

The Time of the Now

Dr. Fiona Amundsen

Dr. Erika Balsom

Stephanie Beth

Stephen Cleland

Cushla Donaldson

Ioana Gordon-Smith

Dr. David Hall

Becky Hemus

Dieneke Jansen

Moya Lawson

Nova Paul

Dr. Janine Randerson

Natalie Robertson

Dr. Alan Wright

James Wylie

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THE TIME OF THE NOW

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WELLINGTON AND THE AUDIO FOUNDATION.



CONTENTS

4	INTRODUCTION	Mark Williams
6	SPEAKING FOR THEMSELVES: THE LEGACY OF BARRY BARCLAY AND MERATA MITA	Ioana Gordon-Smith
12	KAITIAKITANGA, MANAAKITANGA AND A PACKET OF BISCUITS	Presentations by the Document Research Group & a conversation with Dr. Erika Balsom
22	VERTIGO SEA: MONTAGE AND MONAD	Dr. Alan Wright
30	EMBODIED TIMELINES	Stephen Cleland
44	THE VISION OF PARTICIPATORY PARITY	Cushla Donaldson with Dr. David Hall
51	DISCUSSION	Cushla Donaldson, Dr. David Hall, Stephen Cleland, Dr. Erika Balsom
56	MEMORY ON VIDEO	James Wylie
61	RENDERING REALITY	Becky Hemus
69	DISCUSSION	Janine Randerson in conversation with James Wylie and Becky Hemus
72	PERIODISING SITE SPECIFIC PRACTICE	Stephanie Beth
81	DISMANTLING NARRATIVES IN SAUDI ARABIA	Moya Lawson
95	END OF DAY DISCUSSION	Mark Williams, Dr. Erika Balsom, members of the Document Research Group and the audience
101	TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES	Dr. Erika Balsom

INTRODUCTION

The sixth annual CIRCUIT Symposium *The Time of the Now* was conceived and presented by CIRCUIT in partnership with the Document Research Group at Auckland University of Technology (AUT).

In keeping with the focus of previous CIRCUIT symposia, which have sought to place artists' practice at the centre of the conversation, the Document Research Group comprised five artist / academics; Fiona Amundsen, Dieneke Jansen, Nova Paul, Janine Randerson, Natalie Robertson.

The Symposium began with a public call seeking responses to the following prompts around the intersection of 'truth', representation and artist practice;

What strategies do contemporary artists employ to test media representation of reality and the means through which we channel and consume it? How do artists expand the documentary form through various material processes and formal strategies? How do artists deconstruct the surfeit of images we already have and the means by which we receive them? Can 'truth' and fiction exist in the same space? What historical artworks could be part of a revised genealogy of current documentary practices in Aotearoa New Zealand? How could an ethic of care, as understood through sustained relationships with Indigenous and diverse communities be played out through documentary practices?

This publication presents selected papers from *The Time of the Now* and follow-up conversations between presenters and audience. Included

here also is Dr. Erika Balsom's curators essay for *Truth or Consequences*, the 2018 CIRCUIT Artist Cinema Commissions, which screened prior to the Symposium as part of CIRCUIT's annual Artist Week of screenings, exhibitions and events.

Several of the projects discussed in the Symposium freely tested the conceptual and formal properties of the documentary form, a position that CIRCUIT happily embraced. In attempting to summarise the net potential of *The Time of the Now*, I turn to the closing discussion and our 2018 curator at large, Dr. Erika Balsom;

"...what has been happening today across some of the presentations is the articulation of a vision of what documentary could or should be, or how it could relate to an audience. That doesn't always happen. In fact, it often doesn't happen."

Many thanks to our partners at AUT, Govett Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre, The Audio Foundation and City Gallery Wellington. Special thanks to Erika Balsom for her superb curatorial work, and making the journey to Aotearoa New Zealand to be part of these conversations.

Mark Williams
Director
CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa
New Zealand

LIKE LETTERS WRITTEN TO FRIENDS: THE LEGACY OF BARRY BARCLAY AND MERATA MITA

IOANA GORDON-SMITH

Mark Williams asked me to speak today about the influence of late Māori filmmakers Barry Barclay and Merata Mita. Can I just begin by saying that it is a daunting task. There are no other filmmakers I know of in Aotearoa who are so well known, respected and loved than Barclay and Mita. Indeed, that has been the starting point of my current research, to think through a particular spark that Barclay and Mita still have on contemporary moving image makers. I want here to focus specifically on Barclay and Mita's work in documentary, where they produced the majority of their work, and to consider the development of a filmmaking philosophy that challenged both production processes and ethics of ownership. I then want to suggest the ongoing influence and relevance of their ideas on contemporary makers.

Barry Barclay and Merata Mita are often credited as the first indigenous man and woman in the world to solo direct feature films.¹ While this speaks perhaps to the climate of film-making – both globally and locally – as much as their talent, their position as pioneers meant that Barclay and Mita were both operating at a time when film was failing Māori people. In her essay *The Soul and The Image* (1996), Mita traces the history of cinema in Aotearoa and observes the ways that Western perspectives and stereotypes were consequently imposed on Māori via the lens.² Mita notes two photogenic subjects that appealed to early cinema producers – the landscape, and Māori. Citing early 20th century films such as *The Romance of Hine-Moa* (1927), which presents Māori as the erotic 'Other' and a backdrop to the 'real' action, Mita notes that that aspects of Māori character and cul-

1 Te Kuru o te Marama Dewes, *Behind the lens of Merata Mita*, Maori Television, 2018. <https://www.maoritelevision.com/news/regional/behind-lens-merata-mita>

Stuart Murray, *Images of Dignity*, Wellington: Huia, 2008, p.1.

2 Merata Mita, *The Soul and the Image*, in *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Jonathan Dennis and Jan Bieringa, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1992, pp. 36-54.

ture were either exaggerated or minimised to make the action more accessible and attractive to a foreign audience.

Similarly, Barclay would reference international films like *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962) — also referenced in Tracey Moffatt's satirical montage *Other* (2009) — as evidence of the colonial gaze. In one particular scene, men are ordered from the ship onto the shore to enjoy the flesh of indigenous women, a representation of indigenous people as passive objects that Barclay argued could only be maintained if the camera does most of its work on the deck, and the indigenous world is kept ashore.³ It was through this example Barclay developed his metaphor of indigenous cinema as 'a camera on the shore' that reverses the direction of the colonial gaze.

If both Barclay and Merata were concerned with cinema's damaging portrayal of Māori, they were equally concerned with the potential for dignity when the camera was moved into indigenous hands. For both of them, filmmaking offered more than the ability to stem the commodification of the Māori image. Fundamentally, it also had the potential to be mana-enhancing. Barclay and Mita worked from the position that there was something *affirmatively* distinctive about being indigenous, that it was more than just a responsive, reactive position. The indigenous camera would see differently, frame differently, provide a different context. An indigenous approach then isn't simply about indigenous content - it also serves a different philosophy of filmmaking. Both Barclay and Mita grounded their approaches to documentary

3 Barry Barclay, *Celebrating Fourth Cinema*, Illusions, 2003, 35, pp. 7-11.

4 Barry Barclay, *Our Own Image: A Story of a Māori Filmmaker*, 1990, Auckland: Shoal Bay Press, p. 14.

5 Barry Barclay, "Amongst landscapes", in *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. Johnathon Dennis and Jan Beiringa, Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 1992, p. 119.

6 Cushla Parekowhai, *Korero Ki Taku Tuakana: Merata Mita and Me*, Illusions, 1998.

7 Angela Moewaka Barnes, *Ngā Kai Para i te Kahikātoa: Māori Filmmaking, Forging a Path*, PhD diss., The University of Auckland, 2011, p. 93.

in Māori traditions of conversation and storytelling. Barclay notes, "to be any kind of Māori, you must first be a listener."⁴ His approach to filming was steeped in the notion of Māori conversation as distinctively democratic, and often occurring in a circular fashion. He observed that:

"On a marae, there is opportunity for all to speak ... over the days of the hui, the little person, the 'nobody' is given room too. It matters little whether you happen to be a city lawyer or a breaker of horses. All have a voice..."⁵

Mita shared with Barclay this deep respect for Māori conversation and storytelling as a methodology. She wrote;

"Our people have a strongly oral tradition of storytelling with emphasis on the spoken word. .. As a filmmaker what this means for me is that when Māori make films what we do is essentially different from what Pākehā film makers do."⁶

To look at how Māori listening and storytelling informed Barclay and Mita's filmmaking processes respectively, we can perhaps begin with the television documentary series *Tangata Whenua* (1975). Academic Jennifer Gauthier describes *Tangata Whenua* as the "point of origin for Māori cinema".⁷ The series was directed by Barclay, and conceived by historian Michael King, who also served as interviewer for the series. Over six episodes, *Tangata Whenua* shared with a broad audience issues that concerned Māori communities around Aotearoa, such as tino rangatiratanga, land alienation and religion.

In order to allow conversations on these issues

to develop organically, Barclay came into immediate confrontation with the documentary format. “As a Māori technician”, he writes, “the filmmaker is faced with the challenge of how to respect this age-old process of discussion and decision-making while using the technology within a climate which so often demands precision and answers”.⁸ As editor Ian John similarly notes, “the bizarre dichotomy of Barry, is that he wanted to let people speak as they were, without editorialising”.⁹

To this end, Barclay developed a series of strategies to minimise the camera in the act of filming. He preferred long-lens cameras and eschewed using dollies. He end-slanted scenes in order to allow conversations to begin organically. As Māori studies researcher Angela Moewaka Barnes notes, Barclay also valued the ‘talking head’, where you see the person speaking. Voice over is consequently used infrequently, as is narrative. He also encouraged people to speak in groups or in settings where they felt less intimidated by the camera.

Merata Mita similarly was concerned with privileging voices over exposition. Notably, as a point of difference from Barclay, many of Mita’s documentaries were event-based, meaning that the footage taken was determined by recording things as they unfolded. Mita points to her documentary, *Bastion Point: Day 507* (1980) as an example. She notes that *Bastion Point: Day 507* was deliberately structured as if you’re sitting around the campfire and a grandfather or uncle or cousin is telling a story, and in that story they tell us the truth about our history.

“This film is the total opposite of how a television

8 Barclay, 1990, p. 9.

9 Graeme Tuckett and Anne T. Keating, *Barry Barclay: The Camera on the Shore*, 2009.

documentary is made. It has a partisan viewpoint, is short on commentary, and emphasises the overkill aspect of the combined police/ military operation.”¹¹

Mita’s focus on people’s stories, along with Barclay’s approach of asking the camera to act as a listener, rather than as an intruder, are perhaps their most enduring contributions to documentary making. Over the course of future documentaries, the techniques developed in *Tangata Whenua* would cement Barclay’s proposal of “hui as film-making”. This central concept set out how conversation should unfold on film, as well as the role of the filmmaker in that setting;

“...the camera can act with dignity at a hui. There is a certain restraint, a feeling of being comfortable with sitting back a little and listening.”¹²

The results of these methods can, paradoxically, be both partial and, dare I say, long-winded. *The Kaipara Affair* (2005) centres on disputes over fishing rights in the Kaipara Harbour, and Māori and Pakeha worked together to obtain government support to rescue their depleted fisheries. The film, however, is perhaps better known for the scandal that surrounded its editing. Barclay made the film as a freelance director for He Taonga Films. Intended for television, Barclay understood that the 113-minute film would be edited to 90 minutes, but a decision was later made, without his involvement, to edit it to 70 minutes to allow for advertising. In a 22-page letter to then prime-minister Helen Clark condemning the move, Barclay wrote that there was more at stake than the impingement

of his directing decision.

"The cut is disgusting. It has betrayed the Tinopai community. It has made Māori mere protesters."¹³

A respect for Māori forms of storytelling placed a strain on documentary convention but was important in ensuring that the voices of Māori are not reduced to soundbites, posterchildren for a predetermined politics. But there's more to it than that. Mita goes further, suggesting that approaching documentary as the stories of indigenous people imbues the film with a particular emotional charge. She explains:

"The drama comes from the people in the film and people who are telling stories on film. Because of that, what you have is a very strong spiritual component of the film. When you structure a documentary dramatically, what you build with is that incredible spirit of the people."¹⁴

A parallel can be found in Barclay's healthy disrespect for reportage. "You can make a factual history, which may be useful", Barclay suggests, "but then again it's just moving text". Instead, Barclay offers an alternative position for documentary as something that might function closer to "a sincere, well-thought out letter to a close friend".¹⁶

Locating the spirit or essence of film in people's stories impacts on the ethics of the wider industry. Both Barclay and Mita believed that to understand and honour Māori modes of storytelling, it was important to train up Māori crew. There are also repercussions for the distribution and archiving of films. As Barclay wrote on the filming

13 Mike Barrington, "Film editing 'betrays' Tinopai's brave stand, *New Zealand Herald*, 24 October 2011, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/northern-advocate/news/article.cfm?c_id=1503450&objectid=10941910

14 Peter Britos, "A Conversation with Merata Mita", *Spectator — the University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television*, 23:1, 2003, pp. 53-62.

16 Barclay, 1992.

of *Tangata Whenua*, “overnight we become custodians of other people’s spirits.” The safe housing of Māori images became critical and Barclay was instrumental in drafting the Taonga Māori Deposit Agreement used by the New Zealand Film Archive. The agreement sought to provide a mechanism that offered inter-generational protection and guardianship of archival material.

The importance of guardianship is evident in Mita’s documentary *Mana Waka* (1990). The film was constructed from footage shot over a period of 18 months in the late 1930s by cameraman RGH Manley. Originally commissioned by Princess Te Puea Herangi, Manley’s camera followed the construction of three waka built to commemorate the country’s centennial in 1940. While Manley’s raw material was never developed into a finished film, the footage remained in the possession of Manley’s family, before the New Zealand Film Archive took on the task of preservation and proposed turning it into a documentary. Merata Mita was appointed director. Together with editor Annie Collins and Jonathan Dennis, Mita moved to Turangawaewae Marae to edit the film with kaumatua advising on site.

Barclay and Mita developed conceptions of indigenous documentary that prioritised a responsibility to honouring indigenous stories, and storytellers. But how do those ideas stand up now? It has been 44 years since *Tangata Whenua*, and 40 years since *Bastion Point: Day 507*. Since then, some things have changed. Digital technology has mitigated the significant and prohibitive costs of film; organisations like Mana Aute and now Nga

Aho Whakaari emerged to support the Māori film industry, and a wider proliferation of Māori and Pacific artists working with film has challenged any single definition of indigenous film.

And yet, Barclay and Mita’s philosophies continue to offer a useful foothold for contemporary makers. Recently I’ve been working on an exhibition project, *From the Shore*, which looks at the influence of Barclay and Mita on contemporary moving image artists. Notably, the show never began with Barclay or Mita’s own work; its’ roots began in working with artists already influenced by Barclay and Mita. The genesis of the project perhaps began with Tuafale Tanoa’i, aka Linda T., and thinking about the reasons why she makes the way she does. One of Linda T’s longest running projects is *LTTV* (2009-), a live installation in which a number of guests are interviewed and recorded within a makeshift TV set. Inspired by the work of Barry Barclay and Merata Mita, with Mita acting as an informal advisor for the project, *LTTV* responds to mainstream filmmaking processes and their monocultural exclusion of minority representation by prioritising Māori and Pacific voices on an interview set.

There is also a strong element of collaboration in *LTTV*. Though the guests are carefully chosen, the interviews are not pre-planned, and they take on a sprawling and spontaneous path. For the version installed at Te Uru, the footage is often uploaded raw. Editing is in fact close to non-existent in Linda T.’s work. In part, this is an active decision to refuse to shape the content that ultimately is the korero of other people. Leaving

the data raw is also an acknowledgement that the content is never finished; it's always being adapted into new compilations or grows with the addition of new recordings.

Amidst the research for *From the Shore*, Barclay and Mita continue to come up in artist conversations. Last year Te Uru commissioned a new work by Robert George entitled *a memoir for falling light* (2017). Barclay's ideas of Hui as filmmaking and fourth cinema was a foundation for this new five channel work which was both communally-made and centered in an indigenous understanding of time and death. Elsewhere, Lisa Reihana would reference the idea of the camera on the shore in her work *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (2015) and Barry Barclay's ideas of the camera in listener was a recurring reference in the research of Nova Paul. The concept of 'the camera as a listener' is particularly apparent in Nova's recently commissioned films, *Ko te ripo* (2018), and *Ko ahau te wai, ko te wai ko* (2018), which have both been guided by her wānanga with her cousin, oral historian Dinah Paul.

The question for me is not if Merata Mita and Barry Barclay are still relevant — for some artists, they clearly are — but rather why. I want to turn to the words of documentary filmmaker Pita Turei, as recorded in Linda T's commissioned documentary *Merata Mita Memories* (2018). Turei notes;

"Merata's mentorship ran deeper than my colonisation. More than anyone else, she dragged me out of it. She became this anchor for our community because her way of thinking wasn't colonised, so it became liberating in our conver-

17 Tuafale Tanoa'i [aka Linda T.], *Merata Mita Memories*, 2018.

sations with each other to have an anchor who wasn't colonised ... a voice that wasn't measured by BBC standards."¹⁷

I myself never met Barclay, nor Mita. My first encounter with them was through their writing. But I recall the clarity in their texts – a position that was nuanced but uncluttered, attentive not just to the colonisation of the camera, but moreover the ways it could be repurposed to work for indigenous people. While they looked back to criticise the past, they were both looking towards the future, and the potential of documentary to both honour indigenous content and guide indigenous makers. Barclay and Mita offer for us what they openly state they never had themselves; working models, teachers, a foothold to jump off from.

Ioana Gordon-Smith is Curator / Kaitiaki Whakaaturanga at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery. She is the curator of *From the Shore* (2018) an exhibition which considered the influence of Māori filmmakers Barry Barclay and Merata Mita on a current generation of artists.

KAITIAKITANGA, MANAAKITANGA AND A PACKET OF BISCUITS

DOCUMENT RESEARCH GROUP &
DR. ERIKA BALSOM IN CONVERSATION

Kaitiakitanga, Manaakitanga and a Packet of Biscuits explores how an ethic of care frames approaches to lens-based documentary practice. We position this ethic of care as an expansive relationship that is based in processes of engagement that involve ways of connecting, listening, talking, and looking, which also translate into methods for using a camera. At the core of such positioning is the reciprocal process of kaitiakitanga (guardianship, ecological care) and manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness, support), which encompasses our ethical responsibilities to enact, through documentary practice, a caring, trusting, protecting and nurturing relationship to whenua and its people. Such person-to-person connecting is central to the active state that is kaitiakitanga.

Through the following discussion of our individual practices, we focus on how we activate the tiaki of kaitiaki, that extends to caring, connecting, listening, talking, and looking. This activation revolves less around what is visible within an image than ethics, caring, relationships, connecting and knowledge sharing. These processes do not hold material qualities rather they concern how documentary practitioners are able to foster an imaginative and ethical response to the whenua and the people we connect to and represent.

First we will introduce each of our practices in the Document Research Group and then open up discussion with Erika Balsom.

NOVA PAUL

In my recent works *Ko te ripo* (2018) and *Ko ahau te wai, ko te wai ko* (2018), both continue to seek important questions to my practice, what does a self-determined / tino rangatiratanga image

look like and what should we aim for? Working with production frameworks that echo Barry Barclay's, around hui and korero, I began these films with the intention of entering into wānanga (a place of learning and putting time into space). This framework for film production is amenable to the medium of film itself, it literally puts time into space. Through wānanga around rongoā (healing) and wā (time) with my whanaunga, oral historian Dinah Paul, we considered images of healing, to support whanau that have been consumed, for the past decade, by Treaty of Waitangi claims. Following Dinah's directive I went to ancestral spring Waipao, to walk the waterways, allowing for an immersive, embodied experience, what Barclay calls making the camera a listener, a process I describe as filming through my feet. Through this inter-relationship with the entire environment the potential of opening up wā into rongo may occur. In *Ko te ripo* extracts from Dinah Paul's evidence presented as part of my hapū Treaty claims, provide a counter point to flows of the water and is re-read from the vantage point Whatitiri maunga, overlooking thousands of acres of hapū land confiscated by the Crown.

NATALIE ROBERTSON

Sitting at the table with the elders of our small Ngāti Porou Tūturu community to 'talk story' over cups of tea and biscuits, listening to the storied textures of their lives is key for gaining insight into their values and aspirations. Maintaining cultural practices ensures the transfer of intergenerational knowledge. When relationships to place become disrupted or compromised, cultural knowledge

becomes exhausted. Due to deforestation and subsequent land management, along with the impacts of urban migration, these local knowledges have been eroded as severely as the Waiāpu River itself. This loss of knowledge damages the health and wellbeing of people—a cultural health index.

