

Epoch
Epoch
Epoch
2 years later
Or, history, or history
Or, so they say
Epoch
Acted, acting, acts
Entrance
Exit
Or, annex
Or, annexed

Or, history. Or hhhhhhhssstory
And today
Hard, soft, hard, hard.
Annex.
Annex, annexed
Or access
Access point. Access
Entrance, exit
Or, hard, soft, hard, hard.
Timeframe, sightline, timeframe
Or, history
Or, epoch
Acted, acting, acts
Acted, annexed, or I, I, I
Entrance is and or, exit
In
Or
Out

Coupled with her emphasis on entrances and exits as physical access points to the exhibitions and pātakā, the timeline proposed that people and events either make an entrance to the historical record, or are overlooked in History, and that this visibility within our understanding of the past changes over time. “In/Or/Out”. Time itself is shown as irregular, an epoch lasting an unfixed time, and the act of history-making is stressed as a performance, something that is enacted. Buchanan claims that time has tactile qualities, can be hard or soft, both words that describe physical and emotional attributes. It is subjective she says: there are subjects, those who action the events of history, who think, breathe and feel. Considering again the ideas of Mende and Braidotti, we are made aware that history was told from one dominant perspective, that this prevailing version is patriarchal and colonial, but that there are many divergent perspectives.

Time, moreover, is not always linear, as evident in the Māori concept discussed in Chapter Two, that one walks backwards into the future, with the past always in front—an entirely non-Western cosmological understanding that is based on events and four dimensions. Read together, the pātakā and reading area form an historical backbone of sorts: a physical pathway between the gallery spaces that is utilised by Buchanan to provide context, as well as a chance to foreground how history shapes us and behaves, how it hardens, leaks, softens or breaks, depending on the time and nature of its recollection.

In *Can Tame Anything*, Buchanan offered her sculptural work *Circumference* (2016/2018), a large freestanding metal frame, as exhibition furniture on which to hang a monitor presenting Spong's video work: a physical support for her fellow artist and friend (fig. 22). Spong and Buchanan share an interest in the histories of women as told through bodies and evocative materiality.

Buchanan's suggestion to collaborate on the display of Spong's work *This Creature* (2016) was a sign of her endorsement for its message, as well as making the point that her work exists in relationship to others. Buchanan's frame resembled the gridded racks in museum collection stores that are used to hold paintings, although it was signature Buchanan icy green, a reminder this was both a spatial divider and site for artistic content. In *This Creature*, Spong tells the story of Margery Kempe (1373 - 1438), a Christian mystic who is thought to have written the first autobiography in the English language, and shares her own attempt to view the original copy of Kempe's book. Layers of stories from women across time, speaking to the challenges of their situation and ability to have their voice recorded as history, are then highlighted in this juxtaposition of works.

Although unpredictable, the sound of *Break, break, break. Broke* harmonised with Alicia Frankovich's soundtrack to *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* (2018), and similarly brought the room of artists into conversation.

Frankovich's works looked at how our bodies collapse into and merge with

other organisms and their energies, histories and relationships: a concept that Buchanan in a sense applies to artworks, institutions and their interconnectivity. Also unexpectedly, the long chains in *Break, break, break. Broke* formally paralleled the many threads of marine rope in *Tauira*, an installation by Mata Aho Collective that was anchored to the gallery floor and stretched through the space.²⁰⁴

Buchanan's works also showed some echoes of the artists in *Embodied Knowledge*. For instance, The Estate of L. Budd were keenly aware of institutional limits and challenged these where possible, incorporating standard exhibition labels as part of the work, as well as the tables, masking tape and foam blocks used by technicians during installation, to reveal the support structures usually hidden from sight. Lander's hanging works, with long strings of plaited muka fibre, synthetic strips and beads, and Buchanan's beaded curtains had an appealing connection; and Hellyar's works similarly questioned histories and collecting, with the glass-fronted case of collected objects and hunter-gatherer aprons. Lastly, the physical experience of walking along the field of deftly balanced fluorescent green rods in Rhodes' installation finds a kinship with the sensuality of Buchanan's chain curtains, as does the navigation of Lynn's *Lamella Lamina* architectural forms. These earlier artists laid the groundwork for practices that are experiential, site specific, installation-based, that relate to the language and architecture of institutions, and in many ways they are foundational for contemporary practices like Buchanan's—though perhaps Buchanan wished to also stress the differences and break away from a causal or ancestral relationship.

The agility of Buchanan's thinking is perceptible in this exhibition as it defined the entranceways, physical and conceptual, to both past and current artistic practices. She worked with the architecture, culture and language of

²⁰⁴ Mata Aho Collective are a collective of four Māori women artists from Aotearoa New Zealand: Erena Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) and Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne ki Wairarapa).

the gallery, shifting it in subtle ways to highlight how as audiences we navigate these spaces, and in doing so she recommended that we can disrupt these systems. When I invited Buchanan to be involved, the exhibition *Embodied Knowledge* was already formed and the layout planned. In underestimating the level of curatorial input that she could ideally have contributed, this was a missed opportunity on my behalf to invite a more radical rethinking of this feminist history and to tease out directly the connections I wanted to forge. I had allowed for an artist-led methodology with each artist, but as they were part of two concurrent group exhibitions it was more complicated. Buchanan is accustomed to incorporating other artists into her projects, and a more effective artist-led methodology in this case would have been to ask her to contribute to the overall exhibition design to enable a bolder move towards transformation of infrastructure.

III. *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong*

For *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* (2019), Buchanan crammed the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery with an enormous selection of collection works installed across all spaces of the Gallery.²⁰⁵ Commissioned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the institution, the exhibition was a cacophony of art from the past 50 years in Aotearoa New Zealand, with many familiar works in unpredictable juxtapositions that eschewed the usual art historical narratives, such as landscape or modernism. Buchanan researched the museum's collection and acquisition processes and, based on this, introduced the seemingly objective rule that the

²⁰⁵ *The Actual and its Document* (2016) was Buchanan's first exhibition working with the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery collection. For this Buchanan researched the Gallery's collection, gaining a familiarity that assisted her more expansive use of it later on and her discovery of the progressive acquisition policies of the institution, including a radical deaccessioning policy.

first work acquired from an artist, per medium, per decade, would be shown (if practically possible).²⁰⁶ However, to display the works, she then introduced a series of her own linguistic categories that served to reveal the inherent bias of the collection and the lack of diversity within it. For example, it was clear that the collection includes far more work by men than women, that Māori and Pacific artists are underrepresented and their works had been purchased only in the last 20 years, and that objects and paintings are favoured over other artistic practices. Compared with the innovative and ground-breaking exhibition history of the institution, the collection was surprisingly staid.

Each decade, from the 1970s to the 2010s, was installed separately across one of the five exhibition spaces, grouping works into Buchanan's new classifications based on bodily terms: such as "Female", "Legs", "No longer living", "Māori", or "Exception". Icy blue tables and low pink plinths were used as exhibition furniture and large purple screens with fist-sized holes punctuated the spaces, clustering the works and creating new sightlines or pathways, bringing some works uncomfortably close and separating others entirely, making new art historical alliances. No wall labels accompanied the works, instead, the curatorial logic was provided in a large exhibition guide that included acquisition information on every work in lieu of a description. Buchanan utilised the collection as a data set from which to reveal the layers of power that are entrenched within art's institutions. She flexed her role of artist as curator, applying to the collection her own systems of selection, display and interpretation, and addressed the institution as not only a site for intervention and commentary, but as an entity that she could transform through questioning its history and infrastructure.

With *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong*, Buchanan worked with the dominant language of the institutional archive to reveal and accentuate the decision making in relation to acquisitions for the

²⁰⁶ With the assistance of Govett-Brewster Marketing and Communications manager Kate McKenzie-Pollock, Buchanan methodically trawled through the archives, artist, exhibition and object files, to learn more about the acquisition details for each work.

collection through close analysis of the collection policies and acquisition documents. She therefore operated within the institutional systems, yet brought to the exhibition her own vocabularies and pathways—a conceptual disobedience that refuses to follow the normative narratives of art history, questioning the legitimacy of the underlying layers of power functioning in the museum. Buchanan asserts we still need to learn to speak, together, in spaces and powerful languages that we are yet to know, and her exhibition attempts to open a space for dialogue without pre-empting what may be spoken. Buchanan's approach revealed the mechanisms behind institutional collecting, the subjectivities and motivations of the museum professionals who have over the years decided what was purchased, who is represented, and how this public cultural archive is managed. Ignoring the art historical narratives that might usually be applied by a curator, the juxtaposition of individual works was often dictated by practical reasons, such as size, and the galleries offered an overall snapshot of particular moments in time. While seemingly rule-bound and objective, the display exaggerated the biases and made the fluctuating idiosyncrasies of institutional collecting more obvious. The power dynamics at play in the building of a collection suddenly became nakedly apparent. Compared with the scholarly narratives in *Now Showing: A History of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery* book, the chronology of artistic activity was shown to be more arbitrary than a linear timeline or art historical canon.²⁰⁷ Buchanan's interest was located in the gaps, the overlooked, and the exceptions—the misfits. Her curatorial decisions brought visibility to the collection documents of the institution, the layers of history, subjectivities and shifts in popular thinking, that lead to a certain work entering the collection. The impact of changes in directorship, the periodic shift in vision for the gallery, is clearly seen in the collecting history of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. For example, more diverse works by women entered the collection when Priscilla Pitts was director (1993-1998), bringing in artists such as

²⁰⁷ Christina Barton, Jonathan Bywater and Wystan Curnow, eds, *Now Showing: A History of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery* (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2016).

Fiona Pardington (Ngāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Ngāti Kahungunu) and Megan Jenkinson, and the works collected while Gregory Burke was director show his focus on relationships with the Asia Pacific Region. The driving question for Buchanan, as outlined in the exhibition guide, was: “Where is power now?.... [W]ho (how and why) has the authority to act, to speak, to be seen?”²⁰⁸

Along with the usual object description of a wall label—artist, title, date, and medium—the exhibition guide, as previously noted, featured the acquisition notes and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Exhibition History, instead of curatorial interpretation or description. At times these were rich with context, outlining which director had bought the work, their reasons for doing so, where the funding came from, and other commentary, such as how emerging art was now being purchased because of limited funds. It was noticeable how often no acquisition notes were recorded, presumably because the decision was made without due process or the documentation is no longer available, highlighting the importance of the document in the acquisition process.

Some audiences found this challenging to understand and when I asked about this, Buchanan felt that this was because audiences need to be encouraged to read beyond what is presented, to be able to consider simultaneously how and why the decisions for acquisition and display were made. By offering the guide, she wanted to provide a way of also learning about institutional systems and how arbitrary and subjective decisions influenced what is collected.²⁰⁹ Buchanan discussed the display of their work with a couple of the artists, but mainly left it to the rule-based system. In a sense this removed the role that an institutional curator might normally play in being able to distort or refine the collection characteristics through presenting a selection of works that are designed to fit their argument. For example, my exhibition *Embodied Knowledge* included only the work of women artists, but

²⁰⁸ Exhibition guide, *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2019): np.

²⁰⁹ In conversation with the artist, 29 Sep 2020.

that belied the fact that they remain the minority of works within The Dowse collection.

Buchanan brought artworks together in the exhibition under a specifically embodied terminology, grouping them by terms that encapsulate complex perspectives and identities. The keywords challenge the more common definitions for artworks by genre, medium, era or style. One category that repeats throughout the exhibition is that of “Exception”, stressing the inadequacy of classification systems. She explains:

These categories hold concepts of identity formation open and enact them, often uncomfortably, through the use of language used to categorise us: our gender, our ethnicity, our place of origin; language that privileges points of centre: hands, legs; language used to compress our work as artists into single lines of thought: political, erotic; language used to articulate our position in a linear concept of time: living, no longer living; and language that acknowledges its own inadequacies: exception.²¹⁰

Mende uses the term “archival metabolism” to denote a new concept of the archive relevant for the twenty-first century, as something that is decentralised, uncontrollably disseminated by different bodies, in ever-changing forms, based on the idea of “metabolic agora” from Benjamin Bratton:

The metabolic agora supports the political work of de-privatizing, defamiliarizing, and de-hierarchizing the narrations of history, towards the articulation and actualization of differences and intensities. Thus, this gathering-but-changing-place which is the arena for spiritual, political, and cultural life, and which is no longer confined to one location like the twentieth-century archive used to be, seems to provide some of the instruments the daughter needs for processing knowledge otherwise.²¹¹

²¹⁰ Ruth Buchanan, *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* exhibition guide (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2019).

²¹¹ Mende, “The Undutiful Daughter’s Concept of Archival Metabolism,” np.

For Buchanan, this metaphor of metabolism is applied to all aspects of the museum to unsettle familiar processes, invoke difference and multiple ways of knowing.

Buchanan also considers the term metabolism as the process of a body producing energy. She speaks of the organs or inner workings of the institution, bringing in relationships to the body with display furniture, references to the tongue and the liver, the object categories such as “Legs” or “Body work”, and describes the collection as a stomach filled with gut flora.²¹² This view of the institution as metabolic aligns with the work of Clémentine Deliss. In her 2020 book *The Metabolic Museum*, Deliss describes her experience directing the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt from 2010 to 2015, and her attempt to transform this ethnographic institution into an interventionist laboratory.²¹³ She writes: “I imagined the museum as if it were a body, a metabolism built on the cohabitation and interchange between different organs with symbiotic functions”, reversing the disembodied opticality and disconnection from human experience that previously existed in the museum.²¹⁴ Based on her transdisciplinary curatorial practice, the three villas that make up the institution were completely redefined and one villa became the post-ethnographic laboratory, a workshop space to explore the repercussions of colonial thinking and collecting, the “intellectual and aesthetic heartbeat”, that acknowledged the history of how objects were often acquired

²¹² Tara McDowell, “Ruth Buchanan’s ‘The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong,’” *Art Agenda Reviews* (January 2020), <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/311602/ruth-buchanan-s-the-scene-in-which-i-find-myself-or-where-does-my-body-belong>.

²¹³ Deliss attempted to acknowledge and remediate the ethnographic practices entrenched in the museum, and to bring new networks, theories and ways of working through a series of residencies for guest artists with diverse backgrounds and interest areas. Deliss facilitated a radical rethinking of the collection, encouraging wide-ranging fieldwork within the museum and unorthodox engagement, such as providing 24-hour access to collections. This opportunity for artists to reconsider, reframe and remediate was an attractive proposition, even though it upset the longstanding Museum staff and eventually led to dismissal without notice. She says: “Today, there is growing recognition of the value of subjective historiographies drafted by artists on the bases of contested archives and collections. The engagement of artists demonstrates the desire to define a new malleable, heuristic space able to draw together different faculties, methodologies, and shifting social contexts in the museum of the twenty-first century.” Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum*, 105.

²¹⁴ Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum*, 56.

through underhanded means and without documentation of their cultural role or value.²¹⁵ Renaming and redefining the functions of the three historic museum buildings, Deliss radically shifted the direction of the institution towards laboratory research, experimental exhibition making and interrogation of the operations of the museum, inviting researchers with wide-ranging expertise to undertake residencies and fieldwork in the museum.

Deliss' practice was influential for Buchanan as it provided an example of someone rethinking the infrastructure of the institution from the inside out, looking to the collection as a way to spark fresh dialogue and an engagement with the works or objects that enabled new juxtapositions, connections and political readings. Buchanan applied this approach during her own residency at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, unpacking the policies and analysing the documentation of collection acquisitions, as well as introducing bodily terms to the exhibition framework, using exhibition furniture evoking the body and displaying works in unusual groupings and sightlines.

Buchanan coordinated a three-day symposium, *Uneven Bodies* (7 December 2019 - 29 March 2020), to coincide with the exhibition and invited Deliss to present one of the keynote lectures. However, due to Covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions, Deliss could not travel and Buchanan delivered her talk on *The Metabolic Museum* instead. Watching her present Deliss' words, it was apparent to me that Buchanan had closely observed and shared her focus on the cracks in classification, liveness and intimacy. This is also apparent in *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* and the ways in which it exposes the inequalities of power and the patriarchal and colonial legacies embedded in the institution.

For the symposium, Buchanan invited renowned Māori academic Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou) to be the opening keynote speaker, reflecting the second of two threads running through this project: that it is informed by international institutional critique, yet brought together with a

²¹⁵ Ibid.

decolonising agenda specific to Aotearoa. Tuhiwai Smith's influential 1999 publication *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* has become an essential resource through which to consider the intersections of colonisation, research and knowledge—and is an essential resource for the theoretical framing of this practice-led research project, as demonstrated in this exegesis's introduction.²¹⁶ Tuhiwai Smith spoke eloquently in the symposium of how we cannot predict what a decolonised institution might look like, or even if it should be an institution at all, and this prompted ongoing discussion over the weekend. Buchanan had highlighted through the exhibition the lack of female, Māori and Pacific artists in the collection, but how would inserting these artists into the collection change the structure of the institution itself? Buchanan was advocating for analysis of the systems, and a deeper engagement with future artists in an effort to enable ongoing conversations and better understanding of their work, as part of the process of collection building—a transformed institution, rather than one with more diversity. *Uneven Bodies* brought together artists, curators, educators, collectors and art dealers to consider alternatives to current collection policies and protocols. How might we demand, force, or enable institutions to act in other ways, to disrupt the asymmetry of power, and to engage with artists from different perspectives, to open up our institutions and thereby make them more accessible, more relevant, more representative?²¹⁷

Overall, the symposium brought to the fore the issues and perspectives that Buchanan had experienced and addressed through the making of the

²¹⁶ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

²¹⁷ Another of the symposium presentations described an inspiring example of enabling agency for Indigenous communities within the institution. Leone Samu Tui (Ngāti Hāmoa, Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa) shared how collections can acknowledge the existing connections of taonga to the communities they were once part of through the Pacific Collection Access Project (PCAP) that she is a part of. The PCAP project involves bringing communities into the Auckland War Memorial Museum to engage with objects that they may have knowledge about or connections to. This facilitates learning from alternative forms of knowledge, authority, and description for taonga held within collections, and also starts a process of community participation and a stronger sense of ownership for communities. Even the language of the most commonly used collection management system Vernon uses 'authority' fields that are based on descriptive terms from the United States, but the software can be altered on request to include other descriptors, a very practical example of how we can change the rules for collecting and working with collections.

exhibition, stressing the critical importance of the document, the politics surrounding acquisitions and the power dynamics at play in collection policies and institutional systems. She brought the body back into the museum. She wants us to feel a churning in the pit of the stomach, to be reminded that collections are made up of people not just objects, and that who has agency is negotiable. Who (and how and why) has power now? A timely question about authority in the museum, *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* made the museum alive and permeable for a moment, starting a conversation about what our institutions might look like into the future.

Across the examples of Buchanan's practice, there is a growing recognition of the need to work with and within the institution. More than with other artists, working alongside Buchanan as a curator necessitates an artist-led methodology, as the curator is part of the system she is placing under review. For example, it is noteworthy that at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery directors Burns and Lundh had initiated the exhibition and were clearly supportive of the project, yet their voice is not prominent. Inviting Buchanan to be part of an exhibition or programme is to knowingly open up the institution to critical assessment—a self-reflexive mode of internalised critique where she is an external consultant. Buchanan can be supported in practical terms, through being given unfettered access to the collection, and control over the processes of selection, display and interpretation methods, yet she clearly articulates in her own words what is needed from the curatorial relationship—a transfer of power.

Rather than drawing on alternative and overlooked histories as the artists in my previous two chapters have done, Buchanan is researching and questioning the histories, systems and structures of the institution, including the role of the curator, seeking what she terms “infrastructural transformation”. Buchanan scrutinises the language, architecture, acquisition, selection, display and interpretation processes, and heightens awareness of the urgency

to intervene in these structures, to bring greater agency to the artist and demand permeability of museums and their collections. As described in the previous exhibition examples, Buchanan's projects are only possible if the curator adopts an artist-led approach, which in this case means being responsive, flexible, and in some instances relinquishing curatorial power. In issuing an exhibition invitation to Buchanan, the curator is investing in a critical perspective for the institution, therefore in alignment with Buchanan, even if there might be "monstrously unpredictable" outcomes—in essence, this is actually what one hopes for.

Conclusion: Evolutions of Galaxies

When I began this research-based PhD, my aim was simple. I wanted to know how to support artists working with archives and histories, to make their work clearer for audiences to understand and engage with, and to assist them to challenge art institutions, despite being part of the institution myself, through their work. As I curated and reflected on the three projects that comprise this exegesis, I discovered that my approach needed to be adapted for each artist and their practice, to be highly responsive to both the form and content of their work and allow this to influence, even lead, the exhibition framework and design. That these artists were interested in archives made the process of responding to their work more straightforward, since they were addressing specific historical situations that I could also work with, yet this artist-led methodology is applicable for any artist and curator relationship. An artist-led curatorial model can draw on institutional resources and collections to help generate a robust context for artists and their works and leads to exhibition making that supports the artist's practice in multiple, multi-sensorial ways that go beyond textual mediation and explication. I have argued in this PhD that supporting an artist's practice through curatorially sensitive exhibition making not only allows the practice to be fully articulated, but can convey the affective dimensions of the work, such as the warmth of textiles, tenderness of voice or charge of poetic language. With this methodology, the artist's practice can manifest in the institution not only in their work, but also in the way it is displayed, the exhibition layout, relationship to collection works and interpretation. It is a holistic and responsive approach that supports the mediation and presentation of artistic practice, not only, but especially, for artists working with content that may be unfamiliar to audiences, such as archival or historical material.

In the preceding chapters I described three exhibitions that I curated between 2016 and 2018 at The Dowse Art Museum: *From Pressure to Vibration: The event of a thread* by Emma Fitts; *my life as a tunnel* by Shannon Te Ao; and

Can Tame Anything with Ruth Buchanan. Following an artist-led curatorial methodology uniquely adapted to each project, these examples provided evidence of the importance of bringing flexibility and responsiveness to the role of curator, especially within the institution, where curatorial advocacy for artists is essential. Each project was completely different, drawing on specific histories and the artists engaged with me each in their own way, resulting in exhibitions that were likewise varied. Yet they all translated archival research into embodied and affective works that conveyed the feeling of the histories and commentary on contemporary political issues. Through working closely with the artists, engaging deeply with their work and in ongoing dialogue, I contributed to the development and reception of their work: practically, through exhibition design and incorporating works from the collection; and also critically as a supportive, responsive advocate so that the exhibitions successfully created new and dynamic ways of understanding these histories. At this current point in time, after the historical turn and as we see a return to futurity in cultural discourse, I maintain that this methodology of artist-led curating is important in order for audiences to be able to fully engage with the wide-ranging ideas and references in contemporary art. Storytelling through responsive, proactive curating is vital to make sense of the past, present and future, and this is part of the ongoing process of negotiating a robust working relationship between artists and curators.

Claire Bishop's argument about the "poetic opacity" of artists' projects was fresh in my mind when I began this research, and with *From Pressure to Vibration* I wanted to offer some tangible examples of the histories Fitts was referring to in order to complement and enrich the audience experience, as a riposte to Bishop. This was a very direct response to the artist's ideas and, working closely together, we each contributed distinctive threads to the exhibition that wove throughout the space, creating a cohesive and engaging exhibition. It felt warm in the gallery, due to the pale green wall colours, the encompassing exhibition design and the sheer amount of woollen weaving throughout the gallery. Surrounded by textiles of different scale, type and

design, people lingered to have conversations in the space, including both a younger contemporary art audience and an older generation of weavers and their friends.²¹⁸ Fitts and I talked about how textiles are texts that convey their stories in multiple ways—through the materials and processes of their making, the design, and their subsequent use in everyday life and documentation. By including The Dowse collection we also literally surfaced the work and stories of women artists that are often overlooked. This was the most collaborative of the curated projects discussed, and initiated an active dialogue we have continued.

Installed a year later in the same gallery space, the exhibition *my life as a tunnel* curated with Te Ao incorporated histories of waiata (song) and film, brought together by the artist in an exceptionally moving video work based around ideas of intimacy, loss and longing. Te Ao designed the plan for how the work should be installed, asking for the dual-screen to be large scale and on an off-centre angle, to encourage the audience to move around the space as they listened to the lush audio that washed over the room, emanating from the screens, and flowing out into the surrounding galleries. My main contribution to the project, in addition to selecting the artist and the practical tasks of curating, was to suggest inclusion of several collection works and to research and provide more information on Nuku Tewhatewha, the pātakā that was adjacent to the main gallery space. This treasured collection work was a part of the exhibition experience through being in close vicinity and direct sightlines. We felt it was not necessary to describe this to audiences in the wall label, but finding a whakapapa connection gave the project a relationality and reasoning for each of these entities being next to each other. I built on this relationship of Nuku Tewhatewha by using the gallery on the other side for a text collaboration between Te Ao and Kurt Komene as well as a selection of works from The Dowse collection by Ralph Hotere. This putting forward of

²¹⁸ This dual audience was particularly obvious during an event we held, *Tea and Textiles* on 25 May 2017, that brought together several of the weavers, Margery Blackman, Joan Calvert and Judy Patience in conversation with Emma and myself, <https://dowse.org.nz/news/blog/2017/tea-and-textiles>.

collection links was less prominent than it was with Fitts, but for audiences to walk past examples of other works from Māori artists on entry or exit would have provided some broader art historical and political framing—tangential to the main event, yet still perceptible. Te Ao is exceptionally articulate and language is an integral component of his work, so our working relationship was always fruitful, achieving a strong final outcome through the beauty of his work and his ability to collaborate with the many others involved in bringing the project to fruition.

Lastly, the curated group exhibition *Can Tame Anything* that included Buchanan was the most challenging and productive exhibition of the three as it required a wholesale rethinking of my role as a curator working within the institution. Buchanan is a very rigorous thinker and her practice consistently examines the systems and structures that underpin our art institutions. Inviting her to be involved in the exhibition was a curatorial act, one that invited scrutiny of my curatorial practice as well as the institution, and while in retrospect I wish that she could have played an even greater role in the exhibition, her work prompted further discussion around feminist art histories of Aotearoa. As Christina Barton noted:

She has developed a unique way of working that blurs the boundaries between artistic production, curatorial practice, and the exhibition design, exemplifying a deconstructive effort to rethink connections between artists across time and in relation to the powerful structures that condition them.²¹⁹

I also included in this chapter discussion of Buchanan's exhibition at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery as this further revealed the agency and impact that an artist can have when given the full run of the gallery and collections, with ample financial and curatorial support.

I've argued that each of the artists, Fitts, Te Ao and Buchanan, acted as "undutiful daughters", utilising archives towards their own political ends, bringing feminist and decolonising methodologies to the materials they worked

²¹⁹ Christina Barton, "Mother Lode: On the Phenomenon of the 'Older Woman Artist'," *Art Now* (October 2021), <https://artnow.nz/images/ArtNow-Essay-Mother-Lode-Christina-Barton.pdf>.

with and weaving different threads together in what could be thought of as a curatorial approach to artistic practice. As art historians David Joselit and Alison Green have claimed, this prevalence of everyday curating in our lives has complicated the curatorial relationship, yet also enables artists to make transformative works that reflect on and generate new perspectives, out of and in response to the flow of information that saturates contemporary life.²²⁰ An artist-curator relationship that is grounded in providing agency for the artist is key to my own curatorial practice, and I will continue to privilege the artist and offer them my support and advocacy. Now that I am working within a municipal museum, I am even more acutely aware of how artists' voices can be minimised within the scale of a large institution and I take on a curatorial responsibility of ensuring that artists are central to decision making.

The MADA Gallery examination exhibition *Evolutions of Galaxies* (8 - 23 April 2022) brings together the three artists I worked with, presenting one component of each artist's previously exhibited works as traces of their larger exhibitions, in a further mingling of ghosts, times and cosmologies. Applying an artist-led methodology to a group exhibition is more complicated than a solo show since the works must coexist within a shared environment and a certain amount of compromise is inevitable when negotiating artists' different needs. However, when I invited each artist to be part of the exhibition I outlined the situation and was open to however each wanted to respond. Te Ao knew that to attempt to present the video installation *my life as a tunnel* successfully would be difficult since it requires a dark space and a large two-sided projection screen, so he suggested that the audio would be suitable on its own as this is essentially the heart of the work. At first I thought that I could find another location on campus for Fitts to work in, given her interest in collaboration, perhaps a department that specialised in textile research, linguistics or astronomy, but the right relationship failed to materialise as the

²²⁰ David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020); Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2018).

Covid 19 pandemic prevented my visiting, and as things developed, she decided to make a more discrete work that could sit alongside the other artists. Buchanan frequently works with other artists or collaborates with family members and makes display mechanisms for their works or decides on how they will be hung, and here chose to provide a simple and sensitive treatment of the gallery that would resonate with the other two artists.

Buchanan has washed over the institutional white of the gallery space with a lilac wall painting, performed by her niece Lily who is a current MADA student. As Buchanan thinks so rigorously about institutional spaces, the context of the gallery being part of the art school was important. Her decision to ask Lily to undertake the painting was not only a practical one, as Buchanan could not travel from Berlin for the exhibition, but a way of connecting with the Monash University student body, acknowledging the site as one of academic learning and its associated power systems and hierarchies. The painting covers all of the walls to the height that Lily can reach, emphasising her body working in the space. Use of the colour lilac brings warmth, and the paint is applied in visible brushstrokes that are an obvious layering over the white. Within this simple action of painting the gallery are some of the key tenets of Buchanan's work: a treatment of the gallery space that accentuates its institutional character; bringing the physical body into the gallery; and the creation of a setting for the display of other artworks that disrupts the standard viewing situation, in this case a lilac backdrop on which to hang their work.

Into this situation Te Ao offers a pared-back iteration of his two-channel video work *my life as a tunnel*, playing only the audio that is an emotional te reo Māori rendition of *This Bitter Earth*. Providing the soundtrack for the gallery, the song adds another layer to the exhibition experience that in a way ties it together. As the Australian audience will not be familiar with any of the key words, such as aroha (love) or whenua (land), the affective qualities of the male voices carry the message of intimacy, loss and longing—a memory of love that is fluid enough to encompass or connect with many other narratives.

Fitts has included a large canvas textile work related to the architecture of the observatory at Tekapō, a dark sky reserve in Aotearoa, and the story of astronomer Beatrice Tinsley (1941-81) who discovered the life cycle of galaxies, proving that the universe is still evolving and thereby changing the way we measure distances to far off galaxies. The arcs and folds of the canvas shapes that constitute Fitts' work echo the construction of the observatory dome and the lines refer to geometric forms that underpin Tinsley's advances in astronomy. With its three-dimensional qualities, the work also seems like a garment of some sort, alluding to clothing for the body and the pleats Fitts often incorporates in her work.

The title for the exhibition, *Evolution of Galaxies*, is a reference to Tinsley's academic astronomy work through which she discovered and described how galaxies evolve, grow and die. The farther we look into the universe, the further back in time we can see. By adopting this title I wanted to propose that all three of these artists use their spatial, embodied, material practices to think of time as flexible and coterminous, to imply constellations of events and different ideas of cosmology, that things are constantly moving and that time is a matter of perception.

