

# SOVEREIGN PACIFIC / PACIFIC SOVEREIGNS

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS FROM  
AURA FESTIVAL OF ARTIST MOVING IMAGES

TE WHANGANUI-A-TARA WELLINGTON

23–24 OCTOBER 2020

DAVID TEH  
DR. CARL TH MIKA  
SORAWIT SONGSATAYA  
LANA LOPESI  
DR. GREG DVORAK  
DR. DAVID CHESWORTH  
ANA ITI  
ANDREW CLIFFORD  
ISRAEL RANDELL  
RANGITUHIA HOLLIS  
ALEX MONTEITH  
AURA STUDENT CRITICAL FORUM



[circuit.org.nz](http://circuit.org.nz)

**AURA FESTIVAL OF ARTIST MOVING IMAGES  
SOVEREIGN PACIFIC / PACIFIC SOVEREIGNS**

**ARTIST CINEMA COMMISSIONS + SYMPOSIUM  
23 – 24 OCTOBER 2020**

**PRESENTED BY  
CIRCUIT ARTIST FILM AND VIDEO AOTEAROA**

**IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
PĀTAKA ART + MUSEUM**

**WITH SUPPORT FROM  
CREATIVE NEW ZEALAND**



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# Introduction

How is sovereignty inscribed in art – on page, on screen, in space, on bodies, and in the natural world? Is it altered by contemporary media? Which histories does it invoke, and which does it counter? How is artistic sovereignty being recalibrated by our mounting global crises?

In 2020 CIRCUIT presented the second edition of AURA Festival of Artist Moving Images, an umbrella for the annual CIRCUIT Symposium and associated screenings, exhibitions and events.

This year's AURA staged a focussed conversation between a screening of five new Artist Cinema Commissions and the Symposium, presented in succession on 23/24 October at Pātaka Art + Museum in Porirua. Both projects were presented under the title *Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns*. CIRCUIT's 2020 international curator-at-large, David Teh (Singapore) established a set of provocations;

What is sovereignty? Is it innate and universal, or something to be contested and won, in a given place and time? The word suggests an autonomy that is at once individual and collective, yet sovereignty may be more than political, and more than strictly human. Indeed, as our modernity culminates in mounting global crises, we are compelled to recalibrate all our rights and freedoms in favour of others, of animate and inanimate things, of the planet itself.

Art may be sovereign too; in moving images, sovereignty may be implicit (e.g., in the psycho-politics of montage, the gaze, etc) or asserted explicitly, as in ethno-fiction, or theories of third (or

fourth) cinema; while in today's digital media, both the grammar of images and the visuality of text are more material than ever. What does the new immediacy of self-expression mean for sovereignty?

The ensuing works, presentations and conversations confirmed that these provocations suggested multiple points of entry. At the same time, as Teh himself noted, what emerged was

“...a tremendous reluctance to talk about sovereignty, or at least to put it in those terms...”

Thus, this CIRCUIT reader not only presents responses to David Teh's provocations, but also several attempts to reimagine the terms of the conversation.

While all speakers from the Symposium were invited to be part of this publication, some preferred that their contributions remain part of the live Symposium event. Nevertheless, the resonance of these presentations is acknowledged in a conversation from the AURA Student Critical Forum, a group of undergraduate artists who discuss which presentations resonated most strongly from their perspective as emerging practitioners.

On behalf of CIRCUIT's staff and board I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone who participated in AURA 2020. From the artists, whose work was completed amidst the complexities of the pandemic; to the speakers and audience who came together in a spirit of collegial and community exchange; to Pātaka Art + Museum who so generously supported the project by hosting the event. Particular thanks goes to

Ioana Gordon-Smith, who offered valuable feedback on the developing project, and Pātaka Director Reuben Friend whose karakia welcomed visitors. Our appreciation also to Creative New Zealand, who provided the necessary support to develop and present AURA, and whose support of CIRCUIT and the artists remains ongoing.

Lastly my thanks to my collaborator on this project David Teh, whose engagement and curiosity with Aotearoa's makers was never less than generous, expansive and committed, even at a Covid-enforced distance. As with all of our previous curators, we hope that *Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns* is just the beginning of an ongoing collaboration.

Ngā mihi Maioha,

Mark Williams

# Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns

DAVID TEH & MARK WILLIAMS

*Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns* is the sixth edition of CIRCUIT's annual Artist Cinema Commissions. Over several months of research and dialogue with CIRCUIT's director and network, the curator selected five artists, each of whom were asked to respond to the curatorial brief with a work of 10–15 minutes for cinema presentation. While each artist was invited to make a short work for a captive audience, most showings of the programme (in Aotearoa and overseas) will take place in ad hoc settings, extensions or annexes to art spaces, rather than theatrical ones. All five artists are used to addressing their audiences adrift in the social ebb and flow of the gallery, or online. What might the more linear, 'cinematic' setting afford an artist today? And how might the cinema be re-configured by the contemporary moving images of Aotearoa and the Pacific?

The 2020 CIRCUIT Artist Cinema commissions set out some artistic positions from which we might explore the relationship between sovereignty and the moving image, in a regional (Pacific) setting. How is sovereignty communicated through moving images, and what might it mean for moving images to be sovereign? One senses a certain self-possession, an authorial sovereignty that is recognizably modern and liberal. But although these are individually authored works, they nevertheless touch on the *limits* of the autonomous person. Each broaches some history of displacement (formal, geo-spatial, material, semantic), estrangements that the individual, in order to live better, will need to *live with*.



Sione Monu, *Only Yesterday* (2020). 8 minutes 9 seconds, Digital Video, Sound. Commissioned by CIRCUIT with the support of Creative New Zealand.

We did not hold the artists to a unifying theme, nor aim for any focused statement. Instead, in our research and selections, we tried to watch and listen for mutations and modulations of sovereignty – not just that of animate beings but also that of *things*, including art works – and to remain sensitive to the *formal* registers of sovereignty. It was hoped that we might thereby pervert the course of a certain North-Atlantic historiography of modernism (called ‘concrete’), by way of a ‘Pacific’ one; to bend it, pour it into a new shape. And with a little searching, we did uncover a preoccupation with text and language, even with literary modernism, in contemporary video-

making in Aotearoa/NZ. We would not have anticipated that this search would yield such photogenic and *colourful* results!