Working within my tribal community, I explore the potential for photofilmic images to perform as catalysts for environmental change. In my photographic and moving image projects, historic and contemporary images are woven together with ancestral places and stories associated with water and food within Te Riu o Waiāpu, using Māori knowledge systems. In part, I explore the potential of images to transmit Ngāti Porou ancestral knowledges and ignite transformative relationships with the river and the wider taiao (environment). By framing my enquiry through a mana rangatiratanga 'lens', as a Māori conceptualisation of visual sovereignty, and Barry Barclay's "camera ashore" metaphor, I aim to position photofilmic media as a vital element in upholding ancestral relationships to places and practices.

JANINE RANDERSON: TEMPORALITIES

OF KAITIAKITANGA

Tangata whenua (Indigenous), settler cultures and manuhiri (migrants or guests) in Aotearoa New Zealand and are increasingly sharing the role of kaitiakitanga, a complex concept often understood as environmental stewardship, at least in policy documents. In caring for our eco-system and people and ahuman biota, the past is ever-present, and the future is always implicated in the actions of the present. To enact kaitiakitanga in

art-making suggests the possibility of renewal by this back and forward thinking and acting.

There are temporal incompatibilities between film production processes and my hope for durational and careful engagements with communities and the water itself to contend with. The process of making *Interceptor* (2018) involved meeting with several groups who care for Te Manukanuka o Hoturoa, (the Manukau harbour), with an agenda to understand the impacts of the Central Interceptor. I approached the MHRS (The Manukau harbour restoration society) and SOUL communications (Save Our Unique Landscape) initially to see if I could attend their meetings. I attended three meetings with MHRS to discuss my project and one with SOUL, centred around an upcoming hearing to protect Ihumātao. In both cases, I found that the time of the film (which needed to be completed within a few months) and the time needed to participate in a genuine relationship with communities was difficult to reconcile.

Yet in terms of my ongoing film-making engagement with communities of concern around the harbour (since 2013), or longer since I moved to the urban fringe of the harbour in Onehunga, whether participants' voices are recorded for the film is not so important, because they still become part of the spirit of the film. The suggestion to read from the Treaty of Waitangi, Wai 8 claim to form the film's soundtrack emerged from the meeting with SOUL. The process became collaborative to the extent that the MHRS made suggestions; to record their activity of citizen water sampling and to use helicopter footage of the harbour outflow near

Puketutu island. This meant I broke some of my self-imposed rules about only using the underwater footage and the 16mm film to expand the film in ways I hadn't anticipated. The te uru westerly wind also shook the locked-off shots and agitated the frame, propelling itself into my watery story.

DR. FIONA AMUNDSEN: ETHICAL

SUBJECTIVE WITNESSING

Central to my practice is the position that there is much to be gained from listening and staying connected, even when images present another's experiences in ways that look and seem unfamiliar: listening and connection defy visual form. I align with theorist Kelly Oliver's proposition that there is an ethical "response-ability"¹ to go beyond comprehension, which equates as much to looking as it does to listening.

"To recognise others requires acknowledging that their experiences are real even though they may be incomprehensible to us; this means that we must recognise that not everything that is real is recognisable to us"²

My artworks resist providing concrete ethical assurance regarding subjectivity and the politics of representing others. Instead, the artworks ask viewers to confront their own expectations of images and testimony. This confrontation revolves around the kinds of non-visible presence that my images argue for: I explore how past historical residues are not necessarily visible within an image or a landscape. This thinking is also applicable to subjectivity, witnessing and significantly ethics, which exist opaquely in my artworks. This opac-

1 Kelly Oliver. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, 2001, p.7.

2 Kelly Oliver. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, 2001, p.106.

3 Kelly Oliver. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, 2001, p.106.

4 Robert Hariman, John Louis Lucaites. *The Public Image: Photography and Civic Spectatorship*, 2016, p.15.

ity is challenging as it pushes viewers to “respond to what is beyond [their visible] comprehension, beyond recognition, because ethics is only possible beyond recognition”³. Ethics, subjectivity and lens-based witnessing, framed in this manner, are “not a series of behavioural reactions; it is an extended social relationship that works more like a process of attunement or affective alignment than a logic of direct influence” which is thereby “a way of being in the world with others”⁴. Within my artworks, the camera enables connections that are not solely based in relationships premised on cognitive knowledge, but also involve intersubjective acts of witnessing, listening, seeing and observing. In short, the camera indexes a practice of ethical subjective witnessing, which emerges from and cares for human-to-human relationships.

DIENEKE JANSEN: CARE OF REALITY

Through my five-year relationship with the Tamaki Housing Group, an activist group fighting for their community against gentrification, I have learnt what ‘walking the talk’ and living the politics of care and kaupapa of respect looks and feels like. I have learnt that a camera is welcome when it is welcome, and ways that a camera can also be welcoming. My methods aim to work with community and develop strategies that feel, rather than deny, reality: to enact social justice through connecting, listening, caring, trusting and nurturing relationships. This cannot be enacted with a camera dropping in for a cup of tea – relationships and understanding takes time.

Care of this reality and all its mediated moments is critical, and I suggest that extends to

viewers' encounters and experience of realities that may not be their own. Viewers are called to be trusted witnesses and form relations with people, place, histories, with moments of its making and with the labour of its events. These are relationships with each other, all are contingent on care.

My practice asks: how can we expand capacities for listening, connecting and caring to activate our rights to politics and social justice? How can we sustain tensions with an ethics of care? With a lens, we can enable visibility for that which sits outside fields of vision. Can this provide possibilities not just for the visibility of resistance, but for politics itself?

DISCUSSION

Erika Balsom:

Thank you so much for all of this. I thought a good place to start would be to think a little bit about the relationship between collaboration and ethics, because that seemed to run across all of the practices. And it really strikes me that we heard about five individual practices. You are not working as a collective, even though you are the Document Research Group. So it seems like there is still somewhere in there, an attachment to individual authorship for each one of you. And yet in each case you talked about collaborative practice as very central to how you conceive of the ethics of your work. There's a tension in there and I'm wondering if any of you wanted to address it?

Fiona Amundsen:

Collaboration occurs for each of us with the people we're working with, as opposed to across

the five of us. We often talk about how as a group collaboration is more important than trying to fit five practices into an exhibition, which would be disastrous because we're all so different. Our interest is also facilitating and hosting, particularly students, into dialogue. That's how we as a group work collaboratively.

Janine Randerson:

And we also show our work to each other at a formative stage when we have time, so we can give each other some input and work through the same questions in different contexts.

Nova Paul:

Are you asking about us working as a collective or how we reconcile our relationship as an author, an individual, in relationship to a community?

Erika Balsom:

Exactly the latter. I mean I just thought it was worth noting that we could imagine that you could be a collective, but you're not, right? And that seems important and that you are working as individuals, and that individual authorship remains in play. But there's always this sort of practice surrounded in collaboration. And so my question is about how you negotiate that. You may work with groups and show people your footage and so on, but ultimately at the end of the day, you're the artist and you're authoring the work. How do you balance this from an ethical point of view?

Nova Paul:

Well, my accountability is to my whānau.

I happen to be an artist in my family, so it's my job. But there are so many other jobs to do in relationship to a kaupapa which is to ensure that our tamariki have an environment that they're going to be able to live with sovereignty in. So as an artist, I have a role in my whānau to produce work in a particular way. I get to do things that put my whānau in a conversation that would not otherwise happen.

There's a moment here and in this particular project, I really saw it happen, where I hope that my mahi embraces the morale of our people, and that they can see themselves in spaces and places that they would not have otherwise imagined. When you're actually doing the mahi to protect the waterways, for example, then it's tiring and it's exhausting and all those other things. So sometimes to move it out and see what you're doing in another context is empowering, I believe.

Dieneke Jansen:

I've been working alongside with and part of the Tamaki Housing Group for about five years. When Ioela Rauti [Nikki] was issued her third 90-day notice on November 2016 she asked me if I would help her to witness the process. I think both of us at that stage thought that might be a matter of weeks or a month or so, but it ended up being a whole year. At every point – and this sounds slightly defensive and I don't wish it to be that way – but at every point anyone who was in front of the camera had the option to say that they didn't want their footage included. So there were several sections of footage that could not be included in any public screening because there were a few peo-

ple who said, "I don't want to be in this," which I honoured even if it was important footage.

The other thing of course is everything got checked by Nikki, and there were a few things that she picked up on that I'd initially overlooked, to do with the integrity of people who'd passed away and so forth. So it is a collaboration in that sense, but through my colonial privilege, I have advantage and opportunity that enables me to access resources and material support, from galleries, from universities and so forth that Nikki and the Tamaki Housing Group don't have. I really endeavour to utilize that position to enable something to be both enacted and witnessed at those moments of tension, in the struggle for social justice. And to get a two-way open door happening across those spaces; art and politics, where something takes place in social action and where something gets articulated and given visibility in the moment.

Natalie Robertson:

The first place I start in terms of the ethics of care is actually to speak with the river itself. And to speak with the waterways, to speak with the puna wai, the fresh water springs. And that usually means going very early in the morning, it means going alone. And yet I've done it under the guidance of elders, so [Kōkā Keri Kaa] said to me, "you need to go and get your water blessed from the river by [Uncle Boycie Te Maro] tomorrow. And you need to put that on you and on your camera gear, and these are some things you need to take care of for yourself."

And so that's how I start. I begin with each

time I'm home, going to appeal in a sense to my ancestors, more than human, the other entities I guess, the Taniwha, the [guardian water beings] who live there. And so I don't even feel that I'm completely working alone. I don't feel that I'm just this singular individual author. I'm just the latest manifestation of all of my ancestors, and that we [Te Tai Rāwhiti] had an art school — Iwirakau — one of the great art schools of Māori carving.

Sorry to boost Ngāti Porou like that --

Audience:

[Laughter]

Natalie Robertson:

-- but I just want to say that both those films that Barry Barclay and Merata Mita did, they did on Ngāti Porou soil. So just saying, then --

Audience:

[Laughter]

Natalie Robertson:

-- it starts here. Neither of them are from Ngāti Porou, but you know, we were the ones as a tribe who hosted them in making those films. We're the communities that said, yeah, come on in. Bring your cameras.

And so as Ngata said, the whakatauaki which begins with 'E tipu e rea', which is, "grasp the tools of the Pākehā and use them, while holding fast to the treasures of your ancestors that they might be the feathers for your brow." And so this is where we're using the technology. Our elders also used it - Whakatauaki 'E tipu e rea' and say to us, use

those tools. That's your job. That's my job within our community. And it's my job to use the art to keep pushing for some of the changes that we want and also to keep a record as a witness for the children not yet born. So we [Ngāti Porou] have a hundred-year river plan and I'm actually working for them, for those that are a hundred years from now. So it's a long, long game plan and it's a different approach into how do I work and reconcile that tension with individuality and the community.

Erika Balsom:

A lot of what we talked about so far is about recognition. And so Fiona, I wonder if you could unfold that remark a little bit. What does it mean to think of ethics in relation to opacity beyond recognition.

Fiona Amundsen:

I think of opacity in the case of non-visibility, there is no clear-cut definable image that says "yes, this is ethical". Ethics is so much more complex than that. I also think that when working with stories that are seventy three years old, which is the case for my work, of course opacity and ethics are going to be incomprehensible. Rather, there is a focus on listening and staying connected, even when we don't understand each other; meaning when we slip or miss each other, whether that be through inter-generational differences, or through language and cultural differences. These ways of being are really about the work of staying connected, which to me is what my comments mean.

There's a responsibility to stay with the per-

son, to stay with that story, to stay with that relationship. And that's the opacity. And this staying in connection doesn't necessarily make something that's already a well-known or well documented historical event any more comprehensible or understandable or knowable. I think there is ethics in opacity and strength.

Natalie Robertson

We had a situation arise recently. Our Marae had a re-dedication, a reopening, we had new carvings placed outside on the veranda. And I went back three times in a short amount of time. The first time was for receiving the carvings. The second time was the re-dedication. And on the first time, I was filming and I'd been asked to film but this moment happened where we had a meeting with everybody present and (we were) told that for the next two weeks until the carvings were put up, that the women were not to be around the front of the meeting house because of the stipulations from the other tribe that we were working with, Tuwharetoa.

I was like, okay, well I'm the only one here with a camera. So I can't be there. The camera can be there, but I can't. So we had to work through all the different implications of whether or not the camera could be here at all, what would happen to the footage, where could the footage be used, could one of the young fullas use the camera. And the bottom line comes down to the safety of everybody involved. So I just said if there's any remote chance that it's going to come back on me, if I was to be present in that space, (then) I'm just not prepared to do that, not prepared to affect the space

with my being there. And so it was simply a matter of handing over the equipment, and saying 'you go for it'. And just take it from there.

But it was a really key thing to negotiate. And the thing with, particularly with Māori elders, they don't say no to you, they just don't say yes. So you have to learn how to listen really, really carefully to what's not being said.

Fiona Amundsen:

And not shown.

Natalie Robertson:

It's what's not shown, not what's not being said. It's the most important thing to learn, particularly going through a Pākehā schooling system, you want to hear this affirmative, 'yes it's okay if you can do that'. But actually it was listening, going, I don't hear a yes coming. So actually that means no, they're not going to be there.

Janine Randerson:

And I think that might be where some of the generative opacity comes from, even for settler cultures, there's a sense that the Kaitiakitanga, the environmental care or stewardship is something that shouldn't just be left to Maori alone. Manaakitanga is something that Maori are already practicing and we try to bring it into our teaching. But I often have to ask myself 'is it okay to be in this knowledge zone from my [settler] background?', even having grown up here with Māori members of my family and so on, there's still a lack of deep knowledge that Māori have. But then I've always been encouraged by people I respect that it's not

just the job of Māori alone to look after the environment, for instance. So that's where my feeling of it being okay to make work in this area comes from. You often don't know what you are making while you are immersed in it.

The Document Research Group (DRG) includes Nova Paul, Fiona Amundsen, Dienneke Jansen, Janine Rander-son and Natalie Robertson. Based at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) the DRG focuses on documentary practices that seek to effect political, ethical, ecological and socio-cultural change. These concepts are explored through the members' individual visual arts practices via exhibition and written dissemination. The DRG shares a commitment to rethinking documentary practice via de-colonising methodologies that position Mātauranga Māori frameworks through which to consider ethics, archives and whakapapa. Within their research, the DRG members share a collective desire to shift away from the dominance of Eurocentric bias within documentary discourses.

Dr. Erika Balsom is a scholar and critic based in London, working on cinema, art, and their intersection. She is a senior lecturer in Film Studies at King's College London and holds a PhD in Modern Culture and Media from Brown University.

VERTIGO SEA: MONTAGE AND MONAD

ALAN WRIGHT

The relentless flow of images in *Vertigo Sea* (2015) plunges the viewer into a dizzying vortex of time. The film, a three channel HD video installation by John Akomfrah, is exhibited as a continuous loop in the darkened space of an art gallery. One enters the room at any point during its running time and is immediately immersed in an audiovisual environment of majesty and dread. Beautiful images of oceans, forests, storms, mountains, ice floes, waves, whales, swarms, shoals, flocks of wheeling seabirds and other creatures of the deep are projected upon the three large screens alongside archival footage and reconstructed scenes of recent horrors and atrocities, mostly committed at sea: the Zong massacre of 183 African slaves, whose murder was justified as part of an insurance claim for the lost “cargo,” the industrialised slaughter of polar bears and whales, the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the perilous voyage of the Vietnamese boat people, the disappeared of Argentina’s Dirty War whose bodies were dumped into the sea, and, of course, the human catastrophe unfolding in the Mediterranean as thousands of migrants and refugees attempt to reach Europe in overcrowded and un-seaworthy vessels.

Vertigo Sea brings the natural world into violent conjunction with the domain of human history. Akomfrah explores the relationship between the deep time of geological and biological life and the memory of human suffering and trauma, particularly as it has been experienced since the 1700s. *Vertigo Sea* shows that the practices of colonialism, capitalism and industrial modernity cannot be conceived apart from the destruction of the environment and the disastrous consequences

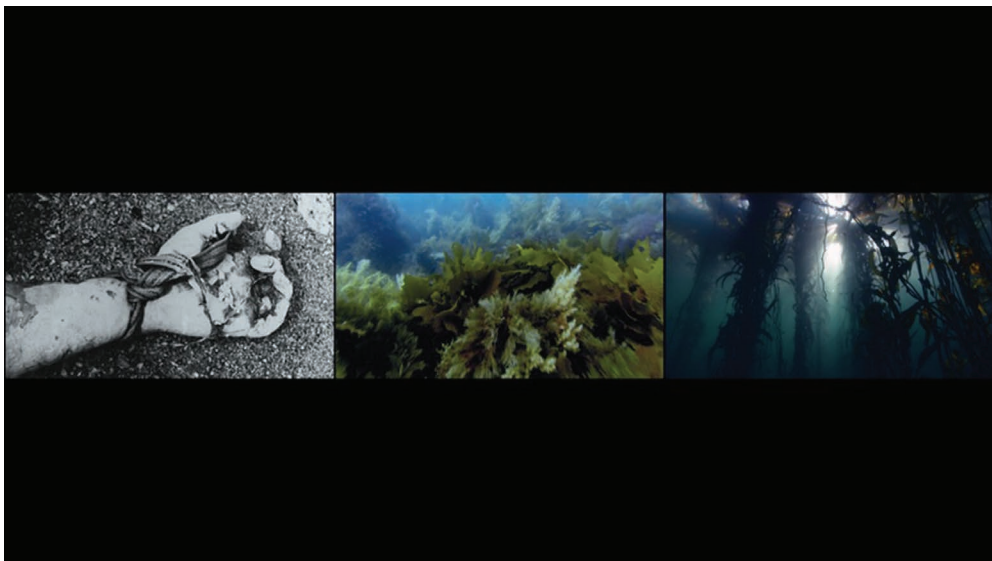
of the exploitation of natural resources upon human and non-human species. But it also reflects upon the critical role that film in its expanded context can play in offering a politicised image of the Anthropocene, as many now refer to our current moment of ecological and epistemological crisis.

In this talk, I hope to situate the important formal and conceptual strategies that Akomfrah employs in *Vertigo Sea* within the context of a wider critical debate about the convergence of media technology and representation with the destruction of natural life worlds and the gradual erosion of the processes of cultural and historical memory. Rob Nixon has posed the problem as follows:

How can we convert into images and narratives the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political interventions ...?¹

Akomfrah responds by submitting the principles of narrative and drama themselves to critical revision. His use of the archive and the innovative practice of montage that defines *Vertigo Sea* cannot be separated from the commitment to expose the conditions of social and environmental disaster that Nixon describes. But Akomfrah confounds the opposition between “long” and “slow” upon which Nixon bases his appeal by bringing images together in a way that combines the modernist principle of shock, with its emphasis on dis-

1 Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011, p.3.



Still from *Vertical Sea* (2015) John Akomfrah.

continuity, juxtaposition and fragmentation, with an ecological model of cinematic representation attuned to the changing patterns of rhythm, flow and repetition. In *Vertigo Sea*, the organic forms of nature supply the template for a historically mediated engagement with the forces of technological production and political domination that have led to the state of emergency against which Nixon protests.

Since the 1980s, in his work with the Black Audio Film Collective and lately in those films produced under his own name, John Akomfrah has used found footage as the basis for a sustained critical exploration of race, history and visual culture. For *Vertigo Sea*, he trawled through nearly 200 hours of footage from the BBC Natural History Unit, the BFI and the National Archive, gathering material drawn from sources such as the iconic television series *Life on Earth* (1984), *The Blue Planet* (2001) and other celebrated wildlife documentaries. Akomfrah sought to set in place a “dialogue between images and institutions,” to get the material from the Natural History Unit to “migrate elsewhere,” “to talk to other sets of images,” as he tells the art historian John Downey.²

The traditional role of the archive has been to preserve the authority of film as historical artefact. But it can also act as a bulwark which confines the past to a distinct and distant location in time. As a cultural institution and as a discursive system, it exists as a kind of temporal fortress. However, as Catherine Russell observes in her recent book *Archiveology* (2018), transmission and accessibility determine the function of the archive as much as

2 “John Akomfrah in Conversation with Anthony Downey”, Arnolfini Arts, Bristol, 2016.

3 Russell, Catherine. *Archiveology*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 12.

preservation and restoration.³ Alongside developments in digital technology and new media as well as changes in social policy and consumer demand, this represents a major shift in emphasis from “norms of authenticity, media specificity and origins” to a practice of transformation, collaboration and connectivity. Akomfrah’s partnership with the BBC Natural History Unit should be understood within this context.

4 Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 241.

Russell has also proposed that “the documentary status of the archival image evokes alternative, invasive, and dialectical forms of temporality and history”.⁴ The creative and critical use of found footage challenges the standard measures of cinematic time, such as those narrative and documentary codes of realism that insure the credibility and authenticity of the image. The found footage film disregards the temporal divide between past and present and it’s in this respect that Downey refers to Akomfrah’s work as “a future oriented gesture” in that it is neither an attempt “to determine or even contest history” but to track “the evolution of the trace,” as Akomfrah calls it, to show how archival images cohere in the present as memory-traces, as “ghosts of other stories,” and how they might be received and understood in the future. Akomfrah does not treat the imagery stored in the archive simply as a record of historical events, as in a conventional documentary film, but as an index of oblivion.