The three simple exhibition components, a wall washed with colour, a song and a large textile, together are a melancholic reflection on lives and legacies that began in archives, but are now conveyed in media that are not documentary forms; that convey the feeling or concept of a past, rather than describing it specifically, and are used to relate to contemporary concerns. *Evolutions of Galaxies* is not therefore an exhibition of the documentation of the previous solo exhibitions, or a display of all three complete works, but a collation of several layers of the artists' research and outcomes. My artist-led methodology enabled a deep insight into each artist's practice, and thus as a curator I gained a rich understanding of these artists' motivations, interests and modes of practice, and developed relationships of trust and mutual

respect. The exhibition is therefore a demonstration of how the curator-artist relationship (and the curator-artwork relationship) can also deepen over time, and give rise to creative reinterpretations. I found connections between these formally quite different works that I would not have observed if I had not engaged with these artists in ongoing dialogue. Each artist is interested in unseen moments or people from the past, in revealing or disrupting institutional structures and hierarchies, and bringing a poetic, emotional depth to their subjects. This exhibition follows an artist-led curatorial methodology that responds to these shared ideas, to create a space in which to follow the folds of fabric and picture what is hidden behind, to imagine a line of harmony or attend to the institutional language of the walls of the gallery. It does not open up complex narratives or extend the many histories these works have come from, as the solo exhibitions did, but instead asks us to consider refined aspects of these artists' practices, the texture of their stories as they mingle and converse, and the idea of history as many incompatible layers.

This exegesis has provided some background on the historical turn of the past thirty years and demonstrated how this was both a practical and psychological shift. I argued for supporting artists through responsive and flexible curating that builds on the materiality of the artwork to form the exhibition rather than relying solely on the textual documents that are common to the archive and gallery norms—to enable artists to generate evocative narratives that can make you feel. Given the breadth of research, critique and temporality in artistic practice now, an artist-led curatorial methodology is a necessary and relevant way to work, especially given the intractable inequalities of our institutions and society. The curatorial qualities of flexibility, responsiveness and relationality can I believe support new ways of thinking about past, present and future alike, and generate engaging and relevant exhibitions. The artist-led curatorial methodology that I have developed, and practise, in this PhD leads to more compelling exhibitions of an artist's work.

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Fig. 1 and 2. Emma Fitts, *From Pressure to Vibration: The event of a thread*, 2017. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Photo: John Lake.

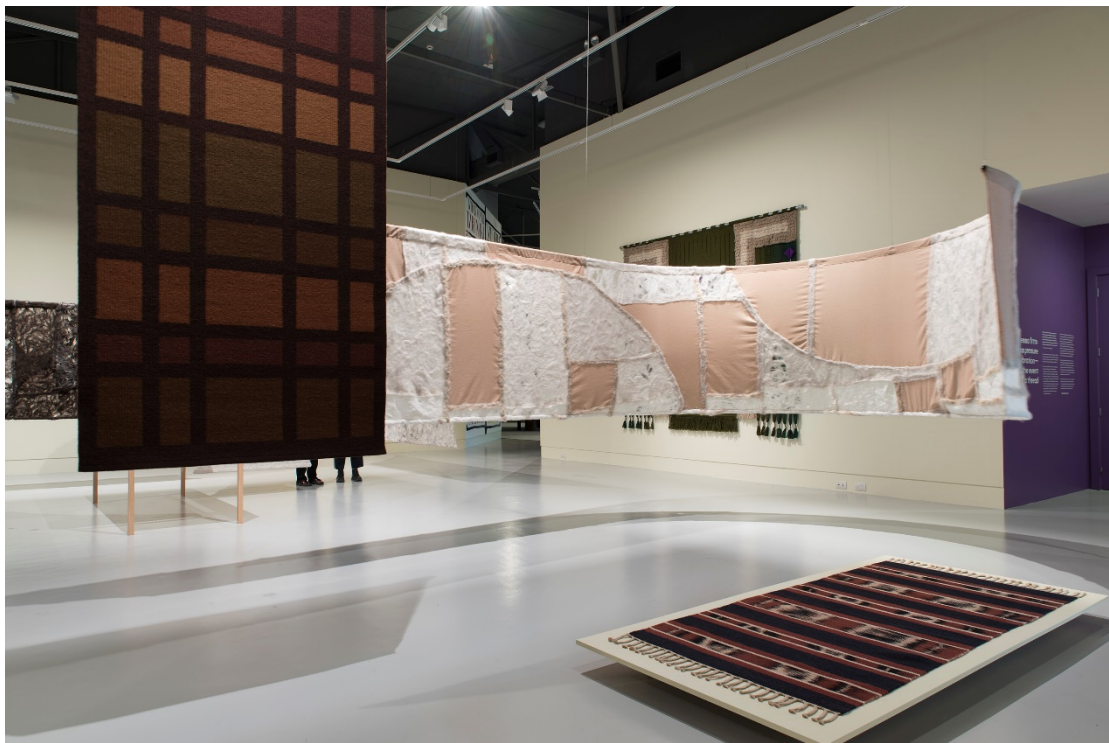


Fig. 3 and 4. Emma Fitts, *From Pressure to Vibration: The event of a thread*, 2017. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Photo: John Lake.



Fig. 5 and 6. Emma Fitts, *From Pressure to Vibration: The event of a thread*, 2017. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Photo: John Lake.



Fig. 7. Emma Fitts, *Fit Out for Olivia Spencer Bower*, 2016. Installation view at SOFA Gallery, Ilam School of Fine Arts, Canterbury. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 8 and 9. Shannon Te Ao, *my life as a tunnel*, 2018. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Photo: Sean Waugh.



Fig. 10. Shannon Te Ao, *my life as a tunnel*, 2018. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Photo: Sean Waugh.

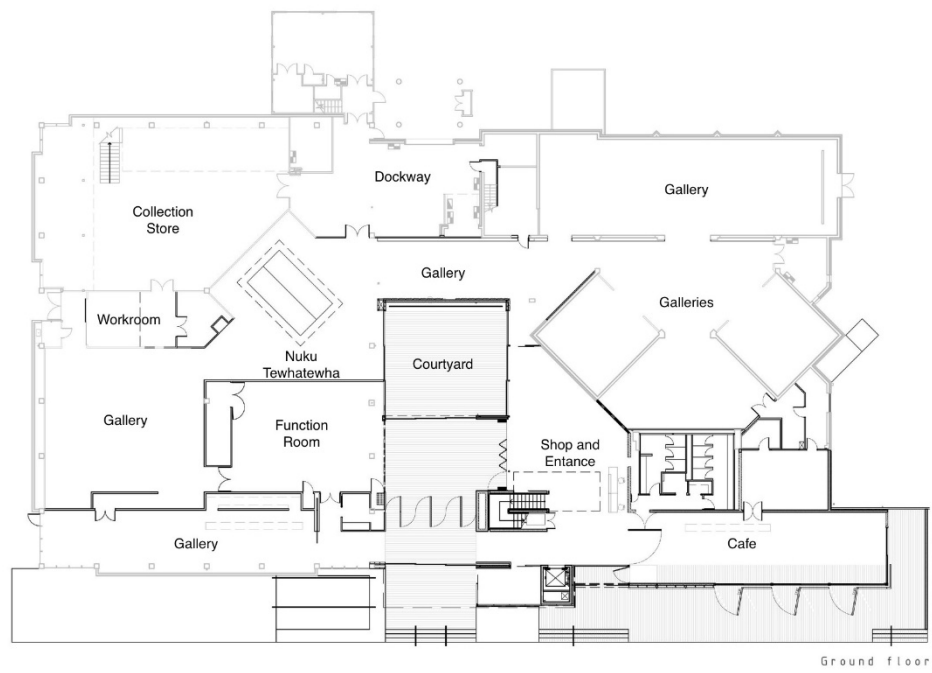


Fig. 11. The Dowse Art Museum layout.

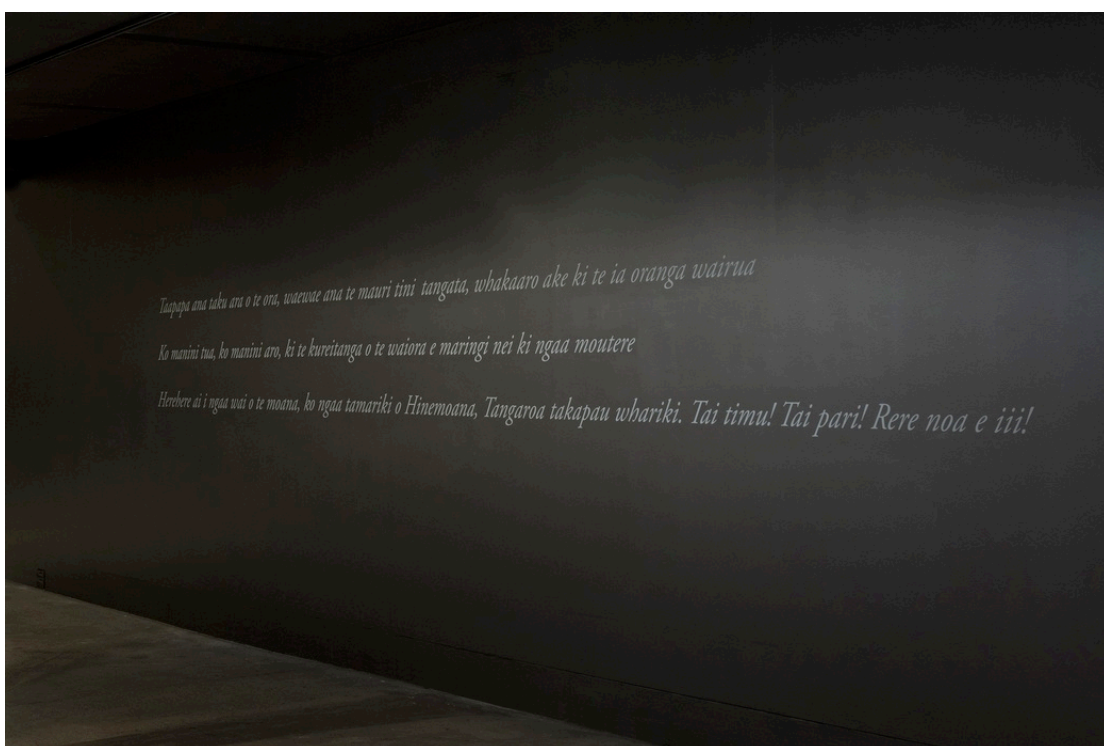


Fig. 12 and 13. Shannon Te Ao, *my life as a tunnel*, 2018. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Photo: Sean Waugh.



Fig 14. Shannon Te Ao, *a torch and a light (cover)*, 2015. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum, 2018. Photo: Sean Waugh.



Fig. 15. Shannon Te Ao, *Untitled (Malady)*, 2016. HD video still. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 16. Shannon Te Ao, *with the sun aglow, I have my pensive moods*, 2017. HD video still. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 17. Ruth Buchanan, *Break, break, break. Broke*, 2018. Metallic chain curtain, installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: John Lake.



Fig. 18. Ruth Buchanan, *Break, break, break. Broke*, 2018. Metallic chain curtain, installation view with Alicia Frankovich behind at The Dowse Art Museum. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: John Lake.



Fig. 19. Layout of exhibitions *Embodied Knowledge/Can Tame Anything*

G1-G5: *Embodied Knowledge* exhibition

G1 Pauline Rhodes

G2 Christine Hellyar

G3 Maureen Lander

G4 The Estate of L. Budd

G5 Vivian Lynn

G6 Ruth Buchanan Reading Room

G7 Nuku Tewhatewha pātaka

G8-8a *Can Tame Anything* exhibition

G8 Ruth Buchanan, Alicia Frankovich, Sriwhana Spong

G8a Mata Aho Collective



Fig. 20 and 21. Ruth Buchanan, *Epoch*, 2018. Installation view at The Dowse Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: John Lake.



Fig. 22. *Can Tame Anything*, installation view at The Dowse Art Museum, 2018, featuring: Sriwhana Spong, *This Creature*, 2016. HD video, colour, sound, duration 14 mins 55 secs. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett Gallery; Ruth Buchanan, *Circumference*, 2016/2018, powder coated steel. Courtesy of the artist; and Alicia Frankovich, *Microchimerism*, 2018, vinyl. Courtesy of the artist, Starkwhite Auckland and 1301SW Melbourne. Photo: John Lake.

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Embodied Knowledge

Can Tame Anything

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Foreword

In the lead-up to the exhibition *Embodied Knowledge* at The Dowse in 2018, I was lucky enough to spend the afternoon with artist Vivian Lynn in her Newtown home. I took tulips; Vivian's partner Jurgen made us coffee topped with cream. I spent hours listening to Vivian's recounting of her remarkable career and life, moving between images stored on her computer, file clippings, and the artworks that crowded the walls of the house.

Vivian by that time was house-bound due to a long illness; she was too unwell to attend the exhibition opening, and passed away shortly after the exhibition closed. As a result, she didn't get to see her work *Lamella Lamina* installed for the second time at The Dowse. Originally commissioned for *ANZART-in-Hobart* in 1983, the fifteen fragile columns of textured architectural paper that make up the work related to the threatened rainforest on Tasmania's Franklin River, and expressed Lynn's enduring interest in the intertwining

of nature and culture, and women's experience and knowledge of the world. *Lamella Lamina* was shown later in 1983 in a group show at The Dowse. My visit to her in 2018 was made to discuss our forthcoming exhibition, but also to negotiate what we at the museum saw as a 35-year-old setting to rights, with the acquisition of this major piece for The Dowse's collection, a symbol both of our own history, and the history of women's art in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Embodied Knowledge and its pendant show *Can Tame Anything* were programmed in 2018 to coincide with the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage in Aotearoa. They came 25 years after the 100th suffrage anniversary, and gestured back to Christina Barton and Deborah Lawler-Dormer's keystone 1993 exhibition, *Alter/Image: Feminism and Representation in New Zealand Art 1973-1993*. They represented an interweaving of histories, practices, generations and approaches to art-making, symbolised by Ruth Buchanan's timeline and two metallic chain curtains, which connected the two sides of the building and the two parts of the exhibitions. This publication is a further interweaving, of texts from the 1980s and today, and writers who were prominent at the time of that 100th anniversary as well as writers emerging today.

On behalf of The Dowse, I offer our gratitude to the artists whose generosity enabled us to re-present existing works in *Embodied Knowledge* and the writers who approved the reprinting of essays from previous publications. And I offer my thanks to the artists who produced new work for *Can Tame Anything*, and the writers who produced responses to the exhibitions' kaupapa and selected texts for this new publication.

My thanks also to Creative New Zealand for their support of this publication; to the talented and dedicated staff of The Dowse who made the exhibitions and the book happen; and to curator and editor Melanie Oliver for her advocacy of these histories and artists.

We hope *Embodied Knowledge/Can Tame Anything* will act both as a foundation and a springboard; a gathering of points in time from the early 1970s through to the late 2010s, which enable future readers, artists, viewers and writers to understand the histories that came before them, and plot their own courses into the future.

Two Limbs: An Introduction to Embodied Knowledge /Can Tame Anything

Two exhibitions held at The Dowse Art Museum in 2018, *Embodied Knowledge* and *Can Tame Anything*, were presented concurrently as a way to readdress and make visible histories of feminism, critical theory, and installation art practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Embodied Knowledge* included significant works from several artists working in the 1980s: Christine Hellyar, Maureen Lander, Vivian Lynn, Pauline Rhodes, Minerva Betts, and L. Budd. *Can Tame Anything* included artists for whom these histories and artists are of particular relevance: Ruth Buchanan, Alicia Frankovich, Sriwhana Spong, and Mata Aho Collective. Although discourse has shifted over the past thirty years, this intergenerational pairing of exhibitions proposed that these artists from the 1980s radically changed art making in Aotearoa; that their aesthetic transformations were disseminated and remain foundational for contemporary art today.

Engaging concepts around language, culture, and the environment, the artists in *Embodied Knowledge* were critically informed and saw the body as a site of knowledge production. Using ephemeral materials, site-specific and performative or process-based practices, the artists introduced subjective experiences and alternative histories, and interrogated our relationships to the land and its resources. The term ‘embodied knowledge’ describes knowledge that is unspoken, contingent and situated, informed by experiences of living in a certain time, place, and context. These artists share a perception of the body as both a cultural and physical entity; they question language in its diverse forms and challenge aspects of dominant institutional structures, all through the innovative materiality of their works.

The exhibition was modest in scale and focused on a specific aspect of our art history, rather than attempting a more expansive survey of women artists or feminisms. The starting point was art critic Lita Barrie’s controversial essay, published in the first issue of the journal *Antic* in 1986.¹ *Embodied Knowledge* diverged from her rigid stance, but acknowledged this moment as a period of transition in which feminist perspectives were developing or fracturing, post-structural theory was being read and discussed, and artists were bringing fresh ideas into their work. By the 1980s, the climate had altered towards a more critical or intellectual approach. Some of the problematic positions of 1970s feminism, such as a lack of Māori, working class and queer concerns, were being responded to.

Barrie’s essay is reprinted here, typed out from the faded, underlined photocopy that I have carried around since I was an art history student. I met Barrie in 2000 at an eventful Post Object Art symposium in Christchurch, where several art historical debates were brought to life, and from this point on I have grappled with how we can rethink our histories and continue to reflect on them from a contemporary perspective; how what we thought was important then might be seen now in a different light. Theorist Sarah Ahmed has cautioned against feminism becoming a routine gesture, speaking of how new materialism often overlooks the subtleties of feminist practitioners:

1. Lita Barrie, ‘Remissions: Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality’, *Antic*, 1, Auckland, 1986, pp. 87-103.

... my aim is not to dismiss specific feminist work, but to account for how that work might be gathering around a gesture, which if routinized, would have problematic consequences for our understanding of the genealogy of feminist thought.²

While the *Antic* article from Barrie has been discussed in art history since its delivery, there are other viewpoints included here that contradict, complicate or run parallel to her perspective as published at that time.

Recounting important steps in the genealogy of women’s art in Aotearoa, Priscilla Pitts writes from a personal lens about issues in the 1970s and ‘80s, as an active participant through her role as a curator, writer, and one of the founding editors of *Antic* (alongside fellow editors Elizabeth Eastmond, Susan Davis, and later Christina Barton). Her historical review is followed by in-depth discussion of the *Embodied Knowledge* artists.

Also from that first issue of *Antic*, Julie Ewington’s ‘Past the Post: Postmodernism and Postfeminism’ is reprinted here in full. A quote from this essay was used in the introduction of curators Christina Barton and Deborah Lawler-Dormer’s catalogue for their *alter/image* exhibition of 1993, citing Ewington as a bridge between theory and practice, and her description of feminism as a tool with which to both make and use theory. Barton has had an ongoing commitment to exhibiting and publishing women artists, curating a number of key solo shows and producing survey publications, such as those for Vivian Lynn and Pauline Rhodes.

Ella Sutherland’s essay, initially presented at the *No Common Ground* symposium convened in 2018 between Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Enjoy Contemporary Art Space and The Dowse, poetically highlights how archives and publishing are important forums for representation. One of the fracturing elements for feminism in Aotearoa was the need for queer voices and advocacy, and issues of diversity across public records and publishing platforms remain complex today.

As well as documenting the exhibitions, another intention of this publication was to republish a few hard-to-find essays from the 1980s, such as those by Barrie and Ewington, to make them accessible for a contemporary readership.

2. Sarah Ahmed, ‘Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism’’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, SAGE Publications: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, Vol. 15 (1), p. 24.

Ngahuia Te Awekotuku’s (Te Arawa, Ngāi Tūhoe, Waikato) introduction to her collection of essays *Mana Wahine Maori: Selected Writings on Maori Women’s Art, Culture and Politics* reads just as powerfully today as it did in 1991, and is contextualised here by Matariki Williams (Tūhoe, Ngāti Hauti, Taranaki, Ngāti Whakaue), revealing the strong whakapapa (genealogy) of Māori women academics. These texts offer some insightful background to the work of Maureen Lander and other Māori women artists working both then and now.

Lander is of Ngāpuhi and Pākehā descent. Her practice is inspired by weaving arts and processes, and uses traditional indigenous materials such as pingao, kuta, and harakeke in all its forms. These natural fibres are combined with manufactured materials, such as nylon fishing line and lighting effects, to create ephemeral, site-specific installations that engage with contemporary concerns. Lander’s first public art installation, *E kore au e ngaro he kakano i ruia mai i Rangiatea* (I will never be lost, I come from Rangiatea), was made for the 1986 exhibition *Karanga Karanga*, an exhibition of work by Māori women artists organised in response to the lack of women represented in *Te Māori*, the 1984 show of taonga Māori that toured the United States. Lander’s work featured whenu (warp threads) and aho (weft threads) that she had carefully prepared to make her first korowai (cloak). Yet instead of weaving these in a traditional sense, she created an ethereal installation, suspending the threads over a swirl of flax seed. Continuing her unique blending of traditional and contemporary materials and techniques, the works in *Embodied Knowledge* all took the form of suspended maro (aprons) or rapaki (skirts).

The whakapapa and multiple or fluid meaning for words also plays a role for Lander. Iorangi clouds are wispy and light, and here they carried a deeper import. Io, the name of a supreme atua (god), is also a word for warp threads in cloak-making, and the works ‘Iorangi I’ and ‘Iorangi II’ convey the significance of muka as a medium that connects ira tangata, the realm of the living, with ira atua, the spiritual realm.

The sculptural works produced by L. Budd during the 1980s and 1990s concentrated on language and its mutability. Featuring hand-drawn writing, found text, and erasure on a range of surfaces, the ambiguity of words and communication is evident. Our belief in and reliance on written text is undermined by it being overwritten and erased, the process

of constructing meaning both refuted and complicated. In exposing the untrustworthiness of words, Budd destabilises the foundations of our broader social, cultural and institutional systems. We are never quite sure in these works whose perspective is being presented, or represented. There is a playful obfuscation of authorship, with no attribution for quotations that are mingled with other texts, references and writing, from Budd and potentially others.

Working at the end of the 20th century, Budd confronted lingering forms of modernism in Aotearoa and argued against the idea of originality in art. Although there is a distinct aesthetic, it is implied that these works could have been made by anyone, or by several people, or perhaps didn't need to be made at all. As the artists et al stated in an interview,

there are a lot of people involved in art who want to make work about themselves—they want biography, they want history, they want information—so it's like preventing, or challenging people who attempt to historicise an identity.

At the same time, there were personal, even romantic, statements throughout The Estate of L. Budd installation. Laden with text, the works speak for themselves, offering a vibrant conversation in flux, liable to change with context and the passing of time.

Christine Hellyar creates sculptural assemblages from found objects and organic materials to reconsider our ways of collecting, categorising and representing nature, emphasising the cultural values that underpin how we organise and describe things—essentially our ways of thinking about the world. She has an enduring interest in early history and museology, in human civilisation and material culture, often presenting objects as artefacts. In *Pacific Aprons* (1983) and *Hunters and Gatherers* (1986), the structures are wearable and relate directly to the body. In the 1970s, she pioneered the use of latex in art making, imprinting textures of organic matter into the surfaces of her works, that were like skins.

Vivian Lynn had a longstanding and wide-ranging practice that spanned many significant developments in art in Aotearoa. She forged a unique pathway, posing questions around the nature/culture discourse, ecology, identity, a repressed feminine and dominant masculine culture.

The concepts of Lynn's work were generated through her materials, which often included organic or bodily substances such as hair. Her works respond and relate to architecture and the land, drawing on intense personal experiences and our interdependency with the environment. She stated,

My work with ecology, the land, rural and urban spaces and the notions inhabiting them, gave form not only to several installations, but to my awareness of qualities in my work which I could not name, valued, and set out to make tangible. This intimation, of a kind of deep sensuality, which inhabited the work's presence I later named, "embodiment" as a foil to transcendence.

The environment lies at the heart of Pauline Rhodes's work. Since the late 1970s, she has undertaken two forms of sculptural practice: outdoor interventions using simple structures momentarily placed and documented in the landscape; and site-specific installations for exhibition venues. She identifies these modes as 'extensums' and 'intensums' respectively, and they can be thought of as corresponding to open and closed space, expansiveness and concentration, activity and reflection. However, both sides of Rhodes's practice consider the flow of a body moving through space, are attentive to duration or time, and are responsive to site, grounded in place. First made for Christchurch's CSA gallery in 1983, the installation *Extensum/Extensor* had not been shown since it was acquired and exhibited by the National Art Gallery in 1987. Rhodes reconfigured the work for The Dowse, and it was shown alongside a new work, *Intensum/Many Voices* (2018), as an opportunity to explore the different dynamics at play in her two modes of working.

Rhodes has a distinctive approach to resources as well as process. With economic and ecological principles in mind, she frequently reuses materials, generating a visual language that includes things like day-glow green rods, corten steel, rusted paper, and Tororaro (*Muehlenbeckia astonii*). The materials themselves are also in a constant state of flux—liable to rust, lose leaves, or sway as visitors walk by. They concretely convey the contingency that is inherent to her practice. Rhodes's

work acknowledges the instability of the land and our relationships to it, constantly drawing attention to the present moment, the here and now.

Can Tame Anything extended and developed the themes of *Embodied Knowledge*, showing how this next generation of artists continue to explore issues of language, culture, the environment, and the body, and also engage with the histories of women practitioners. The title, *Can Tame Anything*, was contributed by Ruth Buchanan (Te Āti Awa, Taranaki, Pākehā) as a work in itself, a framing device for this exhibition. It was included alongside several other works that emphasise physical and conceptual aspects of the gallery, entrances and access points, and pitch the exhibition as a site for history making.

Early mystics Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) and Margery Kempe (c.1373-1438) inspired the works of Sriwhana Spong, who worked with graphic designer Sandra Kassenaar to develop a typeface based on von Bingen's *Litterae Ignota* (unknown letters). Alicia Frankovich considers bodily experiences and post-human forms in relation to DNA and living entities that can reside inside of us.

Mata Aho Collective are a collaboration between four Māori women, Erena Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) and Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne ki Wairarapa), whose work focuses on the complexity of Māori lives and contemporary realities of mātauranga Māori. They have a mentor relationship with Maureen Lander, and hold mana wahine central to their practice. The new work that they made for the exhibition, *Tauira*, is the first that they have created using weaving, and championed māramatanga, a journey into the world of light, understanding and knowledge.

Writing dedicated to each of these contemporary practices is included here. Hanahiva Rose (Ngāi Tahu, Te Atiawa, Ngāti Toa, Huahine, Ra'īātea) writes a compelling response to the work of Mata Aho; Kirsty Baker covers language and theory in relation to Spong; Abby Cunnane contributes an eloquent piece on the work of Frankovich; and I look at some of the distinctive aspects of Buchanan's practice.

Looking back to the 1980s as a critical moment for contemporary art, *Embodied Knowledge* presented important artists from this period to reinforce their ongoing

influence for artists today. In conversation, these two exhibitions, *Embodied Knowledge* and *Can Tame Anything*, showed works that are underpinned by a disruptive tendency; that suggest other potential ways of being, and alternative social, cultural, and institutional structures. The artists draw on experiences of the body, language, and our environment. They use installation, performance, site-specific, and ephemeral materials; things that are a given today, but were once radical ideas and ways of working. Gender, sexuality, culture and identity are thought of in vastly different ways now, but in resurfacing some of the works and writing from this earlier generation, we can find connections as well as differences, and better understand the genealogy of artistic practice in Aotearoa.

Changing the context: Women's art and feminism in the 1970s and 1980s

This text was originally presented as a talk in the exhibition *Embodied Knowledge*. It offers a brief overview of the context for women's art practice in New Zealand in the 1980s and commentary on each of the five artists in the exhibition. However, it's not really possible to talk about feminism or women's art in the 1980s without first looking at the 1970s.

Second wave feminism really took off here from around 1970 and was very much influenced by what had been happening in North America from the early 1960s. 1972 was a big year. New Zealand's feminist magazine *Broadsheet* was launched, Sue Kedgley and Sharon Cederman's book *Sexist Society* was published and the first National Women's Liberation Conference was held. (Male volunteers took on child minding during the conference—at the time this was something of a radical innovation!) Germaine Greer visited our shores to publicise her book *The Female Eunuch*—and was arrested for saying 'bullshit' and 'fuck' in public.

There was a growing awareness of the marked inequalities between men and women and extensive analysis of the gendered nature of social conditioning and the limitations that imposed. Issues relating to women's health, reproductive choices and sexuality, violence against women, women's work, the politics of housework and childrearing were all explored. How women were represented in art and popular culture was a significant area of discussion: sexist language, differences in body language, sexist advertising, pornography, representations of women in the media, film and art—all were analysed in detail. Initially this was largely a white, urban, middleclass movement but during the 1980s increasing attention was paid to the situations of working class women, Māori and other women of colour. These were heady times of collective struggle, change and hard-won achievement.

What's been described as "essentialist" feminism was influential for many New Zealand women, and in the women's art movement. It promoted taking control of our own bodies and celebrated female biology as a powerful, generative force. And it tended to assume that women would experience and do things differently from men, simply because they were female. But alongside it was resistance to the idea that biology is destiny and the limitations that concept had historically placed on women's opportunities, achievements and freedoms.

In the visual arts women were significantly under-represented in exhibitions and gallery collections—at times they seemed almost invisible. There were relatively few women writers on the visual arts, even fewer curators and gallery directors. *Art New Zealand* was launched in 1976 and its record with regard to representation of women was, frankly, abysmal. It is noticeably better now. *Spiral*, a women's arts journal, was also launched in 1976; it covered a wide range of the arts and, unfortunately, its coverage of the visual arts was often sketchy.

The influence of the North American women's art movement was significant. Judy Chicago and her collaborators' *The Dinner Party* (completed in 1979) was influential and inspirational for a number of reasons: it was a huge collaborative project; it honoured the achievements throughout history of a large number of women, many of whom had largely been forgotten; it elevated the traditional 'feminine' arts of embroidery and china painting; and it placed the vulva—a symbol of women's physical presence and sexuality—front and centre. The film of the 1972 collaborative *Womanhouse* project (facilitated by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro) was shown in New Zealand sometime in the 1970s—the *Linen Closet* with its nude mannequin sliced into and confined by the cupboard shelves and drawers and the *Menstruation Bathroom* remain, for me, particularly vivid images.