Landing somewhere between a diaristic modernism and an oceanic orality is Rangituhia Hollis’s rumination on the personal and political dynamics of urban working life. His life-writing has long served as a kind of video-engine, drawing together found or incidental ‘real’ footage with virtual vignettes and simulations. Recent iterations seem to leave behind what Bernard Stiegler called the ‘analogico-digital’ image, but for the persistence of voice – the voice of a personal sovereignty that depends as much on *abstraction*, these days,

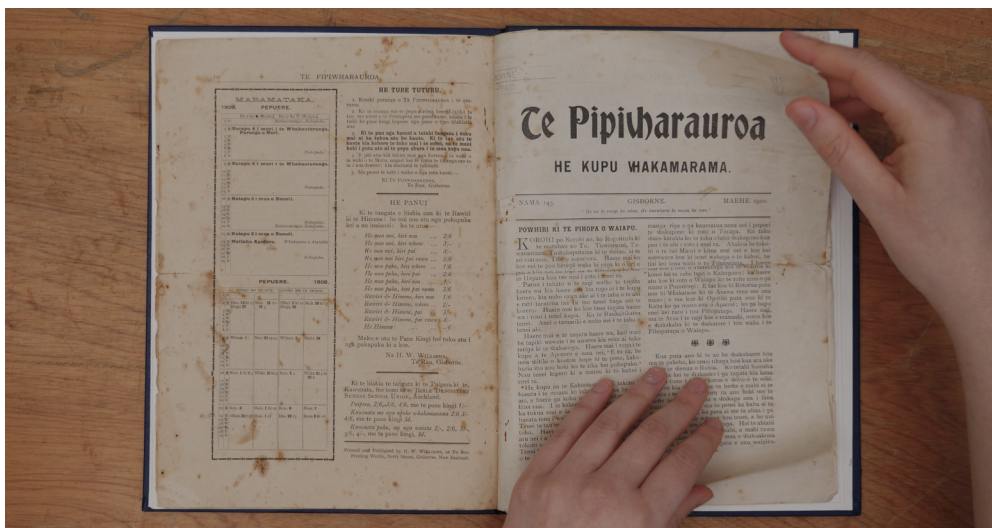
including machine-writing and machine-reading, as on what is too blithely called ‘representation.’

Sione Monu is also invested in a kind of life-writing, but one drafted and iterated publicly, on social media platforms. In his first foray into the cinema, he pushes the picaresque rhythm of personal photo-blogging towards a more sustained narrative. There is nothing ‘found’ about these shots, although the pace is diaristic and unhurried. But while he suppresses hypermediation and text, captions lurk in gestures, hashtags are secreted in everyday banter. The horizons of sovereignty are opened up by way of a low-fi, speculative fiction, and subtle queerings of class, racial norms, and the artist’s diasporic heritage.

Only Ana Iti’s work fits the ‘concrete’ aesthetic, though she cleverly subverts our regionalist premise and whatever universalist pretensions it carries, by insisting on the visibility of writing

but denying a coherent reading (at least for viewers not fluent in te reo Māori). Parsing editions of a hundred-year-old local paper, from before and after its adoption of a bespoke Māori typeface, the Māori-language *learner* is suspended between the desire to uncover a linguistic heritage, and changing protocols for its protection. The text is a mirror, reflecting her paradoxical isolation. But opaque though it may be to some, what it brings into focus is the consolidating formality of a graphic order – design, typography, the ratio of column and line – an act of kaitiaki, but less for the historical document than for the living language.

Gary-Ross Pastrana belongs to an academic tradition in the Philippines that is keenly attuned to the decolonizing potentials of language and modern media. Unlike the North American conceptualist, whose forms are dictated by ideas, the Philippine, tropical conceptualist is frequently led



Ana Iti, *Howling out at a safe distance* (2020). 11 minutes 42 seconds, Digital Video, Sound. Courtesy of the artist.





仅仅一只白蚁是无法危害到我们的……  
One individual termite will never harm us...

Gary-Ross Pastrana, *Rewilding* (2018). 8 minutes 40 seconds, Digital Video, Sound. Courtesy of the artist.

by materials, especially vernacular and ‘indigenous’ ones. The video *Rewilding* sprang from a sculptural conceit: to have termites ‘perform’ a real-time dematerialization of the art object (a Readymade) in a gallery. Over the pulsing, equatorial insect hum, an instrument-maker, a termite scientist and a musicologist discuss the biopolitical premises of their work. The latter refers to formalism and organicism in music. (He is likely a descendant of pioneering ethnomusicologist and composer José Maceda, who after classical training in Europe encountered the concretism of Edgar Varèse in New York, before dedicating his career to indigenous sounds of the Philippines.)

This tropical entropy gives way to the low-frequency churn of Alex Monteith’s video essay on the thermohaline circulation. This thousand-year cycle of water-borne energy and salt invisibly drives planetary systems and with them, our own,

insect-like fates – like the artist’s own passage to Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa from her native Ireland. This great engine of animal, vegetable and mineral histories remains obscure and inscrutable in its oceanic depth, despite our monitoring – by autonomous seaborne devices and mundane handheld ones – and despite even our apparent ability to accelerate it. *Deepwater Currents* reminds us that the urge to understand and measure cannot be separated from the more odious effects of the frontier.

Though filmmaking is historically founded on a canon of complete oeuvres, not for the first time we find artists making the case for a more iterative cinema. Both Rangituhia Hollis and Alex Monteith continue to revise their works for future editions of *Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns*, and opportunities elsewhere. Ana Iti’s video has given rise to further iterations for the page and the billboard. Gary-Ross Pastrana’s piece had previously

been shown in various multi-screen configurations; while Sione Monu's work marks a successful migration from social media to the film festival, even as the latter evolves to meet the challenges of a global pandemic, online. In these diverse works, questions of personal and communal self-determination push us beyond the reach, beyond the experience, of the normative individual subject of liberalism. Yet however tenuous that norm may have become, its biographical and authorial paradigms endure.

**David Teh** is a curator and Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, specialising in Southeast Asian contemporary art. He is CIRCUIT's curator-at-large for 2020/21.

**Mark Williams** is the Director of CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.

## LIST OF WORKS

Sione Monu

*Only Yesterday* (2020)

8 minutes 9 seconds

Digital video, sound

Rangituhia Hollis

*Across the face of the moon* (2020)

10 minutes 33 seconds

Digital video, sound

Ana Iti

*Howling out at a safe distance* (2020)

11 minutes 42 seconds

Digital video, sound

Gary-Ross Pastrana

*Rewilding* (2018)

8 minutes 40 seconds

Digital video, sound

Alex Monteith

*Deepwater Currents* (2020)

29 minutes 46 seconds

Digital video, sound

*Sovereign Pacific / Pacific Sovereigns*

Curated by David Teh

Commissioned by CIRCUIT Artist Film and

Video Aotearoa New Zealand

with the support of Creative New Zealand

# The Māori more-than-human: Rethinking sovereignty

DR. CARL TH MIKA

What happens to talk about sovereignty when it is made to include a Māori notion of the world? If I make a statement such as ‘the world is interconnected through whakapapa’, then we can reasonably expect there will be implications for self-organisation generally but, in particular, for the human realm. It might end up being the case that the human being does not have a great degree of control even over their own expression. If so, then we would have to moderate our certainty about entities – a certainty that appears to have been introduced through colonisation.