For Akomfrah, as for Derek Walcott, whose poem he often evokes in *Vertigo Sea*, “the Sea is History.” Nora Alter has observed how, in much of Akomfrah’s recent work, the sea stands as a

5 Alter, Nora. "Movements: Metaphors and Metonymies in the work of John Akomfrah" *John Akomfrah*, London: Lisson Gallery, 2016, p. 12.

6 Ibid, p. 6.

metonym for "a vast zone of human movement, a crossroads of migration between territories and continents".⁵ It also functions metaphorically "as a reservoir of memory, a place where stories of the past, present, and future are suspended and preserved".⁶ The sea itself is an unfathomable archive. It contains, albeit in dispersed and diluted form, the material traces of destruction which mark the actual historical process. *Vertigo Sea* plumbs this temporal abyss. It charts the ocean as the forgotten space of modernity and globalisation, a "protean space," a place in which subjects and objects, identities and experiences, historical events and narratives, are absorbed and transformed, only to reemerge as the discarded remains of a disavowed history.

Vertigo Sea inverts the usual association of the archive as the "repository of the past" and of found footage as the token of historical evidence. Akomfrah draws the bulk of his material from films that depict nature in all its terror and beauty. The wildlife film stands in an ambivalent relation to the documentary tradition in that it adopts the narrative and dramatic format of entertainment and aims to impress the viewer with its' spectacular effects and imagery. It proffers the illusion of unlimited access to the lives of animals, birds, reptiles, insects, plants and other organisms at the moment when many species and ecosystems are threatened with disappearance or depletion. High quality television programming like *The Blue Planet* (2001) series insures that our understanding of nature takes place under conditions of maximum visibility and is experienced as a fully integrated function of instrumental reason. Akomfrah,

in reappropriating such footage, treats nature as a highly mediated concept whose aura, as a spectacular product of media technology, appears to be at its strongest at the very moment of its dissolution.

Margret Grebowicz explains this paradoxical situation by reference to an earlier period of modernity. She finds an alternative politics of the image in the writing of thinkers like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, who recognized that human knowledge and perception were radically altered by the incursion of technological media into all aspects of life. “Never before has an age been so informed of itself,” as Kracauer comments on the proliferation of illustrated magazines and newspapers, “if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense.”⁷ On the other hand, he concludes, “never before has a period known so little about itself,” to the degree that the world has disappeared into its images.⁸ Grebowicz suggests that in an age of climate change and environmental crisis, “the liberatory potential of the interval, lapse, break [or] blink,” as proposed, for example, by Benjamin’s concept of *Jetztzeit* or now-time, offers a hopeful alternative and an inspiring model for political action and change in the face of the total subsumption of nature in the spectacular economy of the image.⁹

The subtitle of *Vertigo Sea* – “Oblique Tales of the Aquatic Sublime” – affirms the inaccessible grandeur of nature as beyond all measure, sense and comprehension. One can only approach it obliquely. Akomfrah invokes the concept of the sublime, an important moral and aesthetic

7 As quoted by Grebowicz, Margret. “Glacial Time and Lonely Crowds: The Social Effects of Climate Change as Internet Spectacle.” *Environmental Humanities*, vol 5, 2014, p. 7.

8 Ibid, p. 7.

9 Ibid, p. 7.



Still from *Vertical Sea* (2015) John Akomfrah

category in the history of art, by appearing in *Vertigo Sea* as an anonymous character in a hooded parka standing with his back to the camera in a wild and desolate natural setting. History is presented in *Vertigo Sea* largely in the form of allegorical tableaux where figures dressed in period costumes pose amidst the detritus of man-made objects and consumer products (prams, clocks, Victorian furniture), staring out to sea or at an inhospitable landscape. In their solitude and melancholy attitude, they resemble the *Rückenfigur*, most famously depicted in Casper David Friedrich's painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c.1818). Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, abolitionist, writer, seaman and world traveller, often assumes this stance throughout the film, gazing out to sea from a windswept promontory or beach. Equiano, an African consigned to a marginal role in history, "embodies a figure of de-territorialisation, out of time and place, confronting the vicissitudes of experiences and memories that the sea represents."¹⁰ The recovery of Equiano's image places the Black Atlantic at the heart of the cultural narrative of modernity. Kobena Mercer has noted, in reference to an earlier film by the BAFC, how "the colonial archive is structured by gaps, compactions, and distortions that are ordinarily covered over by myths and ideology."¹¹ For the subject of the black diaspora, therefore, there are no monuments. Only ruins. The archive is reduced to a jumble of meaningless objects, its subject either absent, erased or obliterated.

Found footage film, as Russell explains, encourages an "aesthetics of ruin." Such films, belong less to the realist tendency of documentary

10 Demos, T. J. "On Terror and Beauty: John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*." *John Akomfrah*, London: Lisson Gallery, 2016, p. 15.

11 Mercer, Kobena. *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

than to the figurative tradition of allegory. The allegorical impulse seeks to interpret reality rather than to reproduce it, to grasp it in passing, in its transience and incompleteness, rather than to fix it or freeze it in a permanent state. The ruin was also an object of sublime contemplation in allegorical painting in that it revealed how the passage of time was marked by death, decay and decline. In the ruin, as Walter Benjamin declares in his study of the German *trauerspiel* or mourning play, “History was written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience”.¹² Kobena Mercer understands the abiding concern of Akomfrah’s work with mourning and memory as a “postcolonial *trauerspiel*.”¹³ In *Vertigo Sea*, Akomfrah discovers the traces of an obliterated past - “the slow time it takes to come to terms with postcolonial trauma” - in the encounter with the material from the Natural History Unit. The environment itself, and the multitude of lifeforms that inhabit it, registers the memory of catastrophe and injustice. Akomfrah reconfigures history along ecological lines as the site of rupture and ruin. The archive is reconceived in natural-historical terms.

Akomfrah relates how *Vertigo Sea* really snapped into focus when he discovered two images that became the ethical core of the film. He is struck by the shock of recognition as he confronts a photograph of an anonymous young man and woman taken moments before they were thrown to their deaths from a helicopter into the sea. He sees the “specter of the end” in their eyes. The image contains in condensed form, like a monad, the moment of truth to which *Vertigo Sea* attests. This, he reflects, is what the film must address. Akom-

12 Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 1985, p. 177.

13 Mercer, p. 58.

14 Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 255.

frah responds to the photos of the disappeared as a matter of ethical and political urgency. “For every image of the past,” as Walter Benjamin insists, “that is not recognized by the present as one of its concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably”.¹⁴ Vertigo is another name for this precarious temporal condition.

The images of the two young Argentines stand in a metonymic relationship to the rest of the film. The part is charged with the meaning of the whole, while the whole can never be apprehended in its totality. Contiguity rather than continuity supplies the template for the narrative structure of *Vertigo Sea*. According to Kobena Mercer, the archival image does not play a “fixative or anchoring role” in Akomfrah’s work, as it does in the more conventional mode of documentary realism.¹⁵ Rather, the collection of fragments from many sources resonates in “a lyric form of metonymic proliferation”.¹⁶ Each image retains its integrity and immediacy, acting in concert with the next or, as is the case with *Vertigo Sea*, all those others that surround and envelop it in a constant flux of temporal and spatial motion.

By extending the visual format from one screen to three, Akomfrah achieves an exponential increase in the possibilities for combining and linking images. In *Vertigo Sea*, they follow a lateral path. Their course is multi-directional and decentered. They form recurrent and recursive patterns of meaning and are polysemic in their mode of address. The triptych effect in *Vertigo Sea* replaces succession with simultaneity as the guiding principle for a complex montage of time. The gaze of the viewer shuttles backward and forward, tracking

15 Mercer, p. 46.

16 Ibid., p. 46.

the images across multiple time frames and levels as they switch and glide from one screen to another. Akomfrah attempts to devise a more fluid notion of montage, one which seeks to unmoor all fixed points of reference and float free from accepted channels of meaning.

Vertigo Sea oscillates thus between two poles: montage and the monad. It is composed from fragments, bits and pieces of other films, partial objects and discarded remnants. It only exists in the connections and associations formed between the images that Akomfrah selects and assembles. Akomfrah is interested in the affinities and differences that emerge when they are placed in “affective proximity.”¹⁷ He applies this principle at the meta level of subject and theme, as well as at the micro level of shot and sequence. For instance, he shows that whaling and the slave trade are products of the same techniques of extractive capitalism that led to the development of modernity and globalisation. Or, by juxtaposing mesmerising imagery of sub-aquatic flora and fauna with the portraits of the dead and disappeared who have been dumped in the ocean, he suggests that mourning and memory are subject to similar processes of decay and decomposition as in the natural world.

The currents and tides of the Atlantic Ocean still carry the memory of slavery and political violence. Here the traces of the past are present as organic matter and the ghosts of the dead reemerge from the depths. The traumatic experience of diaspora and disappearance is given palpable expression in the framing, editing and placement of the archival imagery.

17 “John Akomfrah in Conversation with Anthony Downey”, Arnolfini Arts, Bristol, 2016.

The style and structure of *Vertigo Sea* are inseparable from its political meaning. Akomfrah has devised a cinematic method, based upon the extended possibilities of montage and the potential of found footage, that permits us to imagine the slow violence of what might best be described as the natural history of destruction.

Alan Wright is Senior Lecturer in Cinema Studies at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch. His research interests include documentary and the essay film, contemporary world cinema, time, memory, dream and exile in film.

EMBODIED TIMELINES

STEPHEN CLELAND

I have been invited to discuss the eponymously titled solo-exhibition *Luke Willis Thompson*, which launched the Adam Art Gallery's 2018 programme. Six months on, Thompson's exhibition remains an important milestone for us which I am pleased to have an opportunity to revisit. Following Simon Denny's *The Personal Effects of Kim Dotcom* (2014), and Ruth Buchanan's exhibition *Bad Visual Systems* (2016), Thompson's exhibition aligned to a strand of the Gallery's programming whereby an artist based internationally returns to New Zealand to exhibit a body of work across our entire building. Often including newly commissioned components, each artist was given an opportunity to present their work at a scale not previously seen in their home country.

The concentrated yet expansive format of these exhibitions reveal aspects of the artists' works which remain latent in smaller presentations. In light of this, in approaching Thompson's work I want to speak directly to the subject of today's symposium. The question that naturally follows the title, *The Time of the Now*, is:

'In what ways is the past infused with the present in the experience of an artwork?'

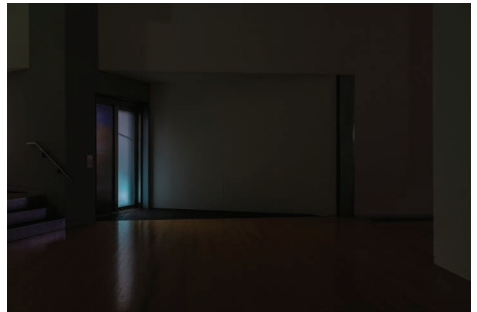
The value of revising this exhibition is the opportunity it affords to consider the time-based structures underlying Thompson's practice. I want to specifically demonstrate how his most ambitious projects place immense weight on our apprehension of his works 'in the now', yet continually require us to 'look back'. His work strategically brings to the fore touchstone moments from our recent and distant past in such a way as to give

them immense gravity in the present moment. I will restrict my discussion to unpacking the three films that made up the Adam Art Gallery exhibition, treating the show as a kind of case study for how these time-based structures play out in his moving image works.

A recurring trait of many of Thompson's most ambitious installations is his activation of the entire site of an exhibition as a mechanism for delivering the work¹. In this way Thompson explores the exigencies of place, often drawing from the legacies of conceptualists such as Michael Asher in order to utilise the context of exhibiting his work (a building, an institution, or as is often the case, a city) as raw material. In this instance, Thompson 'ramped up' our self-reflexive sense of experiencing his work by creating substantial alterations in the Adam Art Gallery's building.

On first encounter, his exhibition referenced the kind of barricades that we might associate with forms of protest. If you were to survey the perimeter of the Adam Art Gallery every vantage point into the building was barred: from the band of narrow windows which border the largest galleries, to prominent windows facing the paths around the southern and eastern perimeter of the building (including a pathway en route to the university's senior staff and Vice Chancellor), and finally to the glass entrance of the gallery, which was obscured by a temporary corridor. Upon entering the building through this corridor, we encountered a dark expanse, completely sealed off from the outside. The installation far exceeded the practical requirements of light-locking a building for pro-

1. See Thompson's treatment of the Auckland Art Gallery in *inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam*, Walters Prize 2014, and his modifications to the entrance of the New Museum, New York in *Eventually they introduced me to the people I immediately recognized as those who would take me out anyway*, 2015. The construction of a bespoke curved room was also important to the first presentation of *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane in 2016, and the second presentation of this work later that year at Galerie Nagel Draxler involved substantial modifications to the gallery.



Installation views, *Luke Willis Thompson*, Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Victoria University of Wellington, 21 February – 15 April 2018. Photo: Shaun Waugh

jection-based work. Instead, Thompson referred to his goal here as not just creating a visual but a psychic seal. To further heighten this sensation, the building was stripped back to its bare essence. All security cameras and light fixtures were removed, leaving vast dark expanses between each artwork. All signage was removed with the exception of exit signs, which provided dim lighting for the Adam Art Gallery stairwells. Once a viewer's eyes adjusted to the darkness they were tasked with roaming the gallery in search of three films, each situated on a different level of the building. In such circumstances, one cannot help but be conscious of one's own bodily movements. Willis-Thompson's work has already begun to act on us well before we experience the works themselves.

To map the works encountered chronologically, the first film in this series, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* (2016), precisely borrows Andy Warhol's methodology of the screen test. Comprising a single static shot per subject, the work depicts two men who are each captured by themselves in an unedited take. Each filmed for the duration of a 100-foot roll of 16mm film (approximately four minutes with Thompson's slowed analogue playback), the figures appear almost static before us with only small gestures—a blink, a deep breath, a subtle shift in emotion—cueing us to the time-based medium. The work allows us to 'be' with these two individuals for the duration of this unedited sequence, to stare into their eyes for what seems an unbearable period of time.

At the time when this work was exhibited, a lot of information about *Cemetery of Uniforms and*

Liveries was in circulation. The film is a portrait of two London men, each descendants of victims of police-inflicted violence undertaken in their forebears' households. Brandon is the grandson of Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce, who was shot by police in her home in Brixton, 1985, an incident that sparked the Brixton Riots that year. Graeme is the son of Joy Gardner, who was killed by police in her home in Crouch End, London during a dawn raid for her deportation in 1993. Joy Gardener died that day as a result of the brutal treatment by the police.

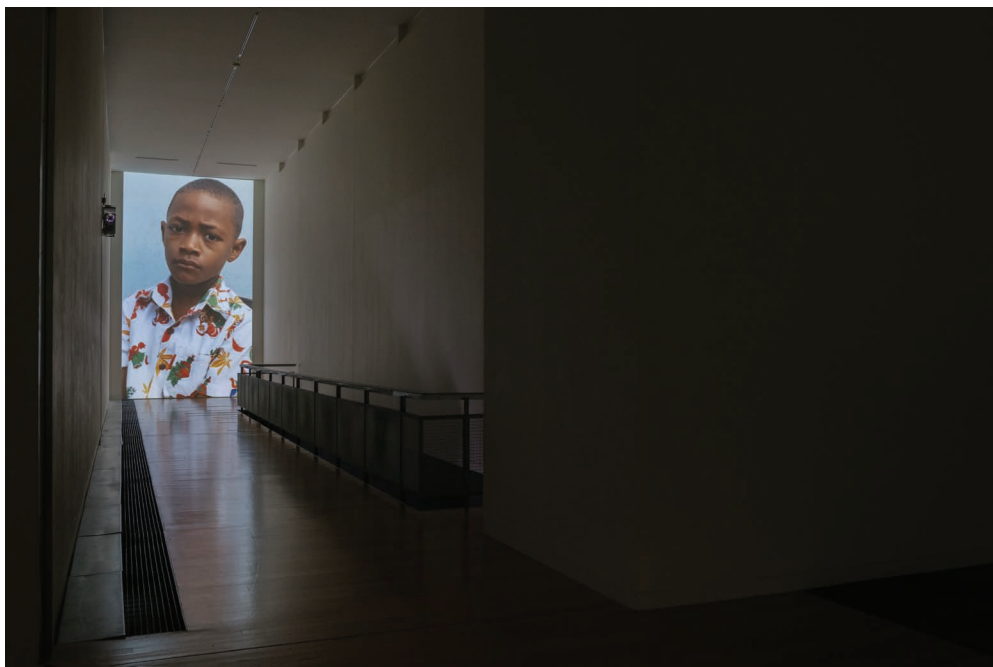
The second film, *autoportrait* (2017) refers to an equally harrowing instance of police violence. The work depicts Diamond Reynolds, who famously live streamed to Facebook from her car in the immediate aftermath of a police shooting, in which her partner Philando Castile was shot by a policeman during a routine stop. Reynolds used her mobile phone to record the incident seconds after the shooting. In her footage, officer Jeronimo Yanez is seen holding the gun over Castile's bloodied body, having discharged seven bullets towards Castile. All of these shots miraculously missed Reynolds and her daughter sitting directly behind him in the back seat. Within an intense stand off, Reynolds' careful narration of the circumstances to both the officer in front of her and her Facebook community online was her instinctual means of defending her partner, her daughter and herself from further harm. Filmed months later, Thompson's 35mm film portrait of Reynolds gives her a monumental presence, far removed from the footage that circulated the internet on that fateful day which Reynolds will be forever connected to.

The third film *How Long?* (2018) was a newly commissioned work that Luke produced in Wellington. Created on the occasion of the exhibition, *How Long?* took Luke back to Fiji, the homeland of his father. Filmed in Suva, Lautoka and Nausori, with permission of the villages of Namoli and Manua, *How Long?* depicts four individuals; John Lebanon; Rosie Lebanon; Rupene Iraq; and Inia Sinai. Captured in portrait orientation on super-16mm colour film, this work was specifically produced to scale the full height of the Adam's distinctive level three gallery. More about this shortly.

But if there were a 'fourth work' for the show I would suggest that it is the text-based information deployed alongside these films. Perhaps also with a nod to Andy Warhol, Thompson arranged for these texts to be screenprinted directly onto the wall.² The texts were faint, but materially present, and only dimly lit with a single light which, thrown from a distance, functioned much like a projector. It was impossible to read the texts without your shadow coming into play, without being self-consciousness of your own presence in the exhibition.

Seen together, these texts outline a matrix of events that underlie each piece. Of the three works, the text for *How Long?* has the most rudimentary information. We are given the names of the four individuals depicted and their birthdates, numbered chronologically. No additional copy is provided. I believe Thompson chooses to supply such a scarcity of information in order to establish the timeline for the work. These textual details provide a means by which we can

2. The screen-printed text was previously used for Thompson's second exhibition of *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* at Galerie Nagel Drexler, 2016.



Luke Willis Thompson, *How Long?*, 2018, 16mm, colour, silent, 11 minutes, 26 seconds. Installation view, *Luke Willis Thompson*, Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Victoria University of Wellington, 21 February – 15 April 2018. Photo: Shaun Waugh

unpack the specific timescales at play.

John Lebanon born 1979. Rosi Lebanon, 1981. Rupeni Iraq, 2011; and Inia Sinai born 2017. Within *How Long?*, each name and birth-date geo-locates a conflict. The two Lebanons, Rosie and John (unrelated) index Fiji's peace-keeping involvement in the Lebanese War. Fijian soldiers were deployed in both Gulf wars; with Rupene Iraq named after his uncle who served in peace keeping efforts following the second Gulf War. Finally, baby Sinai is named after a place of conflict following the Egyptian revolution in 2011.

The work refers to a naming practice which is specific to Pacific cultures, whereby the name acts as a memorial or reminder. In preparation for the exhibition, Thompson described this tradition in the context of Fiji, which allows for an individual to be named quite liberally. 'Fijian names do not always follow either maternal or paternal lines, nor do they necessarily require antecedents. New names can be given either as first or surnames providing the event or the relation that grants the name is significant enough.' In the context of men and women serving offshore, 'a child born while their parent is serving or killed could end up being named after that war zone.'³ Seen together, these individuals make up an embodied timeline—their very birthdate and name marking a series of military-political moments.

If we give this information weight within the work, the reading that starts to emerge takes us back to the islands. What is the effect of these placements among these people back in Fiji? My reading of the work is greatly informed by a public

3. As quoted in Adam Art Gallery exhibition guide, http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Exhibition_Guide_A4_Digital_28Single29.pdf

4. *Fiji now – a panel discussion*, Jon Frankel and Janet Mason, in conversation with Stephen Cleland, Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Saturday 24 March, 2–4pm, 2018.

5. Remarkably, as predicted by Mason and Frankel at the time of their talk, the 2018 election saw Frank Bainimarama and Sitiveni Rambuka go head to head, with Bainimarama narrowly winning the fraught election. See, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/18/fiji-election-bainimarama-returned-as-pm-in-slim-victory>.