There was a good deal of discussion around the distinction between 'art' and 'craft', often within the context of feminist debate. Why, for instance, were Malcolm Harrison's quilts considered 'art' while women's quiltmaking was not? The epic *Te Maori* exhibition, which opened in New York in 1984, privileged carving—a traditionally male practice—over women's art forms such as weaving, and this was called out by Ngahuia Te Awekotuku among others.¹ Re-thinking what constituted 'art' had been happening from early in the twentieth century: now it was being re-evaluated from a feminist perspective. The 1987 *Herstory Diary*², which was compiled by a collective of Māori artists and Feminist Art Network members, gives an indication of where this thinking was heading; there are several examples of contemporary Māori weaving, also Cook Island tivaevae and embroidery, Samoan lei made from plastic packaging, a patchwork quilt, alongside painting, photography and sculpture. Elizabeth Eastmond and Merimeri Penfold's *Women and the Arts in New Zealand*³ also sought

1. 'Ngahuia Te Awekotuku in conversation with Elizabeth Eastmond and Priscilla Pitts', *Artic* 1, June 1986, pp. 44-55.

2. New Women's Press, Auckland, 1987.

3. Elizabeth Eastmond and Merimeri Penfold, *Women in the Arts in New Zealand: Forty Works: 1936-86*, Penguin Books, 1986.

to expand the definition of what constitutes art.

Looking back at what was happening here in the 1970s and the 1980s, I'm struck by the diversity of feminist art practice. In the early 1970s, Jan Nigro made several series of paintings and drawings addressing issues of women's physical and mental safety. Jacqueline Fahey's paintings of family life and Sylvia Siddell's surrealist drawings of domestic environments forcefully challenged the idea that women were or should be content with their traditional place in the home.

Vivian Lynn was working in a range of media. Printmaking became a vehicle for political comment; for instance, in her *Playground* series and *Book of Forty Images*, as well as individual works such as *Hieratic Symbol* (1976)—a stomach-churning take on the rape of Leda by the swan—no soft seduction here. Carole Shephard also used the print medium as well as collage and textiles. She made paintings and constructions, some representational, others abstract but with an underlying feminist agenda. Like Christine Hellyar, she incorporated 'craft' techniques in her work.

I also think of Mary Louise Browne working, always elegantly, with text; and of Joanna Margaret Paul's experimental films and her paintings and drawings, documenting her home and family and her grief at the death of her daughter Imogen. There were Allie Eagle's political paintings. Robyn Kahukiwa's *Wahine Toa* paintings of Māori goddesses and Claudia Pond Eyley's use of goddess figures and images by earlier women artists in her *Shield* paintings reminded us of women's history and female power.

Photography was an important medium for women. In the 1970s Fiona Clark's photographs of transgender individuals caused quite a stir, upending conventional notions of gender and 'acceptable' expressions of sexuality. She photographed others in the LGBT community, as well as documenting Māori women involved in community politics. A number of photographers (including Megan Jenkinson, Jane Zusters, Janet Bayly, Margaret Dawson, Rhonda Bosworth, Marie Shannon, Christine Webster and Merylyn Tweedie) were exploring ways of avoiding or deflecting the 'male gaze', a concept promulgated by film theorists Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, as well as the writer John Berger. The work of Dawson, Webster and Tweedie also subverted the idea of a fixed persona. Photographers Anne Noble and Gillian Chaplin explored their own sexuality and Fiona Pardington started making images of men specifically for women's pleasure.

Di Ffrench also photographed male nudes and her *Observer* series reworked images from art history from a feminist perspective.

A number of women made artists' books and visual diaries, foregrounding the intimate and the personal as valid subject matter for art. And, adapting the *Dinner Party* model, there were collaborative works, for instance *The Women's Den* at the 1980 Women's Studies Conference and Shephard's *Full Circle* project in the early 1980s. Juliet Batten facilitated a number of collaborative projects: *Lifescape* in 1982, the *Menstrual Maze* in 1983, the *100 Women* project in 1985 and *Threshold*, focusing on menopause, in 1987. As I've noted elsewhere, because many of the women involved weren't trained or skilled artists, these works tended to be aesthetically unresolved. However, as a means for the disruption of the accepted relations between artist, artwork and audience and for the active constitution of a female audience, they undoubtedly had their place.

In a response to the obstacles many women faced in trying to exhibit their work, the Women's Gallery opened in Wellington in 1980 and operated until 1984. Predictably, it generated some negative responses. Austin Davies suggested it should call itself "the 'Art Gallery for the aesthetically disabled female'"⁴ and Neil Rowe suggested it was a venue for "a form of therapy for disgruntled ladies."⁵ The Women's Gallery's 1981 touring *Mothers* exhibition was a highlight; the accompanying catalogue explored contrasts between women's representations of motherhood and orthodox 'male' representations, particularly those of the Christian church.

From the mid-1970s, we began to see feminist art publications from overseas. To list just a few: Ann Sutherland and Linda Nochlin's *Women Artists 1550-1950* (1976), Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race* (1978), Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock's *Old Mistresses* (1981), Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982), Isabelle Anscombe's *A Woman's Touch: Women in Design from 1860 to the present* (1984), Roszika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine* (1984) and Val Williams' *Women Photographers* (1986).

Much of this was revisionist art history—and goodness knows that was welcome and necessary. But there was also information about contemporary artists, for instance, Parker and Pollock's *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985* (1987), Eleanor Munro's *Originals: American Women*

4. Austin Davies, letter to the editor, *Nelson Evening Mail*, 17 January 1980.

5. Neil Rowe, *Evening Post*, Wellington, 2 February 1980. He wrote that a gallery "so dogmatically based on an ideology that is determined to show art that serves its own polemical ends has less to do with art than it has with politics and a form of therapy for disgruntled ladies."

Artists (1979) and Lucy Lippard's *From the Center* (1976) in which she wrestled intelligently with the problem of whether one could define 'women's art' and 'feminist art' and, if so, how. We read Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking essay "Why have there been no great women artists?", first published in 1971, in which she identified that the invisibility of women artists was not because women lacked talent or tenacity but was rather a symptom of art's institutional structures, created by and for men. And alongside these on our bookshelves, there was theoretical discourse from America and Britain and a raft of English translations of French feminist theory—the latter not specifically related to the visual arts but of great interest.

So, what about New Zealand publications? As well as *Spiral*, *Broadsheet* carried the occasional review or article and its June 1983 issue looked at what was meant by 'feminist art' and 'feminist artists'. More substantial publications included Anne Kirker's *New Zealand Women Artists*⁶ (1986), Eastmond and Penfold's *Women and the Arts, Six Women Photographers*, edited by Merylyn Tweedie and Rhondda Bosworth⁷, and *A Women's Picture Book*, edited by Tilly Lloyd, Bridie Lonie and Marian Evans.⁸ In 1986, Susan Davis, Elizabeth Eastmond and I, later joined by Tina Barton, launched *Antic*, a journal of arts, literature, theory and criticism. Its content wasn't exclusively female or feminist, but we published a good deal of feminist theory and criticism as well as commissioning covers and page art by women.

Earlier New Zealand women artists were being written into art history in other ways, mostly, though not exclusively, by women. In *Art New Zealand*, there were articles on Rata Lovell Smith, Rhona Haszard, Flora Scales, Margaret Stoddart, Louise Henderson, May Smith, Doris Lusk and Evelyn Page. Alison Mitchell (aka Allie Eagle) curated several notable exhibitions at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch: *A Survey of New Zealand Women Painters* in 1974, the avowedly feminist *Six Women Artists* in 1975, and in 1977 a show of Olivia Spencer Bower's work. In 1982 came the National Art Gallery's Rita Angus touring exhibition and catalogue and in 1986 the McDougall's Evelyn Page retrospective and publication.

We began to see feminist readings of a range of art and exhibitions. And in that context, it's necessary to look at the National Criticism Symposium held at the National Art Gallery in January 1986. This was a landmark event that

6. Anne Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, Reed Methuen, Auckland, 1986.

7. Rhondda Bosworth and Merylyn Tweedie (eds), *Six Women Photographers*, PhotoForum New Zealand, Issue 56, 1987.

8. Marian Evans, Bridie Lonie and Tilly Lloyd (eds), *A Women's Picture Book: 25 Women Artists of Aotearoa (New Zealand)*, Government Printing Office, Wellington 1988.

9. Her paper 'Remissions: Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality' was reprinted in *Antic* 1, June 1986, pp. 87-103.

10. Juliet Batten, 'The Edmonds Cookbook and the Ivory Tower', *Antic* 2, March 1987, pp. 5-17.

11. Letter to the editors, *Antic* 3, November 1987, pp. 141-2.

12. Stephen Zepke, *Repetitions: Toward a Re-construction of Phallic Univocality*, *Antic* 7, June 1990, pp. 41-56.

saw the flinging down of several gauntlets: by Ngahuia Te Awekotuku on cultural appropriation, by Merylyn Tweedie and myself on attitudes to women's art and, memorably, by Lita Barrie.⁹ Aligning herself with French feminist theory, Barrie alleged that New Zealand feminist art critics were prescriptive and simplistic, merely using the tools of the patriarchy to promote a certain kind of women's art practice—"advocating the use of certain stylistic devices and subject matter." (In fact, I'm unable to think of *anyone* who was doing this.)

She went on to identify four categories of women's art in New Zealand. First, vaginal art, which she described as "the 'Chicago-Lippard' school of 'shared-imagery' art, which emphasises vaginal forms and menstruation and employs certain stylistic devices—pastel colours, soft materials and flowers." She described Lucy Lippard's *From the Center* as "analogous to the Edmonds cookbook, as a recipe for how to make a so-called feminist artwork"—which was something of a misrepresentation. The second was what she called "the Merlin Stone" school—" ... glorification of a matrilineal and sometimes mythical female past. Often expressed collaboratively, it includes wiccan moon dances, castles in the sand, horns, spirals, and Neolithic venuses."

Unsurprisingly, these claims had many of the men in the audience rubbing their hands together in glee! They also sent shock waves through the women artists who had shared their ideas, work and aspirations with Lita and who felt betrayed by these damning generalisations.

The third category was art that does not identify with a feminist agenda; and finally artists who don't identify with the feminism "prescribed here" but "who ... work intuitively (as distinct from critically) from their PHYSICAL experience as antipodean women, to the natural environment." She singled out Jacqueline Fraser, Christine Hellyar and Pauline Rhodes for favourable mention.

These claims were promptly challenged by Juliet Batten,¹⁰ by Heather McPherson who described as heterosexist Barrie's argument that women's representations of the female body pandered to male desires;¹¹ and later by Stephen Zepke who critiqued Barrie's conflation of various, incompatible French theories and suggested her identification of 'bad' and 'good' feminist art was as binary as the systems she was opposing.¹²

There were, in fact, a few New Zealand women artists influenced by the French feminists. Merylyn Tweedie (now

known as et al) was one. Barrie acknowledged that in a later paper but described Tweedie's imagery as 'weak'.¹³ Ruth Watson also made some works in this territory. For example, in her *Map of the Dark Continent which is neither dark nor unexplorable* (1987-88) she overlaid text from Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* on a shape that suggested a vaginal aperture and an African shield but also one of the 'gores' that make up Mercator's projection of the world globe, bringing together a patently artificial system and an idea of the feminine/other as constructed by the dominant culture.

Why didn't French feminist theory have more impact on artists here? Perhaps one reason was that it tended to privilege language over imagery and didn't readily translate into visual practice. Barrie's application of it was, I'm sure, seen as prescriptive and potentially limiting of what feminist art practice could be. And perhaps younger women, who might have picked up on this strand of feminism, were becoming less interested in the feminist project.

Anne Maxwell, writing on poststructuralist and feminist literary theory, cited Gayatri Spivak's notion "that the illusion of a unified subjectivity, the adoption of an essentialist position, and even universalism, might at certain strategic moments, form expedient measures in the feminist struggle against real material oppressions ..."¹⁴ And I think this is where Barrie's argument lacks understanding of women operating in the real world. As I've proposed elsewhere,¹⁵ women artists have tended to adopt strategies that are appropriate for a particular moment and for their own particular situations. As is the way with strategies, some are more effective than others in the impact they have in the wider world, some have longer lasting repercussions than others. But you won't know until you try!

So, with the idea of the strategy in mind, let's look at the artists in *Embodied Knowledge*. I've already mentioned Vivian Lynn's printmaking, but around 1980 she began experimenting with a range of other materials and processes, often related to taboos around aspects of the body, such as skin and hair, and began to work in installation. For her, hair was, she said, 'a toxic image' she could use to subject viewers to a 'psychic shock'. As she's noted, it's often associated with women's beauty—but only when it's on their heads; elsewhere on the body or off the body it's considered disgusting—and its beauty is also seen as a snare to entrap men. Her *Guarden Gates* (1982), a series of seven cyclone

13. Lita Barrie, 'Further Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality: Deferrals', *Antic* 2, March 1987, pp. 18-47.

14. Anne Maxwell, 'Poststructuralist and Feminist Literary Theories: The Problematic Relation', *Antic* 1, March 1987, p 59-71.

15. Priscilla Pitts, 'Not just a pretty face: Feminine wiles in New Zealand women's art practice', *alter/image: Feminism and Representation in New Zealand art 1973-1993*, eds Christina Barton and Deborah Lawler-Dormer, City Gallery, Wellington and Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1993, pp. 18-21.

16. Vivian Lynn in conversation with Priscilla Pitts, 1986.

17. Vivian Lynn, artist's statement for *Caryatid*, Installation Project 2, Wellington City Gallery, 1986.

18. Lita Barrie, 'Further Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality: Deferrals', p. 31.

mesh gates with hair woven into or hanging from them, is a beautiful, powerful work, the gates representing the patriarchal repression of female sexuality and spirituality and the hair, clogged with clay, encased in bags, ornately plaited and, eventually, falling free, representing a transformational journey.

Lynn also wanted to confront the physicality of skin. She used small amounts of pigs' skin—or rather pigs' bladder—in *Guarden Gates* but this wasn't available in large quantities, so she began experimenting with materials that could stand in for our largest sensory organ. One of those was tapa cloth, which she used to dramatic effect in her *Gates of the Goddess: A southern crossing attended by the Goddess* (1986); another, as in *Lamella Lamina* (1983), was architectural tracing paper that she layered and processed with tar, shellac, burning and water, which makes the surface bubble.

At this time she was interested in a particular kind of woman-centred spirituality, related to the changes in women's bodies as they age. The columns in *Lamella Lamina* and other works can be read in terms of the female body as a hollow vessel, perhaps to be filled with grace; the female body as a pillar, the caryatids of classical architecture; the tree trunks of the sacred grove, usually the place of a female deity. The work can be related to the stripped tree trunks of her *Taupatauma* garden, in front of her Wellington home, which she described as a living metaphor for the intimacy of the female body and an embodiment of nature's regenerative cycles.¹⁶

She also said of her work *Caryatid* (and this applies to other works): "I tend to represent the figure ... through conceptual signs rather than through description because by doing so I can build layers of meaning into the forms ... This work rehabilitates and recreates the sacred column."¹⁷

Lita Barrie was very critical of Lynn's work—she described *Gates of the Goddess* as "a walk-in menstrual Goddess cunt" that "effectively deliver[ed] woman up for a gang-bang".¹⁸ But is Lynn's work 'essentialist' in the negative sense Barrie asserts? I'd suggest that Vivian Lynn's exploration of and references to women's biological and physical being and her deeply felt interest in female spirituality have always been imbued with a degree of intellectual complexity and questioning that moves it beyond a simple essentialist position.

Unlike Lynn, Christine Hellyar does not describe herself as a feminist artist but there is clearly a feminist politics

underlying much of her work. One strand of her work has focused on the natural environment, the New Zealand bush, the beach and the garden. Another draws on domestic imagery. I’m thinking of works like her *Country Clothesline* (1972) with its latex-dipped clothes pegged out on a piece of rope or her mid-1970s *Food Trays* filled with cast latex food items; and there have been many others focused on traditional women’s work.

The late 1970s saw a major change in Hellyar’s materials and techniques, in part due to the soaring cost of latex and bronze. She began using textiles, plaster and white clay and natural, often found, materials—stones, bones, shells, feathers, fur. Techniques like sewing, binding, wrapping, knotting and basketry became central to her work. The inherent vulnerability of many of her materials can be seen as relating to the changeability and fragility of human life.¹⁹

Something that has been a constant is her use of various framing devices—boxes, glass vessels, cupboards, aprons, rectangular ‘cloaks’. The use of containers, especially boxes, can be seen in the work of many women artists both here and overseas in the 1970s and 80s; for Hellyar they act as both conceptual and formal ways of organising her material.

Many of her cupboards sit at an intersection of the domestic china cabinet and the museum display. She’s always been fascinated by museum collections and many of the objects she makes are loosely adapted from artefacts from a variety of cultures. The *Enhancing* cupboard (1983) is one of four *Thought Cupboards*; the other three are titled *Gathering*, *Worrying* and *Mixing*. They are about shifts in human behavior over time, how thought processes and ideas are expressed in human actions and artefacts. *Enhancing* includes seven ‘heads’, adorned with a variety of objects and materials. For instance, along the bottom row there are references to different aspects of art making. The goatskin hat alludes to primitivism in art, the inverted basket adorned with acanthus flowers to classical art, while the white felt hat represents “the shape of the major plates of the cranium and refers to conceptual art”²⁰. The ‘wands’ represent ritual, the mysterious aspects of the human desire to enhance and create.

Hellyar’s works complicate binary oppositions. Relationships between nature and culture are never simple; they intersect in a multiplicity of ways. We might assume that her aprons are all about women’s domestic activity, but

19. This can also be very disconcerting for the museum professional. I remember only too well Cheryll Sotheran and I unpacking one of her works at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery only to find moth grubs feasting merrily on the contents.

21. Pauline Rhodes in conversation with Priscilla Pitts, 29 May 1986.

22. Ibid.

23. Pauline Rhodes, letter to Priscilla Pitts, undated.

24. Ibid.

25. Rebecca Solnit, ‘Detroit Arcadia’, *Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness*, Trinity University Press, San Antonio, Texas, 2014, pp. 68-83.

while some, for instance those with womb-like pockets, relate specifically to women’s bodies, a key source is a photograph of her father in his gardening apron, while some of her aprons are intended to be androgynous.

Her rectangular cloaks are also ungendered, or perhaps multi-gendered, as the rounded pockets suggest the female body and there are phallic objects attached to the cloaks as well. Each of those in *Embodied Knowledge* is topped by a hat, again highlighting the role of thought and intellect in what might otherwise be read solely in terms of ‘primitivist’ impulses and the body.

Hellyar has at times made work in the landscape, but working outdoors is absolutely central to the practice of Pauline Rhodes. Her outdoor works are temporary, they touch lightly on the land. They differ from the work of British artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long in that Rhodes places non-natural components—fluorescent green rods, squares of heavy paper, loops and discs of metal and plastic—into the natural environment. She’s described some of her works as “writing her signature in the landscape”²¹; others lay down paths across familiar terrain, or articulate the lay of the land, the surface of water. Her photographs of these installations record human presence in and observation of the land, a reminder that our experience of landscape is never unmediated.

Her materials are related in size to the human body and its movement through space and, as she points out, she needs to be able to carry them to her chosen site.²² Working to her own physical limitations, she is able to make large scale works—but they are never monumental or monolithic.

Running has been crucial to Rhodes’s work from the early 1980s. For a time she was involved in annual races on the Port Hills, where she lives, and, rather than focusing on competition, she sees her training runs as a meditative act. In her running she says she wanted “to explore the especially female strengths of stamina and endurance, and their regenerative power to develop my physical potential ...”²³ For her it’s about knowing the landscape not just by looking but through physical feeling, sensing what’s underfoot, absorbing landforms through her feet in a way not possible just by walking. She has described her participation in a relay race as an art work, “a sculptural project” and the runners ahead of her as markers in the landscape.²⁴ Always her work speaks of what Rebecca Solnit describes as “... sensual contact with the land ...”²⁵

Installations such as *Extensum/Extensor* (1982) are the other major aspect of Rhodes's practice. Here, too, she articulates space, but interior, built space, using similar materials to those in her outdoor works. Many of them incorporate the natural processes of rust, using squares of metal—and of course metal is of the earth—which, in the presence of air and water, make 'prints' on paper, cloth, plastic, card. These are often set out in a grid formation, bringing into play contrasts of chance—the unpredictability of the rust stains—versus the orderly placement of materials, the organic against the structured and formal.

I've already mentioned the absence of women's work in *Te Maori*. This was an impetus for the three *Karanga Karanga* exhibitions in 1986 in Auckland, Gisborne and Wellington, which showcased the work of around 70 contemporary Māori women using a range of media—another landmark moment in our art history. Maureen Lander exhibited for the first time in the Auckland iteration, her work a fall of muka and strips of clear plastic suspended over a carpet of flax seeds.

Lander works with indigenous materials—principally harakeke in various forms—the leaves, flower heads, seeds and muka, the fibre stripped from the leaves—but also with pingao and feathers. These are often combined with very different kinds of elements and materials—nylon fishing line, fibre optic cable, glass, lighting, moving image and digital components.

Maureen is of both Māori and Pākehā descent and deliberately positions herself in relation to both. In some works she has integrated traditional Māori practice and key moments in twentieth century Western art history. For example *This is not a kete* (1994) with its dramatically lit woven kete, shown in *Art Now* at the Museum of New Zealand, took its title from René Magritte's 1926 painting of a pipe titled *Ceci n'est pas un pipe* (This is not a pipe—and of course it isn't, it's a painting) to make the point that other kete housed in the museum had been transmogrified into 'artefacts', divorced from their cultural, spiritual and practical contexts.

Red Carpet for a Grand Piano (1996), with its carpet of red-dyed muka mimicking fallen pohutukawa stamens, echoed Joseph Beuys's use of the felt-swathed piano in some of his works as well as referencing Jane Campion's film *The Piano*—which did have its moment on the red carpet. The work juxtaposed an emblem of European art and colonisation with natural materials, Māori fibre techniques and a simulation of an indigenous flower.

Recently Lander has made a work at The Elms, an early Christian mission house in Tauranga, in which she acknowledges the histories of both Pākehā and Māori women. Lander's work isn't polemical, it's in no way protest art, but it seems to me there is always an underlying politics, conveyed quietly and often with wit and gentle humour.

A good deal of Lander's work is in the form of site specific installations and, as a result, much of her work is ephemeral. So the works in *Embodied Knowledge* are recent, not from the 1980s. They take their forms from maro (aprons) or rapaki (skirts), which in the context of this exhibition makes for a felicitous relationship with Christine Hellyar's aprons and cloaks. They are of the human body but, in their use of muka and their forms, which symbolically connect earth and sky, also the body of the land. The use of nylon fishing line gives an added sparkle to the works—and I see a connection there with the importance of kai moana and the significance to Māori of the sea, the rivers and lakes of Aotearoa.

Lander has often worked with other Māori women to realise her projects, for instance in *Ngā Uri o Rāhiri* (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1997) and *Flat-Pack Whakapapa* (toured by the Dowse Art Museum in 2017-18). She and Christine Hellyar have also worked together on museum-based projects, including at the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford and, with Jo Torr, at the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Finally to turn to et al, here represented through The Estate of L. Budd. The installation in *Embodied Knowledge* is a kind of mini retrospective that brings together a wide range of works, mostly from the 1980s with a few from the 1990s. L. Budd is one of the names adopted by Merylyn Tweedie, who now prefers to be known as et al. As I've mentioned, her work in the 1980s was consciously informed by French feminist theory, such as the writings of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, and by the concept of '*écriture féminine*', which can be loosely translated as 'writing in a feminine voice'. Some of these writers argued that oppression of women was entrenched in the linguistic process of logic (logos=word) through which meaning is produced. Et al deliberately disrupts that logic—to make new meaning? Or to empty out meaning?

As I noted earlier, she was one of several photographers who made works in response to the idea of the 'the male gaze', in her case by blurring images, blanking out faces and truncating bodies. Collaged images were often removed,

leaving traces of glue and causing the viewer to wonder what had been there, what was now absent. She addressed the myths of suburban life and played off sexist language such as “Man the cake stall, girls” and “She’ll be right”. A number of works featured manifestations of Dora, a patient diagnosed by Sigmund Freud as a hysteric, one of whose symptoms was the loss of her voice.

The artist’s book was a form used by a number of feminist artists—it invites intimacy and, perhaps, an expectation of some kind of narrative or diaristic approach. Et al’s books frustrate those expectations with their fragments of language, crossings out and seemingly pointless repetition of words and images. Around the late 1980s she moved off the page and away from the wall to make installations using found objects, often combined with found and tellingly altered texts.

Although et al’s work was consciously and openly feminist in the early part of her career, that is an appellation she no longer cares for. However, although overt feminist references disappear, there is still a deliberate resistance to being pinned down or ‘understood’. In a discussion I had with her in 1986, she spoke about using multiple voices as a way of avoiding fixity²⁶; this evasive action developed into multiple personae. Over the years she’s adopted a variety of pseudonyms (for instance, Merit Gröting, Arthur C Craig and Sons, Minerva Betts and, in ‘et al’, a fictitious collective; she also made films under the moniker Popular Productions—ironic since the films were ‘popular’ with only a tiny audience and certainly never populist). That slipperiness is there too in the partial sentences, disconnected phrases, erasures such as blacking out or scratching out text, blonding and blackening surfaces, the use of resin to add layers or seal things shut, white noise ... Though the work is theoretically stringent, its physical nature is critical to conveying the artist’s ideas and to the viewer’s response.

For all these artists, materiality is central to their work. The body, in one way or another, is represented or invoked. Each artist, in her own way, has challenged the assumptions of the art world and beyond—as to what art can be and women can do. In 1986 Ian Wedde said of Vivian Lynn: “Lynn ... for years has worked to have art make contexts, not fit them ...”²⁷, something that is true of all five artists in *Embodied Knowledge*.

26. See ‘Merylyn Tweedie: New Works at New Vision’, *PhotoForum Review* No. 30, November 1986, pp. 16-20.

27. Ian Wedde, ‘Saving art from itself’, *Evening Post*, 20 December 1986.

Past the Post: Postmodernism and Postfeminism

Reprinted from *ANTIC*, 1, Auckland, June 1986, pp. 5-21.

For Elizabeth Eastmond

My title has a retrospective cast. Yet the next fifteen years interest me far more than the last one hundred and fifty, and as a way of looking into the future I'll position my essay halfway between the end of the century and the beginnings of the Women's Movement in Australia in (about) 1970.*

Ten years after International Women's Year another brief season of funding is bringing feminist projects into bloom. Time, then, to take stock of feminist work in the visual arts and to consider the future.

Feminist theory and politics is the richest lode in contemporary life: more debates in fact most life. Not surprisingly, 'definitions' of feminist art have long since been discarded. There are as many feminisms in the visual arts as there are tendencies in feminist culture, and as Lisa Tickner writes:

'Feminism' is not necessarily a consciously determined ingredient in the work, but rather it arises out of the relation between that work and the representations of a dominant culture, a particular audience, and the use to which it is put. (Some are born feminist, some become feminist, and some have feminism thrust upon them.)¹

Yet feminist art must be distinguished from the broader category of art by women. The Women's Movement is certainly diverse; yet its wealth of difference has this in common: an articulate and developed commitment to the specific perspectives brought to bear by women as women. Femininity is insisted upon, not stereotypical femininity, but whatever might be constructed out of present circumstances for the future. 'Women who want to be women'? Rather, women who are women, who recognise rather than mis-recognise themselves, who embrace femininity rather than opting out to hide out in a successful suit, assuming masculine positions to achieve masculine status. (Marx's distinction between the 'class in itself' and the 'class for itself' comes to mind.) Feminists are women for themselves: for change, for radical alteration in the status of women, for that crucial difference and indeed delighting in it, but also refusing to accept the consequences historically accorded that difference, doled out to women on account of it.

This matter of articulate feminist theory and practice is crucial. Taking a feminist position demands clarity in each

* This paper was commissioned by Women 150 and appeared in the book 150 Victorian Women Artists (Australia, 1985). An earlier version was read at the Feminist Art Seminar at ANZART in Auckland, May 1985.

1. Lisa Ticknor, 'Notes on: Feminism, Femininity and Women's Art', *LIP*, Number 8, 1984, p. 17.

2. The most recent guides to the former are *Women in the Arts: a study by the Research Advisory Group of the Women and Arts Project*, Sydney, Australia Council, 1983 and David Throsby (ed.) *The Artist in Australia Today*, Australia Council, 1983; I have written on the latter in *Heartland*, exhibition catalogue, Wollongong City Art Gallery, 1985.

3. I'm thinking here particularly of Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman's 'Textual Strategies - The Politics of Art Making', *Screen*, v.21, no.2, pp. 35-48, reprinted in *Lip*, 1982/2, and so especially influential in Australia.

4. A phrase in Margaret Plant's review of Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic* is revealing. She refers to Craig Owens as writing on 'female photographers', a remarkable contraction of his argument and reduction of the work he discusses. See *Art and Text*, No 12/13, Summer, 1983, p. 120.

5. Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', in Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Port Townsend, Washington, Bay Press, 1983, pp. 57-77.

situation, constant reworking and reassessment of ideas and strategies, hard heads as well as soft hearts. Women cannot afford the careless luxury of wishful thinking. Proclaiming the feminine would be mere rhetoric otherwise. I'm more interested in effecting the feminine.

Feminist positions in the visual arts have taken on greater definition in the last ten years. Current issues range from education for women as artists, to women's employment in the arts, to relationships between individual artists and broader political currents, to women's particular possibilities in visual culture.² What is to be done? What assessment can be made of the strategic possibilities of this movement, a particularly interesting one for women in the history of post-industrial culture? For new possibilities seem to be opening up with the current debates around postmodernism, and certainly changing perspectives (though whose, it is difficult to say) are signalled by the emergence of the term 'post-feminism'.

In both cases the theoretical emphasis is less on the mode of production of feminist art than the cultural climate for its reception. Of course, production and consumption cannot be so readily divorced from each other. This essay points to a direction in current writing about the arts, and doesn't attempt a comprehensive account of contemporary art making practices. Earlier debates of appropriate modes and strategies for feminist artists aren't set aside, merely put on the back burner for the duration of this speculation.³

Postmodernism

What is its relevance for women? This is a different question from what does the postmodern era hold for women? Both are asked, and the asking reveals another interrogative: what IS post-modernism? An incipient cultural crisis, a new era in western history, a cluster of intuitions about historical change, or a fashion merely, an identifiable visual style based on photographic practices?⁴ And what has all this to do with women, or more properly, women with it? Craig Owens⁵ pointed out that the postmodernist debates have been almost exclusively gender indifferent, and that this marks their distinction from (or wilful ignorance of) feminist theory of the last several decades.