We often encounter holistic talk of the order of ‘the world is interconnected through whakapapa’, and in this presentation I shall consider some of the finer possibilities and consequences of that sort of utterance. We can think of the sovereignty of the more-than-human world as especially important in this sort of discussion: if the world is indeed interconnected through whakapapa, then the human self has never acted from their own agency. This makes immediate sense when we think about, for instance, the ocean, which dictates its own moves (and ours). However, there are also intangible entities – including the totality of all things – to consider, and these will be the main focus of this keynote. Recentering the All – arguably one of the senses of ‘whakapapa’ and other Māori terms – may both encapsulate a Māori notion of sovereignty *and* be a sovereign act in response to its human-centered version.

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most important statement to emerge

<sup>1</sup> Southey, K. (2020). *Re-presenting Māori and Indigenous metaphysics: Disrupting the notion of mental illness. Doctoral Thesis*, The University of Waikato, New Zealand and Marsden, M. (2003). *The Woven Universe: Selected writings of Rev. Māori Marsden*. Ōtaki, New Zealand: Estate of Rev. Māori Marsden

from mātauranga Māori literature is that things in the world are interconnected.<sup>1</sup> Written in various ways, this idea takes its toll on the Māori scholar, who is forced to engage with the written word as if there is a universal logic of separability. The idea that all things are interconnected, then, immediately challenges the dominant western premise that is the exact opposite: that all things are separate from each other.

This paper, developed from a keynote titled *The Māori more-than-human: Rethinking sovereignty*, considers the implications of the proposition that all things in the world are interconnected in the context of sovereignty. I rethink sovereignty as if it is the All (an admittedly difficult word but one that must suffice for the present; moreover, I use non-human, more-than-human and the All interchangeably) that governs human affairs. This process of thinking is one that dwells in and on the intangible, with the non-human taking priority. With the human self so deeply implicated with all other things, it then makes sense that even our means of discussing interconnection – language – is itself interconnected with everything else.

## **A MĀORI EXISTENTIALISM OF VULNERABILITY AND THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN**

Of all the ideas that have the potential to undermine certainty, perhaps it is the suggestion of interconnection that figures most prominently. To step over into discussions about whether things are interrelated, whether all things culminate in the All, or whether they are separate and separable,

requires speculative thought and the relinquishing of certainty. In our rush to improve current, dire Māori statistics in the human sphere, it is no wonder that very little literature exists on the abstract notion of interconnection in mātauranga Māori literature as a sole focus. It is often mentioned, but it takes up little space, with most writers turning to apparently more urgent matters.

Science and rationality have their own way of proposing something about the world, but they assume it is none other than the human self that is in command of thought and perception. Discussing the sovereignty of the All, then, assumes the opposite, where the human self is entirely dependent on all things, and this positioning governs our wellbeing. Incidentally, our inquiries into wellbeing must themselves be governed in a way that is consonant with wellbeing: we cannot discuss wellbeing in a manner which separates things out from each other, because that would make us somewhat hypocritical and, fundamentally, unwell. Wellbeing relies on instilling mystery into our ways of talking about mystery, where interconnection takes such a priority that certain knowledge about anything is hidden from us.

This paper is about that very issue, delving as it does into the sovereignty of the non-human from a particular Māori perspective. Fully thinking about the sovereignty of the non-human/All demands that we submit our (apparent) agency, including thought and perception, to things outside our control, and so this paper is not about the agency of the human and our political systems. In fact, the more-than-human implicates with the

human self, meaning that the human is simply another entity among many. This paper leaps into the mystery of the non-human's sovereignty and considers how transformation can take place in our relationship with other things in the world outside of the rational.

Of course, any theme that Māori engage with is steeped in colonisation, and the more-than-human/All is no exception. Colonisation is quite possibly as material as, say, a rock or mountain, and it has become intertwined with traditional views. Philosophical colonisation – the colonisation of our initial, gut perceptions as well as our thinking – is not easily identifiable but we can be sure that it is there. Despite its treachery, though, philosophical colonisation reveals its own vulnerability and gives us the opportunity to transform.

For a start, this sort of colonisation gives us the fuel to speak about (for instance), this current topic. We can only speak about the more-than-human as a problem for our current times because of the contamination of our thought. Additionally, there is always the possibility that speaking of the more-than-human in some way adds to philosophical colonisation, because it seems to starkly delineate between entities (the human on the one hand and the more-than-human on the other), and it also creates a theory that, I suspect, didn't exist traditionally. If we did have a term for the more-than-human, it would not have been in response to a view where the human was superior; thus, labels such as the more-than-human, non-human and 'the All' insert a binary that is nevertheless a necessary response to colonisation.

Any talk of the All therefore has uncertainty as its main feature and, with that, a thrilling sense that one cannot know or have a knowing attitude. The vulnerability of the human self is the mainstay of the All, and surely, anyone who writes on the theme is acutely aware of their own limits in articulating its nature. For me, this shows itself especially in how I will frequently, and suddenly, attack a term or statement I have just used or made. I erase not just the term or phrase but also, in a sense, my scholarly self. If I were a purist with all this, incidentally, I would confront every term (and this would make for an interesting auto ethnography).

I am personally quite grateful to this general uncertainty because we become uncertain again, anyway, when we misapprehend knowledge as being final. This brings me to another theme of this paper: that the All produces a sort of Angst for the Māori self that is both – in a sense – amusing and about vulnerability.

Any venture into the more-than-human can also be about finding oneself at the giddy frontier of the unknown. By the way, I'm not an artist myself – I always feel absolutely on the back foot among artists – but I do wonder whether art elevates the unknown as a primary focus. Alongside producing a piece of work, does it also enrol us in Uncertainty Studies?

This paper, based on my talk, therefore privileges a dive into uncertainty and a view that this introspective activity is not really concerned with navel gazing but more about how the All provides us with a particular kind of thinking.

## WHAKAARO

I will summarise this section in advance: the more-than-human establishes the materiality of what we now call thinking. However, 'thinking' is inadequate, because of its deep implication with the intellect. Whakaaro acknowledges that one's so-called thinking is constituted by the All.