6 Jon Fraenkel, 'The utility of peacekeeping', September 27, 2007, *The Economist* print edition. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2007/09/27/the-utility-of-peacekeeping>.

conversation we hosted between John Frankel, an economist who spent ten years living in Fiji and Janet Mason, an esteemed lawyer who previously advised the Great Council of Chiefs.⁴ The two set out the history that fills out the work and adds context to our timeline. When Fiji became a republic in 1970, the country beefed up its overseas deployment of troops, strategically working with the UN to boost global peacekeeping efforts in an effort to maintain strong diplomatic ties. The paradox however, is that this act created unforeseen instability back home, not only for the relatives of war casualties, but also at Fiji's political heart. Each of the individuals who instigated the military coups—from Sitiveni Rambuka's first coup in 1987, to George Speight's attempted takeover in the year 2000, and finally to Frank Bainimarama's successful coup in 2006⁵—had previously been deployed in overseas conflicts. According to John Frankel, one could make a case that these individuals were both radicalised through their experiences of extremism offshore, and enabled to affect change back home through the UN's investment in the Fijian army. In short:

'Without peacekeeping missions overseas, it is unlikely that Fiji's army would ever have become strong enough to seize power.'⁶

Through an albeit simple means, Thompson's work starts to unravel the complex geo-political position of Fiji. As a key Pacific country, New Zealand is implicated in the politics that surround the work, which goes some way to explaining why Thompson's exhibition in the countries capital communicated like a silent protest. As recipients

for this naming tradition, then, each of these individuals are not only emissaries for their relatives who have served or even died in conflicts, but embodied stand-ins for a complex geopolitical context that they were thrown into at birth.

That sketches out some of the structures that play into this Thompson's work *How Long?*, but if we go through the other two works in the show, *autoportrait* and *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, we can identify similar timelines important within the show. In each of these works, it's equally critical go through the events that underlie each piece.

Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries is primarily inspired by the Brixton Riots that were sparked by Dorothy "Cherry" Groce's shooting.⁷ I think that the heart of this piece is Cherry Groce, who as we already discussed was shot during a police raid of her home in 1985, but who lived on for another 26 years, albeit paralyzed by her injuries. When Groce died in 2011, it became clear that the medical complications which eventually claimed her life were directly connected with the shooting. This not only re-opened wounds within her community who remembered the original incident, but cast light on the rigid judicial system, which didn't extend her financial compensation beyond Groce's perceived live expectancy of 10 years at the time of trial – burdening Groce's children with the financial pressure of their mother's care for another 16 years. It was in the aftermath of Groce's death that she undoubtedly came to Thompson's attention.

It is of course impossible to see *autoportrait* without discussing the events surrounding its production. I think one of the challenging aspects of

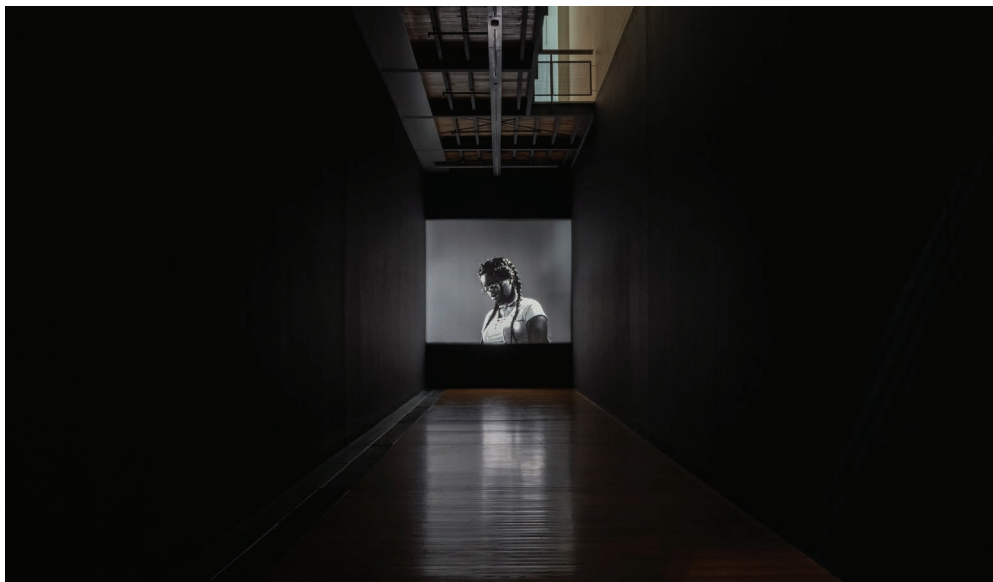
7 See: Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce inquest finds police failures contributed to her death, The Guardian, 10 July 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/10/dorothy-cherry-groce-inquest-police-failures-contributed-death>

this work is the compressed timeline of events that surround it. The production of Thompson's film occurred within a year of the Castile shooting, *autoportrait* then is foregrounded by a live subject, involving on the one hand a self portrait used as a form of defence, and on the other an impending trial for officer Yanez. The silence of Reynolds in Thompson's film was a legal condition of Thompson being allowed to produce the portrait, in order for the work to not prejudice the impending legal proceedings. Extraordinarily, Jeronimo Yanez, the police officer accused of manslaughter, was acquitted the week prior to the first launch of *autoportrait* in London. In this trial, the jury was not only shown the original footage recorded by Reynolds as evidence, but additional footage captured from a camera mounted on Yanez's vehicle. Despite the evidence supplied from both recordings, the jury determined they didn't have enough information to convict Yanez, who was consequently acquitted of all charges.

Thompson notes that in the year between the shooting and Yanez's acquittal the image of Reynolds painted by the media shifts dramatically. In a remarkable article published by the *New York Times* the day after the shooting,⁸ Diamond Reynolds is described as a fellow victim. She wasn't shot, but she had clearly found herself in an extraordinarily traumatic scenario. Over the following months the media downgraded her from 'victim' to the 'victim's partner', then 'girlfriend', with more sympathy being offered to Castile's birth family. This had legal implications when it came to compensation.

It should be clear by now that Thompson's

8. James Poniewozik, *A Killing. A Pointed Gun. And Two Black Lives, Witnessing.*, New York Times, 7 July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/us/philando-castile-facebook-police-shooting-minnesota.html>



Luke Willis Thompson, *autoprotrait*, 2017, 35mm, b&w, silent 8 minutes, 50 seconds. Installation view, *Luke Willis Thompson*, Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Victoria University of Wellington, 21 February – 15 April 2018. Photo: Shaun Waugh

work involves intensive research that draws from a range of material including the articles that surface when a historical incident becomes ‘news worthy’. At the time when Luke started to develop *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, Cherry Groce’s name had come back into the spotlight, when, twenty-six years on, her death was found to be directly connected to wounds incurred during the shooting. Luke shared several articles with me in the lead up to the production of *How Long?*, including one featuring Frank Bainimarama on the eve of the 2014 election, the first fragile move towards the reinstatement of a democratic electoral process. This provided a very brief moment for the news media to take interest in Fiji’s longer history of turbulent politics. At the time of producing his work, Diamond Reynolds had never left the media spotlight,

meaning that Luke was always working with and against their shifting narrative of the events.

The critical stance of Thompson’s work is the way it insists upon our encounter of a person in the now, but nonetheless infers an extraordinary historical and political back drop. In this sense, his work involves an extraordinary kind of phenomenological theatre. Thompson described this endeavor in *autoprotrait* as follows;

To me, there are so few possibilities to work across a real boundary, or in other words, between a real psychological or physical difference between two people. I don’t think the boundary is race, class or geographical location, or the difference produced through education or life expectancy: everything that can make two people very different from one another...I think the difference

in the work is how hard Diamond's experience of living, day-to-day, second-to-second, can be. Four minutes and thirty seconds – the length of time to use a roll of film up and the length of time she would sit for the camera without the connection to her phone, or connection to her daughter – to be alone for that time was and is incredibly hard for her. That is what it is like to be her right now – to have these memories and to live with this vigilant fear. It was continually hard for her during the filming process to keep communicating out of that place. It's likely that a large percentage of the audience can only try to relate, as I can only do too, but the attempt at establishing that relation is itself critical for the piece.⁹

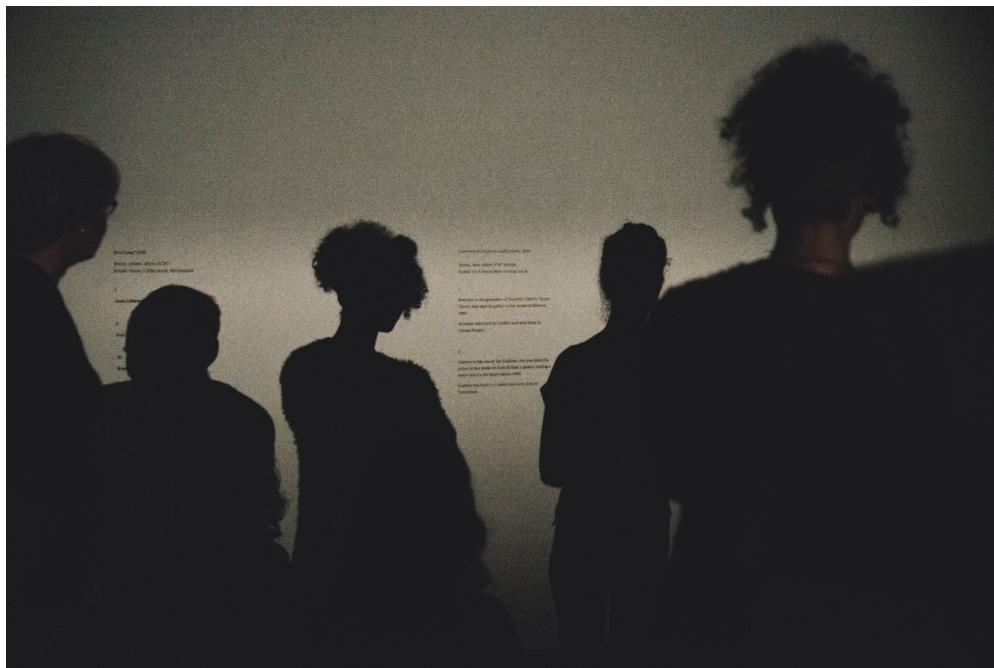
9 Luke Willis Thompson, as quoted in *Chisenhale Exhibition Guide*, p.12-13, 2017.

A close reading of Thompson's exhibition at the Adam Art Gallery uncovers a paradox that lies at the heart of his practice. On the one hand he carefully calibrates sculptures, films and installations in order to heighten the present experience of that material. In so doing the 'nowness' of the work is palpable and the artist goes to great lengths to ensure that nothing detracts from the direct experience of his work. But his artworks also incorporate vital background information which, once understood, becomes indispensable to our understanding of each artwork. These complex time structures have in many ways always been there. To refer to earlier sculpture in his oeuvre, when we approach the roller doors displayed in Thompson's *Untitled* 2012¹⁰ sculpture, we could initially read them as continuing a sculptural tradition which emphasises the presence of a sculpture 'in the now'. But once we learn that these are the actual doors taken from the Manurewa residence,

10 Luke Willis Thompson, *Untitled*, 2012, spray paint, garage doors from Mahia Road, Manurewa, sensor and lights. Collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

the very doors that in 2006 Pihema Cameron and a close friend were caught in the act of tagging by businessman Bruce Emery, an incident that quickly escalated as Emery proceeded to chase them on foot and then tragically and fatally stabbed Pihema—any simpler reading of these doors as being geared to only invoke its momentary awareness of its physical presence in the viewer becomes utterly inadequate. The continual recollection of such troubling and at times disturbing incidents within Thompson's practice is crucial to his form of politics rooted in the 'here and now'. This deep conviction within his work, that one must be conscious of touchstone incidents within both the recent and more distant past, within the specific locale he lives, is evidenced throughout his career, from Auckland to Frankfurt, New York to London, and back in Fiji. In each of these movements, within Thompson's transitory and itinerant life as an artist continually travelling and encountering the world, his politics require us to continually look back to the troubling incidents that form, and continually act upon, the sites he encounters in the present.

Stephen Cleland is a curator based at the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi at Victoria University of Wellington.



Installation view, *Luke Willis Thompson*, Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Victoria University of Wellington, 21 February – 15 April 2018. Photo: Shaun Waugh

THE VISION OF PARTICIPATORY PARITY

CUSHLA DONALSON & DR. DAVID HALL

Cushla Donaldson:

Kia ora koutou. My name's Cushla Donaldson. This is David Hall. I would first like to acknowledge the Tangata Whenua of Tāmaki Makaurau. So, I think we'll just introduce the work first. So, this piece of work is called *501s*. It was played at the Melbourne Art Fair. It was made in collaboration with an advocacy group for the 501 detainees, who are detained under the Immigration Act of 2014. They are held, some without criminal charges. They have no right to legal representation while they're in detention. They're New Zealand citizens a lot of them, and I was working with the advocacy group to connect with them so they could participate and hack into the video that was projected.

David Hall:

The 'in conversation' format is always a slightly artificial one, but, in that spirit, I was going to ask Cushla, on the art side especially, what is the context of the slipper?

Cushla Donaldson:

Okay, so, in terms of the 'artistic' element, or the 'slipper context', I'm very interested in the way that spectacle can be played in different ways. If we're talking about 'old-school' critical theory, I think spectacle is a really interesting place to start both in Luke [Willis Thompson]'s work and in mine. The very popular conversation around affect at the moment, and the way that this functions politically, I have a deep problem with. I wanted to perceive a place where affect – or something like that – was interrupted by agency or an active political moment.

```
root@kali:~# msf
msf > use exploit/multi/handler
msf exploit(handler) > set payload windows/meterpreter/reverse_tcp
payload => windows/meterpreter/reverse_tcp
msf exploit(handler) > show detainee/deportee msg
```

host endpoint breached: 384
time: 00:00:15.00

When did Australia become so heartless lucky country no more

message end

Still: Cushla Donaldson, *501s* (2018). Image courtesy of the artist.

Cushla Donaldson:

The slipper itself comes from a story of Madame Veuve Clicquot. It's a very analog piece of information because it's from a book that I read, but I cannot find it on the internet. But the story goes that when Madame Veuve Clicquot's husband died, she did a whole rebranding of the champagne brand. I see her as a proto-capitalist feminist in a way. She rebranded Veuve Clicquot with, you know, the orange label and staged this event in Venice where they shipped this new brand of Veuve Clicquot, filled a giant glass slipper with champagne in the square during the carnival, and some people drowned in it

Audience:

[Laughter]

Cushla Donaldson:

Going back to the other element and when did Australia become a heartless country? Where did we get to, David, in terms of Australia and New Zealand relations?

David Hall:

Sure. The quote [from a detainee about Australia being the lucky country], one of the questions it begs is: 'When was Australia ever a lucky country?' It has this enormously tragic history, which is easy to forget and has been forgotten (like the tragic aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's history are equally well forgotten). All states are said to be founded on an act of political violence, in the figurative sense of the exertion of sovereign power through constitutions and treaties and declara-

tions. But also in a literal sense, through colonialism and imperialism. Australia and New Zealand share a history in that regards - the alienation of indigenous peoples. But Australia has this other dimension of historical violence as a penal colony where British people were sent to in centuries past. Its original colonial purpose was to be a giant prison continent or island. Thinking back to this history, it's hard not to see the echoes in what's going on now in regards to the treatment of people. The Migration Act 1958 that Cushla referred to - in particular the 2014 amendments to Section 501 - is what sets out the character test, which is being used now as legal justification to detain people.

David Hall:

I'll read a couple of bits, because you can see how loosely defined this is. It's incredibly open to manipulation and overreach. "Your past and present criminal or general conduct shows that you are not of good character". Or "there is a risk that while you are in Australia, you would engage in criminal conduct", so, future crimes. Or, "you have been a member of a group or organization that the minister reasonably suspects of being involved in criminal conduct", so a lot of members of gangs are thrown away whether or not they've committed crimes, just purely by membership of the gang.

Cushla Donaldson:

And their partners.

David Hall:

So, there's about 1,300 New Zealanders who have been sent back to New Zealand and there's

many, many more locked up in prisons in Australia with no sense of where they're going, nor when they're being let out. Some have been there for years now under this legislation.

David Hall:

Then there's all of these other historical echoes. Historically, a lot of the people who were brought to Australia were also on misdemeanors or potentially no crime at all. They were often scooped up from around Ireland especially as a way to manage the population. Moreover, one of the larger portions of New Zealand's pre-Treaty population was actually ex-convicts coming to New Zealand from Australia to set up a new life and to escape that stain of a penal background. So this trans-Tasman flow has a strange precedent.

David Hall:

I was going to mention as well a quote by Robert Hughes, the famous Australian-born art critic of the New York Times, a pugnacious sort of critic. He wrote a book called, *The Fatal Shore* (1986), which was quite impactful in the '80s 'cause he really tried to sort of show the warts-'n-all history of Australia. And, he said that first-generation Australians - and I quote:

"turned out to be the most law-abiding, morally conservative people in the country, among them the truly durable legacy of the convict system was not criminality but the revulsion from it, the will to be as decent as possible, to sublimate and wipe out the convict stain, even at the cost of historical amnesia."

So, he was pointing to this puritanical effect that it had. New Zealanders like to make jokes about the convict past of Australia and how they're all crims today. But Robert Hughes is pointing out that, actually, the opposite was the case. It was an overreaction, this lunge for high moralism – and that comes through today. Peter Dutton, who was until recently the immigration minister, is a complete thug and a bully and a nasty piece of work. But he also has this sort of attitude of moral abstemiousness, a higher-than-thou attitude, which he brings to this. And that's an attitude that's shared by a lot of the politicians who were involved in setting up this increasingly draconian and illiberal migration policy in Australia.

David Hall:

I was talking recently with Kapka Kassabova about Bulgaria, where she came to New Zealand from, and the way that borders and fences have been resurrected there in a way very much similar to during the Cold War. And she reminded me of this quote by the psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg: "Trauma demands repetition." There's these cycles of abuse that play out at the political level in countries like Australia and also at a domestic level, too: I mean, the quote earlier from one of the detainees talking about how he was sexually abused as a child and, obviously, he saw that as part of his own biography and criminality. And so the cycle of abuse continues, both personally and nationally.

Cushla Donaldson:

I think it's a very interesting artistic question, if we are talking about ethics and care, is represen-

tation even enough? Even if we're talking about the intra-frame and the gaps and the blinks between, and we're thinking about the psychological operation of the image – really, we are at a point in our history and our society where you have to ask: Is that enough in an art gallery? Is it enough? To me, it's not enough anymore. I can't really uphold my own artistic practice by thinking that I'm changing the world, one person at a time. We're in serious territory now, which is what led me to develop the work alongside David and other people.

Cushla Donaldson:

So, we both really came to a writer Nancy Fraser. Nancy Fraser is a really interesting theoretician in the fact that she doesn't throw away what's useful about identity politics, but she is able to navigate it in terms of other concerns. Her main goal that she has posited in terms of justice is participatory parity in society. So, if there's anything that's holding someone back from participating as a peer or an equal in that society, then this is a source of injustice.

David Hall:

Yeah, so she treats justice as having three dimensions: representation, recognition, and redistribution. In regards to identity politics, her problematic is that it's often conceived in opposition to economic questions of justice. So, it's either identity politics or economic justice, whereas she says that this is a false dichotomy and that, actually, the two interrelate, that you can't really conceive these questions in respect to justice in isolation from the other.

David Hall:

So, she sets up this idea of participatory parity as asking ‘how we can participate in public life as equals?’ And the only way to do that is to strike the right balance between an economic politics which is concerned with redistribution, an identity politics which is concerned with recognition, and a politics of citizenship which is concerned with representation. And in the Australian migration question, this is one of the issues, that the 501s don’t have Australian citizenship, but many have been there for several decades by virtue of the open borders that Australia and New Zealand have through the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement. So, they’re under no expectation of needing to have citizenship, because they once had access to most public goods, but that’s really being pulled out from under their feet in recent years.

Cushla Donaldson:

I see that the 501s as traversing all three categories, really. Sixty percent or more are Māori or Pacific Island people, so there’s definitely a racially profiled aspect. Working class, most of them. And, as Hannah Arendt puts it, they have lost their right to rights. That, to me, speaks to an incredibly vulnerable group of people. So, how does one actually get away from representing them and hand over agency, to have them engage and participate as peers in a context that they’ve been forcibly removed from?

David Hall:

I come at this from the perspective of a political theorist, so I’m interested mostly in the po-

litical impacts and outcomes of artworks like this. What’s really interesting about *501s* is that it has created an opportunity for the detainees to express themselves in their own words and their own ways, in sometimes rather colorful language, but understandably so given the situations that they’re in. It’s also created an opportunity for solidarity amongst the 501s themselves, that they’ve realised that they’re not in an individualised Kafkaesque nightmare; they’re actually part of a group of people who are all suffering from a structural injustice in Australia. To tie this all up, Cushla, maybe its worth describing the detainee you talked to in Australia? It helps to give a sense of reality to what is really quite a surreal situation.