In one sense this is no surprise. This is not a debate about contemporary accounts of social structure but about conceptions of history and about modernism, which is the

site of struggle and also the prize in the debate, and about perceptions of time and change in an era which has spawned many brave new tools for making and marking each passing moment. In short, women and men both seem to be swept away by changing modes of consciousness, and the postmodernism debate is evidence of widespread attempts to come to terms with that perceived change. When Jean Baudrillard spoke in Australia in 1984 he touched sensitive nerves of recognition; he offered no persuasive diagnosis of the postmodern, in my estimation, and certainly no treatment for the disorder. But his description of the symptoms was (fatally) accurate.⁶

All this aside, I’m convinced the period ahead will affect women and men differently, and that while Owens’ observation may be trivially true, in the sense that the debate that does NOT displace women has only just been imagined,⁷ it must be taken seriously. Whatever it is that postmodernism is must be addressed by feminists, for women’s place in history and historical change is now firmly on the theoretical agenda, and debates about such issues are no longer being run in theoretical indifference to gender roles.⁸

In this essay I want to offer some thoughts on these current perplexities. Or rather some perplexities on these thoughts. For the first point is that postmodernism is a contested term, and so by implication is Modernism. Quite literally, the name itself (fast becoming a proper name, invoked but not investigated) tells us that life after Modernism is the subject for discussion. Yet it’s not so interesting to look for an ‘authoritative’ definition of postmodernism as to consider the implications of the very complex intellectual brawl we are witnessing (and joining) right now. What’s really fascinating is not what Helen Gardner’s nth edith of *Art Through The Ages* says in twenty years time, but where women are placed in the debate now, and what’s at stake in it.

Some recent accounts of Modernism have stressed women’s exclusion or marginalisation from an imagery of technological progress and industrial muscle. (One thinks of Leger, of the German New Photographers, or of Frida Kahlo’s opposition to all that signified the rational ordered progress of the (masculine) world of industry.⁹ Yet in Australia the case was markedly different. Modernist art here was the special province of women: Preston, Dorrit Black, Cossington Smith and others were the local proponents of pictorial experimentation in modernist modes

6. See Andre Frankovits (ed.) *Seduced and Abandoned: The Baudrillard Scene in Australia*, Sydney: Stonemoss, 1984.

7. See Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, ‘Displacement and the Discourse of Woman’, in Mark Krupnick (ed.) *Displacement: Derrida and after*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983, pp. 169-95, for an exhilarating consideration of the possibilities of such a discourse.

8. A tremendously useful account of recent work is Eleanor Fox-Genovese, ‘Placing Women’s History in History’, *New Left Review*, No.133, ‘May-June 1982, pp. 5-29.

9. For example, Lea Vergine, *L’altra Meta Dell’avan Guardia*, Milan, 1980 and Terry Smith, ‘Marginality and Modernity: the Case of Frida Kahlo’, *LIP*, No.8, 1984, pp. 39-59.

10. For example, see Paul Taylor (ed.), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*, Melbourne, 1984, and Paul Carter’s review ‘Roots and Seeds: Art in the Directionless ‘70s’, *The Age Monthly Review*, v.4, 11, April, 1985, pp. 9-20.

11. For example, my ‘Fragmentation and Feminism: the Critical Discourses of Postmodernism’, *Art & Text*, 7, Spring 1982, pp. 61-73, and Virginia Spate, ‘Whatever happened to the Art of the Seventies’, *Art & Text*, 14, Winter, 1984, pp. 75-79.

12. Frederic Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, in Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 111-25.

the dominant groups in the bourgeoisie did not support. Since male artists controlled the culturally high ground of landscape painting and portraiture, women were free to cultivate cultural modes that answered to the interests of a tiny section of the population, sufficiently far away from the concerns of the ruling group to be left to their own devices.

After 1945 Modernism gradually moved to centre-stage in Australian culture, and here as elsewhere women have had a problematical place in it: absent, displaced or a damned difficulty. To wit: the large survey exhibitions of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s that ushered in a new period of official benediction for modernist art were evidently unable to extend to women’s work as modernist artists, and even today surviving proponents of the modern still find the feminist challenges of the last ten years irritatingly irrelevant.

And is this modernism dead? An emerging art historical myth has it that the ‘70s saw the obliteration of Modernism in favour of permissive pluralism, that ‘anything’ went.¹⁰ In fact many tendencies within Modernism were investigated during this crisis period, and the most striking of these was the re-institution of the older programmes of social reform in place of the thinner and most specialized ‘Modernism’ for which Clement Greenberg was the international spokesman. These ‘political’ modes of art making were most apparently under threat when postmodernism was conceived as a return to Modernism, or as a return to object making that favoured the art market, or as an indice of the reaction of these times.¹¹ As a seminar several years ago plaintively asked: ‘Whatever Happened to the Art of the Seventies?’ Now it is clear that ‘the political’ is more subtly inflected in visual practices than was previously supposed, and that political significance and efficacy isn’t confined to existing imageries. On the contrary.

Yet the ‘threat’ was real enough. One of the two major reactions to the emergence of the question of the postmodern in Australia corresponds to Jameson’s ‘Postmodern of reaction’, and the other amounts to a wholesale hatch-battening against the coming tempest of conservatism. More interesting than either is the possibility of a ‘Postmodern of resistance’, and while Jameson displaces women (plus ca change, plus la même chose) our task is to defeat that displacement.¹²

Jameson’s position is unusually optimistic amongst influential accounts of the postmodern. More usual readings

are anxious about the newest age. If Modernism was the creed of hope for the future, the dominant mood of the postmodernist debate is black: few hopes for a better life (either socialist or capitalist), only dark confusion and despair and the loss of power over circumstances. Above all, the final loss of mastery, the failure of western science in its utopian mission (impossible). How are women implicated in this crisis? Can the situation be exploited and can women seize the moment, on the ‘kick them while they’re down’ principle?

This is the position taken by Craig Owens in ‘The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism’. Owens takes Lyotard’s postmodernism fairly straight; he writes of the ‘crisis of cultural authority’ for Europe, for instance, the realization that there is no one central normative culture (good news for Antipodeans, even at this late date!).

According to Owens, this crisis has special relevance for women but he also argues that:

‘... if one of the most salient aspects of our postmodern culture is the presence of an insistent feminist voice ... theories of postmodernism have tended to neglect or repress that voice.’

Worse:

The absence of discussions of sexual difference in writings about postmodernism as well as the fact that few women have engaged in the modernism/postmodernism debate, suggest that postmodernism may be yet another masculine invention engineered to exclude women.¹³

This gung-ho passage drew sharp criticism in Australia.¹⁴ It’s an easy target, though its enthusiasm is touching. Owens need not have attributed intention to the absence of women from the debate: he could have argued from the assignment of women to the category of ‘the Other’, structurally exterior to public cultural discourses. And there’s also the one possibility Owens, significantly, doesn’t consider: that women have absented themselves, A.W.O.L. and engaged on other business. Yet despite its wilful aspects—for example Owen’s apparently disingenuous failure to consider the diverse sources of theories of the postmodern, and his invocation of a notion of representative politics that sits oddly with other aspects of his argument —Owens’ key proposition excites my sympathy. Owens writes:

15. Owens, op.cit., pp. 61-62.

I would like to propose ... that women’s insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an instance of post-modern thought.¹⁵

The first part of this sentence is apologetic nonsense of a symptomatic sort, but the second carries the real weight. Women’s insistence on difference does exceed the old dichotomies in European thought, it is true. No longer simply a question of a universe constructed of oppositions, but an evasion of the old dualities: mind/body, intellectual/artist, man/woman, on/off. Owens’ conclusion is a re-statement of his argument, couched in a social injunction:

What we must learn, then, is to conceive difference without opposition.

This call would be mere easy sympathy were it not for Owens’ stress on the rejection of the ‘master-narratives’ in contemporary culture, and the crisis in representation practices entailed by women’s recent interventions. As Owens remarks, women ‘... not only have nothing to lose: their exteriority to Western representation exposes its limits’.¹⁶ Quite so. The limits of a binary system in which women are conceived of as ‘the Other’ are set from the start, and an obvious place to start dismantling it.

Craig Owens isn’t the first (male) art critic to celebrate the challenge posed by women to the existing canons of representation. Nearly ten years ago Lawrence Alloway canvassed rather similar territory, with the difference that he was concerned then to place women’s work against the evident crisis in (late American) modernism, seeing women’s art as the salvation of the (almost) lost cause of avant-garde art, as a last hope in the ‘confusion’ of the 1970s and the way out of the quicksand of contemporary pluralism.¹⁷ (Owens is past all that.)

Alloway correctly attributed to 1970s feminist art a tone of moral urgency and the project of social reform intrinsic to modernism. Yet only a writer deeply embedded in the American art industry could conceive of women’s work as the Grace Darling of modernism. Admittedly, boarding official culture was a cherished ambition of some American feminist artists: this is one way to read Judy Chicago’s ‘The Dinner

13. Owens, op.cit., p. 61.

14. For example in Margaret Plant, op.cit., and Terence Maloon, ‘On Postmodernism’, in *Follow Me Gentlemen*, No.5, Mar/May 1985, pp. 224-26.

16. Owens, op.cit., p. 59.

17. Lawrence Alloway, ‘Women’s Art in the ‘70s’, *Art in America*, May-June 1976, pp. 64-72.

Party’. Women were flattered when Alloway championed their work, but wary too. ‘Co-optation’ was the contemporary term for the suggestions that if women and their famous ‘energy’ were thrown into the breach their new ‘style’ might see art through. Desperate straits indeed!

For the postmodern was already upon the American art world. It—considered as a style, a body of work, certainly the way in which ‘it’ is referred to in certain art community circles including, and this is most revealing, radical circles—was being discussed in print as Alloway wrote to try to turn back the tide.¹⁸ It’s a moot point whether modernism failed or postmodernism succeeded, and Jameson is one of the saner voices heard in the debate when he suggests that ‘... radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the reconstruction of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary.’¹⁹

But back to Owens. He doesn’t refer to Alloway’s celebrated advocacy of women’s art, but he does recognise the problem in seeing feminist artists and the differences they propose as simply ‘... testimony to the pluralism of the times.’ If feminism is merely one of a number of (equally and unproblematically) valuable oppositional movements, then the force of the feminist challenge is vitiated. Feminism would be reduced to an undifferentiated ‘emblem’ of ‘Difference’. In that case, ‘... the specificity of the feminist critique of patriarchy is thereby denied, along with all other forms of opposition to sexual, racial and class discrimination.’²⁰

What is the substance of Owens’ confidence in the strategic possibilities opened up for women by the crisis of the ‘master narratives’, the loss of modernist authority? Meaghan Morris has recently deflated Owens’ optimism: she argues that even if the ‘master narratives’ of western Europe are in tatters, that’s no guarantee that women will be the winners. Morris questions Owens’ assumptions that ‘... the master-narrative crisis is both real and essentially benevolent to women and other Others.’²¹ First, and this is a drastic contraction of her argument, Morris suggests that perhaps European culture is not so desperately afflicted by the crisis of confidence Owens so clearly desires.²² (Certainly, many individuals and institutions persist

18. An account of the emergence of the term postmodernism in the U.S. in Andrea Huyssen’s very thoughtful ‘The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s’, *New German Critique*, No. 22, Winter 1981, pp. 23-40.

19. Frederic Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’ in Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, p. 123.

20. Owens, op.cit., p. 62.

21. Meaghan Morris, ‘Postmodernity and Lyotard’s Sublime’, *Art & Text*, 16, Summer 1984/95, p. 51.

22. Who can forget Rudi Fuchs at the ‘Regionalism’ Form at the 1982 Biennale of Sydney as he strode to the microphone to proclaim: ‘There is only one centre and it is Europe.’?

23. Morris, op.cit., p. 52.

24. Ibid.

25. Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, ‘Displacement and the Discourse of Women’, in Krupnick, op.cit., p. 184.

in apparently unembarrassed continuity of purpose. Owens might be asked why so many comparisons between 1950s Cold War rhetoric and that of the ‘80s are current.) But even if the end of the master-narratives is upon us (and this is not just another master-narrative in itself, the story to end all stories) ‘... more serious problems are posed if we concede easily enough that legitimation is a general cultural, as well as a specialist phenomenon and if we then also assume that it is automatically good for women, blacks, gays, migrants and anti-nuclear movements.’²³

Thus is optimism punished by precision. For Morris points out that the crisis in authority Owens learns about from Lyotard may simple provoke ‘... the disintegration of motivating arguments for intervening in anything at all, except by random passion (intuition, personal profit, suffering, caprice).’²⁴ How horridly familiar! Art schools in Australia are marked by indecision, lack of purpose and indifference to social change, and the universities are even more so. On the roughest possible balance-sheet one might plausibly retrieve something from Morris’ demolition of Owens: a fond, persistent hope that any change in the fortunes of authority might be to the advantage of women, on the theory that conditions of chaos reward vigilance. But that is a very long shot, and hardly a particularly postmodern perception at that.

To be fair, Owens does argue persuasively for art which takes western systems of representation apart at the seams: Mary Kelly and Barbara Kruger are invoked, among others. (What is no longer seamless is available to be unpicked.) This necessarily self-reflexive work invites analysis and consideration of its means and ends, and in its transparency about its modes of operation denies modernist mastery in favour of fragmentation, exploring the limits of the customary and, therefore, women’s place in culture. Yet a note of doubt, about installing women as the standard-bearers of the postmodern. Why this (overly) obvious and simple restitution? Is there not, after all, something dangerously familiar in the logic Owens proclaims, yet another case of ‘... the founding of a hysterocentric to counter a phallocentric discourse.’²⁵ (The king is dead, long live the queen.) And as Gayatri Spivak argues:

The differential political implications of putting oneself in the position of accomplice-critic with

respect to an at best clandestinely determined hysterocentric subtext that is only today becoming ‘authoritative’ in bourgeois feminism, seems to ask for a different program. The collective project of our feminist critic must always be to rewrite the social text so that the historical and sexual differentials are operated together.²⁶

26. Spivak, op.cit., p. 185.

Postfeminism

Another post. Something to hang on to, or just a convenient afterthought? Are both postmodernism and postfeminism products of the same era and similar cultural currents? And what does it mean to signal a period after feminism? Reasonably enough, feminists have been reluctant to consign themselves to the yawning dustbin of history and theoretical and political oblivion. Recently Catriona Moore took issue with the new historical placement of feminism in Artspace’s newsletter:

This is the first time I’ve seen postfeminism on the agenda in print. ‘Post’ anything has all the authority of an ‘avant’ position in the critical/cultural program. Is feminism and its associated art and critical practices to be implicitly dated, stored and forgotten in the ‘70s radical archive?²⁷

27. Catriona Moore, reviewing exhibitions by Grace Cochrane, Sandy Edwards and Anne Graham, *Art Network*, No.14, Summer 1985, p. 56.

By late 1982, on my personal reckonings, feminist art, seen as a ‘style’ in the visual arts, seemed clichéd to some curators, an embarrassment to be avoided in the ‘80s. ‘Style’, ‘cliché’ and the invocation of the new decade are indicators of an historical analysis so summary that it (literally) beggars the imagination, and entrepreneurial ambitions built on planned obsolescence. In the 4th Biennale of Sydney feminist artists had their best ever outing in Australia: Mary Kelly, Miriam Schapiro, Alexis Hunter, Vivienne Binns and others were represented, just that once, feminism as a style was registered, and the artists forever historically pigeon-holed in this (aberrant) form of work. (New stocks and products are constantly called for in the supermarkets of art.)

Male entrepreneurs do not face this conception of historical change (turnover) alone. Women also may be trapped into putting the discomfoting challenges of art by

feminists behind them, in the ‘70s, under pressure to be ‘up with the times’, part of the present at all costs. Nor is this reaction confined to (for the sake of argument) younger women. We veterans in our thirties and forties are as prone to sentimental disillusionment as any other romantics and revolutionaries. Nor do we hold the monopoly on proposals for social change. Eighteen-year-old women in their first art school year, graduates in their early twenties and young artists no longer reached by organized feminism’s current forms comprise the vast majority of professional artists in their age-groups. (Note: professional, practising, but rarely patronized, in the several linked senses of the word.) And the question of the political and artistic practice of younger women artists, and their relationships to the feminist women of the art community, is increasingly a matter for discussion in art forums.

ANZART-IN-HOBART in 1983 seems to have marked a moment of disjunction between the ‘generation’ of the ‘70s and these younger women. Feminists like Bernice Murphy and Virginia Spate, and New Zealanders Cheryll Sotheran and Barbara Strathdee were shocked to realize younger women were turning away from articulate feminist positions. Some were completely oblivious to debates around the pictorial representation of women, for example, and controversy raged around a performance/striptease by a woman artist.

For the record, I’m convinced that a strip is a tease for male eyes and the simultaneous satisfaction and dissatisfaction of masculine desire, and its conventional form not recuperable to women’s desire. Annette Van den Bosch’s account is helpful here:

The artist claimed her intention—to make the performance as grotesque as possible and not to completely disrobe—changed the meaning of the event. She was supported by other younger women who claimed that no practices should be taboo to women.²⁸

28. Annette Van den Bosch, ‘Anzart - Hobart’, *Art Network*, No.10, Winter, 1983, p. 22.

I am immensely sympathetic to impatience with ‘taboos’. But women’s work is so much a matter of negotiating existing taboos, as if that were an adequate account of the structure of patriarchal capitalist society, that the confidence of the younger women seems premature while the moralism of their elders redundant. According to Van den Bosch, the debate reduced to ‘moral injunctions’ from the one side,

and claims that gains made by feminism had ‘... won younger women their freedom’.²⁹

29. Ibid.

This says as much about the ‘tunnel vision’ of the older women as it does about the ‘depoliticization’ of the younger. When young women depart from the expectations set by earlier feminist agendas tangible evidence is given of development and change. The aim was always to see robustly self-directed projects by women, on many subjects and in many modes. There is always a likelihood that the forms and imageries of previous work will become sanctified and ossified into an approved ‘feminist art’, another orthodoxy, and it must be admitted that an essential feminine strategy is to resist precisely such restrictions while refusing to revert to older patriarchal demands on artists.

This is a fascinating, pivotal moment for feminism in the arts. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the term ‘postfeminism’, inflected as it is in current usage by bad faith, should be so misleading. One argument about postfeminism is that younger women have inherited the gains of feminism, and in their new confidence work with feminine/female topics and concerns and in feminine modes.

Certainly there is a sense in which feminism is being spoken through feminine discourses in culture, and without feminism these positions could not have been publicly claimed. Feminism permitted the exploration of the feminine, and the proliferation of feminine imageries and strategies depends on the many feminisms of the moment and those learnt from the recent past. In art, as in other aspects of social life, women have come to revalue the culture of femininity, and one of the most interesting cultural shifts in recent years has been seeing what was previously subcultural becoming acceptable within the dominant discourses of art. This work is a splendid gain of feminism.

But I resist the implication that these gains allow feminists to relax at last. To conceive of the present climate as ‘feminist’ is laughable. In the mid-‘80s feminists in the arts face new and acute challenges, no longer (briefly) fashionable, seeming part of the past, and still with the great tasks of making different an obdurately patriarchal set of cultural discourses. It would be disastrous, therefore, if a situation were developing where one feminist generation assumed the rightness of its politics and that they should be automatically inherited, that their solutions bore the stamp of legitimacy, that they

(we) are the ‘mothers’ of contemporary feminism, (indeed the generational metaphor says as much, and I’ll discard it forthwith), and that the younger women (unhappily for them) have missed out on those happy times we shared. O perilous nostalgia! For we ourselves would then be implicitly seeing feminism as a phenomenon of the ‘70s, part of history, and wondering why the younger women weren’t interested. (Though they are, as a matter of fact.)

The last fifteen years have seen great changes in feminism in Australia, and not all of them for the worse. Feminist implantation in government agencies has been both marked and productive: in 1984, for instance, the Australia Council published policy and discussion documents on affirmative action for women in the arts, and the 1984 Visual Art Board’s grants to individual artists recognised the principle of women’s equal access to support. At the same time some international exhibitions, AUSTRALIAN VISIONS at the Guggenheim Museum and ANZART-IN-AUCKLAND, have been gender-balanced. And there is a sense in which young artists today are different from the young girls (we were) twenty years ago. Greatly increased numbers of women are exhibiting, fewer artists are being lost to other employments after training and better opportunities are gradually being created—albeit slowly and often only under considerable pressure.

Yet it would be premature to claim that women working in the arts are free of the constraints that have historically oppressed them. Art schools are in some respects little different from those of the pre-feminist 1960s, for example; very few women teach in them, especially in studio courses, women’s courses are tolerated or ghettoised or embattled, and the visiting heavies tend to be men. Affirmative action policies, with several notable exceptions like the S.A. School of Art, are not in operation or not effective.’ An unusually high percentage of women artists are unmarried or have no children and are able to devote all their energies to their work, but clearly these artists have not overcome the usual disadvantages of femininity, merely evaded them, and often at considerable personal cost.

Catriona Moore tells me that a ‘middle generation’ of artist/photographers in Melbourne, women in their late twenties educated as feminists, are now being disappointed in their ambition to work as artists; in some art schools students learn that feminist subjects are now part of their

‘source material’, and the implication is that all’s well. It might be, if the Melbourne women were assured of an even chance of finding exhibitions and work. Disillusion is setting in for them and lying ahead for the students. The disastrous wastage will cease only when maximum pressure is exerted on arts institutions. As ever, women will have to see to the task. It is essential to press home recent gains and recent commitments, too, if the next fifteen years isn’t to see these gains lost again.

The next great battle must be for the art schools, where the authoritarian institution of pedagogy realizes the dilemma involved in women being authoritative while working as teachers. (They just can’t see it.) Art schools are the principal site of professional life for Australian artists: they have been the special province of women as students for over one hundred years, but only rarely for women as artists. Affirmative action for women in arts schools—or the lack of it—is the greatest scandal in art education today.

Nothing remotely like a ‘feminist’ era has been achieved to date. It is ironic, given the continuing struggles in the unions, political parties, universities, with government departments and their policies, in fact in every aspect of Australian society, to hear that the high, sunny open plateau of postfeminist contentment has been reached already. (No women have been to the moon, either.) One can only speculate about the value, to whom and for what ends, the assumption of a postfeminist era represents.

Post Everything

Past the post, past the winning post? Is that where feminists find themselves in 1985? The black joke here, about postmodernism, postfeminism, posting past the end of history, is that there’s no end in sight in women’s struggles. Not that this is a hopeless prospect: it’s more like a happy release from the false constraints of bad history. Women do have a particularly vexed relationship with history, so consistently do we remain outside it, unsung and unrecorded.

Theory is developed within specific historical contexts for very particular purposes. Only the supremely privileged can afford the luxury of treating theory as entertainment, discarding the familiar as tedious, a passing fashion and a past fad. Such modes of intellectual over-consumption

are only available to those in no need of strategies of change or diversions more strenuous than any “other trivial pursuit”. ‘Theory’: the Orgy of theoretical over-consumption is the last fate of intellectuals under capitalism, the final proof of over-production.

The Women’s Movement is still the most remarkable contemporary site (as well as the product) of a persistent determination to understand and alter social life by making and using theory. Reassessment and refinement are part of this process, and intellectual and creative work is an integral part of it, with its own very peculiar pleasures attached. ‘Experience’ and ‘theory’ engage in a long intimate dance; the relationship is still best described as dialectical and the outcome is praxis. Theoretical work is valued by feminists not simply for the sheer delight of the conceptual ballet, but for its power, whatever its origins and forms, its descriptive adequacy, its constructive clarity and its political cogency. To quote Toril Moi introducing a discussion of Freud’s ‘Dora’:

‘... it is necessary to point out that a feminist approach is always a political approach. Feminists are interested in the way in which power operates in any social or textual context, and would indeed claim that any analysis that does not try to position itself in relation to dominant power structures is not only incomplete but runs the risk of incorporating unacknowledged political bias in the very terms of its own analysis.’³⁰

It is not feminism that we are ‘post’ but one historical phase of feminist politics. That is, ‘post’ insisting on ‘authentically’ feminist styles, methods and modes in the arts. The last decade has seen an explosion of feminisms and our resources are now very rich. Yet the one certainty in feminist writing on the arts is the recognition of difference(s). Multiplying desires must be our one desire: previous patriarchal prohibitions on feminine discourses about domesticity or child-rearing or violence or sexual pleasure have taught feminists not to write newly repressive regulations. (Those still in force will more than suffice.)

And as for the prospect of a history without telos³¹ that postmodernism is said to promise, women may be justifiably sceptical both about their position in the older teleological

30. Toril Moi, ‘Feminist Readings of Dora’, *Desire*, 2I.C.A. Documents Series, London: 1984, p. 16.

31. Stephen Watson’s ‘Jurgen Habermas and Jean-Francois Lyotard: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Rationality’, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, v.2, 1, pp. 1-21 is a useful discussion of the issues.

scheme of things and their location in future discourses. Looking forward as well as backward, the only certainty I can appeal to lies in this re-writing, this feminine re-inscription I'll offer on Lyotard's postmodern:

A work can only become ~~modern~~ feminist if it is first ~~post-modern~~ post-feminist. ~~Post-modernism~~ postfeminism thus understood is not ~~modernism~~ feminism at its end, but rather ~~modernism~~ feminism at its very beginning and that beginning is always recurrent.³²

32. Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Reply to the Question: What is the Post-Modern?' translated by Meaghan Morris and Ross Gibson, 21X, Sydney, Winter 1984, p. 16.

Introduction to Mana Wahine Maori: Selected Writings on Maori Women's Art, Culture and Politics

Reprinted from Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, *Mana Wahine Maori: Selected Writings on Maori Women's Art, Culture and Politics*. Auckland: New Women's Press, 1991, pp. 9-14.

The power, the rightness, the sheer joy of being a Maori woman. Of knowing that stretching out on either side of you like a vast glittering fan of light are women of courage, initiative, healing, imagination, terror, and deep, deep knowledge.

Whose adventures crossed mountain ranges and spanned the huge ocean; whose visions knew no bounds.

Whose searching and inventiveness discovered new fibres, new foods, new richness in a strange environment.

Whose very being, in these islands, left breath that fills us all. With the knowing, they were here.

And still are.

What does ‘Mana Wahine Maori’ mean? It’s not a new idea, it’s just that few people, even women, talk about it, maybe because it’s been taken for granted for so long.

Through all the decades of this century, Maori women have worked—not only as mothers, housekeepers and nurturers, but as workers within a vast labour force—on the farm with spouses or parents, in the rapidly growing cities, in a massive diversity of jobs.

And outside the waged population, Maori women have held their own, as leaders and doers, and they continue to, in the community and on the marae, both urban and rural.

This commitment to a high level of productivity has meant a wider vision, too, and concern for the basics of human life and sustenance. Understanding the crises which beset the people, and the anguish that colonization inevitably caused, many Maori women have attempted their own considerable and resourceful solutions, as activists and action-oriented tribal matriarchs.

Te Puea Herangi of Waikato set an astonishing example by revitalizing the Kingitanga—the Maori King Movement—and establishing a prosperous community in Turangawaewae, Ngaruawahia, in the 1920s. She cared for the orphans of the post-war flu epidemic, and gathered around her the hopeless, destitute and homeless; she believed hard work generated high self-esteem, for the individual and for the group, and

the legacy of her incomparable success lives on today as her work is continued by Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, the current monarch.

In other parts of Aotearoa, two welfare networks were set up to meet the needs of the people: Te Pikinga in the Waikaremoana-Urewera region, and the Maori Women’s Health League, in Waiariki. Both were effectively eclipsed in 1951 by the government-subsidized Maori Women’s Welfare League, which benefited largely from these modest tribal initiatives, and persists today as the ‘official voice’ of Maori women at a national and international level. Despite this, the Health league has sustained itself in the Rotorua area, and contributes markedly on a number of marae, declaring a much more tribal focus.

What these women did preceded feminism, or women’s liberation, in the Maori world. Yet they were as much part of my own feminist awakening as any book written overseas; they were, and are, mine, just like the kai arahi, and they are part of my own understanding and herstory.

It is often said that being Maori and feminist must be a contradiction; that feminism is some imported pakeha idea about being female and being put down for being female, that it has no place in the Maori world, that it imposes a foreign way of seeing, and of being. I disagree, because feminism is what we make it; it’s a matter of how we define it for ourselves, in terms of our own oppression as women. And no one can deny that in the last two centuries Maori women have lost, or been deprived of economic, social, political and spiritual power; and this loss, this erosion of power—or mana—or authority, invites a feminist analysis, or feminist view, of what has happened.

So, Maori women are being put down for being female. Recognizing that, and wanting to work through it, is becoming feminist. In a Maori way. There is no contradiction; for that is the message in the phrase, ‘Mana Wahine Maori’—reclaiming and celebrating what we have been, and what we will become. It is not a re-action to males, and their violence against us; it is a pro-action, a determining of ourselves as Maori women, with authenticity and grace. And its ultimate aim is a rediscovery and renaming of that essential strength and harmony, that complementary relationship between genders, that may have occurred on these islands two centuries past. We don’t know that it was like that, for sure, in the ancient Maori world; but we don’t know that it wasn’t, either. And we can always hope.

Why did so few Maori women join women's liberation in its earliest days? Because there were so many other consuming struggles: the urgency of land issues, cultural issues, language issues, and the overwhelming need to deal with what is coming at you from outside the whanau, such as institutional and individual racism, rather than looking *inward*, to the stresses and horror stories happening in one's own home or extended family. We are all effectively trained at a very early age to nurture, protect, cover for, and look after those frailer than or dependent on us. Too often, we cover for our men, for their weaknesses; too often, we fear that to do anything else, to expose them, to bring shame on the whanau, would be to act like a pakeha, to be *un-Maori*—and for a Maori woman coming into a sense of political consciousness, being *un-Maori* is unthinkable. And thus, most of my activist sisters remained firmly within only the Maori cause, occasionally sniffing my way. The cruelest irony of all was that they judged me as being manipulated by pakeha women, and I judged them as being told how to be Maori by their men. Over the last twenty years, much of this has changed; Maori women form the *tahuhu* of the women's refuge and rape crisis movements, the frontlines on the feminist battlefield, and nothing and no one will dare to menace them with juvenile judgements about their *taha Maori*. For as we measure our gains (and losses) in the overall struggle, we move forward with a commitment that grows even stronger; our resilience increases with our knowledge; reinforced with a deeper understanding of who we are, and whom we have come from. For their memory carries us.

The different pieces that make up the pattern of this book describe how I see such varying possibilities. It is merely my perception. Many other aspects, though, are not mentioned in the text at all. One of the most consuming and dynamic was the young Maori protest movement of the 1970s—Te Reo Maori, and the language petition and beginnings of Te Wa o te Reo Maori; the flamboyant and irascible Nga Tamatoa; the renaming of the New Zealand Federation of Maori University Students to Te Huinga Rangatahi o Aotearoa; and the splendidly stylish and momentous birth of Nga Puna Waihangā, the Maori Artists and Writers Society. All these stories await their telling, but not here, as this collection is primarily about *mana wahine*, and Maori women, and my view of some aspects of our experience.

Which brings us to one more aspect of our world which I consider to be feminism—woman-initiated political

action—at its ripest and most elemental. The creativity and inspiration of the Kohanga Reo Movement, the language nest programme which nurtures infants in our mother tongue, enriching the little ones, and ensuring the language's survival. In its earliest days, this was a flax roots movement of grandmothers, aunties, mothers and big sisters—it spread across the land, even across the ocean, to shape and empower new generations. Children whose parents, as survivors of an assimilationist school system, had almost completely missed out on that truly great treasure that makes the Maori unique—*te reo rangatira*, our own voice—are learning to speak, to dream, to write, to laugh, in the first language of these islands. A colossal success which has been adopted by other indigenous peoples with languages at risk, Te Kohanga Reo still challenges the colonizing, monocultural bias of mainstream education, and women, Maori women, are steering this extraordinary canoe, opening the way.