It would not be a foreign idea, for Māori, that even something as apparently self-evident as 'thought' is governed by whakapapa. If we take this idea as plausible (and, admittedly, some may not, preferring instead a more self-originating, individualised proposition about thought), then it is no big leap to accepting that how we interact with anything, must be done with respect. This respect, though, is of a particular kind, where it corresponds with a more diminished intellectual self. As we think, so we are thought, in a sense – similar to how we don't have whakapapa, but whakapapa designates us as entities among many. In fact, the All probably does not bother with thought but more with a self-organising regard which involves the human self. The totality of all worlds regards us, in that we are included in its existence.<sup>2</sup>

I want to raise at this point a theoretical possibility that comes from a Māori term, whilst indicating that there are several Māori terms that can cover what I've just talked about. Moreover, this term emphasises that the first gut response to anything needs to have greater priority, whilst representing a worlded encounter with an entity through perception and emotional thought. This phenomenon can be talked about from var-

<sup>2</sup> Mika, C. (2017). *Indigenous education and the metaphysics of presence: A worlded philosophy*. Oxon, England: Routledge



ious vantage points within our language, but one word that does come to mind here is ‘whakaaro’. Whakaaro is an incredibly complex word that has most likely been overlooked in favour of its much more knowing cousin, ‘mātauranga’. Whakaaro can mean several things but its translation in the dictionary, ‘to think’, is thoroughly inadequate in dealing with it (although ‘to think’ has layers to it, etymologically, that would make it resonate more with ‘whakaaro’). While ‘to think’ often carries with it a strict intellectual component, ‘whakaaro’ means both that and the fact that the All creates the possibility for the human being to think. Whakaaro does not begin with the brain; it can mean the bringing about of something so that it swings around in front of the self. It indicates the bringing to the front of something so that thing comes into a field of awareness. It therefore has to it a sense, as Takirangi Smith argues, of ‘to cast attention to’<sup>3</sup>, as an outcome of the work of the stomach and entrails. The stomach, according to Smith, “is associated with the ira tangata aspect or earthly component of that which forms the basis of action”<sup>4</sup>. However, it is not “the actual process of rational thought”.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, T. (2000). *Nga tini ahuatanga o whakapapa korero*. Educational Philosophy and Theory, 32(1), pp. 53-60

<sup>4</sup> Smith, T. (2000). p. 58

<sup>5</sup> Mika, C and Southey, K (2018) *Exploring whakaaro: A way of responsive thinking in Maori research*. Educational Philosophy and Theory 50 (8) pp. 795-803

While we can glean from this that there is a human component to whakaaro, it is the possibility that whakaaro pre-exists humanity<sup>5</sup> that intrigues me. There are certain whakapapa or genealogies that mention whakaaro as something that is from ancient times but doesn’t appear to be related immediately to the human. If this is the case, then we can perhaps speculate – as I have elsewhere – that whakaaro works in two ways: it refers to the bringing of any one thing to the

regard of the All; and it also refers to the human uptake of all things, through the appearance of one thing or a set of things within the human field of awareness. But that human uptake is due to the All. To summarise all this in a rather blunt way: whakaaro is not just about human thought but the integration of the All within the regard of any one thing in the world.

Words such as whakapapa therefore raise a problem for us, involving its more-than-human, almost immersive nature, versus one where we simply think of it as genealogy. Of course, whakapapa can mean 'genealogy', and we can recite names and the events they associate with, but we are also implicated in something beyond our knowledge that links to a less structuralist notion of whakapapa. In traditional times, as Marsden notes, all things in the world were interconnected, but in our colonised world, we now need to talk in ways we didn't necessarily in those traditional times.<sup>6</sup> In discussing something, in the colonised voice there appears to be a distance between the speaker or simply the thinker on the one hand, and the thing being talked about on the other. If I mention my maunga, in other words (as we often do in whakapapa korero, or talk about whakapapa), I am placing it over there. It seems to be easier to do this in the Indo-European languages I am somewhat familiar with than it is in Māori (although there is nothing to stop the Māori language from doing the same thing, over time): 'That is my maunga, there, and this is its name'. We might not think about it, but we are placing that distance between myself and the maunga.

<sup>6</sup> Marsden, M. (2003)

I'm not sure, based on what Marsden identifies about things being interconnected, that whakaaro traditionally would have put a conceptual gulf between myself and my maunga (for example). In our colonised setting, then, space needs to be understood differently. One way of discussing this is, indeed, through the affordance of 'whakapapa', as long as it isn't confined to 'genealogy'. If whakapapa is being reduced to 'genealogy', then any discussion is about the idea of interconnection, but it is not about the phenomenon of being interconnected – of the immediate interconnection of someone who is thinking about this entire issue with the All. In other words, whakapapa-as-genealogy places the thinker about these matters at a distance from the issue of interconnection – or at least it threatens to.

But when whakapapa is thought of as a kind of activity or verb (I don't like 'verb', by the way, because although linguistics would say that there are verbs and nouns in the Māori language; if all things in the world resonate, then they all have their own verbal activity), then the speaker about the issue of interconnection themselves become interconnected. Whakapapa has the capacity to unriff any so-called academic speaking about the All; as a thinker on the issue, when I think of whakapapa as a sort of universal designator of existence, I have to fold myself into the proposed fact of interconnection. The supposedly detached speaker on whakapapa is themselves a product of whakapapa. Immediately, the distance between myself and the discussion is lessened.

Linguistically, conceptually and material-

ly, whakapapa originates from Papatuānuku, the Earth Mother. It is a ground of sorts. In Māori philosophy, there is a sustained belief in an originary ground from which all things emerge. But another possibility crops up here. This ground is not like a supreme God that sits outside of the world, but instead it constitutes the world. And then, to complicate things even further, those things that emerge from that ground, constitute it. What happens, then, is my language I have just used, becomes effectively incapable of this description. I say this because words such as 'ground' 'constitute', 'emerge', imply a sort of 'first this then that' experience. In other words, linearity. Not only do they suggest causation; they also place a conceptual distance between things. In this reading, we emerge on top of the ground, from it – only part of it, perhaps, if we want to be. This ground, as I said, is a co-constitutive one; it both constitutes us and we (meaning all things in the world) constitute it, to such an extent that any talk of 'constitute' and associated language actually becomes obstructive to a true discussion of it. But how do I come to the conclusion that there is a collapse of time and space in this apparently first ground? It is a theoretical extension of the initial belief that the past is the present and the present is the future. It seems therefore that 'time' also becomes an inappropriate term if it is used to divvy up the world. Despite my reservation of the word time and all that goes with it, we can say that Papatuānuku reorients our current notions of time and space so that there is no time and space between things in the world.

Another very broad way of putting this re-orientation is to say that Papatuānuku resets our

thinking as well as our other dimensions – physical, spiritual and so on. As I noted, it is multifaceted ground. It is here that I return to my mention of whakapapa. Whakapapa becomes relevant to this part of my description because of its immediate association with Papatuanuku through its inclusion as the ‘papa’ part of whakapapa.<sup>7</sup> If we retain Papatuanuku as a reminder of space/time collapse, then whakapapa is more emphatically about the agency of the All or the more-than-human in the existence of any one thing. With whakapapa, all things are claimed by that ‘first’ ground. Literally, we ‘become ground’, with whaka meaning ‘becoming’ and papa meaning ‘ground’. Again, we are reminded that the first ground and the self are one.

All this is perhaps a more elaborate way of stating that all things are one – a fact well known about the word whakapapa – but I emphasise that there is a reminder here of the All amid a colonising regard for the world. Where whakapapa is often cordoned off as a holistic thing – a ‘genealogy’ – we’re talking here about whakapapa being a process, where the self and all other things are always-already claimed as one. Perhaps we could contort the English word ‘genealogy’ to ‘genealogise’, and this might be closer to what I’m getting at, where all things are called by the more-than-human/All to relate to each other on the premise that they are one. Note it would be the more-than-human that did this; it isn’t primarily about the human self-ordering humans and non-humans into understandable genealogical tables.