Cushla Donaldson:

I already have Ministry of Justice clearance for New Zealand, because I do visit prisons in New Zealand. So I was asked to visit a particular detainee in the Melbourne detention center by the advocacy group, *Iwi in Aus*, while I was there. She [advocate Filipa Payne] wanted me to see what the detention center was like, as an artist. And like the Documentary Research Group who were talking earlier said, there’s an ‘extension’ of opaque care that you can’t just walk away from. I very much respect that attitude: you’ve got to walk the talk.

Cushla Donaldson:

So I rocked up to the detention center after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing and difficulty getting in. The person I was speaking to was on non-contact for complaining, which meant that I could only speak to him through a glass wall. He was feeling

malnutrition, so he complained about the food and he was on non-contact. The actual detention center was worse than any prison I'd visited. There was no natural light.

David Hall:

And what had he been put away for?

Cushla Donaldson:

He had committed a crime 30 years ago. I think it was a couple of burglaries. And what had happened is he had gone, come back to New Zealand to visit his sister a year and a half before he got detained, and they changed his visa status when he got back in. He questioned it at the time, and they said, "Oh, don't worry about that." And, he was walking home from work, and they picked him up.

David Hall:

And he's been in prison for how long?

Cushla Donaldson:

Four years. First he was on Christmas Island. When he arrived there, he said it was like receiving a 'rockstar' welcome. He didn't know where he was, all he could see were palm trees, and the security guards were lined up in a queue to walk him down the gangway. Then, after two years there, he got transferred to Melbourne. And, actually, he's been transferred again, he got transferred two weeks after I visited him. I'm not sure if that was related – I hope not – to Yongah Hill where the riots have been this week for the person who had committed suicide. So we're talking about a very, very serious situation that is necessary to talk about in the art

context, which is often middle-class and educated. We are not getting the kind of information that we should be getting.

Cushla Donaldson (b. Wellington, NZ)

Recent work: *501s* (Commissioned by The Physics Room, Special Projects, Melbourne Art Fair, 2018) and *The Fairy Falls* (solo) (curated by Iona Gordon-Smith, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, 2017). She holds a MFA from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

David Hall is a Senior Researcher with The Policy Observatory (AUT). He has a D.Phil in Politics from the University of Oxford and experience in journalism, publishing and the non-governmental sector. His research interests include ethics and public policy, and environmental policy.

DISCUSSION

CUSHLA DONALDSON, DR. DAVID HALL,
STEPHEN CLELAND, & DR. ERIKA BALSOM
IN CONVERSATION

Erika Balsom:

[to Stephen Cleland] You're not the only person to reference Warhol in relation to Luke Willis Thompson's practice. But I was wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about why Warhol is important for Luke Willis Thompson. When I think of Warhol I don't think of empathy; I don't think of an engagement with racialised violence. We have the *Death and Disaster* series but that's still not quite it. Instead I think of media spectacle, seriality, the society of consumption, even of cynicism. So, what's at stake in that as an important art historical reference?

Stephen Cleland:

That's an excellent question. It partly relates to Luke practicing in the (United) States. He made quite a significant piece for the 2015 New Museum Triennale which involved re-staging an Acconci 'follow piece' performance, which originally involved the public following Acconci through the city. (Thompson) worked with the neighborhood by invitation from the gallery and re-staged the piece in such a way that you followed young, predominately male, black gentleman through the city tracing certain pathways. The work was Luke's critical response to a political scenario in New York at the time, where anyone could still be stopped and on the basis of very flimsy evidence frisked and interrogated.

It's a powerful piece, but one problem for Luke was that very few people saw it. Another problem was just the sheer economy of presenting the work, which meant that it could only be experienced in a specific place for a limited time.

What Warhol provided (in) the greatly extended durational films such as the 24 hour Statue Of Liberty film (*Empire*, 1964) and the studio tests, was a relationship to reality that approximated the liveness that (Luke) was trying to seek out in those prior works.

Amongst Warhol's hundreds of screen tests there's maybe three people of colour in the entire body of work. That speaks to the prevailing whiteness of the New York art scene as well as Warhol's vision, which Luke is implicitly critiquing. So I think (Luke) is clearly using the Warholian strategy for a very different end.

Erika Balsom:

This is maybe a very pedestrian question for Cushla but I'm not familiar with the work you presented, so how does this hacking structure actually work? How does the work function? It was fascinating to hear about the political background, but I wonder if we could talk a little bit more about this work's formal strategies. For instance, you called it hacking but generally hacking is not something that people are invited to do.

Cushla Donaldson:

[laughs] Sometimes they're paid to do it

Audience:

[Laughter]

Cushla Donaldson:

With the technology, I'm not going to go into the full ins and outs of it. The detainees' phones had been actually taken from them on Christmas Island and at some other detention centers. The

federal court ruled that they must be given back under their human rights, actually two weeks before this work was to go live. So, that was very lucky timing because only a few of them had phones before that point. So we very quickly made sure there were as many phones as possible in the centers.

We also checked that the detainees who had already been deported back to New Zealand had access too. Some of the phones were given back by the government to detainees in the centers without sim cards in them (which was really useful!) so we helped as much as we could with that as well. They were often sharing phones in the centers and they got together in groups to text into a “system” that I had developed with a guy in Australia. This guy, in his younger days, was very good at this kind of thing and now works for a big company. When I explained the project to him he said he’d do it for free cause he hates Dutton.¹

Audience:

[Laughter]

Cushla Donaldson:

...so, he wasn’t paid, he did it for free. We developed a technology and systems that they were able to safely and anonymously text into. The texts would come through and then interrupt the ‘art-work’ in live. The texts would then feed back into a replay system.

Erika Balsom:

So it happens as a real time performance but then also exists as document.

¹ Peter Dutton is an Australian Liberal Party politician who has held the post of Home Affairs Minister. He is known for his conservative views on the rights of immigrant and Aboriginal communities.

Cushla Donaldson:

Yes, that's right.

Erika Balsom:

Cushla, you mentioned a frustration with identity politics...

Cushla Donaldson:

No... I said...

Erika Balsom:

I think you said you hate it.

Audience:

[Laughter]

Cushla Donaldson:

[Laughs] no... I didn't say I hated it... I said there were limitations...of which you know there are!

Erika Balsom:

Hey, I'm the moderator – I'm not answering, I'm asking.

Cushla Donaldson:

...oh right! [Laughs] But everyone knows there is. [laughing]

Erika Balsom:

There was a question raised about the limitation of identity politics, and Luke Willis Thompson's work has come under fire, often using a framework that I think many would associate with identity politics. So what is identity politics? It means different things to different people.

Cushla Donaldson:

Um....David, what is identity politics? [Laughter] You know, the issues I mainly have with identity politics are the way it's used by the right. It's the way it's used by the alt-right and by capitalist feminists actually. They rock out identity politics all the time. It's really problematic in terms of, you know, if we are trying to fight Fascism on some level. But that's me really straight talking isn't it? I should shut up and let you talk David!

David Hall:

Well I can try channeling the spirit of Nancy Fraser² here. She worries that one of the problems is that identity politics in some of its expressions tends to reify identity and to make people play out these categories that have been assigned to them – whether that's to do with race or class or gender or whatever. That's one manifestation it can take but then she also recognizes that no politics of emancipation and justice can be done without, you know, a deep recognition of people's situations and their peculiarities and particularities, so she's trying to strike that balance.

To pull it towards Luke's work, as a political theorist, I'm often thinking about representation in terms of representing people and their agency, like a politician is a political representative who has all of these demands of the demos or the public or the voters impinging upon them. They don't have total control over those demands, so they have to somehow navigate that and manage that.

Of course, politicians get very good at avoiding representing the interests of the people, they

² Nancy Fraser is an American critical theorist and feminist.

represent other sorts of interests too, but the democratic process is designed to pull them back on board. But then representation in art can involve an artist taking control of how people are represented - which is why a political theorist like Jacques Rancière has critiqued how representation sometimes plays out in art.

I think there is this at play in the way that Diamond Reynolds is represented. By contrast, when she originally filmed her boyfriend Philando Castile being shot, she kind of hacks Facebook in a way, in a similar way to the detainees hacking Cushla's work. She has the agency: she's taken the technology and she's made it her own, to get across her perspective, her experience, and a situation which might otherwise have been neglected. Facebook commodified this eventually and, in a sense, she lost control of it over time because it becomes, you know, either the platform making decisions about how her experience is portrayed, or the artist.

So there is this tension that the democratic sense of representation is getting lost through the process of an aesthetic representation.

Cushla Donaldson:

The political question for me too, as we've talked about before was, how would it have been dealt with if it had been a white person being shot on Facebook. In Diamond's case there was the constant replaying and reposting that was happening on Facebook of this event. It potentially could also be seen as a loss of agency in some way.

Erika Balsom:

Does she lose agency with each replay? I don't know the answer to that question. But I ask it as a genuine one. On the one hand, she becomes this endlessly replicating sign, traveling through the internet. On the other hand, that circulation was absolutely galvanizing of massive protests and a social movement in the United States. This is true not just of her video but also of all of these videos of police violence that have circulated online. It's impossible to conceive of Black Lives Matter without that viral circulation of images.

So I would maybe push back a little bit against this idea that promiscuous digital circulation is inherently tied to a loss of agency.

Stephen Cleland:

There was really nice idea developed by some media theorists who were responding to Luke's work in Wellington. They talked about this reversal of the Foucault idea of a panopticon, the image Foucault used to critique the widespread use of cameras to surveil public space. Is there someone behind that camera? We don't know. But it's a very effective means of crowd control. This phenomenon of people using cameras to film these instances of violence is a reversal, or a radical democratization of this model of creating an all seeing multiple eye that spreads everywhere.

I think the issue of (Luke's) identity is really difficult to unpack in the limited time this conversation affords. So I'm not really sure I have a good answer to that. One thing that became really evident to me as I was recalling these projects was that, as the Adam Art Gallery has done, each of

these works have been created by invitation from a large powerful organization, an art gallery, operating in New York, London or various parts of the world. That is an invitation for the artist to engage with the community and to create a work in those cities and to explore relationships, to explore, perhaps, easy material (or) difficult questions that relate to that place.

So I think one of the big issues at the heart of Luke's work is a question of empathy. Can he really create a work that suitably balances all these considerations? For *How Long* (2018), I leave that project with a clear conscience. I can't think of anything you could have done better, in terms of the correspondence with the families, the villages. As we were gaining permission to film Rupene Iraq, the six year old boy, it not only involved the willingness of this boy to be filmed (and) the permission of his mother, but also the permission of an entire village. The chief of the village and all the elders of that village grilled Luke incessantly for hours over a Kava circle session and he was granted their full blessing.

Cushla Donaldson:

Yeah there is that aspect, sorry to interrupt Stephen, there is that aspect of care I do understand and certainly I know Luke to be a definitely committed artist. But you can't go past looking at how an artwork operates, and when it operates what does it do? And this is what I'd say too about the constant repetition of this footage on Facebook, yes it, and other filmed atrocities, have galvanized a community towards something as massively important as Black Lives Matter... and

in another sense, this particular footage, through its unlimited use and circulation on this platform, also could be said to have become potentially pornographic. It's not straightforward is it.

David Hall:

And the police officer was acquitted.

Cushla Donaldson:

So as evidence, you know, we're not talking about Fiona's opacity, we're talking about "The Art Work", the Evidence, the thing that will last. We're not talking about the opaque. We've got to think about "where is that TRUE political moment", you know?

Erika Balsom:

It strikes me that in both of these works, there is a sense of dealing with subject matter that has been absolutely spectacularised and that often verges on the obscene, or is patently obscene. But in each of these works there's a retreat from that.

Cushla Donaldson:

Exactly.

Erika Balsom:

In Luke Willis Thomson's work, whatever critiques we may want to make of it, one thing I think everyone would agree upon is that there is a retreat from the overt picturing of bodily suffering and violence. All of the historical events that Stephen discussed as informed the work are not pictured within it. This seems like an important thread to connect the two practices.

MEMORY ON VIDEO

JAMES WYLIE

In his enigmatic 1940 text *Thesis of the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin writes of a day where we cite the entirety of our history, and so it goes:

“A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past - which is to say, only a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation à l'ordre du jour (order of the day) - and that day is Judgement day.”¹

¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1968, 254.

I would like to present a thought experiment on what I believe is an integral human function in the presence of receiving art: memory. The human action of accessing memory, the ambiguity and fuzziness of this act, brings the power of experiencing artworks forth. Though when it comes to the digital realm, it is often unclear if *the thing* you are seeing on the Internet is a citable version of *that thing*. So when we submit ourselves to what we experience online, we are making a pact with the unordained, and *the thing* is often divorced from its original context. The fuzzy becomes fuzzier. This lack of citation distorts intended meanings, performing multiplicity, exciting the viewers memory and challenging their perceptions. For better or for worse.

What happens to *The thing*? What happens if it finds its' citation, its' home? The author is obviously already dead,² *the thing* is waiting at the doorstep of a deceased estate. The *thing* is being

² Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 1977, 142.

scrambled away from source to source, curated into and propped up by a series of reposts or retweets. Social media is a performance of attempting to create digital citations to lived experience. But, what about the memories? Libidinal forces drive the recording and structuring of biography through social media, but there is an anxiety within this libidinal force - it could be a trap! We are being delivered fake news, there is a clear consensus that we are being lied to. But even in the midst of this crisis, should we demand absolute truth?

Author Ted Chiang speculates that technological evolution will intersect with memory, that accessing memories will become a process of searching an archive of personal video footage and having the event played back to you in perfect detail. He posits the question of whether we will bother to manually remember information in the presence of such technology.³ In Chiang's speculation, every event will be stored in a readily accessible format; of video, quite the reliable counterpart to the slippery format we have now; memory. This memory on video could deny the fuzziness of recollection, a prosaic confrontation with our personal histories.

Given we embrace Chiang's speculation with some seriousness, would nostalgia still exist? How could we expect our memories to react to this new mode of recognition? He references recent psychological studies to observe how memory is being affected by our relationship to the technology. In a 2011 joint study from Wisconsin, Harvard and Columbia Universities, psychologists compared participants' recognition ability of details on a

3 Chiang. *Speculations - The Future Is _____*, 2013.

4 Sparrow, Liu and Wegner, *Google Effects on Memory*, 2011.

given topic. Half of the participants believed they will have future search engine access to the topic, compared to the other half who believed the information will not be available to them.⁴

This study reiterates similar concerns to that which Plato addresses through Socrates in *Phaedrus* (370 BC). In this dialogue Socrates recounts the story of the Ancient Egyptian King Thamus, who proudly boasts to Theuth, the God of the Underworld, about his recent gifting of writing (which he understood as a technology) unto his subjects. However, Theuth questions King Thamus' decision;

Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing.⁵

5 Plato and Hackworth, *Phaedrus*, 274-275 bc.

it (writing) will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, (....). What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder.⁶

6 Plato and Hackforth, *Phaedrus*, 274-275 bc.

It is important to note, as with the majority of Plato's dialogues, that the author's stance is unclear due to the curmudgeonly behaviour of Socrates. But, with that said if writing did negatively affect our ability to remember, what potential collateral damage could the digital realm cause?

Returning to the aforementioned thought experiment, would its scenario of memory on video allow us to free up more space for our minds to function better in the present moment? Would we work faster, more efficiently? One could say our

brains are clogged up with too much mental cholesterol. The manual slog through our memories would be just too much hassle for a high functioning digital world. On the other hand, does this constant defragging push our minds towards a state of untethered free thought, where we exist only in the immediacy of the present moment? Is this a Messianic force or will our state of mind and relationship to information open us to manipulation by algorithms and invasive forces? To muse on these questions provides a means to investigate the intentions of progress and how they might affect the marrow of our being. Memories are ambiguous due to the shifting contexts from which we access them; much like our reception to artworks over repeat visits. To potentially lose this ambiguity to progress, might be to lose something greater than the manual act of accessing memory; we may lose an integral part of human understanding.

In her 2008 film *The Beaches of Agnes*, the wise and wonderful artist and filmmaker Agnes Varda presents an autobiographical picture, but instead of a didactic account, the film tends towards a questioning of how Varda might express the *nature* of her life, of how she repurposes her footage whilst looking from the position of her later years. The film is a collage of moments, some original, some charmingly recreated to enigmatic ends. Varda combines objects from her rich archive, gifts of a life lived through film, but does not rely solely on them. She approaches her history through major and minor moments, imbuing value and care to both. Loss of memory is a subtext within the film, but Varda is in control, as if to be saying what is not included might be willingly lost to history. In

an interview after the release of *Beaches of Agnes*, she proclaims;

"Forgetting is a form of Freedom."⁷

With that said, and on a slightly different note, I would like to preface the video work I am about to present. *(untitled)* (2018) is part of a proposed larger series of work I am undertaking as preparation for a longer form film work. These works are crafted using a variety of (usually) original digital video and appropriated audio in a process of détournement. The works become a blend of haptic explorations of digital materiality and searches for understanding within the cacophony of the virtual world. *(untitled)* presents a world much like ours, an intersection of the real and virtual. The victims of *(untitled)* are organic, avatars from the natural world, repurposed from their instinctive rhythms - subservient to a newly constructed landscape.

RENDERING REALITY

BECKY HEMUS

Hi, welcome again to the Circuit Symposium 2018, the *Time of the Now*. Thank you for coming, my name is Becky Hemus and I am going to be speaking to you about rendering reality, and cartooning as a strategy for documentary practice.

As a starting point, I'd like to speak about how documentaries are generally classified.

Documentary is:

- Non-fictional
- Informative
- Factual
- About something that has happened / is happening

My question today is – what makes our present experience unique, and how do we attempt to preserve these narratives meaningfully?

Looking at video artworks by three contemporary New Zealand artists, I'm going to explore the ways that cartooned figures can begin to explore this notion, transcending the limits of the physical body into something that is poetic, collective and speaks to our new sense of digital reality.

Janet Lilo documents her South Auckland neighborhood with heightened acuity and transplanted figures that are faceless, morphing into their surrounds.

Sorawit Songsataya documents the interior psychology of feeling, being involved in certain events or subcultures, where figures embody a kind of magical realism.

Jessica Morgan documents the ways that we process and receive information, and the body as a vehicle through which experience manifests.

The technical bodies portrayed vary in their proficiency. None fully attempts to “become” human. Their movements are too stilted, they lack eyes, noses, the porosity and vulnerability of skin. But they do incite a kind of empathy for the bodily signifiers that can be seen.

In his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson offers a strategy for ascertaining the nature of ‘real existence’. He proposes that the “most assured” point of departure is an analysis of our own conscious experience. What makes the human figures in these videos recognizable to us is the proportions of their bodies and use of gesture.

Meme. A viral phenomenon analogous to biological evolution. That which is imitated. Noun. A thing. Signified.

Culture traverses through gesture: mimesis, speech, writing, ritual. It is not always the specific facts that define an era but the way that behaviors become lauded, embodied.

In the works by Lilo, Songsataya and Morgan, cartooned bodies struggle, they think, their identity is erased in ways consistent with political and social subjugation. The thread that runs through these narratives is one of personal politics. None is trying to tell the story of a breathtaking phenomenon or event, or document literally the facts of a situation. But they do convey a contemporary reality and a feeling distinct to each artists’ lived conditions.

Janet Lilo's videos *Beneath the Radar* (2012) and *Right of Way* (2013) document the experience of living in her South Auckland neighbourhood.

Right of Way shows the depiction of cartooned bodies within the language of graffiti.

To quote Julian Stallabrass¹:

"[Graffiti] about rights to the city. Who gets to decide how the city is decorated. It works against advertising, commercial decoration and state interests. It remains in many cases illegal and is a mutation of capitalist publicity culture. Graffiti is advertising for the invisible, for those without a product to sell other than the advert itself."

Through recording these so-called acts of rebellion and incorporating them into her video, Lilo hands back a degree of prominence to those depicted.

The film also shows these generic bodies within landscapes stripped of nature. A city that is bare, pumped with industry, sanitation, whiteness, colonisation.

Faceless workers whose identity is defined through depictions of "labour" - a term that Hannah Arendt outlines as being solely for consumption, distinct from work which connotes invention and engagement of more sophisticated faculties.

In *Beneath the Radar*, the figures are constructed by combining an evocation of stenciled graffiti with blank, generic faces.

What makes these figures interesting, with

¹ Julian Stallabrass. *Image of the people?* TEDxCourtauldInstitute, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE58YQkAx0A>

their lack of features or specific personalities because of the way that they have been cartooned, is the way that they are able to stand in for many bodies. They are representative of a wide spectrum of the kind of demographic and social groups that they may be a part of - indicated by their hair, the way that they are dressed, their stances, even in some cases the colour of their skin.

Here the body is completely removed, allowing the viewer to project an identity into the frame.