The new confidence is demonstrated further in different avenues of achievement—in business, education, and the public service; in the quietly courageous and determined endeavours of Te Ohu Whakatupu, the Maori Secretariat in the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Could we ever have seen that far ahead?

Meanwhile, Maori women make fresh inroads in tertiary education, with extensive new development in the Polytech sector, and considerable ground and head breaking in the universities. Specialist courses on Maori women's issues, *tikanga*, and knowledge traditions are being taught in both languages at a number of campuses, and some provocative research is being pioneered, and theories presented. We are reaching a critical milestone in our own political growth, with the writing and discussion of our own theory and analysis.

The chapters in this book come out of those times and events—a time which many call a renaissance, but which I believe was a reassertion, a deliberate and forceful declaring of who we are. For we are not being culturally born again; *mana Maori motuhake* has always been with us, in our *kuia*, our *kaumatua*, our *marae*, our music. How can they be part of a renaissance, when for them, and for us, the continuity never ceased? Nor is it ever denied by most Maori. So who is being reborn? With this, we risk tripping ourselves up, taking definitions from the other, when we can and must define ourselves, for we are the makers of our own authenticity.

Mana Wahine Maori is one part of that reassertion process, as it happened to one person, me. Like points on a meandering map each item in this collection reveals a new dimension of this journey; each section offers a different insight, picture, or analysis. And much remains unwritten, too.

One notable experience not recorded in the following pages was the restoration of the great carved war canoe Te Winika, at the Waikato Museum, during my time there as curator. With the blessing and active encouragement of Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, a team of five young women and a very young man stripped, refurbished and completely renovated a wakataua that had been first launched in the 1830s. They were all direct linear descendants of the canoe's very first carvers, owners and crew; she embodied their tupuna.

Originally regarded as men's work, best done by men only, this project gently but irrevocably changed many of the restrictions regarding work of this nature. The young women were counselled and protected by the project supervisor (who was also closely related) and their immediate families, though in the beginning it was not easy at all. The men who had been working on the canoes of Turangawaewae for decades were openly hostile, and very threatened by what they saw as a female and pakeha (museum) intrusion on their rightful expertise. Eventually, curious, they came round, appreciated what was being done, and took part in the project; they were needed for the final stage of reassembly, and when the sixty-six parts of Te Winika were put together again, lashed and fitted into place, there was laughter, and gaiety, and a sharing and learning of skills. Certain rituals were observed without question; certain roles were played out—but the carvers and maintenance crew had a new, genuine, respect for the female conservation team, and that has lasted. Many similar projects have been undertaken in the community since that time, and women continue to work easily and well in this previously forbidden area. That change was achieved by patience, aroha, and a pool of tears upon which Te Winika still floats today.

Many marae-based activities like this have occurred. Another utterly breathtaking demonstration of mana wahine Maori has been happening over the last decade. The Maori women's art world has an energy, momentum, and electric excitement that carries the grief, frustrations, laughter, shattered promises and broken dreams, tenderness, pathos,

humour, disease, magic, cynicism, wit, stress, memories, guile, rage, spontaneity, and triumph on a strong current of wisdom and creative will-power.

While most of our contemporary women art-makers remain safely within the warmth of the pa harakeke, a brave new generation has come forth, and their art is unashamedly aggressive, political and personal. Denied the privilege of carving, a number of women are nevertheless exploring traditional whakairo forms and design on media apart from wood or stone; the robust strength and subtle ferocity of their images—chiseled in paint—reflect an evolving challenge. Working in colour, in fibre, in clay, in film, are Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Shona Rapira Davies, Maureen Lander, Emily Karaka, Merata Mita, Robyn Kahukiwa and Lisa Reihana to name merely a few; there are many more. And they tell the world about *us*—our experiences, our perceptions. About our land, and our waters, and our sky; about our children and our tupuna: about our love for all of them. And always, always, in the shadows of their work, the voices of those gone on cry out, from the heart,

Ma wai e kawe taku kauae ki tawhiti?

Who will convey the patterns of my chin to a faraway place?

In distant lands, and times; a woman, who will remember me?

Maaku e kii atu, e whae, ma matou, ake tonu ake.

We will. Always. Forever.

*In the shadows of
their work: A response to
Ngahua Te Awekotuku's
Mana Wahine Māori*

Mana Wahine Māori, the seminal text from Ngahuia Te Awekotuku (Te Arawa, Ngāi Tūhoe, Waikato), opens with an image of *Ngā Mōrehu: The Survivors* by Shona Rapira Davies (Ngāti Wai ki Aotea). In this work, the faces of kaikaranga call out, urging the receiver of their call, a small child, to be strong and to hold fast to their culture. Though it was published in 1991, this article, like the call to the young child and the abusive words etched into her skin, continues to resound.

Ngahuia has long been a champion of the voice and perspective of wāhine Māori. Having had the honour of listening to her speak at museum and kaitiaki hui, I know that hearing Ngahuia's words complements reading her words. These words, and the poetic way in which she relays, portrays, and conveys our culture to people, is inspiring. In fact, I've never heard anyone speak with the vernacular that she has. And yet, let it be known, that her poetics are loaded with power. For a long time, Māori have been written about by the other, our culture dissected and repackaged in ways that are digestible for others to understand us on their own terms. This statement, that we have been written about by others, connects very strongly with a suggestion she put to a group of museum and gallery Māori staff: we need to write our own histories, we must become the masters, or in her own linguistic turn, the *dowagers*, of our own narratives. This message, delivered in her idiosyncratic, quiet and considered way, was a provocation that had no less impact than if she had yelled it.

This hui was where I last saw Ngahuia speak, at the lakefront village of Ohinemutu, where Tunohopu Marae of Ngāti Whakaue stands. It is also the place of her upbringing. Touring our group of kaitiaki around Ohinemutu, where geysers bubble out of the ground and tourists abound, the people of the village are impervious to tourists' lingering looks but the uninitiated kaitiaki amongst us found great pleasure in ogling the oglers. As we embarked on our tour, the sun beat down on us, Ngahuia brought along a rainbow umbrella to shield herself from the sun's heat, though the umbrella remained done up most of the time, with her nimbly twirling it as if it were a taiaha. Through the tour we hear the stories, the histories, of some of the many people that have shaped not just Ngahuia, but the village of Ohinemutu. Among those mentioned is Whare Toroa. On the slopes of the village is a small carved

whare. This whare was made by Tene Waitere, a master carver of Ngāti Tarāwhai from Lake Rotoiti, another of Rotorua's many lakes. Waitere's work is in the national collection, his name is etched in the written history of this country, and his legacy mentioned in museums studies courses. In these collections, his work is arguably held in a stasis in temperature-controlled rooms, handled by be-gloved kaitiaki. In Ohinemutu, the whare is lived in, and lives. On the mahau of this whare, a wāhine rangatira once sat, carving for the tourist market that would wend its way through the village. She was Whare Toroa.

The mention by Ngahuia of a wāhine mau whao was a revelation as it surfaced much of the histories of te ao Māori that have suffered from a heavily gendered telling of our history—a telling that has essentialised our histories and rendered some arts 'tāne' and some arts 'wāhine'. These gendered representations of te ao Māori are something Ngahuia has written against, positioning wāhine Māori within these histories, in our own words. To contrast Whare Toroa with Tene Waitere: her work is not named in the national collection, nor was it taught in the museum studies course I undertook at Victoria University and yet, she was active within the structures that Rotorua remains most famous for. Through the sharing of this story with the many kaitiaki gathered, she illustrated one of the most important aspects of te ao Māori: that we pass our knowledge on, and that intergenerational relationships are a cornerstone of our world and key medium by which we transmit this knowledge.

To return to Rapira Davies' work, *Ngā Mōrehu* was made for an exhibition titled *Whakamamae* held at Wellington's City Gallery in 1988, featuring only her work and the work of Robyn Kahukiwa (Ngāti Porou, Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, Ngāti Hau, Ngāti Konohi, Whānau-a-Ruataupare). The exhibition's accompanying text features a piece of writing from Christina Lyndon who makes a link between the genesis of the work being from Papatūānuku, and the making of the first woman, Hineahuone, by Tāne Mahuta. Lyndon takes this further to remind us that it is at the hand of Tāne that wāhine Māori, through Hinetitama, first experienced abuse, and that we continue to disproportionately experience abuse. The wilful exclusion of wāhine Māori from our histories is another kind of violence exercised upon the agency of Māori women, and anyone who might have otherwise learned of these women's feats.

Despite this absence, Ngahuia is assertive, she is forthright that the histories have always been there:

“...mana Maori motuhake has always been with us, in our kuia, our kaumatua, our marae, our music. How can they be part of a renaissance, when for them, and for us, the continuity never ceased?” In the museum I work at, Te Papa Tongarewa, we talk often about wanting to uplift the ‘hidden histories’ of women, and I have always seen this work as being about wanting to address a deficit, and when you address a deficit, the focus remains on what you don’t have. Loss is centred. With this passage from Ngahuia is the acknowledgement that, though we refer to a loss, we can maintain focus on what we have.

This may feel like unnecessary mental gymnastics, so I’ll address this in another way framed by the way Ngahuia describes ‘Mana Wahine Maori’. She does not see this as a “...re-action to males; and their violence against us; it is a pro-action, a determining of ourselves as Maori women, with authenticity and grace.” Again, this is an affirming statement and echoes a sentiment I’ve heard from the late filmmaker Merata Mita (Ngāti Pikiao, Ngāi Te Rangi) when she said: “One of my primary goals is to decolonise the screen, and to indigenise a lot of what we see up there.” The former, decolonisation, I see as a re-action, and the latter, to indigenise, I see as a pro-action. To read Ngahuia’s work is to see this theory in action, as the romantic way that she writes about te ao Māori does not slide into romanticism. It also does not suffer from the detached academic language through which a New Zealand history canon has sought to define our worldviews. One peculiarity I did note in the article was how Māori was capitalised but pākehā was not—was this a deliberate subversion? An oversight? Or was it a sly wink at the power of language, of how we can be the dowagers of our own narratives, and that those with the pen in hand can be the arbiters of knowledge?

I’d like to think it were a mix of all of the above, with a heavy wink. One of my favourite pieces of Ngahuia’s work is *Ruahine*, a book in which she brings her “subtle trickster” voice to the retelling of stories of women from our myths and histories. Included amongst these is the story of Rona, a woman who cursed Marama, who in turn takes her to reside with him in the sky. Ngahuia’s retelling is a wholly unexpected sci-fi take in which her creative flair is evident and astonishing. In these retold stories, as is reflected in her own acknowledgements included in the back, is Ngahuia’s representation of “the energy of being

female—not as fantasy, but as visceral fact.” Tautoko. As a child reading over Peter Gossage’s Māui books, I remember asking my mother what ‘myths and legends’ meant and was disappointed to hear her reply that they were made up stories. In that moment I resolved to not believe that, and to this day I don’t—these are visceral facts.

In the final paragraphs of her article she turns again to wāhine toi Māori, producing a list of artists who would now, almost thirty years after publication, be considered senior artists. Here she deploys a beautiful turn of phrase that, all at once, encapsulates the ways in which toi Māori has been essentialised by gender and how wāhine toi Māori have adapted and worked against any imposed categorisation. Describing the work of Kura Te Waru Rewiri, Shona Rapira Davies, Maureen Lander, Emily Karaka, Merata Mita, Robyn Kahukiwa and Lisa Reihana, she writes of the subtle ferocity of their images, *chiselled in paint*. The role of these artists in giving voice to the role of wāhine Māori in history continues, and Ngahuia acknowledges that “in the shadows of their work” they represent those that have passed. This is where I work too, as do the wāhine Māori, women, Māori, people that have worked in the sector in the generations after Ngahuia first brought her voice to our field. We are in the shadows of her work, on a path she has chiselled for us, and must do the same for those who come after us.

Remissions: Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality

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My concern in this essay is to outline the contribution of theory to feminist art practice and its reception. Since my intention is to be provocative, I will begin with the assertion, that in New Zealand up to this date art criticism—both non-feminist and feminist—has ignored the crucial question of subjectivity, as constituted by historical and social factors.

I will be arguing that the process of addressing this question demonstrates the need to implement a project for feminist theory as an enterprise which attempts to disrupt dominant discourses in culture. Such a project would—through an examination of the diverse factors which determine artistic production itself and the repression of women through these determinants—aim to transform the way art is used and perceived. Specifically, I will be arguing for the need to locate feminist politics within a revaluation of art as a social practice; a revaluation which must examine how ‘femininity’ is determined as an ideological construct.

The issue of sexual ‘difference’ is central to feminist theory. Any theorization of the process by which women grapple towards a self-conception revolves around the problem of thinking outside the patriarchally determined dichotomies—Same/Other, Subject/Object, that is to say, ‘Masculine’/‘Feminine’—identified as the basis of western culture by Simone de Beauvoir 36 years ago. The domination by men of women which continues in advanced western cultures today, is not effected by force (in general) but more insidiously through the creation of consent, by means of an elaborate apparatus of binary oppositions.

In the words of Hélène Cixous:

the complete set of symbolic systems—everything said, everything organised as discourse—art, religion, family, language—everything that seizes us, everything that forms us—everything is organised on the basis of hierarchical oppositions, which come back to the opposition man/woman.¹

The pivotal question for any feminist theory attempting to include women as an active subject is whether we want to re-organize the relationship of difference to one of “sameness”, through a dialectics of valorization, or whether we want to subvert the over-determined saturated metaphors of binary oppositions which organize our perceptions.

**This is the first of two essays which argue in favour of the need for a deconstruction of that unitary viewpoint based on masculine privilege; phallic univocality. In the second essay I intend to proceed further in developing the theoretical issues introduced in this essay and to extend these through readings of specific experimental artworks, in which the human body begins to be dephallogentrized and connected, instead, to the natural environment.*

**Juliet Batten is preparing a reply to this paper. It will appear in ANTIC 2*

1. Hélène Cixous, ‘Le Sexe ou la Tête?’, in *Les Cahiers Du Grif*, 13, October 1976, p. 7.

In the initial phases of feminist inquiry into the vexed issue of difference, the pendulum swung between “same as” and “different from”. The radical critiques undertaken by American feminists—notably, Kate Millet and Elizabeth Janeway—used the concepts of sex-role stereotyping to argue that biological sex is not co-extensive with social gender: that gender is an acquired facet of social life produced through societal conditioning and re-inforced through social pressure. The belief that de-emphasizing sexual difference would remove a major obstacle to women’s participation in cultural and political life, reached its most extreme form in Shulamith Firestone’s critique in which she attempted to abolish even the mammalian function performed by women as childbearers.

In the recent evolutions of feminist inquiry, however, there has been a shift to what Gerda Lerner calls the ‘woman-centered analysis’, with it increased willingness to challenge the old naming of difference by the privileged, with a reclaiming of difference. That is to say the woman-centered perspective examines the meaning of difference in terms of its value TO WOMEN.

The new French feminisms—echoes of which have not yet resounded in New Zealand art criticism—posit difference as a problematic with a subversive potential. Both their perspective and methodology are dis-connected from the empirical, sociological approach of American feminisms. Whereas American feminists focus upon the OPPRESSION of woman as sexual identity (in a prescription for pragmatic action to rebalance inequality), the new French feminists analyse the REPRESSION of women as difference and alterity within western signifying practices.

As we know the French are passionate for theory. And the most revolutionizing texts of the new French feminists are by women of letters. Inspired by a Marxist anti-bourgeois tradition, skilled in dialectical argumentation, they employ a combination of semiotic, philosophic and psychoanalytic concepts to examine the sexual subject’s inscription in culture through language. Not afraid to appropriate concepts for their own purpose from such seminal male thinkers as Saussure, Freud, Lacan and Derrida, they combine theory with a subjectivism which confounds the protocols of patriarchal, academic discourse. For Elaine Marks says:

Their tradition, resolutely atheistic, loudly proclaims the death of God, the death of man, the death of the

privileged work of art. It concentrates on the acts of reading and writing as subversive political²

Underlying the new French feminisms is the post-structuralist premise, that the world is experienced phenomenologically as vast text encompassing all human symbolic systems. And they utilize this premise to argue that throughout western history the teat—or, logos—has been based on a binary structure of culturally determined oppositions, that is to say, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. The strongest voices among the French feminists—Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva—argue that women’s repression is embedded in the foundations of the text—in the complex linguistic and logical processes that procure meaning. So that what we perceive as the ‘real’ becomes merely a manifestation of the symbolic order as constituted to privilege men. Only by deconstructing³ this phallogocentrism, can we transform the ‘real’ in a fundamental way.

In the words of Hélène Cixous:

the logocentric project has always undeniably existed to found phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself⁴

They argue that within the phallogocentric order woman receives an illusory recognition. She IS but she IS NOT—except insofar as she exists as man’s opposite. HIS other and not as otherness in HER own right. She is HIS repressed, trapped in the cycle of HIS representations. She exists merely as a reflection of HIS claims to knowledge, of HIS interpretation of her body and her sexuality. A reproduction merely, reflecting back to him a vision of HIS masculine privilege; she is designated through absence: minus phallus = minus power, minus authenticity.

The politics of repression is, in the works of Josette Féral:

founded upon the negation of her difference, upon her exclusion from knowledge and from herself⁵

By being subjected to a principle of Identity conceived wholly as masculine (signified by the phallus), woman exists as a function of what she is not. She is caught between, what Kristeva calls the “not that” and the “not yet”.⁶

2. Elaine Marks and Isabelle di Courtivron, eds, *New French Feminsims*, Harvester Univ. Press, 1981, p. xi.

3. ‘Deconstruction’ is an activity of duplicit reading and writing which uses texts against their professed aims. In the critical project of its major exponent, Derrida, this methodology is employed to challenge the dominance of logocentric concepts and values within texts. As Christopher Norris elaborates: “Deconstruction is avowedly post-structuralist in its refusal to accept the idea of structure in a text ... (it) ... starts out by rigorously suspending this assumed correspondence between mind, meaning and the concept of method which claims to unite them.” - in *Deconstruction; Theory and Practice*, Methuen, 1982, p. 3.

4. Quoted in Elaine Marks, ‘Women and Literature in France’, in *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture And Society*, 3:4, Summer 1978, p. 841.

5. Josette Féral, ‘The Powers of Difference’, in *The Future of Difference*, Hester Eisentein and Alice Jardine eds, Rutgers Univ. Press, 1985, p. 85.

6. Julia Kristeva deconstructs the western concept of the subject as an organic, consistent identity. She argues that woman is lost on the fringe that separates the “pas encore” (not yet) from the “pas cela” (not that). See *Polylogues*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977, also “La femme ce n’est jamais ca” in *Tel Quel*, Autumn 1975, a translation of which appears in *New French Feminisms*.

7. *The Future Of Difference*, p. 90.

8. *Les Cahiers Du Griff*, 13, p. 13.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The most revolutionary dimension of the new French feminisms lies in their insistence upon the specificity of feminine unconscious, which they locate as the central focus of struggle against women’s repression. As Feral elaborates:

woman’s unconscious is the ‘noise’ in the system, the defect. It is a surplus which patriarchal society has always wanted to get rid of by denying it any specificity, thus positing the same society’s right to talk about it in terms of identity with and resemblance to the male model⁷

Their examination of the unconscious differs from the canonical Freudian formulation of the unconscious, which would only unleash the already spoken stories—since it has been constituted by the repressed culture. Instead they insist upon the release of an unspoken feminine unconscious, freed from cultural constraints. And they argue that this unconscious must inform the genuinely political feminine text. In Cixous’ words:

that level of the unconscious is always reshaped by the forceful return of a libido which is not so easily controlled and by the singular, by the noncultural, by a language which is savage and which can certainly he heard⁸

In various ways, they call for the creation of a specifically women’s language and writing, informed by the feminine unconscious, to speak the female body through the cracks in the syntax, semantics and logic of male language. Such ‘writing-in-the-feminine’ (“l’écriture féminine”) would forge an anti-logos weapon for re-appropriating the female body which man has confiscated as his property. As Cixous says:

let her speak of her sexuality and God knows she has enough to say, in such a way that she manages to unblock female and male sexuality, to ‘dephallogentrize’ the body, deliver man from his phallus⁹

Alright, so to return to my initial assertion that New Zealand art criticism ignores the question of the socio-historic determinants of subjectivity. I suggest that the major contribution French deconstructivist theory—and I

include here male theorists who I have addressed the ‘woman question’ namely Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard and Granoff—offers art criticism, is that it demonstrates that the human subject is not a DISCRETE self, but a COMPOUND and that it cannot be known without examining the ideological formulations of patriarchy.

New Zealand art criticism—with the notable exception of Pound’s ‘Frames on the Land’ argument—still operates largely within a modernist tradition insofar as it approaches the artwork as an autonomous entity, applying to it formalist analyses of stylistic and thematic qualities. This approach fails to acknowledge the complexities of authorship and of audience reception as they are constituted outside the artwork, by sets of social relations deriving from the ideological determinants. Through this omission, New Zealand art criticism consistently fails to locate art as a social practice and fails to recognize the subversive potential within criticism itself I would go so far as to name this omission as HEDONISM, since by avoiding the inter-relationships obtaining between art, subject and their historical conjunction, criticism can only hope to provide entertainment.¹⁰

Whatever position criticism adopts contains its own affiliations and historical agendas, even IF these are not made explicit, or if the critic is ignorant of them—as most New Zealand critics are. The formalist approach simply plays into the lap of the status-quo, by preserving art as a marginal activity, as though it had nothing of momentum to contribute to social practices.

Feminist art criticism in New Zealand to date, also operates largely within a modernist tradition of stylistic analysis, although there have been attempts to identify various stylistic features as recurrent motifs in women’s art and to relate these to societal conditions within which women make artwork. And to this extent a break HAS been made with modernist conception of the autonomy of art.

The approach is, of course, empirical since it is based on observations only. And unfortunately it has sometimes been elaborated into an inhibitive form of prescriptivism, which advocates the use of certain stylistic devices and subject matter as though these were more genuine expressions for women. Even if an exhaustive inventory of features occurring in women’s art were compiled and compared with occurring in men’s art, that still could NOT establish these as more “genuine” expressions for women. What we would find

10. The subversive political possibilities of criticism are powerfully articulated by Edward Said in *The Word, The Text And The Critic*, Harvard Uni. Press, 1983. In ‘Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies’, Said argues: “... no one writes for oneself. There is always an Other and this Other willy-nilly turns interpretation into a social activity, albeit with unforeseen consequences, audiences, constituencies and so on. And, I would add, interpretation is the work of intellectuals, a class badly in need today of moral rehabilitation”, in Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Bay Press, 1983, p. 137.

11. Lucie Irigaray expounds the world in expansion which lies ahead for women. In ‘Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un’, *Minuit* 1977, a translation of which appears in *New French Feminisms*, Irigaray uses Lewis Carroll’s Alice as a symbol of woman’s exploration in a new wonderland. By casting the looking glass upon the concepts which confine women the text emerges into the domain of speech which is freed of guilt from the old patriarchal taboos. And in the final play on “levres”—lips and labia—denies the separation produced through the dichotomy of self and other.

from such a patrist pursuit would be symptomatic expressions of historically determined difference. Any inference from such contingent symptoms without an examination of their origins (within the ideological formulations of patriarchy) is simply untenable.

And I would urge that every precaution must be made against the ‘erection’ of a feminist imperialism which merely mouths slogans to legislate the “right” way to package a so-called ‘female’ product. (I voice this objection in full awareness of the predictable counter-objection that I am splintering a—fictitious—“solidarity” within women’s art practice. That no unified purpose exists among women artists in New Zealand is a fact, obvious to the least informed. That a hegemony exists among a vocal spokes group, is perhaps obvious, but not readily challenged—such being the partisanship of meek liberalism.

Where the French feminists’ advocacy that women draw from a feminine unconscious differs enormously from this simplistic prescriptivism is that they provide analytic tools for examining psychological experience, to distinguish what is culturally determined as internalization of repression from the unexplored areas deriving from an uncoded libido. They certainly do not pre-define the expressive form this would take which—after all—would contradict the argument that feminine unconscious is not-yet explored terrain.¹¹

New Zealand empirical, prescriptive feminism fails to distinguish the psychological experience of internalized repressions. And from work I have seen the stylistic features and themes which are fatuously applauded as somehow “genuinely female” are—ironically—symptomatic of those very internalizations. (I am referring here to small scale, pre-occupation with details and domesticity and fragmentation.) There is no remaining need for the art phallocracy to exclude art by women, when women themselves presume to legislate for one another a prescription which is symptomatic of repression.

On the positive side, feminist critics have reviewed more women’s artwork. Nevertheless, by using the thematic and stylistic tools acquired from the patriarchs. Such pragmatic actions for women’s inclusion WITHIN phallocentric order is ghily dubious when there is complicity with its terms. Indeed, the very notion of “promoting” an artist is a very phallic notion. And it would appear that women’s art is HOMOGEnized (formed into HIS genus?) to be impaled

on the phallic pedestal. This is to distort the purpose of much women’s art which attempts to transform the dominant (phallogentric) order with an ‘other’ perspective.

Given the recurrent dangers of co-option with the recent upsurge of token-feminist sympathy by self-consciously styled ‘liberal’ male critics, who extend their paternalistic tolerance to feminist art issues (in some cases after years of flagrant disinterest), the role of the feminist critic is in serious need of clarification. The extension of masculine ordering to accommodate a position for women is—after all—so very MISSIONARY. Perhaps it should be argued, as Gayatri Spivak advocates, that feminist critics:

produce useful and scrupulously FAKE readings in place of the passively active fake orgasm¹²

(Indeed, the premature rush by male critics at the ‘New Zealand Critics Conference’—in which this paper was presented—to emit their sudden tolerance on feminist issues in the session which preceded the panel of women speakers on feminism, gives substance to this view. Within this repressive tolerance timing is, after all, masculine privilege. Need feminists STILL fake appreciation at being consigned to follow after masculine prerogative? Perhaps we should question, instead, how long they can keep it UP?)

Again, on the positive side, feminist critics have emphasized the value of giving expression to women’s personal experience. But I want to argue that a radical reconceptualization of the personal to include socio-historic determinants and unconscious aspects, makes a more theoretical approach to personal experience necessary. That the personal simply cannot be left at the level of the experiential only, if any real TRANSFORMATION of the structures of women’s repression is to occur—which I locate as the goal of feminist art practice and criticism.

The personal is not political, when as Martha Rosler expressed it:

attention narrows to the privileged tinkering with, or attention to one’s solely private sphere, divorced from any collective struggle or publicly conjoined act and simply names the personal practice as political. For art this can mean doing work that looks like art has always looked, that challenges little, but about which one asserts that it is valid because it was done by a woman.¹³

12. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Displacement and the discourse of women’, in *Displacement: Derrida And After*, ed Mark Krupnick, Indiana Univ. Press, 1983, p. 186.

13. Martha Rosler, statement made in discussion ‘Is the Personal Political?’, ICA 1980, quoted in *WOMEN’S IMAGES OF MEN*, eds. Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau, Writers and Readers, 1985, p. 178.

To emphasize the need for a point of intersection between theory and practice, I want briefly to characterize four categories of women’s art in New Zealand terms of their unexamined presuppositions.

The first category is what I will call the ‘Chicago-Lippard school of “shared-imagery” art’, which emphasizes vaginal forms and menstruation and employs certain stylistic devices—pastel colours, soft materials and flowers. In this context Lippard’s ‘From the Centre’ has become analogous to the Edmonds cookbook, as a recipe for how to make a so-called feminist artwork. Alright, so it is derivative and dated and in my opinion always was grossly unsuccessful. But what I want to emphasize is that it is based on essentialist thinking which poses differences between men and women as innate and irreducible.

These artists simply reverse the valuations attributed to each sex, to elevate an “essential female” and through this simple reversion attempt to encourage women’s self-esteem through new prestige attached to women’s biology.

The error of such a-historical views on women is, as Adrienne Rich says:

we cannot ever know what is truly male or female¹⁴

which when stated emphatically sounds so self-evident as to be banal—except that it is not self-evident within certain New Zealand feminist circles. While I do not deny the importance of biological difference by any means, I certainly would refute claims that biological experiences are UNMODIFIED through socio-historical factors (one need only consider the strikingly different experience eastern women have of childbirth, for example, or even of our own grandmothers’ experience of menstruation, when it was considered a ‘curse’ and the highpoint in female sexual cycles). The problem—and the challenge—is to extricate the influences of biology from ways it has been culturally coded within patriarchy.

This category of vaginal art by singling out and focussing upon the very organ which is the favoured site for the patriarchal inscriptions which created women’s repression CONFORMS to the powers in operation, because it employs an iconography of the body which does not disrupt phallogentric significations.

I want to make a fine distinction here concerned with the way the body is employed in art practice, since I am of the

14. Adrienne Rich, in *On Lies Secrets and Silences*, London 1980, p. 78.

opinion expounded by Derrida and by the French feminists, that woman’s body can be the privileged site from which to deconstruct phallocentric thinking. However, this requires that the female body is employed in such a way as to disrupt the restrictive symbolic order, by introducing new significations.

When the French feminists advocate “writing the body” they are not presupposing crude biological reductivism (which lies at the basis of the “shared-imagery” school) but instead referring to instinctual desires and drives which are also linked to their concept of a feminine unconscious.

I am personally committed to the view that ALL good art—by men or women—is OF the body. And I would locate the major obstacle for women artists as that of finding free access to a body which has been colonised for them, through patriarchal cultural coding. Because art is open to multiple interpretations the associations produced through the old patriarchal ideologies are extremely persistent. Often the significations of signifiers—particularly if the signifier relates to the female body—are not perceived, or they are confused. An example here would be Carolee Schneeman, of course, who attempted to reclaim an area of female eroticism for women, but inadvertently, through the relentlessness of the phallocentric order, evoked a voyeuristic male response. And to give a New Zealand example, which illustrates Cixous’ argument that the male body must also be dephallocentrized, would be John Cousins’ ‘Membrane’ performance work, in which the penis acted as a signifier for natural transformation processes, but was mis-interpreted—and by feminists—as a phallus. Obviously, the penis and the phallus are not the same—one expects this degree of perception and literacy at very least.

A final objection I want to make against this vaginal art, is that it derives from an exterior view of body as spectacle and not from an interior experience of the body as source of desire and instinct. Nor is this art extended or transformed beyond the private, it remains at the level of naïve, infantile self-acknowledgement. A kind of women’s equivalent to men’s ejaculatory art (what is called ‘expressionist’ but is so often, more accurately, ‘expresso-ist’). If sticky, splurgy substances must be splashed on canvas one hopes it would be to signify something more complex and interesting than the mere fact of sperm or ovum production.