Whakapapa therefore doesn’t just happen in formal spaces of tikanga or kawa. Sometimes

<sup>7</sup> Mika, C. (2017)

I think that, by designating strict spaces where Māori things happen, we mistake that for fact. On the contrary, these things are not controllable, and they take place whether we want them to or not. Both whakaaro and whakapapa are non-human processes which give all things their vibrancy; they are not here or there. I must admit that I have made the mistake in the past of thinking that whakapapa was 'there', in 'the name', but I have since come to think of whakapapa completely differently. If we do want to think of whakapapa solely as genealogy, then there may be room to broaden that to the possibility that the names involved have a pervasive force that is inseparable from any one particular thing: the names in a whakapapa book, for instance, not only give rise to the human self, but they determine any resonance with different spaces and times. But that version, although better than simply calling whakapapa 'genealogy', does not deal sufficiently with either the language of space and time, nor does it contend with the probability that those apparently different spaces and times, are in fact one.

#### **THE 'WHO' OF WHAKAPAPA: WAI**

Whakapapa does also understand the identity of things as interconnected, and so we are asking after the 'who' when we think of whakapapa in this way. There is one further phenomenon in Māori that can serve as an example for much of what I've talked about so far. In Māori, the term 'wai' refers to both 'who' and 'water', but they don't often occupy the same realm in most descriptions. We usually mean either 'water' or 'who', not both at the same time. Yet, the essence that gives the

world its identity – its ‘who-ness’ – must be read in conjunction with the inundation that water points to in a Māori worldview, all things have animacy and are therefore entitled to their identity as living entities, and, in turn, the All gives rise to them and imbues them. In other writing, I have called this fact of being ‘worldedness’.<sup>8</sup>

As I have noted in my other writings, the problem is that, when we inquire into ‘who’, we automatically assume that it is assigned especially for reference to the human being – never a mountain, for instance. ‘Who’ has a specific use in English that involves questions meant solely for human affairs. Who attended the party, who came to the tangihanga and so on? It seeks to know the identities of those humans involved, and in fact I cannot think of an instance where ‘who’ would be used for anything apart from the human being. ‘Who’ becomes a critical issue for Māori, then, because it is highly anthropocentric in its daily use in the English language. Moreover, it deals in specificity, where there is one human being or set of human beings being asked after. The Māori worldview moderates that human self somewhat so that it must defer to the non-human realm, and it doesn’t seek to isolate anything being asked about, from its context.

In relation to ‘wai’, I have theorised about the dual nature of water and who in the following way:

If we encounter something, rather than asking after its specific ‘who-ness’ how do we account for its torrential overflow into the world, and, just as importantly, the world’s flooding of the inquirer? The fact that we only ever have a partial glimpse

<sup>8</sup> Mika, C. (2017)

into the world should provide some guidance here: we could say that the world reveals itself through any number of freshets that – as with a glowing rupture in the earth that does not divulge its inner secrets – will never allow us truly to say what anything is. The overarching lesson of wai is a tentativeness in saying what something is, where asking after the identity of something is fraught with the inquirer’s own worlded flux. More than that, though, it asks us to reconfigure our thinking and then our language so that our drive to fix the identity of things is loosened.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Mika, C. (2017). p. 31

In the Māori language, we ask who someone is in the following way: “ko *wai* koe”. It can of course mean ‘who are you?’ This seems too equiv-  
alent with dominant western views of the self. Much closer to the idea that the more-than-human constitutes the human self is ‘which waters do you come from?’ It is here that we get an insight into the deep connectedness of all things, where the more-than-human impinges on the human self, making him or her somehow insignificant in relation to the rest of all things.

#### **AN EXISTENTIALLY VULNERABLE**

#### **MĀTAURANGA/WHAKAARO MĀORI**

There are a couple of points here before I move on towards concluding this talk. What becomes clear when we consider all these things about whakaaro, whakapapa and wai, and the more-than-human philosophies around them, is that the significance of the human self is greatly moderated. Also, the ability to reflect on the power of the All is a colonised one: as symbols of coloni-

sation, alongside whakaaro sits ‘to think’, whaka-papa ‘genealogy’, and wai ‘either water or who’. But another issue arises, and that is the workability of the All in whatever expression we use. Arola advises (and here I default to a wonderful quote that I have often used before) that;

“The first hallmark of American Indian philosophy is the commitment to the belief that all things are related – and this belief is not simply an ontological claim, but rather an intellectual and ethical maxim”<sup>10</sup>

I take from him that it is not enough to simply recite the fact that the world is interconnected but to represent that fact as well. But at that stage, that colonised reality rears its head again, which leads me to conclude that it is impossible to fully describe the more-than-human (and that’s probably the way it should be).

The elusiveness of the non-human for myself as a Māori academic is hugely significant for me. I’ve decided to refer to this inability to get to the very heart of the more-than-human, through language or any other medium, as an example of a Māori existential reality, in which, as a colonised people, we are forced to split ourselves between two worlds: one, involving the philosophies we take to be important; and the other, a realm in which we are forced to adhere to another set of philosophies that do not match.

I suspect most Māori wouldn’t have too many problems with Arola’s sentiments: we should be mindful of how we even write about things, as an ethical call. Placing whatever is unknowable into

<sup>10</sup> Arola, A. (2011). *Native American Philosophy*. In W. Edelglass & J. Garfield (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* (pp. 562-573). New York, NY: Oxford University Press



the too-hard basket, and consigning it to the fan-  
ciful, is to deny its transformative potential, but  
also to neglect its inherent value. We see this in  
the education system, where Māori (along with  
others) are not allowed to engage with unknown-  
ness in its own right. By this, I don't mean that  
they're not allowed to engage with a limited aspect  
of mystery but, even that is soon stripped back so  
that they're soon simply focusing on the knowable  
aspects of a thing – and soon they will be call-  
ing on methods to explain that thing, seen most  
evidently in postgraduate studies. Overall, mystery  
in its fullest form needs more of a say, and so one  
form of counter-colonialism is to destabilise cer-  
tainty, from a Māori perspective. How exactly this  
would happen in the academy is itself uncertain:  
it may involve 'making do' with rational thought  
and linear argument but then, suddenly, under-  
mining it by deliberately matching the argument  
with something irrational. Then one could follow  
the associations opened up by that irrational dis-  
covery, and follow that through (also irrationally)  
so that a completely unrelated story emerges from  
the original, rational one. What emerges, really, is  
the writer's grappling with his or her own initial  
certainty. It could be done through self-mockery  
or self-doubt more broadly, and it wouldn't stop.