In this still, there is a transplantation of a caricatured figure into the landscape. He moves in this really exaggerated fashion where he seems very eager to please or perform. Here, the cartooned body documents the way that many Pacific bodies are seen in the media. It sets up this really interesting contrast with the posed montages above, that seem quite self-determined within a blank canvas where everything has been meticulously constructed and the body is defined within its own setting. Versus this person within the very distinct landscape of Auckland who appears like they are playing a role.

Such technical bodies and digital representations deconstruct the proliferation of images – a way to unpack the colonial gaze and at times an attempt to become autonomous.

In these works by Lilo, there is a dichotomy between the erasure of the body as something that is disposable, and the reclaiming of the body through navigating a new identity built on its own terms.

SORAWIT SONGSATAYA

Sorawit Songsataya's *Midnight* was exhibited at Window in 2015.

The video documents the story of Tian Yu, a 17-year-old factory worker at Foxconn in Shenzhen who jumped from the fourth floor of their dormitory. That same year, over a dozen other Foxconn employees also attempted suicide.

Moving to the city to work is sold as a glamorous lifestyle choice full of potential.

"There's no choosing your birth, but here, you will reach your destiny. Here you need only dream, and you will soar."

Labourers are assigned to random dormitories, causing sleep disruption and hindering their ability to set up networks and social support. On the production line, they are unable to move beyond 'markers' that demarcate confined areas for maximum cubic efficiency. Each person learns to repeat a specific, basic task that they must consistently enact at high speed throughout shifts of up to twelve-hours.

Yet the video itself only vaguely alludes to this narrative; and the figure who Songsataya used as a stand-in for Yu was in fact a blonde, Barbie-esque doll. The only element that alluded to the narrative was the accompanying roomsheet and links on the gallery website to articles outlining the conditions in the Foxconn factory that Yu worked at.

The figure is isolated, blind to the world around her, staring blankly out of two vast buttons in place of eyes. The strands of her hair appear

thick and fibrous. She is plastic, “the most significant material of our age”. She is mass-production, corporate power, the construction of gender, utopia.

The use of cartooning here respects Yu’s privacy but it also makes the story about so much more than one specific incident. What are the conditions that lead humans to want to obliterate their own existence, and how do we define the utopias that we seek?

Because the cartooned environment is not real, multiple narratives can play simultaneously. I am online. I am in my head. I am in my room. I am trapped. I seek liberation.

Eviscerated from their contexts, figures in Songsataya’s works are situated in ambiguous settings where they can be anywhere, evoking an acute experience for the viewer.

The installation consisted of blue-lit side panels, two mismatched garment racks each displaying a child-sized sweater, a ceramic clock with no hands, tape along the right side of the floor with tallies etched into it; and a Sony, mass-produced monitor that played the video animation.

Many of Songsataya’s recent video installations – such as *Midnight*, *Bronies* (which we will touch on soon, shown at Te Tuhi, 2016), *a bone, a flesh a daddies nest* (RM, 2016), *Coyotes Running Opposite Ways* (Artspace, 2016) – combine quite a cartoonish or mediated physical setting alongside animated video to create a very immersive world that engulfs the viewer.

Here the blue light speaks to the blue light

emitted from screens and electric devices. But it is also contagious and effectively places the audience in the same space as the cartooned figure.

In *Bronies*, this was the setting that surrounded the video. The lighting was very hazy, there was a wooden table with a 3-D printed vase and sketched images printed onto metal sheets that had been bent - appearing like these very unreal props that might be inside a cartoon. This is a still from the video itself which shows the same vase in a digital 2d format, held by hands that have a very uncanny first-person perspective, so that it appears like the viewer is looking at themselves, holding this prop that shares their physical space.

Cartooning here speaks to the way that we seek to construct our own identities. This artwork documents the subculture of Bronies, adult My Little Pony fans. But instead of showing specific people or sharing quotes or costumes, which however sympathetic the lens tries to be can always be open to ridicule and scrutiny, Songsataya's video demonstrates the experience of identifying with something that is not human – which to me is a far more potent and relevant proposition, as it speaks to the precarious existence of living now and the functions that our bodies actually serve.

As Donna Haraway has stated:

There is no stabilized existence, “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion”²

JESSICA MORGAN

Jessica Morgan's video, *Here We Ascend from*

2 Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 1985.

Earth to Heaven (2018), was first shown at AUT and subsequently reformatted for a Window on-line exhibition.

The title is based on striving for ascendance from material ground to intangible ideas. The video begins with a muffled beat that is slightly out of sync. Throughout, there is the idea that bodies are struggling. They check for affirmation of existence in the mirror. Their movements are lagging, lacking. Morgan's figures are not productive. They sit, struggle to push boulders in a Sisyphean manner, navigate their way through obstacles only to end up at the edge of a room, running into a wall. They repeat Marxist aphorisms and debate the relevance of capitalism.

Allow me to put forward ideas posited by Tim Gentles and Dorothy Howard for *The New Inquiry*, in an article titled *Cartooning the Body* (2015):

Cartoons "evoke...supposedly passive consumption...They are defined by an affect of inertia, slackerdom, immersing viewers in adolescent fantasy spaces that would seem to refute any sense of personal transformation or wider political possibility." However, these "deviant attitudes" also "represent a recognition and reaction to emergent global economic conditions" by "reflect[ing] an apathy... that nurtures the feeling of having some control over our futures."

History and narrative have been maintained rigorously. Modes of representation have laid in the hands of a select few, bodies are an imposition of projected ideas. When we begin to slack, rebel, we liberate the body. The representation of these

cartooned bodies invites scrutiny as each has been constructed to be viewed. The figures are a manifestation of labour, productivity and failure. The still here shows two figures talking to each other from separate frames, behaving as if they are in a shared space by gesturing and leaning forward. The diptych structure is jarring, a witness to fake bodies that are part of a conversation but are isolated through physical disconnect.

Individualism has fostered competitiveness, economic disparity. To quote from the video:

Instead of solidarity, we would rather have individual groups of people doing individual things that don't actually really amount to fucking anything... The way that we build a mass-based movement is through solidarity, with people who [don't fall into the exact same sort of identity and demographics as you]

In what sounds like a recording or enactment of a conversation between the artist and another figure, the person being interviewed notes:

And you're inside in an apartment. On your own. So you've lost that connection. You've spent most of your life on the streets. They secured housing. They went inside. They lived alone. And they died alone.

The digital figure is a collective body, made of coded parts, contoured into something that stands in for more than one figure. Cartooning here is a structure to unionise the body and advance through collective knowledge and sharing of information. It attempts to document the conditions we live in today, from the perspective of an

underclass community.

CONCLUSION

Writing in the 1950s, film theorist Norman McLaren put forward that: “what happens between each frame is much more important than what exists on each frame... Animation is the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between.” I would like to argue that each of the three artists I have discussed today have somehow managed to achieve a revelation of the invisible through their own version of documentary practice.

Thank you.

Becky Hemus completed an Honours degree in Art History at the University of Auckland in 2016. Currently, she is working at Michael Lett Gallery as well as facilitating artist projects and maintaining her own art writing practice.

DISCUSSION

JANINE RANDERSON IN CONVERSATION

WITH JAMES WYLIE & BECKY HEMUS

Janine Randerson:

Has anyone got any questions that they'd like to direct to Becky or James?

Speaker 2:

It seems that you both are positing a different way of representing reality, one that we sometimes think of as distanced from the photographic documentary form, or that originally associated with film. Could you give us a sense of what is it about our reality now that would make it more accurate to utilize non... social realist documentary practices?

James Wylie:

in my case it's experiencing the world online as an anxious, fast place. It makes me want to make films which speak to that same language, right? To try and recreate that.

Becky Hemus:

I think it's hard to believe anything that you see, or that you hear. Especially at the moment. But it's been the case for a long time, that when someone uses something like cartooning as a strategy, then it enables them to really take their experience into their own hands. It's obviously a constructed medium but it's still showing this experience that someone's had, which is just as valid as a factual exercise.

Speaker 1:

Just thinking through the sound in your work James, there was an awkwardness in the dialogue around the recovery of the bird. You felt like you were in this very real situation but seeing quite

different images. Do you have any thoughts about how you used sound?

James Wylie:

With that particular clip I took a lot of humorous exchanges between the two men out of the edit. I just wanted to keep those quieter moments. They're still awkward and entertaining to me at least, but (I) took the more extreme elements out and made it a bit slower. I quite like the crunchiness of the quality of those dialogues as well, and how that matches to the crunchiness of the imagery. The JPEGs that I used to animate those animals are the smallest I could find. I think they're something like 12 by 12, so they're blown right up and then I've forced 3D space through their faces. That's what that distortion's from. They said in the preamble that they're still victims to a form of digital landscaping. In this case, I'm the perpetrator.

Becky Hemus:

In a lot of cartoon works like yours there's a kind of disjunct between the sound or the way that the bodies move, and it's like this Brechtian distance that (allows you) to look at things maybe in a more critical way, or in a new way at least.

Dieneke Jansen:

Becky, I was just wondering if you had any further thoughts about the impact of the lens on this making? It seems that a lot of perspectives are recreated from a lensed image to start with, as opposed to a drawn image.

Becky Hemus:

I think that Janet's work is a documentary

primarily, so it's a lensed image. And then I saw the cartoon bodies coming out of the graffiti and the stenciling that was in the neighborhood, and then as a way of projecting certain types of bodies into the spaces. And I think with the other two works, they did start off as more abstract ideas, and as a drawn narrative. Jess's was a little bit more documentary 'cause there was some kind of conversation and some sound, that was based on something that had happened.

Janine Randerson:

In Sorawit (Songsataya)'s work also, the relationship between being in a room with objects and then also the cartoon world as well, there's that sort of moment of disjuncture I guess. Do you have any thoughts about that? That relationship between - or is there no difference?

Becky Hemus:

That series of works that Sorawit's done is really amazing, 'cause you're standing in the space and you really suspend your disbelief and feel like you are part of the video. And you question what your body is, and how you view yourself, especially because of all these first person perspectives, there's lots of hands, and figures kind of looking at themselves, and you're standing in the same space as them.

Speaker 2:

I've got a question for James. I'm really interested in the fact that we live in a post-internet world, and how that post-internet and digitally heavy world impacts on us as artists? Franco Berardi talks about the phenomenon of the Internet

as putting us in the space of “and and and and and”, so we’re not in these deep moments, it’s a space of hyper connectivity and dispersal. Whether we think that’s good or bad or problematic is a separate question. But, if that may be one way of looking at the current situation, my question is; as an artist, how do you develop, make, know, the structure and form of your work?

James Wylie:

I made a film called *Recall* (2018), and I created quite a large digital world. I used an exploratory narrative through it. I built it, I spent two months away from it, and then I entered it again and recorded myself trying to figure it out. And I think it is that figuring out and playing a game of “and and and and and” that I really appreciate and really want to illustrate through my work.

Speaker 2:

But in a way that you don’t get completely lost in it?

James Wylie:

I think I do. A bit anxious as well.

Speaker 2:

So maybe that’s the point of it?

James Wylie:

I think so. Totally, yeah.

PERIODISING SITE SPECIFIC PRACTICE

STEPHANIE BETH

CIRCUIT and the Documentary Research Group at AUT held a Symposium in September 2018 entitled *The Time of the Now*. I was invited to discuss my film practice of the late 1970's as part of the theme 'Returning agency to the female perspective'. The organisers were keen to know more about the history of women being critically self-reflective on film in New Zealand, and my part in it. This was no opportunity to be missed.

I WANT TO BE JOAN (1977)



Josepha Judd, interviewee, *I want to be Joan* (1977). Directed by Stephanie Beth

I literally threw the baby in the cot. If I had been a mother now I would consider that my child was bashed. But, yes, I literally threw my child into the cot.¹

I Want to be Joan was a commission from the United Women's Convention (UWC) organizing committee in Christchurch in 1977. I was given carte blanche on how I went about my process. Content was drawn from interviews with attendees at the Conference. In preparation for filming I complimented my background in film theory

¹ Josepha Judd, interviewee, *I want to be Joan*, 1977.

with three months of readings and discussions on feminism and politics. What to say about the commission responsibility? Four years prior to Fine Art School, I had been constantly travelling overseas, working hotels and restaurants and doing some infant teaching. I had noted the reckless and post-traumatic behaviour of soldiers on leave in Bangkok. I met soldiers from Israel who took off from Hydra early one morning to join the Arab Israeli War. I began to note traditions of difference. So, I noted violent, disruptive, distressed worlds, but, at the age of 21, did not know Domesticity or the sense of isolations women experienced. It was to books that I went for guidance. Viewing from my Western perspective, I saw how the roots of struggle were in class and economic bases. My other tool was education already undertaken in Documentary at the school. So, I had made decision about cuts for essay style, or whether to use camera as fixed or hand-held, for example. Or, whether to use 'talking heads'¹.

2 "talking heads" is a broadcast term for interview footage.

I decided the best strategy to put in place for intuitive recording of women speaking was to find out how they positioned their personal narratives. The function of a Second Wave of Feminism was to see worth in making analysis of the social systems that bred and trained women to be an underclass. I had a three-month lead-up to plan a strategy whereby I might access women at this convention with confidence or courage enough to talk about 'sense of self' in public discourse and locate sufficient honesty in representations. So, I looked at the workshops being booked. One that stood out was, 'Guilt the Great Controller'.

The film needed to be reflective. Self-disclosing content was hoped for. If it wasn't a certain dogma from religion in the air of women's lives it was passivity from conditioning. Individuals had to see their opportunity as of the secular framework. These phrases sound almost melodramatic, but innocence and naivety about power structures were prevalent. Angers and frustrations were real. The film site was a chance for each woman to make some kind of 'breakthrough' with confidence. And my chance was to share a tapestry of thoughts, embracing these efforts with respect and care.

I had put out to the committee that I wished to recruit scouts to bring me prospective interviewees. I would be busy on a set providing calm and acoustic comfort. I had faith that a film title would arise out of the organic process. I set up weekly 'book group' meetings with a range of women who had heard I was making the film. We held these at the University Film School house in evenings. In our group, questions of 'consciousness raising' were strongly argued. For example, Canadian/American Shulamith Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970. Engels, Marx and Freud were often cited in her argument for Feminist theory.

I had three days to find and my women and one day to film them. I hired two professional journalists (one working in television and one working in radio) to make preliminary audio cassette interviews, one to one with the women in private booths. Each of the first three nights I scrolled through these tapes. After the 3rd night I picked up the phone and invited the selected interviewees to be filmed the next day. I let them know that this

phone conversation was our last opportunity for any discussion and preparation before we turned the camera on the next day.

I selected women with no affiliation with leadership or movements. They were from the silent unknown majority. They were chosen via a process of sub-selection undertaken by my crew of twenty scouts (the book study group) who went into the convention on my behalf after being asked to look for women who were 'listening' in the workshops but not speaking. The interviewees' words resolved into the final film as a document of six private insights offered by six women and with particularities about marriage and motherhood. Afterwards, I gathered pick up shots of poetry, art and song to punctuate the interviews with points of staccato and affiliation. The heightened atmosphere of collected women in situ (because they all attended one convention) aided a kind of psychological fast track to their determination. Filming was to be at this convention or never. The participants were irresistibly excited by the chance.



Hilary Findlay, interviewee, *I want to be Joan* (1977). Directed by Stephanie Beth

I still want to be a mother. I don't think I want to

be a wife anymore. I want to develop my mind... through my own fault I have never developed my mind properly and I want to do it now, right now. And, I don't know what I want to do. I have never known what I want to do, ever since the day I left school. I went into an office because I didn't know what wanted to do.³

3 Hilary Findlay, interviewee, *I Want to be Joan*, 1977.

These UWC conventions/gatherings ran bi-annually, commencing in 1971 in New Zealand, first in Auckland, then Wellington, Christchurch and closing in Hamilton. Ideas touched upon included Second-wave feminism issues - Family, Sexuality, Work, Abortion Rights, Violence in Society, The Law.

Day four at the convention was an intense relay of shoots. The 'subjects' 'were women living married lives, seeing through the degrees of their disempowering 'normalisation', which overshadowed cognisance of their personal health and well-being. From out of the matrix of commonality as a gender, and because of the context of the conference and the camera, they found voice to analyse their self-perspective. These women spoke subjective perspectives. There is no such thing as truth.⁴ Using the technique of 'talking heads' was apt for the task. The dawn of Nietzsche was "brought back to life", Finnigan may have said.⁵ As, "Truth is a style of life". The power in the film was the power of personal vocal delivery. The punch of the voice. It would become a document of individuals who gained more self-awareness due to their practice of critical reflection.

4 Finnigan, Maureen, "Nietzsche's Perspective: Beyond Truth as an Ideal" in *Topics in Feminism, History and Philosophy*, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. VI/9, 2000.

5 *ibid.*

An aspect distinct to the filming of *Joan* was the complete absence of men in the speaking

space, thus giving women 100% airtime. This opportunity commenced at the convention by decree from the committee in the opening plenary. “All male members of the Press please leave” was announced, due to sexist reportage of the 1971 Auckland event.

The screening tour of *I Want to be Joan* continued in this vein. Within each discussion circle after the film, the men in the audience were asked to please not speak, but rather, listen to women. These discussion sessions invariably ran for one and a half hours. Women were learning assertion.

I was able to take *Joan* on tour with confidence, because of the rarity of such a congregation speaking out. My confidence was rewarded at the premiere at the James Hay Theatre in the Christchurch Town Hall when the screening concluded with a Steinway piano performance and a song, to resounding applause. Over the next nineteen months my *Thundering Through New Zealand* tour was an on-again-off again set of screenings and discussion groups. I carried the film reel from place to place with organisers billeting me, borrowing 16mm projectors wherever I went.

B: ...and now I am finally succeeding. And he's happy about it.

H: Any comment on how difficult it was?

B: It's particularly difficult. But, if you really want to develop yourself as a person you have to keep trying, trying, trying. You can't give up. And, well, even to the point of being beaten you have to keep going. For me it was just natural. I knew who I was and what I was. That was where I was going. Whether it was with my husband or without him I would have still carried on.⁶

6 Hilary Findlay, interviewee, *I Want to be Joan*, 1977.



Barbara Paine, interviewee, *I want to be Joan* (1977). Directed by Stephanie Beth

A second film, *IN JOY* (1980), is a companion piece to *Joan*. I made this one as a particular response to violence against women in society. My research included being a volunteer at a Women's Refuge in Christchurch in 1979 for three months. Concluding there, I decided to make some currency out of the old art form of mime. Student life had fed to me *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945). It would be enjoyable to work next in the non-verbal realm, and keeping me positive at work was a key objective.

I contacted a Performance teacher, Maggie Eyre. I had seen her in a mime at that past United Women's Convention. She ran workshops in improvisation, play and performance. I went to Auckland to plan this film shoot at a four-day workshop we co-wrote, to run at a Parnell Community Hall. *IN JOY* was a shift from 'talking heads' to a study of movement, mime, play and performance with kinesthesia, laughter and sliding tears as outcomes of learning. In subsequent screenings, these films became part of discussions exploring ways to live a

more mindful and physically integrated life.

Neither documentary was produced within the mainstream known by then as Television. I recall being approached by the television producers of arts show *Kaleidoscope* in 1981 about airing *IN JOY*. I declined the invitation saying that I wanted the film in a prime time documentary slot.

Each film was a 16mm print. The first I took around the country on a road tour. The print deteriorated from use. It was a single reversal film print that was converted to VHS video some years later when the technology was available. The second film was a release print made from processing and colour grading negative film, a costly process done then in Sydney.

After editing was complete, a combination of private funds and institutional resources enabled me to distribute the work. I became quite indebted to my various supporters, and koha entry fees from the *Joan* tour supported my day-to-day running costs.

Various institutional partners supported the work at home and abroad. The first grant came to me from Creative New Zealand, after this the National Library Service of 1978, who distributed *Joan* in libraries for twenty years on VHS. After this Creative New Zealand again, then TVNZ support for *IN JOY* completion, and a New Zealand Film Commission grant for a punt on it in an NZ selection journeying to Cannes. I took *IN JOY* to four venues in New Zealand, Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch and it was screened in the 1981 Oberhausen Short Film

Festival, Germany. In the 1990s it was screened at the BFI National Film Theatre, London as part of a collection presented by the New Zealand Film Commission. My films were later digitised and both now reside in the vaults of Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision.

The forces and risks of the 1960s had emboldened 1970s creative output. A strong slogan of the time was 'a woman is made not born'. 'The Time of the Now' back then was fuelled by an idealised shift towards an emerging plurality of 'voices', seeking to address issues of racism, the position of women and later, issues of post-colonialism and gender. Meanwhile the general populace of New Zealand fell into more of a somnolence of depression as power elites secured their hold and thumbed 'others' further to perimeters.

In the 1970s we were looser in how we were influenced by intellectual or conceptual thought. Nowadays, with so much proliferation of data and questions around media manipulation, would one proceed without either the reassurance of mass data gathering, or a more conscious examination of process? Nevertheless, critique never went away and achievements that matter were made politically and professionally towards gender and discrimination reform. Written publications such as *Broadsheet* and *Spiral* printed essays, poetry and some book publishing.