As this point I want to qualify that even Lucy Lippard

15. Lucy Lippard, ‘Issue and Taboo’, Introduction in *ISSUE: SOCIAL Strategies by Women Artists*, ICA Catalogue to exhibition, 1980.

16. See Lucy Lippard, *Overlay*, Pantheon, 1983, for the extension of feminist concerns to environmental issues. See *Get The Message: A Decade Of Art For Social Change*, E.P. Dutton, 1984, for the extension of feminist concerns to socialist concerns.

17. *Get The Message? A Decade Of Art For Social Change*. In particular, ‘The Dilemma’ p. 34 and ‘The Third Power: Feminism, Art and Class Consciousness’, p. 115, p. 150, p. 152.

18. Merlin Stone, *The Paradise Papers*, Virago, 1979.

herself, abandoned and explicitly rejected her early untenable essentialist position some years ago.¹⁵ The subsequent changes and development of her position illustrates the importance of self-criticism and revision, which must be employed by any feminist critic who is committed to the project of feminism—rather than to creating their own orthodoxy. In addition, Lippard has attempted to extend her feminism beyond a defence of women artists, to broader environmental and socialistic concerns.¹⁶ And in so doing, she has criticised feminist art which conforms to the dominant order, to insist that it is only when feminist art expresses “different values” that it will communicate to a wider audience.¹⁷ Against the background of the progression of her feminist thinking, the cloning from her initial—long superseded—essentialist position which continues in New Zealand today, serves as pathetic indictment of the lack of critical vigour, which characterises feminist art thinking—just as it characterises most other areas of the New Zealand artworld.

The second category of feminist art I want to characterise deals with a glorification of matrilineal and sometimes mythical female past. Often expressed collaboratively, it includes wiccan moon dances, castles in the sand, horns, spirals, and neolithic venuses. This is what I will call the ‘Merlin Stone induced school of ancient images of women’ while I do not, at all, undervalue Merlin Stone’s important contribution (by exposing the Watergate of the rise of patriarchal dominance, through the destruction and distortion of matrilineal pagan culture¹⁸) nevertheless, the kind of sub-cultural resistance groups which it has inspired and the kind of pictorial literalisms translated from it, somewhat curdle enthusiasm.

The major problem with this category of work, is that it has an aura of strained artificiality: it simply fails to engage an audience at the core of its experience. And I suggest it fails to do so because twentieth century women living in urban capitalist societies, have no direct experience of what it could be to have lived in an agrarian matrilineal culture. Such utopic projections tend to translate into palish, anaemic expressions. At its worst it constitutes an abuse of the very powerful expressions—still available to us—of these women from a culture which was based on women’s strength. (One need only listen to the singing of Solomon Island women, who have still retained a matrilineal line.)

Nor does this work engage itself in the struggle to transform cultural codes which produce women's repression. Rather, it isolates itself on the margins as an alternative tradition, while compounding the patriarchal nature/culture division.

What also worries me about this work is that it idealizes women as "passive", "nurturing" "peaceful"—contingent definitions only, which are provisional selections from among those produced by a phallocentric order. They relate to the inscription of women as silence. And I would urge that women's anger and assertion are very real reactions to the experience of lived oppression, which can be transformed into effective feminist art practice.

The third category I will characterize very briefly—although it includes the majority of practising women artists in New Zealand—does not identify with, or sympathize with, the feminism prescribed here. Sometimes linked with statements such as "art has no gender" or—by more stringently careerist—"we are in a post-feminist era" (another patriarchal myth). But most often, it involves a sense of uncertainty about the relevance of gender art.

Art most certainly does have gender insofar as its authors are inextricably effected by patriarchal ideologies—which constitute the pre-'Text', from which signifiers are drawn. And a "post-feminist" era could hardly have begun when women have yet to re-define themselves against the old binary oppositions. Nevertheless, beneath these slogans is a more important indication of the impatience and embarrassment which marks the reaction of many women artists to fundamentalist feminism. Crudely exhibitionist vaginas and wimpish wiccan dances may satisfy the needs of 'born-again' women who have escaped retrenchment within binary—though they may not yet have a coherent insight of a future direction.

Women within this third category attempt in various ways to negotiate with mainstream forms of art. And with varying degrees of success—since these forms are based on masculine praxis, to express different experience, given the different relations of man to socio-historic structures. By not fully understanding how their work is embedded in a cultural context and how they themselves are situated and formed by it, these women cannot assume full responsibility as 'Subject' of their work. I would suggest, that greater success has been attained by those women who have, nevertheless, managed to infuse some of their femininities within these forms—but an elaboration of this, would be a complete paper.

Overlapping this category is a fourth category of artists who also do not identify with the feminism prescribed here, but who—in addition—do not relate to masculine praxis. Instead they work intuitively (as distinct from critically) from their PHYSICAL experience as antipodean women, to the natural environment. To date, I consider this group to produce the strongest women's art in New Zealand and I will give examples (since I am being positive) of Jacqueline Fraser, Christine Hellyar and Pauline Rhodes. Their selection of materials, construction methods and scale relate directly to their own physical experience so that the significations of their work, are very much of an antipodean feminine body. I would suggest that it is for this reason that they are able to engage an audience at the core of its experience. I do not think it can be underestimated that they work in an experimental way, since this provides greater freedoms to explore techniques that have not been coded, than traditional art forms can.¹⁹

What has not yet emerged in New Zealand is feminist work which plays upon the ambivalences inherent within the socio-historic determinates of 'femininity'. That is to say, CRITICAL feminist art, which challenges cultural codes which create women's repression. I have attempted to argue that this would require an understanding of the formation of the sexual Subject and that this is a vital intersection between theory and practice—an intersection I have tried to justify as a project for radical feminist criticism.

Before concluding, there are two qualifications I want to make within my argument. Firstly, that I am not advocating a programmatic for deconstructivist feminist art, but rather an intersection with theory which assists women to take responsibility as subjects of their work. And I would add that there are dangers inherent in theory induced art IF it does not involve associative perception. (I myself, have been an adherent of de Beauvoir for too many years to underestimate the value of lived experience.)

An analogy here can be made between socialist theory and socialist realism: in which the latter (as art) often loses aesthetic power and becomes merely mechanical illustration of what is more interesting to read as theory. In this regard I am sympathetic to Marcuse's concept of "aesthetic mimesis": namely that art's political potential lies in its aesthetic dimension.²⁰

19. My conception of an Antipodean feminine body will be elaborated further through readings of specific works in the sequel essay.

20. For an interesting application of Marcuse's conception of the political potential of art, see Peter Fuller 'Abstraction and the Potential Space' in *Art And Psychoanalysis*, Writers and Readers, 1980, and 'Aesthetics and Nuclear anaesthesia' in *The Naked Artist*, Writers and Readers, 1983.

I have deliberately emphasized the notion of an ‘inter-section’ to allow for the cross-referencing of theoretical stimuli with experiential perception. The motivation, after all, for examining the determinants of subjectivity is to study the Subject in growth—which is the area in which art operates. While art is endowed with little social power (in this particular conjunction with capitalist society) nevertheless, because it derives from an internal realm—the “imaginary” (which I use in Lacan’s sense)—it can express contradictions within subjectivity more intimately than any other social content is able. While the problems involved in subjectivity apply to both men and women artists in their work, the symbolic order has very biased values to offer each sex—values which create extra difficulties for women artists. For this reason, I argue for the need for a more theoretically informed feminist criticism, which is able to take account of the complications of subjectivity, in such a way as to contribute to the movement of feminist art. Nevertheless, for the artist, as a human being living within a complex of personal relationships, there remains the need to return to the associative perception attached to these experiences.

The power of deconstructivist feminist art in the hands of Barbara Kruger, Mary Kelly and Martha Rosler, for example, is due also to a highly sophisticated level of literacy which most New Zealand women artists do not possess—and which is encouraged through this country’s art school education curriculum.²¹ The intellectual woman is after all, an OBSCENITY, within the binary oppositions: masculine = intellectual vs feminine = emotional.

And this relates to my second qualification: that New Zealand poses additional problems for the development of strong feminist art, because anti-intellectualism pervades all areas of the artworld. This is entrenched within the “modernist myth” of originality, to use Rosalind Krauss’ phrase.²² Because in New Zealand art is mystified as personal expression, the spontaneous OVERFLOW of creativity, which in a “Man Alone” culture is the privileged domain of rugged masculinity—rather like beer slops and other fluids which are peculiarly male.

The “master narrative”²³ is internalised as the ONE viewpoint—excluding not only women but Maori.²⁴ Before any radical RECONSTRUCTION enabling women’s full participation

21. The lack of inclusion of theoretical studies in New Zealand art schools, is an omission peculiar to this country’s notion of what constitutes art education. For women art students this omission is particularly retarding, when what is provided is in effect, practice for implanting a masculine praxis.

22. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, 1985.

23. Craig Owens, ‘The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism’, in Foster, *The Anti-aesthetic*, Bay Press, 1983, uses this phrase as a translation of Lyotard’s “grand récit”: the icons of cultural authority, which are now being challenged with the narratives of ‘others’ (women and disenfranchised peoples).

24. ‘Ethnocentrism’, like ‘phallocentrism’ is a product of the unitary white western masculine viewpoint, which conceives itself as the ‘One’, the identity principle, from which the non-white, like women, becomes HIS ‘other’. That is to say, constructed in His image. The most extensive critical study of the inter-relations of these forms of ‘centrism’ which secure masculine dominance has been by Gayatri Spivak. Her work is particularly relevant to the New Zealand situation, in which the “master narrative” represses the non-white narrative, just as it represses women.

25. By insisting upon the genderizing of art, I am to some extent following Gisels Ecker’s suggestion. See ‘Introduction’ to *Feminist Aesthetics*, The Women’s Press, 1985.

in culture is possible, the primacy of this viewpoint must be deconstructed.

And I would go so far as to suggest that this requires all investigations of art to be genderised.²⁵ Meaning that the sea—man or woman—of artist, critic and curator is taken into account, to make explicit the different relations of the sexes to the phallic institution of ‘art’. If the myth of gender neutrality is to be deconstructed, then men in ALL these positions must be challenged to take responsibility for the privileged status of their sex.

What should be obvious, is that consistent with new French feminisms, I am not advocating pragmatic action, for equality of women within the EXISTING phallocentric order—which has been the approach in New Zealand, adopted from early American empirical feminism. But rather, the SUBVERSION of that order which, by entailment, includes the subversion of the construct of ‘masculinity’.

Signature Piece

1.
CIRCLE. Wellington. no1 (D1973)-23(winter1976)
Superseded by *Lesbian feminist circle*.
LAGANZ: [Stack 1] no1(D1973)-20/21 (JI/S1975);
23(winter1976)

Sent by art, moved by archives, a shoulder tap from some other beyond. Wandering around the page coaxing 26 letters to the edge of experience, leaves fall open: 8-10 days by Regular Post—

creature stealing up¹

While reading from 9 to 5 in the Katherine Mansfield Reading Room, you became a group of characters—who were of course real people in the real world—but also names building a body from the pages. For some of you a voice is imagined: the rhythm in which an account of the work of— the network of—, the first national hui of— is delivered.

I imagine your domestic assemblage. In the kitchen, in the lounge, wrangled into logic so that the machine may get started with storing voices in your body: inviting their names and their times and the quality of a line as a ghost of everywhere and before. Your desire to be written, to be published, to be public, to bear the weight of being the first of your kind on your saddle stitched spine speaks to me from 1973. *Dusty red men look down*. As Warhol stacks his books arse about face in his Montauk home, and Jill Johnston rings at regular intervals, the Gutenberg Galaxy² turns the page, away from yours—designed together, urgently, with various difficulties.

2.
BITCHES, witches & dykes; a women's liberation newspaper. Auckland.
1(Ag1980)-6(Ag1982) LAGANZ: [Stack 2] 1(Ag1980)-4(N1981), 6(Ag1982)

In 1499, the first image of a print shop is depicted as a dance of Death.³ Your spirit—or is it your spookiness—strikes me each time you're retrieved from the stacks. Was it a surprise to see your body reproduced by machine? Even after death, disembodied, covered in black ink and haunted by the devil. Did the motion of your pages moving over a

1. Sappho, *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, eds, E. Lobel and D. Page, Oxford, 1955, fr. p. 130.

2. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the making of typographic man*, New York: New American Library, 1962.

3. Danse macabre [Lyons: Mathias Huss], 1499. The British Library IB.41735.

4. Susan Sontag, *Reborn: journals and notebooks, 1947-1963*, London: Penguin Books, 2009, p 223.

nonsensical, mirror image to produce—instantly, perhaps magically—text and image, again and again, make you feel in control?

It comes as no surprise that the administration of power is closely linked with the continuous flow of standardisation, the legible clanging of letters, international paper sizes, *the threshold of the machine*.

3.
PINK triangle; New Zealand's lesbian and gay community news magazine.
(Pink Triangle Publishing Collective) Wellington.
no1(Mr1979)-85(S/Oc1990)
LAGANZ: [Stack 2] Introductory issue' no1(My1979)-63(Summer1986/7);
[Stack 1] no64(Mr/Ap1987)-85(S/Oc1990)

Susan Sontag wrote about needing her identity to be a weapon, to match the weapon that society has against her:⁴ awkward body waits to be buzzed in. A bright room, some people, unsure of the appropriate moment to ask what it is that one should do, and in exactly which order. For someone so impressive—forest green, oversize—it really should be quite easy to leave, but in exchange for walking, you must contend with the worry of not being ambitious enough to stay, to stand up—because after all—this is why things are the way they are. There are a small group of people who can recognize this in you, your lines, that type, shoulders up around your ears—shoulders for holding, shoulders for folding—turned 90 degrees to the action in order to effectively achieve a slim line to slip out the back in. A gaze both ways, frozen at one point or another, summoned by the power of printed matter to outdo itself as a mode of communication.

4.
LIP: Lesbians in print. Auckland. no1(My1985)-26(1992)
LAGANZ: [Stack 1] no.1(My1985)-26(1992)

The desire was to map the making of you onto the soul of a thing, to history, to me. At dinner we speak of those drawn to the gritty Xerox of trying to be seen; how she retires home to a bright young man, compares notes, prepares for

class, for work, for being straight—but queer—politically.

Your double-headed axe presents five times wide across the lecture theatre: dykes, cunts; is it embarrassing? Are you trying to embarrass her?

5.
DYKE news; a newsletter for Lesbians. Auckland. 1(1982)-?
LAGANZ: [Stack 1] no17(N1982)-57(D1984) [broken]

One of the oldest signed self-portraits in western civilization was found in a collection of sermons illuminated by Guda, a nun from the late-twelfth century. Its caption reads: *Guda, sinful woman, wrote and illustrated this book.*⁵ I notice her particularly long fingers, raised in the gesture of a witness, reminding us of the lengthy task undertaken by the scribe.

Your thoughts are presented as an assembly of many and various characters: Johanna Drucker, what is a letter? ‘Very simply, it means that acknowledging a letter, like any other cultural artefact, is designed according to the parameters on which it can be conceived.’⁶ *Why not let us know where you are hiding?* wraps around your Aotearoa in a chubby bubble hand, while *Dyke News* explores the full gamut of the biro. I’m encouraged to think about the material relations between body, object, and class, between the hand and machine, embracing both the similarities (scribe or factory worker trying to be as much like a machine as possible), and differences (the inability of the hand to engage the endless repetition basic to mechanization). The capacity of your body to be fully customised, to broadcast, and to bring all of these voices together in both ultimate visibility and total anonymity makes me think about the way we shape objects, and how objects shape us: our writing tools are also working on our thoughts.⁷

6.
LESBIAN feminist circle. Wellington. [24](Spring1976)-(Summer1978); 31(Feb1979)-? Continues Circle. LAGANZ: [Stack 1] [24](Spring1976)-(Summer1978); 31(F1979)-40(Ag1982); (N1982); 41(1983)-42(1984); 44(Dec1985)

We’re walking because of some kind of essential friction that keeps us upright, a match lights when struck against

8. Bruce Nauman, *Body Pressure*, 1974.

a mix of red phosphorus and glass, standing up, burning down, it’s kind of erotic, like that Bruce Nauman work⁸ you see show up in the hallways of artists, a body pressed up against the wall.

I’m collaging together a seat at the bar on Vivian Street. You lifted the social life of the book to the Club, where it was tough to break even, and the rent was high, and there were some troubles with the rules, the real estate, liquor and law. The impulse to know every detail of the design and the décor is strong: how were the lights, were you edited together, would a feeling of shyness creep across you as your repeated pages appeared? Did you think about the margins, politics, was drinking a problem? Why did you choose this face, over that, and what about feminism? If you arrived alone would you have someone to speak to? Did making multiple and taking space make you feel like you belonged? *Where is the true impermeable community of the second human whose arms do not easily arrange themselves, and for who the salaries and weddings and garages do not come?*⁹

What does the reader want from the memory of these spaces, from the people stored between the letters, words, leaves, standing up to strike a match at the bar, between 9 and 5 in the Katherine Mansfield Reading Room?

5. Frankfurt am Main, Stadt- & Ubib., MS Barth. 42, fol. 1 10v.

6. Johanna Drucker, *What is? Nine epistemological essays*, Victoria, TX: Cuneiform Press, 2013, p. 9.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds, G. Colli and M. Montinari, Berlin, 1975-84, pt. 3, 1:172.

9. Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women*, Idaho: Ahsakta Press, 2015, p. 23.

Embodied Knowledge

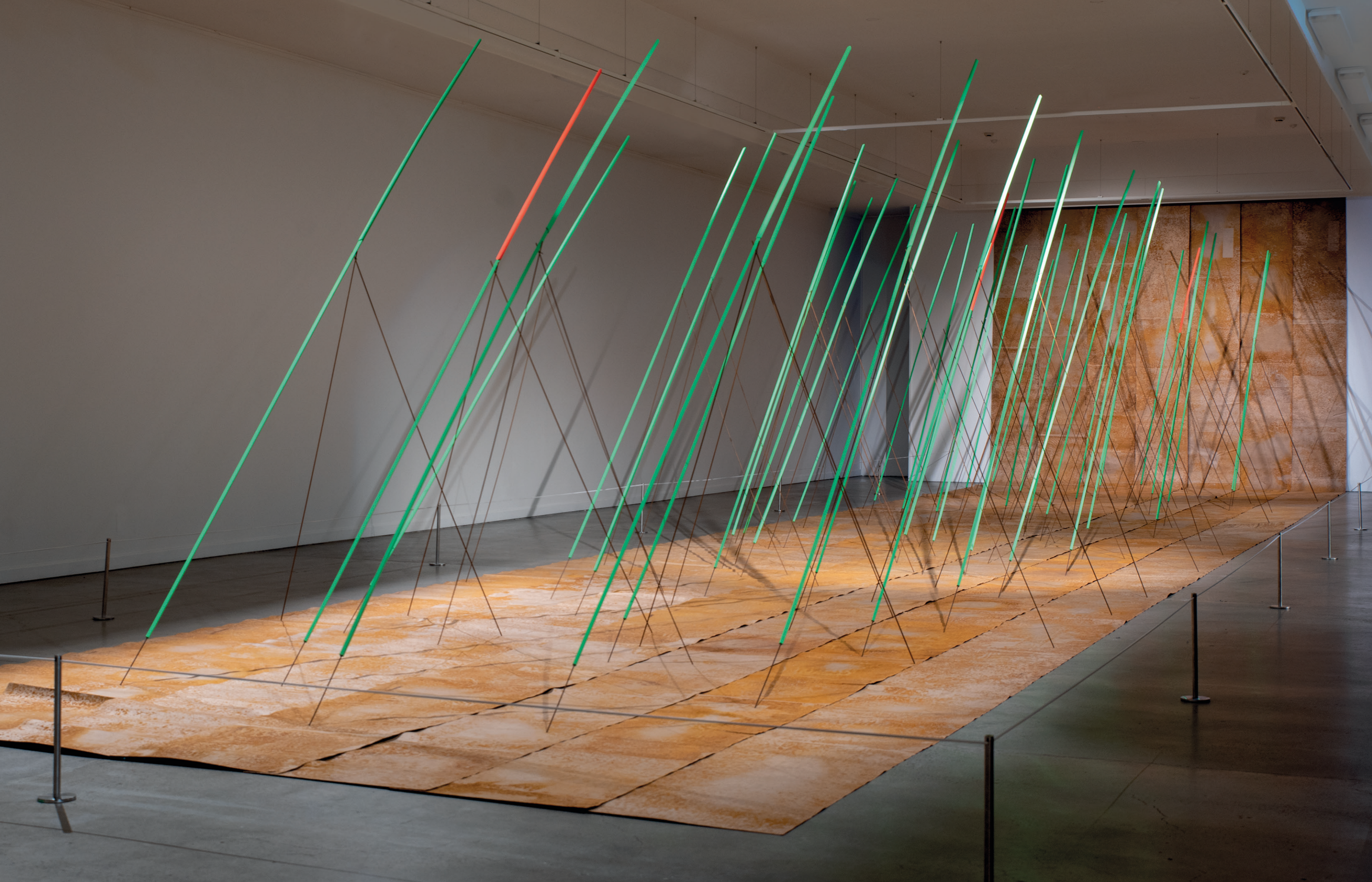
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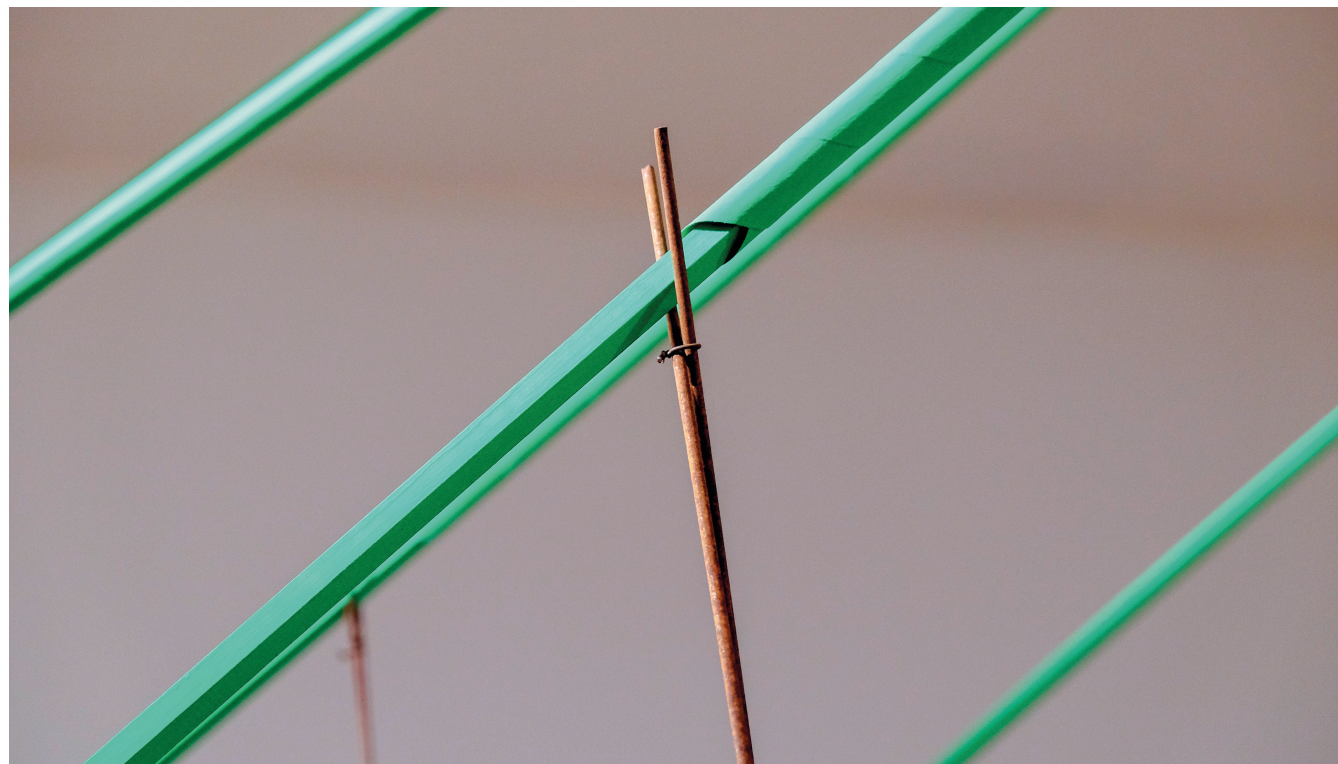
The Dowse Art Museum
Curated by Melanie Oliver

4 August - 25 November 2018

The Dowse Art Museum
Curated by Melanie Oliver

Can Tame Anything







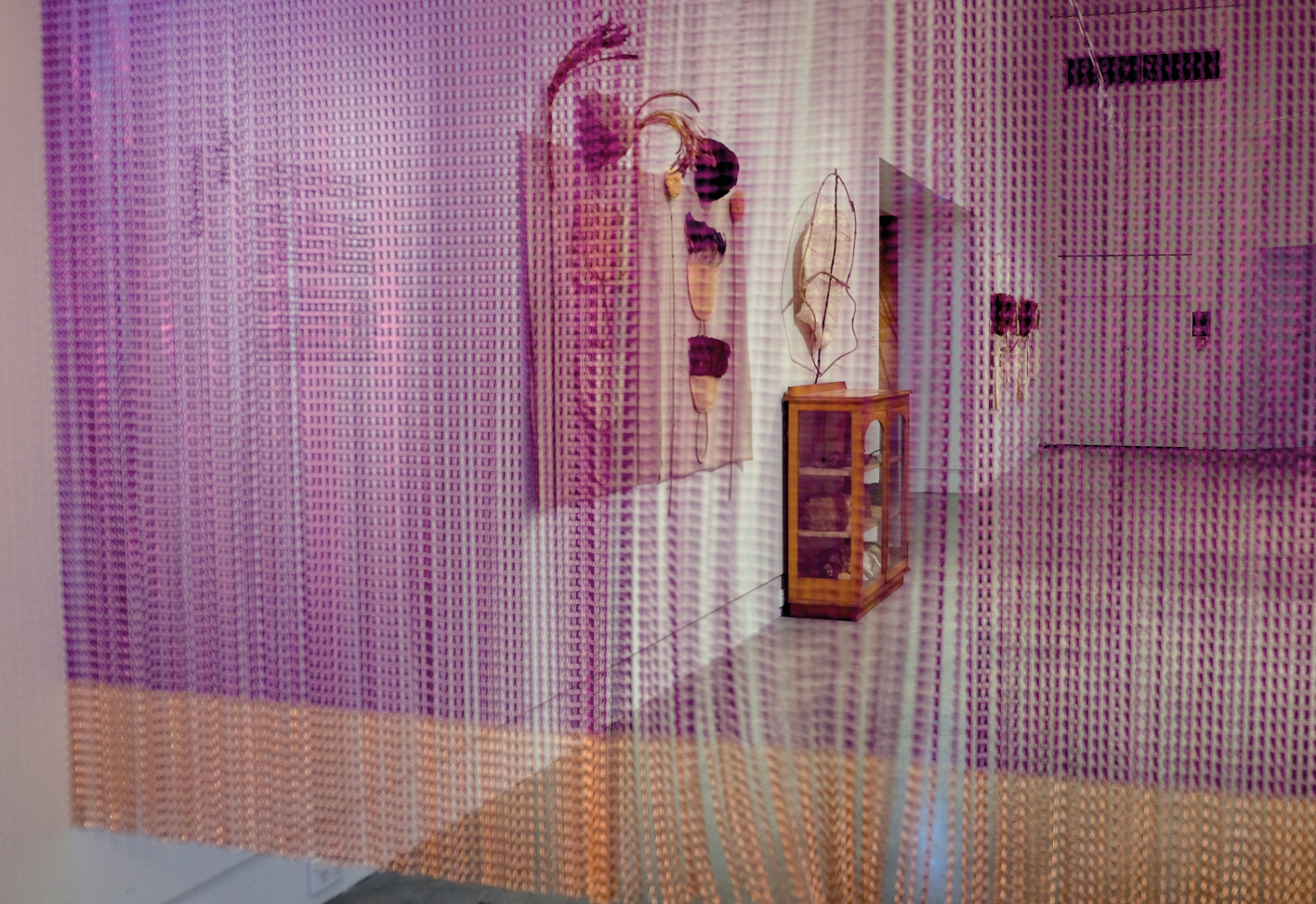












Can Tame Anything

Ruth Buchanan
Alicia Frankovich
Mata Aho Collective
Sriwhana Spong



Epoch
Epoch
Epoch
2 years later
Or, history. Or history
Or, so they say
Epoch

Acted, acting, acts
Entrance
Exit
Or, annex
Or, annexed
Or, history. Or hhhiiisssstory
And today

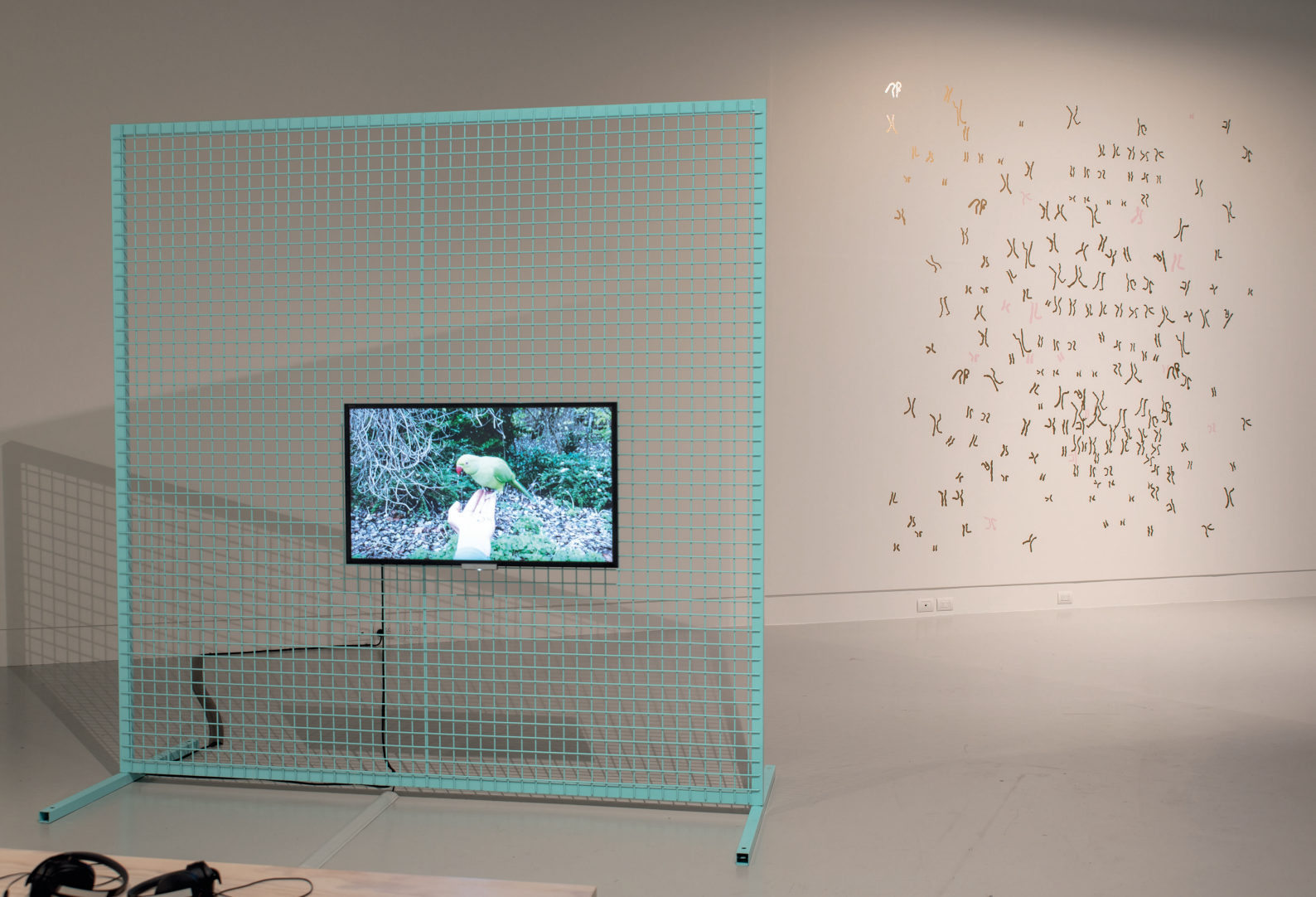
Hard, soft, hard, hard.