<sup>11</sup> Mika, C. (2020)

This last aspect of my work<sup>11</sup> is a work in  
progress and it's not something that is going to  
be resolved soon, if ever! I feel that, as a Māori  
academic, I am caught up in the constitution by  
and of the All even as I try to advocate for it. How-  
ever, this inability to really articulate the nature of  
the more-than-human through academic language  
is quite possibly an existential reality that involves

Māori as a whole, and it goes like this: attempting the impossible leads us to a state of vulnerability, which is (to coin the language of some of the existentialists) a mode of authenticity.

## CONCLUSION

I feel privileged to have been invited to talk to those working in the field of art (in its various forms). Art has the capacity to gesture towards, yet not fully grasp, the more-than-human. As with the world disclosed in our conversations about whakapapa, it has the potential simply to set the scene for some human understanding that is nevertheless indebted to the All.

This indebtedness is something that I would like to conclude with, by speculating and theorising about another term of ours: rangatiratanga, one meaning of which is 'sovereignty'. More often than not, it is assumed that it is the human self who engages in 'raranga' or 'weaving' of 'tira' or people. Yet, there is nothing to suggest that a type of rangatiratanga has taken place well in advance of the human-derived organisation we've imputed to the word. It seems likely that the more-than-human has organised or woven the human self, along with any impression s/he has that s/he has organized any state of affairs, back into the All. If this is the case, then our first and enduring challenge is to understand human sovereignty as occupying a state of uncertainty or, more thrillingly, mystery, which undoes our claims to knowledge about anything. It is in making this explicit in our dealings with things that true sovereignty takes place.

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# Sovereign Media, Sovereign Scenographies<sup>1</sup>

DAVID TEH

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this paper were developed in the context of the 2019 Asian Film and Video Art Forum, organized by Eunhee Kim at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul

For readers in Aotearoa New Zealand, this paper covers some exotic ground, both geographically and culturally speaking. It concerns a kind of sovereignty, and sovereign practices, that we would like to think have no place in a modern, liberal multicultural democracy, even in one that strives to accommodate and respect multiple sovereignties. I will not try to collapse or resolve that distance, yet I will be suggesting that other kinds of sovereignty may be less incompatible with your political and cultural modernity than you think, and might thus inform deliberations about sovereignty even in a liberal, multicultural setting.

Before I present some evidence for that, I will start in a quite abstract register, by considering how sovereignty might be defined – in relation to which kinds of subject – and how it might be changing; and whether there is a ‘sovereign’ dimension of art that exceeds the frames (political, juridical, ontological) within which sovereignty is customarily discussed. I will then address some moving images from the Southeast Asian context in which I have lived and worked for the last fifteen years, images that reveal a sovereignty very different from the Western-liberal one. I will consider how sovereignty is inscribed in or by such images, how it is communicated, formally, technically and contextually. I will propose that we study not just images but the scenography of power, especially as those forms, techniques and contexts are changing.

## MANY SOVEREIGNTIES

There can be no doubt that our object,

sovereignty, is a multi-faceted and multiple phenomenon. With this term I want to invoke, without conflating, an individual sovereignty and those experienced collectively – for instance, the sovereignty of a nation, or a people, as defined precisely by a constitution or less precisely by a movement or a discourse of struggle. We are dealing with a spectrum, ranging from the absolute to the popular, from the personal to the mass. At the same time, I mean to address another spectrum, that of a sovereignty just as immemorial but perhaps only ever incipient or projected, one that can accommodate the sovereignty of *things*, as for example in an ‘object-oriented ontology’ or the new materialism of the Anthropocene; and, perhaps more insistent these days, the sovereignty of machines (as in Artificial Intelligence, for example), as well as that of animals. Contemporary art, film and debate in Aotearoa New Zealand would inspire an allowance for the sovereignty of plants, rivers and places, entities deemed inanimate by colonial law but understood to have spirit or ‘personhood’ by other authorities. One might facetiously, but nonetheless logically and urgently, add the corporation here. And last but certainly not least, we are concerned with the sovereignty of works of art (or film) themselves, which is sometimes but not always tied up with the sovereignty of an Author, a figure to which I will return in a moment, and who we will be distinguishing from the Producer.

I will try in the following pages to keep many of these registers alive, but having summarised them here, I want to make the preliminary observation that a certain ethical norm ties them together: in modern societies with some

parliamentary set-up, some kind of rule of law, one of these (or the dyad linking individual and collective) becomes a model for all the others, becomes normative; they are shaped in its image, figuratively, if not legally, dependent on it. In this respect, ‘sovereignty’ is nearly synonymous with ‘autonomy’ – the independence of a person or a people, their self-determining capacity. I am self-conscious underlining *this* kind of sovereignty, as an unhinged individualism runs amok in some parts of the world. Yet there may be something worth knowing, worth saving, in this sovereign individual, even if the sovereignty we need most right now is collective. Because the two may be, as liberals would have it, interdependent; or because in many places, sovereignty does not lie with the people at all; or because a more inclusive sovereignty we are asked now to entertain, in the name of the non-human, the environment, the planet, very likely partakes somehow of *both* the individual and the group kinds, in ways that are opaque, to me at least. So let us hold onto what is singular, and sovereign, in case it is indeed indispensable for our common purposes.

Those of us concerned with the politics of art talk about sovereignty quite a lot these days, even if we do not often utter the word. Contemporary art, whatever its investments in the collective, is apparently one of the realms where singularity has its place. In some traditions, the art *object* has sovereignty – in sacred art, say, or in formalism, or the doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake.’ In modern art, the author enjoys a sovereign status. We could even venture a definition of modernism around this ontological hinge, between the being of the work and

the being of its maker. (Film inherits these possibilities, though it is tilted towards the popular not just by its reproducibility, as emphasized in a whole library of cultural theory, but because its most visible production is such a massive and collective enterprise.) Nevertheless, in a sovereign art-making, the two sovereignties do not necessarily coincide or dissolve into one; and if for antipodean purposes that modernism might be contained to a single century, the experience of *cultural modernity* belongs to a much older and wider history.

In his inimitable study of artistic desire, *My Name is Red*, Orhan Pamuk discovers this modern, authorial tension in a distant empire in the sixteenth century. The true virtuoso, he muses, might “paint an incomparable masterpiece without leaving even a trace of his identity.”<sup>2</sup> For Maurice Blanchot, too, the work of art does not refer “immediately” to the one who made it; and when we know nothing about its creation, not even “the name of the person who made it possible – it is then that the work comes closest to itself.”<sup>3</sup> Perfection, mastery, immortality – none of these things are what qualifies greatness in art, but rather, a breath of *infinity*: that the work of the work is never completed.