It is of political interest to note that in Hamilton in 1979 there was a fourth New Zealand United Women's Convention. I attended this. There was a challenge to the middle class Pākehā nature of these conventions from a flange of activists car-

7 In 1979 what I called a rupture is interpreted in this article as “socialist and lesbian feminists refusing to join mainstream groups”. The writing is in the ‘lifestyle’ section of a pulp Australian magazine *Now to Love*, 2008: <https://www.nowtolove.co.nz/lifestyle/career/kiwi-feminists-from-the-seventies-on-the-fight-for-a-brighter-future-39059>

8 E H McCormick, Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Juliet Batten, 2008.

9 <http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/189>

rying banners proclaiming UWC’s as ‘WHITE WOMENS’ CONVENTION(s)’. In 1979 protesters refused the convention interior setting and made dissenting speeches outside. The UWC’s folded after this rupture.⁷ In the years later, instead of unity gatherings, professionals returned to increase their workloads, education numbers for women began to soar. A lot later, Mana Wahine - as well as the forerunners of more radical protests or, indeed, recanters of positions - showed their head as New Zealand folded into hardline neoliberalism.

Collective Women: Feminist Art Archives from the 1970s to the 1990s is a private collection of publications and ephemera that opened in late 2017 at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. It includes many objects, from copies of *Broadsheet* and *Spiral* to event posters, a film and Marti Friedlander photographs gifted to the gallery by Juliet Batten.⁸ The display sits alongside other periodicals and catalogues as well as significant information files; including New Zealand Women Artists, a collection of fifty-nine audio cassette tape interviews with artists recorded 1971-1984.⁹

To my astonishment and delight, this curated collection in Auckland Art Gallery I found the day after the CIRCUIT Symposium. The delight came because I went twice to look at contemporary artist Ruth Buchanan’s exhibition *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS*, (2018). As part of Buchanan’s installation a Gallery Attendant guided me to the collection of historical ephemera. Had I not sought out Buchanan I would otherwise have not seen that collection. Buchanan was a nominee then, and a

winner now of the 2018 Walters Art Prize. She has smartly and wondrously incorporated the Feminist Art Archives as her 'Site 4' of *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS* by instructing a Gallery Attendant to take any visitors to see this historical collection at 2.30pm of any day. To Buchanan, happily, that collection acts as a most satisfactory New Zealand Women artists' precursor to her own heavings of action. Her significant and breathtaking contemporary installation addresses not only voice, but also manifesto, feminism, and exhibition spaces, giving refreshed urgency to the complexities of body politics.¹⁰

It was my luck that I attended this exhibition just one day after speaking at CIRCUIT that September day, and for the first time, heard my 1984 voice on one of those fifty-nine cassettes discussing my heartfelt times making these films. By participating in Buchanan's swift and provocative navigation I fell in love with Art as life once more.

This essay is dedicated to Vivian Lynn

¹⁰ Buchanan. R. *BAD VISUAL SYSTEMS* (2016, 2018). Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Curator. Conlan. N, July 2018-April 2019: <https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/about/major-projects/walters-prize>

Stephanie Beth is a film-maker based in Christchurch. Her films include *I Want to be Joan* (1977), *IN JOY* (1980) and *US AND THE GAME INDUSTRY* (2013).

THE DOCUMENTARY IN SAUDI FEMALE ART PRACTICES

MOYA LAWSON

Arwa Alneami grew up and began her career as an artist just outside of Abha in southern Saudi Arabia, where *Never Never Land* (2014) was made. In November 1979, a group of armed extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca and demanded the overthrow of the monarchy, accusing it of corruption and Western decadence. The rebels were expelled, many retreating southward to this mountainous province of Asir on the border of Yemen. When Alneami's grandmother was a child, Asir's settlements were tribally diverse, women freely partook in work and trade, and were the key artisans of the community. Following the insurgency however, these communities became host to a new ideology, one which has slowly transformed their social makeup. It has infiltrated all aspects of daily life—even the operation of the harmless amusement park.

Alneami began picturing the Mahrajan Abha theme park when she realised it was changing. One day she and her brother arrived at the park to find they had to be separated by gender. Rules forbade female screaming and skirt malfunctions, with the threat of being removed from the rides for failure to obey. Heavy leather covers were suddenly installed on the rides to prevent skirts from flying up, and for some rides, opaque plastic blocked anyone from watching the women taking part. For the past four years Alneami has gone about with a camera hidden beneath her abaya, faking a baby bump and smuggling out images. She has produced over 500 photographs of the park and two fixed-frame videos. She shows women enduring and defying these restrictions, undermining the seriousness of the system with wry ingenuity.



Arwa Alneami, *Never Never Land* (2014)

Here, her experiences at the local amusement park become spectacle, bestowing the everyday with an exceptional agency. The determined figure on a quad-bike, or a woman in a bumper car, become a commentary on the encroaching influence of local fundamentalism.

For Saudis, morality laws starkly define interaction and movement in the public sphere. Lives evolve in private and insular circles, defined by family, gender, class and tribe. The lives of women are perhaps the most private of these—and perhaps the most besieged by foreign suppositions. When the ban on women driving was lifted in June of this year, reports tell of the international press descending on driving schools. Each journalist would be assigned the back seat of a car, as the subject nervously ventured out on to the road for the first time, a torrent of questions at her ear.

Moving on from the work of Arwa Alneami, I will consider the roots of the contemporary art scene from which she emerged, and the shifting paradigms which define expression and interaction—most notably in the work of younger artists Ahaad Alamoudi and Sarah Abu Abdallah. Through illuminating their processes and concerns, the image of the naïve woman learning how to drive can be dismantled, and our blinkered news feeds can be destabilised.

The Al-Meftaha Arts Village, located just outside Abha in the hills, is the obscure nerve centre of Saudi Arabia's contemporary art beginnings. I like this way of looking at it, a 360°-image made for Google Maps. Despite its remoteness and lack of (English) written history, you can still virtually stand in its central square. In the 1990s, the humble collection of houses provided studios for



Al-Meftaha Arts Village, Google street view, retrieved from Google Maps, 2018.



BBC clip documenting Gharem's *Flora and Fauna* performance (2013)

many artists who now lead the contemporary art scene. Arwa Alneami moved there in the year 2000. It was founded by Asir's art-loving governor Khalid bin Faisal Al Saud, some believe as an effort to counter the local extremist climate. Its name literally translates as "place of opening". Art galleries and museums were not an established part of the neighbourhood, this was an entirely novel venture. Behind closed doors, concerts and exhibitions were hosted, and important relationships were set up with international curators and collectors. Prince Charles even took up a residency practicing watercolours in the early 2000s.

Alneami gained recognition when she became the first person (also female) to photograph the interiors of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Prac-

ticing as a doctor, her husband Ahmed Mater embedded x-ray prints within religious manuscripts to challenge the prohibited depiction of the body. Abdulnasser Gharem, also a lieutenant colonel in the army, performed a plastic-wrapping ritual of imported trees in downtown Abha, to protest the degradation of indigenous ones. Two boys in Gharem's year at school were involved in 9/11, their radicalisation a topic he has since investigated in his practice. The blunt adjacency of contemporary art and ultra-conservatism seems rare, or even unnatural. But reading into the varying practices of these early artists of Al Meftaha, it is apparent that their intensive experimentation can be construed as a kind of resistance.

Saudi Arabia became a modern nation in

1932, when the Al Saud family conquered its areas with the aid of the Wahhabi brotherhood. Since then, theocracy and absolute monarchy have commanded its system of government. It believes it is the responsibility of society to protect Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, and lead by pious example. Art and music are considered haram or forbidden by the most conservative sects of Islam. For many years the religious police have raided movie screenings, artist studios and concerts. In a piece called *Singing without Music*, written by Ahmed Mater for ArtAsiaPacific in 2015, he described how such morals have been drummed into young Saudi children through the common religious camp. "On occasion the students are told to break instruments in front of each other as a kind of statement against music, for the pursuit of music is perceived as stealing time that could otherwise be spent praying."¹

Before the sluggish introduction of the Internet in 1999, artists had to exercise an old school resourcefulness. Those who could booked month-long stays overseas so they could read banned books, purchase dial-up internet, and visit galleries. As people moved and gravitated towards other centres, private studios and "incubators" were set up to support a clandestine movement—often with a built-in escape hatch in case the religious police came knocking. As visiting Kuwaiti artist Monira Al-Qadiri wrote in 2016 about navigating Riyadh's art-scene, "In one strange moment...I had a hallucinatory vision that the entire city was like one giant nuclear bunker and that all life here only occurred underneath the thick asphalt on the street."²

1 Ahmed Mater, *Singing Without Music*, ArtAsiaPacific, May/June 2015, last visited 22 Oct 2018 at <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/93/SingingWithoutMusic>

2 Al Qadiri, Monira, "The Saudi New Wave: Digital Landscapes and Future Institutions", 9 December 2016, Ibraaz Publications, online project for *Future Imperfect, Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*, last visited 22 Oct 2018 at <https://www.ibraaz.org/publications/77>



Monira Al Qadiri for Ibraaz magazine "A swimming pool as a discursive platform" Jeddah 2016

Mater and Alneami established Pharan Studio in Jeddah, a notoriously liberal city on the west coast. It was one of the first to provide a space for exhibition, discussion, and residencies. Grass-root initiatives, such as Edge of Arabia, Athr Gallery, Jeddah Art Week and the YouTube collective Telfaz 11, heralded a growing art ecology. An intensive programme of internationally touring exhibitions, online publications and even Venice Biennale presentations have been launched by artists since 2003, independent from government sponsorship but undoubtedly nationalist in their delivery. All have paved the way in providing platforms for what is now a gradually more accessible contemporary art network.

Today, half of the Saudi population are under

the age of 25. Its daily use of the internet is of the highest in the world, reflecting a people well versed in the sweeping and unregulated mediums of expression in the digital age. This not only redefines what space means, but sets up an expectation among young Saudis for a more open social environment. There is a documentary aspect to online profiles and accounts. A reality is extended when something is published, posted or tweeted online. Countering regulation of the public space which still hinders expression today, in Saudi Arabia more than anywhere internet culture is a counter-culture. It valuably collects like-minded individuals outside of the traditional social paradigms. For London-based curator Omar Kholeif, the story of Saudi Arabia is a compelling analogy for how the world (or the West) flooded into the Muslim Arab world. In his mini-novella *Jeddah Childhood* circa 1994, Saudi Arabia embodies the most polar dynamic in the Gulf. E! Television, Princess Diana, grunge culture, and the internet spurred its regulated spaces—malls and living rooms alike—into a state of “cultural schizophrenia”. As one line goes:

‘It was, for me, supreme Gibsonian teleportation.

I remember coming home from school one day,



The Barbi Twins (c 1990s)

3 Omar Kholeif, *Jeddah Childhood* Circa 1995 (Manchester: Cornerhouse Publishing, 2014) 20.

after our compulsory religion class, to the sound of the Barbi Twins on TV....Former Playboy models who, like Elton John, were a face for bulimia from an era gone past.’³

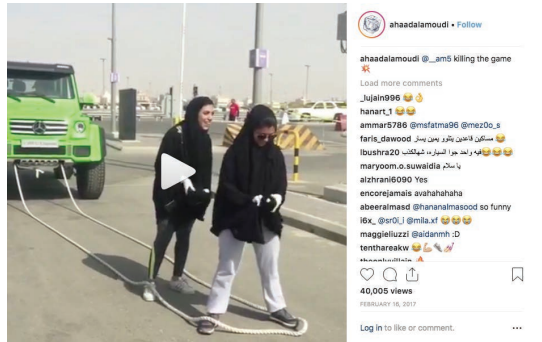
His Saudi Arabian alter-ego speaks for the young, diasporic generation who grew up intuitively fusing a Pan-Arab or spiritual identity with a buzzing and nebulous world beyond.

Twenty-seven-year-old artist Ahaad Alamoudi, having studied art in the UK and now studying back in Jeddah, engages with this flux. Her work often jumbles consumerism, Western commercialism, tradition and iconography. A key way that I have studied artists in this region has been through their online profiles, and hers are among my favourites. The visual culture of her immediate world is recorded through these channels, and feeds into her process as an artist. A TV programme of a pop star performing *No Woman No Cry* is re-purposed to advertise an opening of her exhibition. She has a YouTube video of archived viral videos, one of a man completing his Hajj on a hover board. A video on her Instagram shows two women hoisting up their abayas to pull a car on ropes, perhaps a dig to stereotyping.

As she has said:

“Social media made me re-analyse the space that I’m in ... there are so many different representations of who [Saudi Arabian’s] are. I work on imagery that is generated from my country and society through what they put out there on social media....I understand that it’s not a representation of my country, but in my art, I want to create my own narrative of what I see around me.”⁴

4 Mai Al-Farhan, *Ahaad al-Amoudi: Imagining Saudi Past and Future through Art*, Feb 26, 2018, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, last visited 22 Oct 2018 at <http://www.agsiaw.org/ahaad-al-amoudi-imagining-saudi-past-future-art/>



Retrieved from Instagram @ahaadalamoudi

This is her mood board, her corner of reality for us to share, and in my opinion a useful way to understand her practice and that of others. The artist Sarah Abu Abdallah, who is twenty-eight, also considers the multiplicity of experience in her video-practice. She has studied art at Sharjah University in the UAE as well as at the Rhode Island School of Design, but now works in Qatif, Saudi Arabia. *The Salad Zone* was made in 2013, and is a mind-boggling course of diverse environments, off-camera interactions and performances. Translations and discursive introspections overlay the images throughout. A scuttling cockroach crosses the frame as the protagonist is asked what she wants for food; she is often sitting in the passenger seat of a car and observing the scenery; there are cluttered family rooms with crying children in the background. The perspective changes with the space one occupies, and public realms are often observed covertly, at an irregular angle. The hand-held camera is clearly the artists constant appendage, but there is a selectiveness and warping of the views which perturbs any possible comprehension of where we might be.

The Salad Zone is a one of many videos endeavouring, with cool meditation, to disrupt the boundaries between private and public, between the prosaic and the artificial. Abu Abdallah describes her process as

'sifting through the absolute and predefined... [and] the absurdity of the agreed-upon in a time of excess'.⁵

Her work is all available through her Vimeo channel, which I recommend having a look at. She

5 Mai Al-Farhan, *Ahaad al-Amoudi: Imagining Saudi Past and Future through Art*, Feb 26, 2018, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, last visited 22 Oct 2018 at <http://www.agsiaw.org/ahaad-al-amoudi-imagining-saudi-past-future-art/>



The Salad Zone (2013), stills

resists the impulse to enlighten or educate—she doesn't need a distributor more official than the web—instead she uses her methods to complicate further the contradictory state of her world. The internet (as much as the global art world) is a realm in which to participate, where you're as easily locatable as you are likely to be overlooked. But considering that she has exhibited from the Sharjah Biennial, to the Pompidou, to the Serpentine, her work has clearly been identified as remarkable.

The Misk Art Institute is the philanthropic arm of the suave reformist, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. It opened in Riyadh in November last year. Alneami's husband, Ahmed Mater, has been appointed as its director. It intends to revamp the Al Meftaha Arts Village, oversee the opening of a massive new cultural centre in Riyadh, and facilitate the build-

ing of an official national pavilion at Venice. Recently the Institute commissioned an internationally touring VR experience, titled *Reframe Saudi* (2018) (using Ahaad Alamoudi as one of its cover girls) which enters the studios of ten Saudi artists. In March, the Kennedy Centre in Washington DC hosted a Misk exhibition of contemporary art. It featured two traditional murals made by women artists from southern Asir, the same area where *Never Never Land* was made. Conditions have changed drastically in the space of a year, with small arts initiatives at the risk of being overrun by a colossal state agenda. In a country where artists once moved cautiously against the tide, they have now been plucked out and presented as the unexpected ambassadors of a renovating political regime.

The stories about Saudi Arabia which dom-



Arwa Alneami *Never Never Land*, installation shot, City Gallery Wellington, 2018.

inate our screens in New Zealand are often those about religious police, oppressed women and public beheadings. There are major problems in Saudi which seriously affect its citizens, but in the media, they are often abridged and decontextualized, where click-bait culture is bolstering damaging stereotypes. Recently, bin Salman's efforts to reposition the country and diversify the economy away from oil has sparked a story which no one can keep up with. While wooing Western politicians, he commands a devastating war against Houthi rebels in Yemen. His government has lifted the ban on women drivers and is committing to getting women into work, while at the same time jailing female activists and even seeking the death penalty for one of them. It is a turbulent time, where women in particular have been identified as a political pawn, still immobilised from their future.

Arwa Alneami, Ahaad Alamoudi, and Sarah Abu Abdallah are all well aware of how contradictions are inherent to their experiences, and define human relationships across the world. Their art practices comment on these states in simply letting reality—virtual or physical—flood in. A map of statistics was published at the back of a publication that the Misk Institute launched, coinciding with the Crown Prince's inaugural visit to Washington. It's a fascinating piece of propaganda. It lists the number of galleries, art events, and the demographic of Saudi art audiences, and women comprise 64% of this audience.⁶ This is a curiously empowering statistic, considering the necessarily public nature of the art gallery, and the heavily regulated public space which people in Saudi Arabia still occupy. It complicates the image of the Saudi

6 *Misk Art Institute*, Art & Culture Program in Washington DC, Publication, last visited 22 Oct 2018 <https://miskartinstitute.org/publications/washington-dc>

woman which is dispersed by international media.

Conducting my research from as far away as New Zealand, I am aware of the problems that come with this displacement, that sifting through the internet (essentially) will never enable me to fully understand this context. However, I grew up in Kuwait City, spending my days at school or in our local pool while within a two-hour drive the Iraqi border marked the beginning of a very different reality. From a young age I realised that distance, where you are, and understanding the “truth” of an issue are not always coherently connected factors.

There is a performance in Sarah Abu Abdallah's *The Salad Zone* (2013) where two niqabi women take to a television screen with blunt instruments. Dull thud after dull thud is inflicted on the archaic box until it is smashed in, and the women stand back, silently satisfied. The symbolism of this accomplishment is uncomplicated. While watching it, I sit back and look at my own portable screen and imagine the consequences of it being smashed in forever as well. By laying out these counter-narratives, there is a power they exact in entangling with each other and those that overshadow them, without making anything necessarily clearer.

Moya Lawson is Assistant Curator, City Gallery Wellington. In 2018 she curated the exhibition *Arwa Alneami: Never Never Land* for City Gallery Wellington. A version of this exhibition was presented in Auckland as part of the CIRCUIT Artist Week (2018).



The Salad Zone (2013) still

END OF DAY DISCUSSION

MARK WILLIAMS, DR. ERIKA BALSOM,
MEMBERS OF THE DOCUMENT
RESEARCH GROUP AND THE AUDIENCE

Mark:

Erika, as a visitor to New Zealand, I was wondering if you could share some of your observations from the day, and from what you've heard, your thoughts about what drives local practice?

Erika:

One thing that has emerged for me throughout the day is the question of how we think about the relationship between local practices and international tendencies or concerns. On the one hand, I can say that there's a tremendous specificity to the kind of work that happens here. On the other, the work here is absolutely plugged into many themes that are circulating internationally at the moment.

Another thing that has been interesting to me today is to see how elastic the conception of documentary is across all of the presentations. One would never want to be too strict about saying, "By documentary, I mean only this." But on the other hand, if a category expands so far, sometimes there can be a risk of it losing its heuristic value. Maybe there is a need to negotiate between what we mean when we talk about documentary, even if it can mean many things.

There's obviously a very long history of documentary cinema. It's as long as cinema itself. And we could also trace documentary impulses through the full history of artists' film. But we could equally say that historically, documentary was not a huge part of artists' film, at least as it has been theorized and understood. Even though it was of course 'documenting' things in the world, this is

generally not how many artists conceived of what they were doing, or how critics conceptualised what they were doing.

In fact, for some artists, documentary itself was a bad object. It was deemed insufficiently artistic. It was too grounded in recording the world. It wasn't allied with the kind of creative transformation that was associated with art making. And so it's been really interesting, internationally, in the past ten to twenty years to see this huge turn toward documentary from within the sphere of the visual arts.

Fiona Amundsen:

Can I pick up on that? I want to relate this [back] to what Cushla said, about affect, which I completely agree. I think it's a fatigue around a certain kind of affect, and it's, for want of a better term, the 'poetic' or the 'painterly' in film. But in terms of what you were just saying, documentary - whether it's any kind of enlarged field or however we might think about it - somehow cares for and presents a reality. Where affect comes in, is that there's something about how those images insight feeling, and that feeling can be mobilizing. And for me, that's the artistry. Not necessarily certain camera techniques or whatever, in terms of 1970s, '80s film making, but the way images can teach us to care about what we're looking at, whether it's in a *Second Life* rendition or 16mm, or whatever. So how images can teach us to care about what we're looking at, and then ultimately care about each other and ourselves. And to me, that's a politic and a really powerful one.