Annex
Annex, annexed
Or, access
Access point. Access
Entrance, exit
Or, hard, soft, hard, hard.

Timeframe, sightline, timeframe
Or, history
Or, epoch



Handwritten text in a stylized, cursive script, possibly a form of shorthand or a specific dialect. The text is written in black ink on a light-colored background, with some words highlighted in red. The script is dense and covers a large area of the page.



MOIST AND RESTLESS,
TEEMING WITH FORMS

MONZIL (MANGE),
MINSOL (ULCER),
MIRSCHA (BLACK STAIN),
ARLIZ (BLISTER)

CRYING, ROARING,
WEEPING SHE WAS

O'NDANZ (A ROOM
WITH AN
OPEN FIRE),
SCRINZ (A RUNNING
SORE)

MOIST AND RESTLESS,
TEEMING WITH FORMS

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SORE)



MOIST AND RESTLESS,
TEEMING WITH FORMS

KGORUS (MANGE),
KOBZGS (ULCER),
KOBZHO (BLACK STAIN),
BUBR (BLISTER)

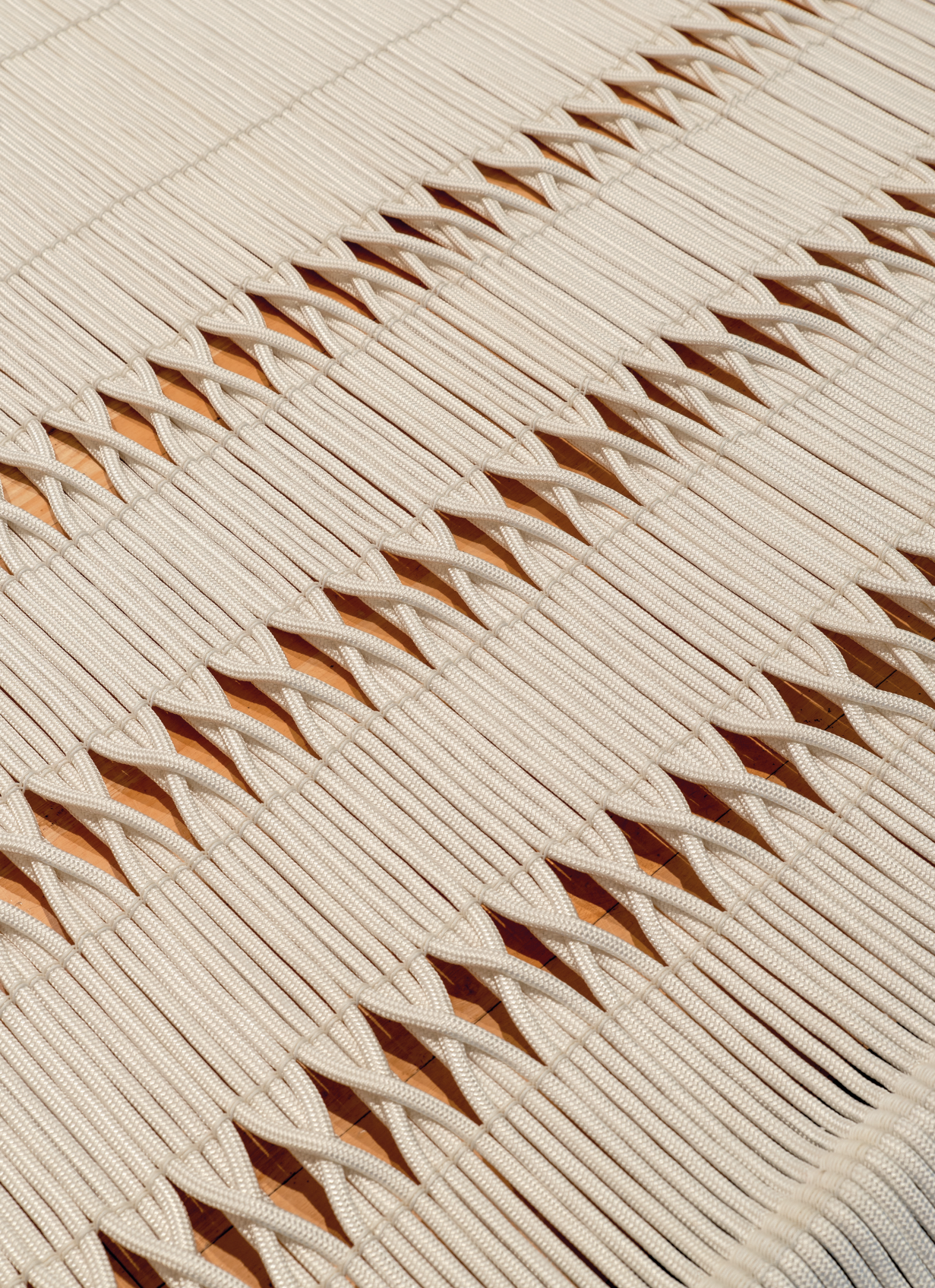
CRYING, ROARING,

WEEPING SHE WAS

ZGKOROR (A ROOM
WITH AN
OPEN FIRE),
BZKOR (A RUNNING
SORE)







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Subversive strategies:
women, language
and ideology

*This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues ...*¹

Donna Haraway

We all inherit a mother-tongue. We are taught to believe it is the language of our culture and of our consciousness. Through this language we seek to give shape to our experiences, to understand our subjectivity in relation to the world, but the words that we speak are not our own. Born into language, we assimilate its rules and exceptions, we learn to navigate its logic and power. In doing so we cannot help but mis-speak, mis-hear, grow frustrated with our inability to be understood. As Nelly Furman, Professor Emerita of French at Cornell, explains: ‘We may wish to make our language our own, but we must first recognize that we are moulded into speaking subjects by language and that language shapes our perceptual world.’² A particularly rich strand of artistic practice has developed in recent decades, seeking to explore the ways in which language shapes us, and asks in turn how we can shape language.

The intersection between linguistic and visual representation has been a site of rich exploration within the visual arts, having borne particularly compelling results in the wake of French feminist theory. During the 1970s, the influence of a number of writers engaged with critical theory came to have an increasing impact upon the development of feminist thought. Responding to both Jacques Lacan’s structural interpretations of Sigmund Freud, and the deconstruction formulated by Jacques Derrida, these writers were often grouped together and referred to as the ‘French Feminists’. Despite their divergent positions, the writings of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig shared a common concern: how best to counter the gendered nature of language itself.

If women-as-subjects are outsiders to language, if they have lacked a position from which to counter or derail male-centred conceptions of both sexes ... this is the consequence not of inevitable family arrangements but of millennia of cultural subordination of women’s bodies and their sexuality to the needs and fantasies of men.³

1. Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1984), in: Donna J. Haraway and Cary Wolfe, *Manifestly Haraway*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pp. 67-68.

2. Nelly Furman, ‘The politics of language: beyond the gender principle?’ in Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, London and New York: Methuen, 1985, p. 69.

3. Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Inscribing femininity: French theories of the feminine’ in in Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, London and New York: Methuen, 1985, pp. 84.

4. Christina Barton joined the editorial board from the fourth issue, with Elizabeth Eastmond participating until the fifth.

5. Susan Davis, Elizabeth Eastmond and Priscilla Pitts, ‘Editor’s introduction’, *Antic* 1, 1986, p. 3.

6. Anne Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists: A Survey of 150 Years* 2nd ed., Tortola: Craftsman House BVI Ltd., 1993, pp. 204-205.

By highlighting the ideologies carried in the structuring of language as a signifying system, these writers challenged the centrality of the unified male subject as the origin point of knowledge and meaning. However, the theoretical abstraction of much of this writing has—somewhat ironically—served to render it virtually inaccessible to those uninitiated in its own vocabulary and linguistic experimentations. Perhaps this inaccessibility goes some way towards accounting for the way in which this field of scholarship first found its way into the field of arts discourse in Aotearoa.

In 1986, the inaugural issue of *Antic* was published by Susan Davis, Elizabeth Eastmond and Priscilla Pitts.⁴ *Antic* published a total of eight issues, and provided a platform for innovative arts writing until its final issue in 1990. Outlining the critical focus of *Antic*, the editors stated that they hoped to ‘foreground aspects of a growing body of work dealing with recent directions in feminist and other theoretical practices often ignored by existing arts publications in New Zealand.’⁵ Several essays were published in this first volume that discussed French theory, bringing this scholarship to a New Zealand readership. While both Julie Ewington’s *Past the Post: Postmodernism and Postfeminism* and Anne Maxwell’s *Poststructuralist and Feminist Literary Theories: The Problematic Relation* offer critical engagement with this terrain, their contributions have been overshadowed by a pair of essays written by Lita Barrie and published in issues one and two of the magazine.

Barrie’s essays have been credited as playing a transformative role within the development of feminist arts discourse in Aotearoa, ushering in a more critical engagement with theoretical issues. Writing in 1993, Anne Kirker asserts that Barrie:

... took a vanguard position in relation to feminism some eight years ago (in the mid-1980s), arguing against biological determinism, focusing instead on the question of representation and gender difference. Rather than viewing female creativity as linked to a particular sensibility, Barrie challenged us to see it as being subjected to cultural construction. Taking her cue from the French theoretician Julia Kristeva, she was the first to outline a Poststructuralist feminist project for the visual arts in New Zealand.⁶

In comparison to the essays written by Ewington and Maxwell, Barrie arguably offers a relatively cursory account of this complex theoretical terrain, often conflating the writings of Kristeva and Cixous.⁷ Why, then, has she been positioned at the ‘vanguard’ of such developments? I would argue that the polemical tone, combined with the local specificity of her essays allowed them to gain traction—or notoriety. Arguing that ‘the lack of critical vigour, which characterises feminist art thinking ... characterises most other areas of the New Zealand artworld’, Barrie broadly dismisses the work of women artists working from a feminist perspective in Aotearoa.⁸

Historicising this period of critical debate around the construction of a pivotal moment, in this instance the publication of Barrie’s writings, is worrisome. Such a narrative posits a before and an after: inferring that the naive biological essentialism of earlier feminist work was rightly overwritten by the theoretical sophistication of this new wave of criticism. Both of these characterisations are simplistic and one-dimensional. The enforcement of a linear narrative linking them fails to account for the multi-vocality of feminist criticism and art-making.

By 1990, the linguistic approach to critical theory had become increasingly dominant within New Zealand’s art world, as exemplified by an exhibition entitled *NOW SEE HEAR! Art, language and translation*, held that year at Wellington City Art Gallery (now City Gallery Wellington). The exhibition and its accompanying publication addressed the intersection between art and language, demonstrating the influence of linguistic theory on the production and reception of art. Although the exhibition did not focus specifically on art that could be defined as feminist, curator and writer Ian Wedde acknowledges that this ‘field has been conspicuously occupied by women.’⁹ For many women artists during this period, feminism was viewed as an increasingly restrictive framework, rendering their work easy to dismiss by those unsympathetic to its aims. The overwhelming whiteness, heterosexuality and cis-genderedness of feminist discourse also functioned to alienate many from claiming it as an identifier. As Donna Haraway states:

It has become difficult to name one’s feminism by a single adjective—or even to insist in every circumstance on the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory,

7. For a more fulsome consideration of these essays, see Stephen Zepke, ‘Reptitions: Toward a Re-Construction of Phallic Univocality’ in *Antic* 7, 1990, pp. 41-56.

8. Lita Barrie, ‘Remissions: Toward a Deconstruction of Phallic Univocality’, *Antic* 1, 1986, p. 87.

9. Ian Wedde, ‘Introduction’, in Ian Wedde and Gregory Burke (eds.), *NOW SEE HEAR! Art, language and translation*, Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1990, p. 10.

10. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 16.

11. Vyacheslav Ivanov, ‘Heteroglossia’, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 9 (1/2), pp. 100-102 accessed 25.10.18, www.jstor.org/stable/43102437

12. Sriwhana Spong, *This Creature*, HD Video, 2016

13. British Library, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, accessed 28.10.18, www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-book-of-margery-kempe

partial, and strategic. ... There is nothing about being “female” than naturally binds women. ... Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.¹⁰

Though articulated in the mid-1980s, Haraway’s assertion of the partial, fragmentary nature of identity retains its insightful charge today.

Contemporary artists frequently work in a manner that either interrogates or embraces this difficulty of naming by a single adjective. The exhibitions *Embodied Knowledge* and *Can Tame Anything* bring together the work of several such artists, situating them loosely within a theoretically informed framework. The exploratory linguistic approach underpinning the work of one such artist, Sriwhana Spong, allows her to harness multiple voices and speak from disparate positions. Heteroglossia is best described as ‘the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech or other signs, the tensions between them, and their conflicting relationship within one text.’¹¹ Spong’s layering of different kinds of speech within and across her works in this exhibition serve as a creative example of Haraway’s ‘powerful infidel heteroglossia’.

Speaking in tongues

*As a reader one never knows whether she actually heard these voices, or whether she created them in order to live how she wished. Either way, these are voices that authorise her speaking. Kempe’s is a body of voices bleeding into one another. A body of imprints, echoes, where power is constantly shifting. Like a broth, like a potion, like a cure.*¹²

Sriwhana Spong in *This Creature*

Margery Kempe lived in England, between c. 1373 and 1438. She was a mother, a mystic, a visionary: she was also responsible for a book that is considered to be the ‘earliest autobiography in English’.¹³ Illiterate, Kempe’s disjunctive narrative was written through the hands of three male scribes. There can be no way of knowing how faithfully they transcribed her words. Written in the

third person, Margery is referred to throughout the book as the ‘creature’.¹⁴

This Creature, exhibited in *Can Tame Anything*, is a video work made by Spong in 2016, in response to Margery Kempe’s book. In the work, the viewer watches through a tightly cropped camera frame showing us Spong’s point of view. Her hand extends from our position behind the camera into the visual field. The images we are shown are sensuously tactile: Spong’s hand caressed by flowing water, moving with insatiable curiosity across stone and fencing, extended and filled with seeds that birds delicately peck before flitting out of the camera’s frame. We may see through Spong’s eyes, but bodily we are detached. Denied the tactility of touch, our experience is mediated through expanding layers of language and subjectivity.

Our experience of the work’s visual language is informed by a sort of spectatorial doubling: our vision is Spong’s, yet it is our own. However, it is in Spong’s spoken narrative that the apparent logic of language is frayed, troubled and unravelled. In fact, describing *This Creature*’s narration as a narrative is misleading. Like Kempe’s book, Spong’s spoken interrogation is a weaving together of numerous voices. We hear Kempe, Spong, an officious librarian, medical practitioners from the 15th and 21st centuries: numerous voices making themselves heard through the speech of one woman. Spong, like Kempe before her, acts as a conduit to multi-vocality, as a site of heteroglossia. Linguistic systems clash and compete within the video-as-text.

The multiplicity of voices expands further still when Spong references her mother, who occasionally speaks in tongues: ‘she raises her voice in sounds, not words. But kinds of words, a rhythm, some sounds repeated, forming ribbons of tones, vibrating with a meaningless speaking that carries meaning in pitch, tremor, repetition.’¹⁵ Though spoken in recognisable words, the narration of *This Creature* could be described in similar terms. Spong skilfully utilises the tonality of her voice, harnessing repetition and emphasis to form an aural pulse. She operates within, outside and before language: ‘that period before the tongue can speak, before words get in between.’¹⁶

Julia Kristeva positions much of her interrogation of the masculinity of language in this period ‘before the tongue can speak’. If language seeks to define and clarify according to a patriarchal logic—he is a boy, she is a

14. Ibid.

17. Julia Kristeva quoted in Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Inscribing femininity’, p. 86.

18. Furman, ‘The politics of language’, p. 69.

15. Sriwhana Spong, *This Creature*, HD Video, 2016

16. Ibid.

19. Wall text for Sriwhana Spong, *Can Tame Anything*, The Dowse Art Museum

20. Julia Kristeva, ‘Interview with Catherine Francblin’ in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2003, p. 1055.

girl—then maybe this pre-linguistic space can offer a way of unveiling the artifice of such logic? *This Creature* meshes voices and subjectivities over and through each other, challenging the limits of the languages by which it was created. In line with Kristeva’s urging, *This Creature* rejects ‘everything, finite, definite, structured’.¹⁷

Margery Kempe is not the only woman through which Spong explores these issues. Hildegard von Bingen’s (1098-1179) constructed language ‘Lingua Ignota’ demonstrates the historical persistence of our ‘wish to make our language our own’.¹⁸ Like Kempe, von Bingen has been described as a mystic, a woman who heard divine voices and through them forged a new language. Spong’s series of text works, made for *Can Tame Anything*, combine text from an essay about Kempe with individual words from the ‘Lingua Ignota.’ Moving from left to right across the five panels of text, what at first appears to be an incremental effacement of the text reveals itself to be a transformation. This transformative process is described as follows:

Spong asked graphic designer Sandra Kassenaar to design a font inspired by the 23 *Litterae Ignotae* (unknown letters) that accompany the *Lingua Ignota*. Kassenaar created *Elizabeth Ignota* using her hand-drawn translations of von Bingen’s letters in combination with *Elizabeth-Antiqua*, a font designed by the German typographer Elizabeth Friedländer in 1933. Kassenaar’s sketches are grafted onto Friedländer’s typeface like a vine, and in this meeting of two historical typefaces, a new font emerges.¹⁹

This new font gives visual expression not only to the emergence of a new language, but also to the simultaneous layering of multiple languages and voices. The extension of Spong’s linguistic interrogation into the written word enriches the density of her visual language. For Kristeva it was important to ‘take into account the visual factor’ of language, a component that she felt ‘lends itself more readily to playfulness, to invention, to interpretation, than verbal thought.’²⁰

Such playfulness and invention is perhaps the hallmark of this artistic interrogation of language. Slipping between voices and perspectives, assigning power to the overlooked and the unheard, Spong forges a language that is visual, aural, poetic, and impossible to pin down. While neither

of these works vocally claim the noun ‘feminist’, they persistently incorporate the voices of women. Speaking of Spong’s work, Thomasin Sleigh has noted:

Hildegard’s *Lingua Ignota* includes a few adjectives but is mostly nouns, a language only of names—this seems, in a way, defiant; a woman announcing and claiming space for herself in a world that did not recognise the brilliance and intellect of women.²¹

The richness of Spong’s work lies, in part, in its multiplicity of voices and female subjectivities. When Haraway spoke of a powerful infidel heteroglossia, of a feminist speaking in tongues, she refuted the need for unity and wholeness. There is no shared universal experience of ‘woman’; such a concept is a product of naming. If the power of language is also the power of restrictive definition, slipping from its grasp is a subversive strategy. In Spong’s words: ‘I’ll never know who was speaking who, whose tongue was speaking where, who was voicing who, affecting who, touching who’.²²

21. Thomasin Sleigh, *Spong’s Polyphony - Sriwhana Spong: a hook but no fish*, Govett Brewster Art Gallery 12 May-22 July 2018 accessed 27.10.18, www.circuit.org.nz/blog/spong's-polyphony-sriwhana-spong-a-hook-but-no-fish-govett-brewster-art-gallery

22. Sriwhana Spong, *This Creature*, HD Video, 2016

A voice suggests
(expects, demands)
a body

There were three works by Alicia Frankovich in the exhibition *Can Tame Anything*. There was a video called *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!*, two large suspended photographic prints on PVC called *After Blue Marble: Mouth Bacteria I* and *II*, and a vinyl wall work called *Microchimerism*. At a simple level, each might be considered a performance in the realm of microbiology. These performances occur, respectively, in a home-cultured probiotic drink, a site exterior to the human body; in the mouth or entranceway to the body; and within the deep interiority of the biological body, in the DNA structure itself.¹ Each is approached as a scene of lively encounter, of minute and significant differentiation: between what exists outside and inside the body, between ‘self’ and other forms of organic life.

I enjoy finding this descending pattern of three. I begin here. I think: through these sites of biological activity we might think about the displacement of the individual self, into infinitely microscopic cells, a diffusion of selfhood, so that it is registered on a biological scale rather than within a giant and self-contained ‘I’. Thinking about the clean diagram of this reading, and the scale shift it entails, I feel the small and habitually tensed muscles in my jaw and round my eyes relax. Paradoxically, the ‘I’ that I recognise as myself is consistently eased by the idea that this same self is also a cultural construction, something that could be re-conceptualised as more porous, more soluble, less finished.

As materialist feminists have long been aware, acknowledging matter at a microbial scale is a political act: the conventional binary differentiation of scale is itself a gendered power relationship. Physicist and philosopher Karen Barad points out that the belief that the world is separated into macro and micro, with classical physics applied to the macro and quantum physics to the micro, “suggests that at a particular scale, one conveniently accessible to the human, a rupture exists in the physics and ontology of the world.”² In this scheme ‘normal’ things are macro, while the micro is restricted to a kind of sub-humanity, and “any danger of infection or contamination of any kind is removed in this strict quarantining of all queer Others.”³

Breaking with this binary means interpolating the solidity of the humanist ‘I’ with a series of organic processes, such as those of digestion and immunity, eating, sleeping, aging, disease, cell formation and development.

1. In a recent project, for which the film *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* was commissioned, the exhibition itself was conceived as a series of cavities, the body and architectural forms as hosting microscopic and macroscopic worlds. See Hannah Mathews, exhibition text, *Alicia Frankovich: Exoplanets*, Monash University Museum of Art (Melbourne), 6 October - 15 December 2018.

2. In this interview Barad addresses a common misconception that her theory of ‘agential realism’ means applying quantum physics as a form of analogy for the social world of people. Rather, Barad’s aim is to look at the metaphysical assumptions that underpin and conventionally separate the two. In questioning this dualism her assertion is not that scale doesn’t matter, but that the way scale is produced should be part of the discussion. See Malou Juelskjær and Nete Schwennesen, ‘Intra-active Entanglements, an Interview with Karen Barad,’ *Kvinder, Kon and Forskning* 1-2 (2012): pp. 17-18.

3. Ibid, p. 18.

4. For a full discussion of Barad’s agential realism, see ‘Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers: Interview with Karen Barad,’ *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, edited by Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin, np. (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

5. This is not new knowledge. Most relevant in this place, Aotearoa, is the Te Ao Māori principal of whakapapa, which situates humans in relation to the Earth. Papatūānuku. Emilie Rākete (Ngāpuhi) writes of this relationship: “From a political ecological perspective rooted in Papatūānuku, we could translate ‘tangata whenua’ ... as ‘land-people’- ‘people’ not as its own epistemological category, but as a function of the land, of the whenua. We are not beings who are of the land but the land itself in the act of being. We are a function of the ecology, we are ecology foremost.” Ecology is a biological designation; the model here is that of organisms within a system, their relationship to each other, and their surroundings. Rākete, “In Human: Posthumanism, Parasites, Papatūānuku,” *Anarchic Cannibalism*, accessed 15 January 2015: <http://anarchacannibalism.tumblr.com/post/99890543754/in-human-parasites-posthumanism-papat%C5%AB%C4%81nuku>.

6. Quinn Latimer, ‘Signs, Sounds, Metals, Fires, or An Economy of Her Reader’, *Like a Woman*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017, p. 205.

It means recognising that matter holds forms of agency,⁴ and that being itself is essentially relational. Rather than as discrete entities, humans may be seen to function both as and within a material ecology.⁵

Frankovich’s recent work is frequently framed as posthumanist in its elastic reach for the plural possibilities and performances of selfhood. As her practice has always suggested, though, it’s important to hold conceptual conversations about selfhood close to the recognition of *physical bodies* in the encounter with this work. How then are multiple physical bodies present at each of the sites in this work? How do they perform in relationship to what we conventionally call ‘our’ selves? How do they speak in this work, how do we hear them, and in hearing, what do we hear? Or flip it back the other way, as Quinn Latimer does in a recent text on the reader-writer relationship: “[But] a voice suggests (expects, demands), a body.”⁶

I didn’t see this exhibition; I am far away. Too far away really, now sitting writing at a desk in the summer after the exhibition, far from from the living bodies that provide the information for these works. I download and watch the video *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!*, following the unfolding fluorescence of blue crystals on the screen. I have been making kimchi in the morning, another probiotic fermentation; the smell is still on my hands, mildly sulphurous but not unpleasant. After I watch the video, I leave the room and my laptop and go to check on it. It’s hot in the concrete apartment and already the cabbage and carrot and onion are bubbling gently inside the jars. They glow, luridly alive, in their own juice.

1

Because I am here, in the kitchen, walking back to the desk, let’s start with thinking about the bodies in *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* The video is made up of thousands of stills of the microbiota in water kefir, photographed at the Centre for Advanced Microscopy (Australian National University). These appear as luminous, swimming on a dark ground. The image is accompanied by a voice track, reading fragments of text. At some points this sounds like a simple recipe for the drink water kefir; at others it is more existential: “things that I take, I swallow.” At some fluid threshold of the self, somewhere between swallow and

stomach, these bacterial bodies become part of our own.

Probiotic bacteria, such as those found in water kefir, occur through fermentation, producing enzymes, acids and proteins that are said to improve gut health. While longstanding hygiene-oriented rhetoric suggests humans are at ‘war’ with bacteria, requiring us to fortify our bodies against germs, there is a growing counter-movement through the probiotics industry, within which wellbeing begins with the presence of ‘good bacteria’ in the digestive system.

In a contemporary capitalist context, where consumption and selfhood may often be seen as correlative—consumption as an expression of *who we are*; the bodies we consume in the performance of self-transformation—water kefir presents a distinct exception. Frankovich points out that kefir is a ‘free’ phenomenon, the crystals typically gifted from an existing bug, and that it is able to be sustained with just water, sugar and lemon and some dried fruit every three days. Water kefir is not usually able to be purchased in shops, rather circulates in a gifting economy. As such it relies on a community network as well as ongoing acts of nourishment to keep the bacteria alive.

The human microbiome, or community of bacteria, fungi and viruses hosted by our bodies, is receiving increasing attention in biological and medical research. Science journalist Richard Conniff writes, “We tend to think that we are exclusively a product of our own cells, upwards of ten trillion of them. But the microbes we harbor add another 100 trillion cells into the mix.”⁷ The maths are necessarily reductive but they make a significant point: if we count *cells* as the matter that makes us human, this forms only one-tenth of our bodies as functioning organisms. This opens to an understanding of the self as a form of host, or an activity of hosting; the idea that to be alive is, irreducibly, a symbiotic companionship with other material bodies.

There is the reference to something else within *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* though: an exoplanet, or planet outside of our solar system. Exoplanets belong to other solar systems, orbit their own star-like suns; by statistical probability, some may occupy the ‘habitable zone’.⁸ Our closest exoplanet is Proxima Centauri B, 4.2 light years away from Earth. The exoplanet evokes a vastly distant exteriority—and yet, within the scope of this work there’s a relatable resonance. As the voice-over says: “I grow you / inside, outside / these are the planets that we do not know / this is the inside of me.” Probiotic bacteria

7. Richard Conniff, ‘Microbial Research: The Trillions of Creatures Governing Your Health’, *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2013. www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/microbes-the-trillions-of-creatures-governing-your-health

8. The habitable zone relates to the possible presence of liquid water (in the right climate conditions) on Earth-like planets orbiting their own stars.

and exoplanets may be said to represent the farthest conceivable poles of human ‘inhabitation’. As such there is between them a difference in degree, not kind. Extra-solar space and the microbial universe that is “growing, orbiting, with us”: both projections of ourselves that are at once intimate and distant.

2

In the second work, *After Blue Marble: Mouth Bacteria I* and *II*, there is the mouth, its bacteria imaged in using microscopic photographic technology. ‘Blue marble’ is the name of the image of Earth taken from space on 7 December 1972 by astronauts on the Apollo. That image was almost ten years old when I was born; I grew up with a poster of the image on the bathroom door, and have just realised it’s still here on the wall in my flat, a faded banner of a photograph so ubiquitous I barely register it. What comes ‘after’ such hyper-reproduction?

After Blue Marble: Mouth Bacteria I and *II* (originally commissioned as a series of public billboards for Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria, 2018) might be read as Frankovich’s response to the contemporary impossibility, or philosophical imprecision, of a singular anthropocentric perspective. In these two photographs, the lens is turned internally, to a site where life proliferates, largely unseen and beyond any identifiable sense of the self as an individual. Frankovich writes: “These interior spaces become inversions: surfaces of forms exploring the resonances between micro-processes and macro-ecologies. Artificial hormones and antibiotics become fluid continents; the microscope becomes a telescope.”⁹ Rather than looking back telescopically from the distance of space, this view is of the unknown terrain that we embody as material organisms. The blue marble image is turned in on itself; the ‘I’ is turned inside out.

The mouth is where the voice resides, where we speak from; it is where we take in nourishment and remedies, oxygen, and from which we expel carbon dioxide. It is also where swabs are taken for testing. There are over 1,000 possible microbial species in our mouths,¹⁰ making it a key site from which samples are taken and grown in a petri dish, and DNA sequences read from. As well as taking in what the external world offers, what the air carries, what is to be swallowed down, breathed in, spat out, the mouth is a body

9. Artist note.

10. “It’s not just that there are more than 1,000 possible microbial species in your mouth. The census, as it currently stands, also counts 150 behind your ear, 440 on the insides of your forearm and any of several thousand in your intestines. In fact, microbes inhabit almost every corner of the body, from belly button to birth canal, all told more than 10,000 species. Looked at in terms of the microbes they host, your mouth and your gut are more different than a hot spring and an ice cap.” Conniff, *ibid*.

of information in itself. As such it’s a site of multiple expressions, performances of self-identity, and a place of meeting with other bodies.