Only the artisan’s mastery culminates in the object he fashions. For the artist the work is always infinite, unfinished. And thus the fact that the work is, the singular event of its being absolutely, is disclosed as not belonging to the mastery we associate with achievement. *It belongs to another order.*<sup>4</sup>

I like this rather romantic formulation be-

2 Orhan Pamuk, *My Name is Red*, trans. Erdağ M. Göknar (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 22

3 Maurice Blanchot, ‘Characteristics of the Work of Art,’ in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 221

4 *Ibid.*, emphasis mine

cause it poses questions of authorship that arise whenever mediation and reproduction techniques change, and because Blanchot points here to something art carries independently of any author, and calls that something *sovereignty*, a “being absolutely.” It is important to distinguish this from the general authoring he calls ‘artisanal,’ and from ‘autonomy’ – a work’s determination, on its own terms, Greenberg might have said, of a critical judgment. The sovereignty that interests me has nothing to do with this kind of autonomy or this kind of judgment.

Sovereignty in its idiomatic sense has two sides: it describes the autonomy of the individual and that of a group (say, a state, or a people). The two are mutually constitutive and their interde-

pendence is fundamental to liberalism. But while they are imagined to be universal, in practice, few people experience them in anything but qualified ways. I want to set aside this kind of sovereignty too, to think beyond the political freedom of the modern, autonomous, rational Western subject. For this paradigm excludes the sovereignty of peoples *without* secular liberal government: not just theocracies but many monarchies, not to mention all the authoritarian states. If we limit ourselves to contemporary Asia, that would mean most or all of Southeast Asia, China, Russia and much of Central Asia, and probably a good many malfunctioning democracies besides (Modi’s India, Erdogan’s Turkey, Bangladesh, the Philippines...)



Ugatalahi (Philippine effigy-making collective), *Duterte-Marcos-Hitler-dog Cube*, Manila, September 2017



Puppetry protest with Park Geun-hye and Choi Soon-sil masks, Seoul, October 2016

What are the *non*-liberal faces of sovereignty? Of religious, cultic or kingly sovereignty? Of the autocrat, or the dictator? These are not confined to the past, even where modern, neoliberal regimes are entrenched, and perhaps especially where they are coming undone. The offices of the sovereign preserve a much older discourse and mediumship than their modern, democratic premises may suggest.

In sacred art traditions, we think the ‘author function’ was slow to develop, or stunted. Works were consigned not to their maker but to their maker’s Maker. Hence, the ease with which works and deeds have been attributed or *consigned* to patrons in so-called ‘civilizational’ discourse: the Khan who made the Taj Mahal; the Sultan who built the splendid gardens; the Lord whose irrigation works brought prosperity to the land. This attributed authorship lasted well into the industrial era, even where secular and clerical power were separated.<sup>5</sup> And while these ‘works’ may stand for epic sacrifices of life and labour, and therefore offend our modernity, it is just this sort of authorship that we can call *sovereign*. Why? Because it is a kind of *giving*, to or by someone who is not him or herself concerned with the work’s practical realisation. It is because this work is *given* – a *consignation*, as Jacques Derrida put it – because it is attributed to the ruler and *not* made by him or her, that it is *sovereign*.<sup>6</sup> (If the queen rolls up her sleeves and lends a hand, it’s no less of an achievement, but it’s a different sort of work.) In Asian modern art, this kind of honorific attribution survived the emergence of individual, modern authorship. Indeed, as we shall see, the two were to prove quite compatible. So

5 John Clark, ‘The Southeast Asian Modern: three artists,’ in Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (eds), *Southeast Asian Modern and Contemporary Art: an anthology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell SEAPP, 2012), pp. 15–32

6 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)



Asian art's story of reification and instrumentality must also be a story of the gift, of dedication, of sovereign consignment.

This philosophical précis leaves us with two provisos. First, although individual sovereignty may be a sensible, lived reality in some places, a lived aspiration in others, let us not naturalise the Western, liberal-democratic rendition, even if we see the good sense of it. It is historically an anomaly on this planet. The individual in that formula is native to specific modern and privileged, phallogocentric European societies. Be that as it may, sovereignty is at the same time subject to popular appropriation. It is made to describe more and more the autonomy of individuals, though this must be distinguished from the fact (actual or putative) of "popular sovereignty" which by definition cannot be enjoyed individually; and from today's "sovereign citizen" movement, a loony libertarianism rearing its head lately in various places. In law, 'sovereign individual' is almost an oxymoron, unless of course one happens to be a Sovereign – to be sovereign – in the older sense of the term that is anathema to that popularization: an absolute supremacy or superiority. In nineteenth century Ireland, 'sovereign' was used for the mayor of a town, we learn in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. But in the 44 lines given there to sovereignty, this mayor is as far down the political pecking order as we get. Speaking literally, in English at least, the supremacist connotation has survived.

This is the second proviso: I want to point to this divergence between an everyday speech that has rid itself of that personal supremacism, and the

properly performative terms of a legal discourse that sustain it, albeit for collective purposes. Take, for example, the supreme power (*shuken*) in Japan's short, liberal-democratic constitution of 1947 – drafted by Macarthur's people in English, in under a week, yet which stands today as the world's oldest unchanged constitution. It is shot through with these tensions: it had to transfer a sovereignty already modern (because constitutional) but at the same time supreme and feudal (because absolute and personal) to 'the people,' yet shedding the quintessential sovereign right to wage war. It guaranteed equality, civil and human rights, yet the occupying military command's authorship of it was tightly censored, before and after its promulgation. The sovereignty it defined was moreover suspended, held in reserve until five years later. In other words, *modern* sovereignty may be conferred and devolved in unmodern ways, can even be 'popular' without being a *priori* any more democratic; and its popular connotation may be widely invoked, without its formal meaning changing much.

## 2. SOVEREIGN CINEMA: FILMS OF MAJESTY, THE MAJESTY OF FILM

I turn now to a specific instance of this qualified modernity and its conveyance by visual means. What does it mean for moving images to be sovereign? Whereas the individual authorship proper to Western liberal societies (and a modern, secular history of art) is a norm carried into global contemporary art, in light of changing technologies and fresh anxieties around appropriation, its universality seems less assured. So in revising our concept of sovereignty, we should attend to partic-

ular times and places, before attempting any general theory. To that end, I will sketch such a history of sovereign images, referring first to three videos circulated by global news-media networks.<sup>7</sup>

7 Suthida <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx3R6QUqzA>

Sineenat <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/embed/p07rpfwp/50134690>

Bhumipol <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rb4Tjs-Qs9o>



Two of them are recent. In the first, Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn anoints his queen, Suthida, just before his formal coronation in 2019.



In the second, recorded a few months later, with Suthida by his side, he anoints his on-again-off-again consort Sineenat as the palace's first official concubine in a century.