Nova Paul:

I was just looking up Whakatauki just before, "He wahine, he whenua, he mate a tangata" (For man and woman, men will be defeated). I thought it was really interesting that we started off the Symposium discussing this relationship with the whenua and then we moved into addressing our relationship with wahine and space. For me, the care that comes through is always thinking: "What is the kaupapa of today?" What is the relationship that we're entering into with the subject?"

Fiona Amundsen:

That's also come through today, whether it's virtual reality, or received through the internet, or people talking to a camera about their experiences of how their bodies are policed. But yeah, it's the people, the people, the people - and how to listen.

Cushla Donaldson:

I'm going to jump in here to relate to what you were saying about affect, and the terms of relationships with people. By affect, it's probably an individualized experience that I critique. The false sense that we can connect politically with a subject and care about that through an aesthetically manipulated individual emotion. Apologies, but I did my Masters thesis at Goldsmiths on Affect and Photography, so I'm kind of all about this issue (laughs).

So when we're talking about people and close relationships and care - that's a political moment, as opposed to a falsified aesthetic. And affect, actually, is currently often being used as a bullshit term for Romanticism, anyway, (audience laughs) but

that's for another day. Yes, but carry on.

Fiona Amundsen:

Well, I think actually, weirdly, we're saying the same thing, just with slightly different language.

Cushla Donaldson:

It's a slightly different concept of how images can operate, yeah.

Janine Randerson:

I differ about affect, because I think it's not necessarily just housed in the individual body, that's just one way to think about it. But there is the possibility for a collective politics of affect. I think of how a cultural geographer like Nigel Thrift thinks about it, that it is relational. Sometimes I think that across a crowd, there's a sharing of a particular feeling that isn't necessarily a visceral response to something sensationalized, but a spatialised sense of affect, experienced more collectively and beyond just the human, too.

There's also a lot of work today that de-centres the human and I'm trying to think from a dis- anthropocentric perspective. So perhaps all those affects are not just housed in the human.

Cushla Donaldson:

I think then that 'affect' is actually the incorrect term that you're utilizing. What we may be talking about is group experience, or a more de-colonised term that we could use for that, because-

Janine Randerson:

Yeah, I think we could definitely come up with a term for it.

Erika:

Deleuze, for instance, would say that affect is not personal. Deleuze would say affect is not a property of an individual; that would be emotion. And so it depends on what definition of 'affect' we are working with.

Janine Randerson:

But I think of the principle of the Manaakitanga [a collective sharing of responsibility and for hosting of the documentary subject], maybe that's something that we could come back to, as well.

Eu Jin Chua:

The other dichotomy is between ethics and politics. If I'm not misremembering this, it's Steven Shaviro who says somewhere that there is no such thing as ethics, only politics and aesthetics. We usually use the word 'ethics' in the modern Western way to mean individualized relations between one's self and someone else. But this conception of ethics misguidedly brackets out the rest of society or the polis or the community. When we restore this occluded party, i.e. society or polis or community, which is always present, we realize that what we're really talking about is politics. So the word 'ethics', at least in its usual modern usage, is a construct that we can do without. In its place, there's only politics and aesthetics.

Nearly all situations that are called 'ethical' are in fact situations of political "negotiation", or renegotiations of the social contract, in the sense that they are transacted not just with one other individualized counterpart by whom we're supposed to do "good works", but rather with the entirety of

the collective. You're negotiating an entire relationship, if you like, with all the other people in the world of which you are a part.

The aesthetics portion of things is within the word "negotiation". Negotiation is itself a kind of aesthetic or compositional act --- it's the working out of how to put things together (or asunder). "Aesthetics" in the broadest sense here, of course, as per Nietzsche and Deleuze and so on.

Cushla Donaldson:

Exactly... we've talked about this before right Eu Jin?

Eu Jin Chua:

It's much in the vein of what you said a minute ago too!

Nova Paul:

Well, to decolonise this conversation, Tikan-ga and Kaupapa.

Fiona Amundsen:

And Manaakitanga. It comes back to how images can host what you just said.

Cushla Donaldson:

Mmm... that's dangerous.

Audience 1:

There was a question that you raised in your essay about the work that an audience has to do. Dienneke (Jansen) raised a similar point, when she said that the viewer is asked to be a trusted witness. How do you see that question of audience?

Erika:

There's a question of the audience, which is an empirical thing that exists in the world. But to make a distinction that I think is historically very important in film theory, there's also the spectator. And the spectator is a subject position, not an empirical person. It's a subject position imagined by the work. I think that every filmic work -- documentary, fiction, whatever it is -- imagines a place for its viewer, and then it's up to real people in the world to take up that position or not. A lot of documentary works do make ethical demands on their viewer, and in this instance, I would say that 'ethics' is actually the term. It might also make political demands, but it is actually a-

Eu Jin Chua:

I concede that ethics might be a subset of politics!

Erika:

Exactly. I would echo a lot of the things that Fiona said this morning in her presentation: it's a matter of being attentive and attuned to what you are presented with, and to work through those moments where there may be something that is not resolving for you, to stay with it and to see what comes from it, and to have that as a non-instrumentalised encounter.

Now, what I just said is not true of all documentary work. Not all documentary works are founded in an ethic of care. We keep talking about that, but can we say that Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty* (2008) is founded in an ethic of care? Absolutely not. Can we say that *Nanook of the North*

(1922) is founded in an ethic of care? Perhaps not. So there's nothing about documentary as such that creates those relationships. But what has been happening today across some of the presentations is the articulation of a vision of what documentary could or should be, or how it could relate to an audience. That doesn't always happen. In fact, it often doesn't happen. But many of the practitioners who've presented today have made a claim about a belief in a certain kind of practice and its importance.

Fiona Amundsen:

I guess it's also staying with the opacity, which is also the not knowing. And that manifests differently in different art works. Ones that we may be able to relate to more easily because of our own experiences - what we whakapapa to - and ones that don't. They all require work. And the work is in the not knowing. And there's a discomfort in that, but to me that's also where the politic lies.

Nova Paul:

Or Barry Barclay would say, "You have no right to know."

Fiona Amundsen:

Yeah. Exactly.

Nova Paul:

That knowledge is given to you. So there's that relationship that's played out again, that flips that idea of having access, that knowledge isn't a right.

Eu Jin Chua:

Can I ask about mainstream documentary? That answer about what documentary can do, that you have to stay with trouble and maintain your opacity, is almost defined by the fact that our conversation in this whole symposium is based on the fact that it's about artists' films and how artists make documentary. Artists can be opaque. Mainstream documentary filmmakers, on the other hand, are less wary of claiming a non-opaque reality and might value clear polemic on the basis of that reality - "My film makes an argument for this clear reality". But that's a whole other path. Erika, it's a question I thought of while reading your essay, *The Reality Based Community*, because half way through that essay it sounded like you were going to make a defence for mainstream documentary polemics. But unexpectedly for me, you pivoted away into a defense of the observational. Well what about the polemical mode? Can artists be polemical? What would be an artists' film that's polemical? The usual answer is that it would be didactic, it's propaganda.

Erika:

I find myself searching for examples of artists' films that maybe are polemics. Enjoy Poverty probably would be one. As I mentioned before, we can say that artists' documentary work is completely plural as a field. There are so many different concerns. Yet one thing that tends to run across all these practices is a concern with form. There is a pervasive idea that the work is not just engaging in a politics of the signified. It's not just about presenting some content in a transparent container, but actually working on the signifier.

It means thinking about how form creates this encounter that we're talking about. It's a matter of not just what we know, but how we know it. One interesting thing, is that increasingly, so-called 'mainstream' documentary is doing that, too. Mainstream documentary has become much more performative, reflexive, and so on, in recent years. It doesn't always happen, but I find a lot of mainstream documentary really fascinating. I don't think it's something that should be the bad object in this discussion.

Eu Jin Chua:

Those boundaries are very leaky.

Erika:

Yes. Very leaky.

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

ERIKA BALSOM

"Above all, it is the referential principle of images which must be doubted."

If Jean Baudrillard saw cause to look upon cinema's claim to reality with suspicion in 1987, when giving his evocatively titled lecture *The Evil Demon of Images*, today he would have even more ample reason to face the screen with suspicion. News has become opinion, entertainment, or both. Lens-based capture is increasingly giving way to pictures that are made rather than taken; assembled in postproduction, they have no referential grounding. "Deepfakes" use artificial intelligence to generate realistic-looking videos depicting events that never occurred, undermining whatever vestiges of trustworthiness remained in visible evidence. At a time of political and ecological emergency—when some say reality has collapsed, when some say truth has died—many practices of image-making have turned away from the world, towards the banal perfection of synthetic creation.

But many others have not. Artists' documentary practices adopt manifold strategies to engage with the complexity and fragility of worldly reality, making its traces visible in time and in public. For the five artists that comprise this programme, commissioned in 2018 by CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand with support from Creative New Zealand, the referential principle of the moving image is not something to be doubted wholesale, but an affordance that spurs poetic inquiries into history, identity, and relations to the land. The image's ability to capture physical reality is not trusted outright as a guarantee of knowledge or singular truth, but approached as a

starting point for processes of reflection, questioning, and attunement that make a claim on the real. These works leave behind postmodern scepticism, trading doubt and suspicion for an attitude of care, asserting a bond to actuality even if the meaning of what is seen and heard remains open to debate. The artists embrace diverse techniques—found footage, interviews, observation, testimony—but in all cases documentary emerges as an inquiry into not simply what we know, but how we know it, as experiments with form dynamically reflect on how to rehabilitate a relationship to reality at a time when it seems everywhere in peril.

Vea Mafile`o's *Toa`ipuapuagā Strength in Suffering* was filmed in the Samoan village of Siufaga in 2016, where a young woman named Toa—whose full name, Toa`ipuapuagā, means “strength in suffering”—had begun to display wounds and cuts on her body on Good Friday. On Easter Saturday, she lost consciousness and was pronounced dead, only to reawaken two hours later. Is she displaying the stigmata, manifesting the bodily violence inflicted upon Christ at his crucifixion? Or are these marks the product of earthly self-harm? Mafile`o does not seek to provide a definite answer to these questions; she is unconcerned with affirming or debunking Toa's claims, with legislating whether we are witnessing a miracle or a hoax. Instead, she finds in the story of Toa a means of inhabiting the uncertain space between the facticity of worldly appearances and the multiple meanings that may be brought to bear upon them—a central tension that pervades all documentary image-making.

Mafile`o opens with an overtly performative

gesture, filming Toa, clad in a white dress, as she wades into a waterfall, accompanied by Bellini's aria “Casta Diva.” A low-definition BBC news clip, manifesting the visible marks of its internet transmission, offers an account of the basic facts of the controversy and brings the embodied specificity captured by Mafile`o's camera in Samoa face-to-face with the fibre-optic networks of the internet, where the story circulated widely. These digital travel of these images invert the trajectory of much earlier voyages of the 1830s, when missionaries brought Christianity to Samoa as part of the colonial project, importing a faith now held by 98% of the population. Following this opening, Mafile`o pivots to a relatively straight documentary style, filming talking-head interviews with Toa and her family and bearing witness to displays of blood-stained clothing and limbs etched with painful scratches. Further material drawn from the internet appears throughout, joining here with elsewhere, yoking the intensity of religious passion to the frenzy of online spectacle. When, in the film's final shot, Toa stands in the river in her white dress once more, now in the orans posture of supplication, Mafile`o's embrace of artifice simultaneously points to the mediated construction of all non-fiction representation and offers a testimony to the complicated reality of her subject. It is a portrait marked by beauty, generosity, and nuance, one that could never appear with the sensationalist frame of mass media representation.

In *Mai i te kei o te waka ki te ihu o te waka*, Jeremy Leatinuu carries forward a concern with Polynesian circulation while articulating it in a very different way, turning his attention to

the journey of the waka Tainui and its people to Aotearoa. With a title meaning “from the bottom of the canoe to the front of the canoe,” this work raises questions of narration and translation by recounting two interconnected stories in a voice-over performed by the artist with quiet intensity. The first is in te reo Māori, subtitled in English, while the second is in English, subtitled in te reo Māori. Both tell of trajectories of migration and settlement that pre-date the arrival of Europeans in Aotearoa, of crossing sea and land in search of a different future, carrying the accumulated practices of the past to new horizons. On screen, placid black-and-white images of landscapes capture a place referred to in both stories, what is now Portage Road in the Auckland suburb of Ōtāhuhu. Although shot in the present, these images convey a sense of timelessness; they are devoid of people, empty of any markers of human inhabitation, with trees and grasses blowing in the wind as they have for thousands of years. When accompanied by the voiceover, what do we see in these landscapes? While there may be no visible inscriptions of the histories Leatinuu recounts, his images of vegetation become screens for the projection of passages long past, sites of living remembrance.

Yet *Mai i te kei o te waka ki te ihu o te waka* is not entirely devoid of traces of contemporaneity. Like Mafle’o, Leatinuu bookends his work with paired images that depart from those that occupy its bulk: to begin and end, he makes use of long shots of the shoreline, where the water meets electricity towers, power lines, and suburban houses. These indices of twenty-first-century life frame the narratives heard on the soundtrack, subtly casting

their telling as a recovery of histories that have been overshadowed by the colonial mythology of European settlement as supposed moment of origin and discovery. This gesture is compounded by the prominence of translation on the soundtrack, which orchestrates a confrontation between two cultures—two epistemologies, even— and situates the inevitability of miscommunication at the very heart of the speech act. Translation is deeply ambivalent: it makes cross-cultural understanding possible, but meaning is slippery and always shaped by power. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Italian adage *traduttore, traditore*—“translator, traitor”—has special resonance given the significant differences that exist between the English and Māori versions of the Treaty of Waitangi. Truths can be lost with time and retelling, left to lie dormant in wait of new narrators who will re-activate them in the present. Leatinuu joins in this task.

Mai i te kei o te waka ki te ihu o te waka looks out across Manukau Harbour, the body of water that is the focus of Janine Randerson’s *Interceptor*. From the time of the waka Tainui to the present, the harbour has been transformed into a public utility, threatened by development and blighted by pollution. *Interceptor* begins with a reading in voiceover of text drawn from an unsettled 1985 Waitangi submission, claiming rights to the harbour in an effort to repair the ongoing violence of historical land confiscation, as well as to mitigate ecological damage stemming from development projects in the area. Randerson sets a polyphony of voices over images of the harbour, alternating between a diptych format and watery expanses shown in a widescreen format. Much of the sound

is comprised of recordings of meetings of the Manukau Harbour Restoration Society, an organisation formed in 2011 that is devoted to the protection of the harbour and the improvement of its environmental conditions. They discuss increasing salinization, the changing habits of animals, sewage treatment, and fishing practices, with all attention directed towards the contemporary degradation of a precious resource, one that is sacred to local Māori people. As environmental activist Carmen Kirkwood puts it in the treaty submission,

"The Manukau not only belongs to us but we to it.
We are a people begotten from within the depths
of its waters."

The Manukau Harbour is in danger, but in many of Randerson's images, lush and liquid as they are, no indicator of this can be seen. Certainly, there is the occasional appearance of a pipeline or an electricity tower, but these are dwarfed by the natural beauty that pervades most of the film's images. The schism between voice and picture that emerges in *Interceptor* speaks to one of the great problems of ecological crisis: it may not manifest itself visibly until it is too late. Timothy Morton has deemed global warming to be a "hyperobject," something that is so temporally and spatially vast that it resists apprehension. The contamination of Manukau Harbour may be easier to conceptualize and quantify than a warming planet, but spreading awareness and mobilizing resources in the service of change meet the same difficulties in both cases: the most deleterious effects do not yield to vision alone, and power is concentrated in the hands of those who think of value only in economic terms.

By documenting the activities of those who seek to protect and rehabilitate the harbour, juxtaposing the urgent advocacy of the soundtrack with images in which injustice and emergency remain largely invisible, Randerson calls upon the power of visible evidence while also underlining its limits. Images can testify, but their testimony may mean very little unless there are frameworks of presentation and understanding through which they become legible.

Bridget Reweti's *Ziarah* takes to the open sea once more, in search of the remains of Tupaia, a nobleman from Raiatea in the Society Islands who was indispensable in liaising between Māori and the crew of James Cook's ship the Endeavour on its first visit to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1769. Guided by Safir Islami, Reweti travels to Damar Besar, an uninhabited island in Indonesia where Tupaia and his nephew Taiata are believed to be buried. *Ziarah* relays the story of Reweti and Islami's pilgrimage through the latter's voiceover, set against calm images of the ocean's surface and the great forests of Damar Besar, with the graves themselves never pictured. Rather than simply relay information about Tupaia, Islami telescopes then and now, bringing together Tupaia's story with remarks about contemporary ecological problems, including trawling, overfishing, and the devastation of coral reefs. Echoing the schism between voice and image that marks Randerson's *Interceptor*, he articulates how deceptive appearances can be when environmental damage is concerned:

"The water looks clear but most of the coral has
been destroyed."

The work's title gives a hint of the significance of this story to the artist: it is an Arabic term used in Indonesia to refer to a pilgrimage to a holy place or grave, designating a journey of spiritual and/or ancestral significance. The search for Tupaia is a search to re-tell the history of cross-cultural encounter in Aotearoa New Zealand from a non-European point of view, to recover an ambivalent mediating figure from within a history often conceived as binary. Cook's description of Tupaia, found in his journal of 1770, suggests something of the navigator's interstitial status:

"He was Shrewd Sensible, Ingenious man, but proud and obstinate which often made his situation on board both disagreeable to himself and those about him, and tended much to promote the deceases [sic] which put a period to his life."

On the one hand, Tupaia is emblematic of the navigational knowledge and rich oceanic exchanges that predate colonial boundaries in the Pacific; on the other, he used his diplomatic and seafaring powers in the interests of European explorers who suffered no casualties under his guidance. In this regard, the life of Tupaia offers instructive propositions for the writing of history: he is a figure of circulation that forges connections between narratives that might be conceived of as separate, one who reminds us that the past is populated not by pure heroes and pure villains, but by conflicted individuals acting variously out of necessity, contingency, affinity, and principle.

The programme concludes with Andrew de Freitas's *Weight*, a portrait of trans musician Lees Brenson, who performs under the name Dregq-

ueen. *Weight* largely takes the form of an interview in which de Freitas asks Brenson about her life and work. Handheld shots frame her face in close-up, with jump cuts occasionally interrupting the flow of recorded time. This is, however, no exercise in *cinéma vérité*, but a complex negotiation of the boundaries of truth and fiction, particularly as they pertain to competing image economies and the actualization of the self. De Freitas begins by prompting Brenson to reflect on footage viewed on a laptop of a young man on a Kiev street corner, dressed in a mattress costume and waving a flag, tasked with advertising to the passing vehicles. De Freitas and Brenson speak of the images as if they represent her past, but something is awry: the cars seen in the Ukrainian footage appear to be of relatively recent vintage, and Brenson's accent is decidedly Canadian. And yet through the uncertain artifice of this encounter, something genuine of Brenson's reality begins to emerge, as she speaks of her feelings about work, comfort, weight, and music.

De Freitas blends heterogeneous image textures, weaving the crispness of the interview images with murkier performance footage, documentation of the Kiev street corner, and pixelated Russian-language advertisements for mattresses and bedroom furniture in which women levitate and all families are happy, well rested, and heterosexual. De Freitas's recontextualization of these ads shows up the sinister falseness of their spell, particularly when they are accompanied by the industrial sounds of Dregqueen and her entreaty,

"I want to feel your weight."

What appears first as an individual portrait gradually metamorphoses into something much larger: an effort to puncture the monopolization of reality by the forces of normativity. Against essentialist conceptions of gender, and against capitalist attempts to narcotize the masses through the drug of consumption, *Weight* recovers the power of antagonism and contestation, claiming the right to craft the contours of one's own existence. Though it is situated far from the Pacific waterways that flow through the other four works of the programme, *Weight* joins them in mobilizing the testimonial power of image and sound to challenge hegemonic narratives and the visual rhetorics through which they are often communicated.

Across *Truth or Consequences*, the moving image—so often in the service of media spectacle, so often linked to the fading of reality and the domination of life—becomes a means of shaping an encounter with our shared world, one that occurs far from the logics of privatization and distraction that increasingly surround us.

Dr. Erika Balsom is a scholar and critic based in London, working on cinema, art, and their intersection. She is a senior lecturer in Film Studies at King's College London and holds a PhD in Modern Culture and Media from Brown University.

LIST OF WORKS

Vea Mafle'o

Toa`ipuapuagā Strength in Suffering (2018)

10 minutes, 4 seconds

Digital video, sound

Jeremy Leatinu'u

Mai i te kei o te waka ki te ihu o te waka (2018)

7 minutes, 53 seconds

Digital video, sound

Janine Randerson

Interceptor (2018)

11 minutes, 36 seconds

16mm film transferred to digital video, sound

Bridget Reweti

Ziarah (2018)

10 minutes, 21 seconds

Digital video, sound

Andrew de Freitas

Weight (2018)

12 minutes, 46 seconds

Digital video, sound

Truth or Consequences

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