3

This takes us deeper into the interiority of the body, to the third work, *Microchimerism*. In *Microchimerism* Frankovich’s DNA profile (karotype) is recorded. The original data was taken from a blood sample, and mapped according to a standard female chromosome profile. This information was then magnified and reproduced as a series of forms in gold vinyl, applied like skin to the wall. Pink variants of the forms are more scant and interspersed throughout the gold. These suggest foreign DNA that may be inside Alicia’s body.

I saw this work (in a later iteration) at Starkwhite in Auckland.¹¹ Sharing a physical space with both works, I was taken back to the scale inversion that had started my thinking about this work. In the exhibition, the DNA returns to a form of embodiment. Dislocated from the analytical logic of the recorded sequence, it is re-materialised here in relation to the room and its contours, a composite of private biological script and the public architectural space it temporarily inhabits. Necessarily abstracted, and on a large scale, I finally experienced these microscopically-imaged bodies as taking up space, as public forms. It was here, seeing them on the wall where they appear almost to swim in one’s vision, that I started to think of how DNA moves fluidly between biological or scientific discourse and social meaning.

A microchimera is a single organism that is host to DNA cells from another organism or organisms. For example, a mother’s body may retain cells from her child through pregnancy. Equally, siblings may inherit cells from each other, in utero, rather than through a parent. Microchimerism can also occur through blood transfusion or organ transplant. While heredity tends to be associated with traits passed ‘down’ through generations, contemporary genetic research continues to reveal the multiple ‘horizontal’ and non-linear relationships that genetic organisms participate in, and in so doing, to complicate the concept of how genetic material is shared, to include the microbiome, epigenetics,¹² and cultural experience. In this sense microchimerism embodies

11. Alicia Frankovich, Starkwhite, Auckland, 6 February - 8 March 2019. Here it was shown alongside the water kefir video.

12. Epigenetics is the study of things that affect how cells read or express DNA; that is, biological factors that operate in addition to genetic material. These might include age, lifestyle and diseases.

13. “So whenever humans have a child, we’re passing down, via vertical heredity, viral genes inserted sideways into our genomes via horizontal heredity. In fact, we wouldn’t be able to reproduce at all without horizontal heredity. A crucial membrane between foetus and placenta exists thanks to a viral gene from one of those retroviral horizontal transfers. That viral gene makes all mammalian pregnancy possible. So at the level of DNA, humans are actually a mash-up of different species.” Meehan Crist, ‘Race Doesn’t Come Into It’ [a review of Carl Zimmer’s *She Has Her Mother’s Laugh: The Powers, Perversions and Potentials of Heredity*, 2018], *London Review of Books*, vol. 40, no. 20, 25 October 2018, p. 9.

14. Ibid., p. 10.

a contradiction, and a question that has also been a central concern of Frankovich’s recent work: the primacy of a whole or true ‘self’ that underpins it is at some level destabilised by that same science.

Meehan Crist, current writer in residence in biological sciences at Columbia, notes that horizontal inheritance makes up to eight percent of the human genome; some of our DNA actually comes from viruses that enter human cells at the reproductive phase, and are then passed on. She points out that not only do such viruses make pregnancy possible, their presence means that humans are at birth the fusion of different species’ DNA.¹³ As Crist argues, “certain relationships are culturally valued [over others]”, pointing out that since ancient Roman law the recording of heredity (linguistically related to ‘heir’) can be linked to an agenda of power and the consolidation of assets—ensuring that wealth was passed down through families.

In the case of linear inheritance, it’s an idea that has also scaffolded the hetero-patriarchal project of colonisation, justified by the biological inheritance of race, inherited ‘superiority’:

Specious biological categories have long been used to bolster racist or xenophobic speculation about inherent differences between people and cultures, but modern genetics makes notions of racial ‘purity’ laughable, and shows them to be rooted in cultural and political desires that have nothing to do with biology.¹⁴

To reframe genetic inheritance as multiple—the line of thought prompted throughout this work—is then not only to begin to undermine the biological singularity of the human individual, but with it an oppressive politics of individualism.

Reader, writer, listener

But I fear getting lost in all this. How to reconcile the physicality of the known body, the me that sits here at the laptop, reading, or making kimchi, with a more diffuse sense of self, dispersed through myriad microscopic bodies and across three sites of attention in this work? Where is the hinge, where is the relationship that keeps me—as writer, reader, viewer of the work—from floating into the

dematerialised abstraction of scientific account?

Perhaps the work offers one further, and intersecting, way to think through dispersed selfhood: through the co-constitutive gestures of writing, reading, and listening that it initiates. Quinn Latimer’s essay ‘Signs, Sounds, Metals, Fires’ considers the structural relationships embodied in archaic and classical Greek language, that of writer (a patriarchal figure), text (a daughter figure) and reader (a suitor figure), who would give the text voice, making it audible.¹⁵

In her text, Latimer devolves the hierarchy of this structure, making space for a different configuration of relationships that include the reader, and the listener or ‘receiver’. Importantly, this inter-relationship is described on physical terms—those of the body, those of gesture. Latimer writes, “The listener takes the reader’s voice into her; the reader will take the writer’s voice into her. She is the writer’s vessel, her instrument. The reader beckons the receiver; someone must recognise her sounds. The writer beckons the reader; someone must read her signs.”¹⁶

The *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* text is written by Frankovich, read by Nadia Bekkers. Bekkers reads a form of poem (“a biological interior ... becomes a planet ... I grow you”), including scientific optical instruments (dark field illuminator) as well as a recipe for fermentation (a slice of fig, 40 degrees, water, sugar, lemon). When I hear this I recognise some of its signs. I hear a woman speaking about health. I hear the politics of resistance toward an entrenched differentiation of scale that dislocates us from the microscopic, and in so doing dislocates us from our own bodies, dislocates us from the vastness of the universe. I hear a voice, the embodiment of written text, and within this experience, a multitude of other voices are present.

Language—spoken, written, received—is part of what enables this recognition. I listen, and as I listen I take in. To return to Latimer’s assertion, “a voice suggests (expects, demands) a body.”¹⁷ Frankovich’s installation is a space in which the voices of numerous microbiological forms of life are foregrounded. It’s not necessarily that I ‘hear’ these voices in the work, but rather, as a viewer, listener, and later as a writer, I am momentarily but acutely aware of their embodiment, and of my own physicality, which is the physicality of infinite organic relationships. It is like ... it is like being ... no, not *like*—but actually, *this is a body*.

This relational, but also physically connecting, capacity

of the voice in the work might also be extended to the text—this text, that I am writing, that you are reading. I again borrow this thought from Latimer: “The writer writes for the future (reader) ... The act of writing and reading itself is an apprehension of the present, a holding of it in one’s hand or mouth.”¹⁸ The exhibition is finished but here in the present, between us, there is this voice, this body of text that may be held. And you: you are here.

15. The orientation here was oral language: “What was remarkable in ancient Greece was what sounded. What achieved an audible reknown. What was read-out loud.” Latimer, ‘Signs, Sounds, Metals, Fires ...’, p. 204.

16. Ibid., p. 205.

17. Ibid., p. 206.

18. Ibid., pp. 219-20.

Tauira:
*Mata Aho's many
ways of knowing*

The question arises: do old taonga like these have a way of subliminally passing their āhua, or likeness, down through the memories and fingers of those who see and respond to them?¹

In some tellings of the narrative that sees Ranginui and Papatūānuku separated from their tight embrace, the push is preceded by a gleam of light, glimpsed by their children through a gap in one of the parent’s armpits. How much can an absence hold? The pure vacancy of that space between was enough to shift earth from sky.

Calling forth that story of creation—and creating a space where there previously was none—is the installation *Tauira*. This space, as conceived by Mata Aho Collective—Erena Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tuhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Te Rangi) and Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne ki Wairarapa)—guides us, gently but firmly, toward Te Ao Marama. *Tauira*, which means at once student, teacher, pattern, and sampler, began in an enclosed gallery space. From there 2000 metres of 12 millimetre thick marine-grade rope, worked in situ by single and double paired finger twining, moved back along the ground toward the wall. Just before it got there it began to rise, up toward the small rectangular space incised into the wall. Through that glimpse of light *Tauira* poured forth onto the other side, inaccessible to visitors but freely viewable from the outside through the gallery’s exterior windows, where its careful woven structure collapsed into a wave of threads.

Tauira’s own creation story was incremental and well documented. Looking from the outside in, the view framed by Instagram’s square dimensions, Mata Aho’s process seems to come in waves. If you are familiar with their social media presence, these photographic notes—wānanga, research, practice pieces—ring a familiar tune.

“Weekend wānanga, new work development #tauira” reads the gram posted on 9 June, 2018, the text accompanying an image of clustered bundles of white thread, gathered at their tops by grey strips of tape. They look to be the ends of something longer; bursting from the constraint of the tape to unravel like the tail of a plait of hair. This is

1. Maureen Lander, “Te Ao Tawhito/Te Ao Hou: Entwined Threads of Tradition and Innovation,” in Awhina Tamarapa (ed.), *Whatu Kākahu: Māori Cloaks*, Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2011, p. 73.



2. Erenora Puketapu Hetet, *Maori Weaving*, Auckland: Longman, 2000, p. 24.



3. “Origins of Maori Weaving,” *Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*. Available at <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/topic/3612>

where it starts: the next week brings a post every day. An interest in marine rope becomes apparent. Interspersed amongst the images of rope—lengths of varying thickness as displayed at Barton Marine Ltd; an unravelling end on a wooden floor; wrapped around a cleat—are others which more explicitly exhibit the collective’s ongoing research into traditional Māori weaving and sewing practices. Muka, the fibre extracted from harakeke that forms the structure of a number of forms of Māori weaving, recurs, and neatly ties together a number of emergent threads in the post made on 18 June: “This is Muka that Mata Aho extracted in Omapere under the guidance of Maureen Lander. In April it was tied to the pito of a special brand new baby. Harakeke is not only very strong, but has naturally occurring anti-bacterial properties which makes it an excellent umbilical cord clamp.”

The first work Mata Aho created as a collective was *Te Whare Pora*, made during their residency at Enjoy Public Art Gallery over the summer of over 2012/2013. Te Whare Pora translates into English as the “house of weaving”. Despite the image that this conjures, it is better understood as a state of being rather than a physical environment. As Erenora Puketapu-Hetet explained, “When one is dedicated to pursuing the knowledge of weaving in its totality, then one is in Te Whare Pora”.²

During their time at Enjoy, Mata Aho treated the residency as a contemporary whare pora. They slept, ate, talked and worked together within the gallery, eventually stitching together twenty black, queen-size, faux mink blankets, edged with a faux satin trim. The result was immersive and enveloping, plush darkness; a place in which to spend some time.

After his parents were pushed apart, Tāne-nui-a-rangi searched for a source of light to illuminate the world born from their separation. He found Hinerauāmoa, “the smallest and most fragile star in the sky”, and from their union came Hine-te-iwaiwa, the atua of Te Whare Pora.³

It was *Te Whare Pora* to which Mata Aho returned when developing *Tauira*. As they described in conversation with Kirsty Baker,

[*Te Whare Pora*] is made from black faux mink blankets that really suck in all of the light. Visually, it’s a big black presence and creating an installation that looks opposite to that was something that we’d been thinking about for a long time. So we started researching and theorising about Te Ao Marama, the world of light.⁴

The two works are converse, rather than contrary, and *Te Whare Pora* speaks to a number of key concerns that the collective has continued to work with in the years since this first artwork. There is the considered engagement with mātauranga Māori, the use of accessible and everyday material, the large scale and hands-on methods that require all eight hands and four brains to work together. And, I think most significantly, there is the acknowledgement that the artists are working from within a place of learning.

That white waterfall of thread that poured into the Dowse’s window gallery recalled muka. It was toward the beginning of 2018, in Omapere, when Dr Maureen Lander guided Mata Aho through the methods of harvesting and preparing muka for taniko weaving. The process generally involves removing the outer flesh of the harakeke by scraping it with a mussel shell, before rolling, soaking and beating the resulting fibre. Finally, it is rubbed by hand, a process that softens the threads for working. Lander was introduced to the fibre by Diggeress Te Kanawa in the early 1980s, and since then, her use of it has recurred and developed.

I was seduced by the beauty and magic of muka. My first public installation in 1986—*E kore koe e ngaro he kakano i ruia mai i Rangiatea* in the *Karanga Karanga* exhibition—featured whenu (warp threads) and aho (weft threads) that I had carefully prepared to make my first korowai. Instead, I suspended them in an ethereal cloud-like formation over a swirl of flax seed.⁵

4. Kirsty Baker, “Before Words Get in Between,” *The Pantograph Punch* (28 September 2018). Available at <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/post/before-words>

5. “Maureen Lander - Artist Statement,” *Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*. Available at <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/topic/3656>

Recall as it might have, the fibre Mata Aho chose to employ was not muka; *Tauira*’s ropes’ seed—if we were to call a polyimide that—is synthetic. Despite this, muka and nylon thread share a number of characteristics: both are exceedingly strong, both are waterproof, both produce a fine thread. Both have been industrialised.

It is near impossible to reproduce the softness and silkiness of hand-dressed muka but the process is time intensive. With the advent of the mechanised stripper in the second half of the 19th century, harakeke was worked in unprecedented quantities. By 1916, at the height of the fibre’s production, 30,000 tonnes of muka were being spun a year.

A photograph posted by Mata Aho on 27 July, 2018 shows one of these mills in action. Captioned “Historic images of flax fibre being drawn into continuous silver suitable for spinning,” the black and white reproduction is a blur of movement. What looks like hundreds of white threads stream, in tight but orderly succession, between a myriad of mechanical arms.

Looking at that image, I thought of a description of Lander’s *Tool-box* (1984), published in the 1987 *Herstory Diary*. Below a photograph of the work—four green-lipped mussel shells, housed safely in a black, wooden box—is printed the following text:

Maureen Lander produced this ‘tool-box’ in 1984, during her second year at Elam. While studying in the sculpture department she was required to work with wood and bronze amongst other materials. During that year she also spent some time with Diggeress Te Kanawa who taught her how to prepare flax fibre in the traditional way by scraping with a mussel shell. Maureen decided to make her own ‘tools’ from bronze. Not surprisingly, the tools nature provided were superior in every way. She has given away the bronzes but continues to use real shells when preparing flax fibre for use in her work.⁶

There is a respect here, for the utility of materials—their function and their form—drawn from wherever we might find them. Reflecting on her time at Elam, Lander has described how, in that context, bronze had a recognised



6. Herstory ’87 Collective, *Herstory 1987*, Auckland: New Women’s Press, 1986, p. 50.

sculptural value that natural fibres did not. “However, I was more interested in using materials that were light and flexible and that I could relate to. I prefer to make things that aren’t ‘permanent’ but endure and change through innovation and knowledge passed down.”⁷

7. Maureen Lander quoted in “Her Story, Maureen Lander in Conservation with Priscilla Pitts,” *Art New Zealand*, no.169, 2019, p. 47.

The legacy of innovation in weaving stretches back to its very beginnings, when the first Polynesian settlers to Aotearoa found the plant life different to what they were accustomed to. It was with their own history of the craft that they encountered harakeke and with that knowledge they applied and adopted their existing technologies to the plant. With European contact came further developments; some, like the adoption of silk, cotton, wool and candle-wick, immediately obvious; others, such as the changes in weft-twining techniques, more subtle to the untrained eye.

It is from this history that *Tauira* comes. Mata Aho have consistently argued that their use of materials is designed to make their artworks accessible to a wider audience. This does not serve to displace their artwork’s from the traditions from which they come—for every piece of weaving has a story; every piece of weaving has a whakapapa. Their work asks us to consider what changes and what stays the same; how we carry with us those incremental developments we later come to see as tradition and what is left behind in the process.

How does one account for the many ways of knowing in ngā mahi a te whare pora? Tauira is a word that refers to both product and process, to the task of learning and the actions of practice and collaboration which that entails. Teacher, student, pattern, sampler. Mata Aho are, as Rachel O’Neill so elegantly describes, attentive to “knowledge through time—in which what is not known, what is coming to be known, and what can only be imagined contributes to making something workable”. The knots we know, then, are not only that; for so many of us, each strand of knowledge carries with it the shadow of what we have forgotten. What we do know we learn through a variety of means.

Tauira carried in its warps and wefts a tradition that transcends the physical; speaking beyond itself to the many narratives from which it comes. At the same time, there was a reverence in the act of making for what it is: a craft, one that demands practice, patience and care. There was a dignity in the way *Tauira* held these concerns together; just as there was in the way it let them spill out over its edge.

Kia ū ki tōu kāwai tupuna, kia mātauria ai, I ahu mai koe I hea, e anga koe ko hea.

Moving bodies through space

Purple and pink metallic chain curtains covered the entrance-ways to the exhibitions *Embodied Knowledge* and *Can Tame Anything*, allowing glimpses of the galleries beyond, but creating a physical threshold to be pushed apart by visitors. The cool metal brushed against one's skin and the gentle clinking of the chains announced the movement of someone breaking through the curtain barrier: an empowering sensory experience. Titled *Break, break, break. Broke* (2018), these interventions by Ruth Buchanan (Te Āti Awa, Taranaki, Pākehā) connected and distinguished the two exhibitions that were located on opposite sides of The Dowse Art Museum. With this simple sculptural gesture, Buchanan acknowledged the curatorial proposition of a shared aesthetic across the shows, yet also accentuated the split in time between the practices from the 1980s celebrated in *Embodied Knowledge* and the work of her peers in *Can Tame Anything*. Buchanan's work sat alongside, questioned and contributed to the curatorial framework, making visible the architecture of the gallery.

I curated *Embodied Knowledge* to bring together artists who were connected to histories of feminism, critical theory and installation art in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many of the works had not been shown since the 1980s, such as the large-scale installation *Extensum/Extensor* (1982) from Pauline Rhodes. Archival works from The Estate of L. Budd were reconceived in the space; Maureen Lander created an installation inspired by her ephemeral works of the mid-80s; several Christine Hellyar works from The Dowse Collection were included; and an installation from Vivian Lynn, *Lamella Lamina* (1983), was once again presented in the gallery. These are not works one might think of as activist art, but the artists share a radical approach to making that is informed by the body, language and the environment. Using ephemeral materials, site specific and performative or process-based practices, they introduce subjective experiences and alternative histories, and interrogate our relationships to the land and its resources. They challenge many aspects of dominant social, cultural and institutional structures: ideas that are explored through the innovative materiality of their works.

Buchanan engaged with the premise of the show as an artist with a deep understanding of how history operates and the ways in which structures can be subverted. Without attempting to interpret, retell or respond to this moment in art history, she provided frameworks that supported

these artists, enhancing the experience of their work, to be read historically and appreciated physically. Buchanan often manipulates institutional structures in her own work, and her participation led to questions in keeping with curatorial practice: how do you want the exhibition to be encountered? What are the relationships and differences between these artists, across the two exhibitions? As an artist, she is comfortable working across many aspects of the gallery system: graphic design, exhibition layout, interpretation and invigilation. In bringing her own distinct visual language to this, she accentuates exhibition features that we normally disregard, and highlights the potential for these to be altered.

Buchanan's strident entranceway installations—along with the gifting of the exhibition title *Can Tame Anything*, the design of the reading area, and use of her sculptural work to host a video by fellow artist Sriwhana Spong—convey important aspects of Buchanan's practice. Her works emphasise context, framing devices, aspects of buildings, and language, but always in relation to bodies: bodies moving through space, text, structure, and time. The sight of works beyond *Break, break, break. Broke*, either sculptural installations from Hellyar and Lander, or the works of Alicia Frankovich and Spong, at once drew visitors through the chains to the gallery and reinforced the transition into the exhibition space proper, making the audience active and aware in their role as viewers. Buchanan has developed a language of particular colours, forms and design elements that she adapts to the specificities of a site, wrapping these around and intervening in the existing architecture. Peach, purple, pink, turquoise; grid, wave, or line, intentionally used to call attention to the white cube museum norms.

The unusual layout of The Dowse Art Museum meant that the two exhibitions were separated with another gallery in between, one that houses a collection work on permanent display: the pātaka (storehouse) Nuku Tewhatewha. Made in 1856, this small building was carved in support of the Kingitanga movement and is symbolic of the struggle for Māori sovereignty and self-determination: a political narrative that is distinct from the adjacent exhibitions. However, Buchanan is from Taranaki and Te Āti Awa whakapapa (genealogy), the same iwi as Wi Tako, the commissioner of the pātaka, so she worked with this whanaungatanga (relationship) in mind. The chain curtain separation of

Break, break, break. Broke could also be seen as a divider that meant Nuku Tewhatewha was encountered independently and without distraction of other artworks: a sign of respect. Buchanan’s elegant pink chains played off the architecture of the pātaka, which features elaborate carving, painted kowhaiwhai panels and a front door that is set back in the entrance, and was a contemporary version of a threshold made with political intent.

Also situated between the exhibition spaces was a corridor gallery designated as a reading area, intended to house artist publications relating to both shows and to provide access to hard-to-find materials about feminist histories in Aotearoa. Buchanan recommended designs for this area to create an encompassing space, with a dark pink paint applied to the lower half of the walls and a timeline poem, *Epoch* (2018), that stretched along the full length of one wall. Together these evoked a particular feeling: what she described as a channel to link the past and the present. The timeline read:

Epoch
Epoch
Epoch
2 years later
Or, history, or history
Or, so they say
Epoch

Acted, acting, acts
Entrance
Exit
Or, annex
Or, annexed
Or, history. Or hhhiiiiissssstory
And today

Hard, soft, hard, hard.

Annex.
Annex, annexed
Or access
Access point. Access
Entrance, exit
Or, hard, soft, hard, hard.
Timeframe, sightline, timeframe

Or, history
Or, epoch

Acted, acting, acts
Acted, annexed, or I, I, I
Entrance is and or, exit
In
Or
Out

Coupled with the emphasis on the entrances and exits as physical access points to the exhibitions, the timeline proposed that people and events either make an entrance to the historical record, or are overlooked in History, and that this visibility within our understanding of the past changes over time. “In/Or/Out”. Time itself is shown as irregular, an epoch lasting an unfixed time, and the act of history-making is stressed as a performance, something that is enacted. Buchanan claims time has tactile qualities; can be hard or soft, both words that describe physical and emotional attributes. It is subjective, she says: there are subjects, who action the events of history, who think, breathe and feel.

Read together, the pātaka and reading area form an historical backbone of sorts: a physical pathway between the gallery spaces that is utilised by Buchanan to provide context for the ideas of other artists and works. They foreground how history shapes us and behaves, how it hardens, leaks, softens or breaks, depending on the time and nature of its recollection.

Buchanan is accustomed to working within a context of other artists, such as in her exhibition *Bad Visual Systems* at Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi in 2016. When invited to present a solo show, she proposed two additional artists become part of this exhibition: Judith Hopf and Marianne Wex. There is a generosity with her invitation for others to enter her projects, and also a thoughtful construction of the historical context that she wants her own work to be seen within. Buchanan takes careful control of this, an activity that is customarily performed by an exhibition curator. Many artists have an awareness of how they are positioning themselves and ensure that writing around their work is aligned with their intent, but Buchanan makes the broader institutional conventions part of her work, giving her practice a wider scope than other artists might. As

Christina Barton wrote:

Unlike conventional art history, the links she forged with these artists were personal, professional and ideological. She allowed biography and happenstance, narrative and positionality to operate, conceiving a history that was partial, situated and pointed. And this took place not in exegesis but in the physical experience of the exhibition ...¹

In *Can Tame Anything*, Buchanan offered her sculptural work *Circumference* (2016/2018), a large freestanding metal frame, as exhibition furniture on which to hang a monitor presenting Sriwhana Spong’s video *This Creature* (2016): a physical support for her fellow artist. Spong and Buchanan share an interest in the histories of women and tactile approaches to their being uncovered. The suggestion to collaborate on the display of Spong’s work was a sign of Buchanan’s endorsement for its message, as well as making a point of *Circumference* as an artwork existing in relationship to others. Buchanan’s frame resembled the gridded racks that are commonly used to hold paintings in museum collection stores, although hers was signature Buchanan icy green, a reminder this was both a spatial divider and site for hanging artistic content. In *This Creature*, Spong tells the story of Margery Kempe (1373-1438), a Christian mystic who is thought to have written the first autobiography in the English language, and shares her own attempt to view the original copy of Kempe’s book. Layers of stories from women across time, speaking to the challenges of their situation and ability to have their voice recorded as history, are then highlighted in this juxtaposition of works.

Although unpredictable, the sound of *Break, break, break. Broke* chimed with Alicia Frankovich’s soundtrack to *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* (2018), and similarly brought the room of artists into conversation. Frankovich’s work looked at how our bodies collapse into and merge with other organisms and their energies, histories and relationships: a concept that Buchanan in a sense applies to artworks, institutions and their interconnectivity. Also unexpectedly, the long chains in *Break, break, break. Broke* formally paralleled the many threads of marine rope in *Tauira*, an installation by Mata Aho Collective that was anchored to the gallery floor and stretched across the space

1. Christina Barton, ‘Postscript’, *Bad Visual Systems*, Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi: Wellington, 2017.

before breaking through the gallery wall into an external window space beyond.

Buchanan’s work echoed the artists in *Embodied Knowledge*, too. For instance, L. Budd was keenly aware of institutional limits and challenged these where possible, incorporating standard exhibition labels as part of the work, as well as the tables, masking tape and foam blocks used by technicians during installation, to reveal the support structures usually hidden from sight. Lander and Hellyar have both worked to question museological practices and how we catalogue or define archival objects. The physical experience of walking along the field of deftly balanced fluorescent green rods in Rhodes’ installation finds a kinship with the sensuality of Buchanan’s chain curtains, as does the navigation of Lynn’s *Lamella Lamina* architectural forms. These earlier artists laid the groundwork for practices that are experiential, site-specific, installation-based, that relate to the language and architecture of institutions, and they are foundational for contemporary practices like Buchanan’s.

Language is central to this, and Buchanan gifted the name of the exhibition, *Can Tame Anything*, as a work with which to group contemporaries Frankovich, Spong, Mata Aho Collective, and herself. This title was taken from a longer title for one of her own textile works, ‘Can tame anything, tables, tables, chairs, blinds, bodies’ (2016). As an overarching claim for the exhibition, it is hopeful but ambiguous. There is the optimistic suggestion that these artists can bring things wild and unruly under control, yet it can also be read as an acknowledgement of dominant, homogenising forces at play.

Jan Verwoert has described Buchanan’s work as, “a home for agile metaphoric thoughts.”² The agility of her thinking is particularly perceptible in this exhibition as it defined the entranceways, physical and conceptual, to practices from the past and now. Buchanan worked with the architecture, culture and language of the gallery, shifting it in both bold and subtle ways to highlight how as audiences we navigate these spaces, and in doing so proposes that we also can disrupt these systems.

2. <https://frieze.com/article/focus-ruth-buchanan>

Contributors

Kirsty Baker is a writer and art historian based in Wellington, where she is currently completing her PhD at Victoria University. Her interests are shaped by the overlapping spaces that exist across disciplines and the interlinked nature of the political and the creative. Influenced by an enduring engagement with feminism, her PhD focuses upon a critical examination of the discourse surrounding women artists in Aotearoa.

Lita Barrie is an art critic and essayist based in Los Angeles. Born in New Zealand, in the mid-1980s she wrote a weekly art column for *The New Zealand National Business Review* and contributed to *The Listener*, *Art New Zealand*, *Antic*, *AGMANZ*, *Sites* and *Landfall*. Barrie re-located to Los Angeles in 1990, where she became the LA correspondent for *Artspace*, a contributing editor for *Artweek*, contributor to *Art Issues*, *Visions* and co-editor/co-publisher of *Vernacular*.

Abby Cunnane is a curator and writer based in Tāmaki Makaurau. She is co-founder, with artist Amy Howden-Chapman, of *The Distance Plan*, a journal and exhibition platform focused on interdisciplinary conversation around climate change.

Julie Ewington is a writer, curator and broadcaster based in Sydney. An authority on contemporary Australian art, especially art by women, and contemporary art from Southeast Asia, she has held both academic and curatorial positions, always focusing on contemporary art. Between 2001 and 2014, Julie was Head of Australian Art at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

Melanie Oliver is Senior Curator and Programmes Manager at The Dowse Art Museum. She was Director of The Physics Room in Ōtautahi (2012-2016), has held curatorial roles at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Artspace Sydney, and was Gallery Manager at Enjoy Public Art Gallery from 2004 to 2007. She is currently a PhD candidate at Monash University in Melbourne.

Priscilla Pitts is a Wellington-based writer, researcher and curator. In the 1980s, Pitts was co-founder of the literary and visual arts magazine *Antic* as well as a frequent contributor to feminist magazine *Broadsheet*. In 1998, Pitts published *Contemporary New Zealand Sculpture*, which explored themes and issues that were emerging in Aotearoa in the '80s and '90s. She is well-known as the former Director of Artspace, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Otago Settlers Museum.

Contributors

Hanahiva Rose is an art historian and writer from the islands of Ra’iātea and Huahine and the people of Te Ataiwa, Ngāi Tahu and Ngāti Toa. She has been widely published for her work on Māori and Pacific art practices in Aotearoa.

Originally from New Zealand and now based in Sydney, **Ella Sutherland** is a graphic designer and artist whose practice is concerned with the relationship between printed matter, typography and social histories, with a focus on a queering of mechanical reproduction. Experimenting with forms of publishing, her books, prints, and installations draw from systems of reading and navigation operating both within the built environment and print media to displace habitual ways of understanding language, space and information.

Ngahua Te Awekotuku, Te Arawa, Tūhoe, Waikato, has been a fierce advocate for Māori, women’s and LGBT rights for nearly five decades. Her PhD (1981) focused on Māori women and tourism. She has produced three collections of creative fiction and poetry and a volume of essays. Her works on culture, gender and sexuality, as well as her poems and stories, have been published extensively. She is the principal author of *Mau Moko: the World of Māori Tattoo* (2007), and the

catalogue, *E Ngā Uri Whakatupu: weaving legacies* (2015), which records the retrospective exhibit of the exquisite textiles of Rangimarie Hetet and Diggeress Te Kanawa. Her latest fiction collection is *Tahuri: A Limited Edition* (2017). She was recently made a Fellow of the Auckland War Memorial Museum. She is still fierce.

Matariki Williams, Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Hauiti, Taranaki, Ngāti Whakaue, is a Curator Mātauranga Māori at Te Papa Tongarewa. With Bridget Reweti, she co-founded and co-edited *ATE Journal of Māori Art*. Her writing has appeared in print and online publications, including *frieze*, *The Pantograph Punch*, *ArtZone* and *The Spinoff*. With Stephanie Gibson and Puawai Cairns, she is co-author of *Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance*. She is a trustee for arts writing website *Contemporary HUM* and Kaihautu Māori on the board of the National Digital Forum