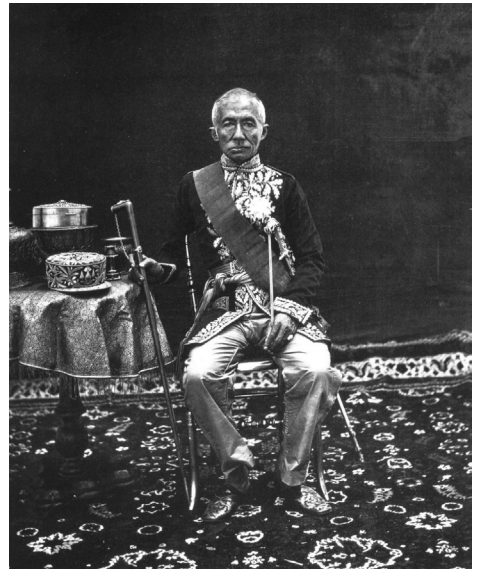


The third, more famous scene sees his late father, Bhumipol, at the height of his moral powers

in 1992, defusing a bloody political confrontation.

One gathers from these moving images that Thailand may not be the best case study, that its sovereignty is indeed quite peculiar. And so, it turns out, is its cinema. At the movies in Thailand it is not only customary but obligatory to stand in polite silence for the duration of a rousing anthem while an elaborate promotional video, celebrating the monarch's beneficence, plays before the feature presentation.<sup>8</sup> But however idiosyncratic, this modern ritual can tell us something about the amplitude of moving images in places where sovereignty is not entirely secular, popular or rational; where older forms of sovereign investment persist in politics; and photomedia images command more than just the value attributed to them by Benjamin and others who grappled with their proliferation in the twentieth century.

<sup>8</sup> Apichatpong Weerasethakul made a brilliant 35mm short film about the practice. *The Anthem* (2006), a non-celestial version of that theatrical overture for a sovereign cinema, can be viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKA4iLL89hl> David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* (London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 169–172. Apparently, since the extraordinary student protests broke out in 2020, this rule is being flouted



John Thomson, *King Mongkut of Siam, Bangkok* (European Dress), 1865-66. Modern albumen print from wet-collodion negative.



Francis Chit, King Chulalongkorn enthroned upon his second coronation, 1873

The tight relation between monarchy and film dates to the fourth Chakkri king, Mongkut (r. 1851–1868), the first who deigned to be photographed; and the return from a European tour of his son, the fifth king, Chulalongkorn, with a film camera in 1898. Siamese filmmaking, film exhibition and film discourse all began in the palace. Royals were key players in early commercial production and distribution, their wealth and mobility putting them at the new medium's cutting edge.<sup>9</sup>

Their patronage – the use of royal and military funds, land, vehicles or animals – was decisive, and it continues today. Sovereignty has not surprisingly been a favoured subject: the oldest surviving Thai film (*King of the White Elephant*, 1940) is a historical drama, designed to galvanise national consciousness one year before the newly named

9 Anchalee Chaiworaporn, 'Royalty Shapes Early Thai Film Culture' in Nick Deocampo (ed), *Early Cinema in Asia* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2017), pp. 266–267



Ernst Shoedsack and Merian C. Cooper, *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927) poster



Chatrachalerm Yukol, *The Legend of King Naresuan The Great, Part V: Elephant Battle*, 2014 (poster)



Sunh Vasudhara and Pridi Banomyong, *King of the White Elephant*, 1940 (poster)

kingdom of Thailand joined the Axis powers in World War II. It was written and produced by Pridi Banomyong, Finance Minister of the non-royal but very sovereign Field Marshall Phibulsongkhram, a leader of the 1932 constitutionalist coup but by 1940, already a dictator.

With all this in mind, the seventh king, Prajadhipok's avid engagement with film is not all that remarkable, but it yields the clearest example possible of a 'sovereign cinema.' Rather than attempt a summary of the many films he made, I will instead focus on one that he did not make, but in which his authorial hand is nevertheless legible.<sup>10</sup> *Coronation of King Prajadhipok* (1926) is plainly about sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> Resembling the newsreels the King and his friends had seen abroad and had begun to commission themselves, the film might be taken for run-of-the-mill coverage of a 1920s spectacle, in the genre that would soon be dubbed 'documentary.' Crowds milling, flows of bodies, rituals stately and more informal. Its narrative is provided by supposedly ancient rites, which dictate the setting, points of focus, and so on.



The impression sought was one of antiquity, but these artifices – a meticulous, glimmering feast of architecture, costume and performance – were

10 The palace also published a commemorative picture book. Sing Suwannakij, 'King and Eye: Visual Formation and Technology of the Siamese Monarchy,' PhD Thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2013, p. 189

11 Published online by the Thai Film Foundation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6ieWBFmowU>

not straightforwardly 'traditional' at all; and their assembly into a single, coherent stream of moving images, above all, was unmistakably modern. The scenography of coronation was elaborate enough, but was complicated this time by the new technical demands of the apparatus, that would take the scenes to destinations unforeseen by the mandarins and Brahmins who choreographed them, and would afford vantage-points from which such a spectacle had never before been seen. It is in light of these two displacements that I want to pose questions about sovereignty and its mediation, its *mise en scène*, in a moment of upheaval in Thailand's "economy of appearances."<sup>12</sup> Yet the significance of this film for a wider, transnational history of moving images may lie in what it *does not* show us: the modernisation that was the more obvious profilmic choice in terrain newly conquered by the camera in 1925, where – as the film *The Light of Asia*, made the same year in British India, put it:

"the relic of an age-old civilisation still holds magic sway over [a] teeming population, and ... motor cars vie for popularity with the slow pacing oxen carts."<sup>13</sup>

Though made with a Maharajah's support and presented at Windsor Palace, *The Light of Asia* is not really a work of sovereign cinema, to the precise extent that it dwells on this contest between old and new. Prajadhipok's coronation film, by contrast, was integrative, a sacralization both of the institution (monarchy) *and* of the medium of film, enacted in the midst of a drastic disenchantment. Its putatively premodern choreography, thick with modern, performing bodies, came

12 Rosalind C. Morris, *In the place of origins* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000)

13 Franz Osten and Himansu Rai, *The Light of Asia*, 1925

just as the first burst of motorisation was transforming Bangkok, its canals filled in as roads, new façades framing subjects of a power that was newly ‘modern’ and Siamese. This reframing included the museumification of the old town around a nucleus of resplendent palaces and royally sponsored temples.

Prajadhipok had his heart set on a military career when recalled from Europe at the outbreak of the Great War, and took the throne upon the rapid passing of no fewer than five heirs. Since the Cold War, royalists have made great efforts to recuperate the soldier’s image, revising the story of his 1935 abdication and exile. Ironically, his rehabilitation has taken the figure of ‘father of Thai democracy.’ This fantastical makeover as progenitor of popular sovereignty continues today at the King Prajadhipok Museum and Institute, a whole floor of which is devoted to his filmmaking.



King Prajadiphok Institute and Museum, Bangkok. Photo credit: *Supanut Arunoprayote* (wiki)

The pomp and pageantry of the film – the first of a Siamese coronation – seems fateful, knowing that reforms begun in previous reigns were to climax just seven years later in the overthrow of absolutism. It was all the more novel for the extraor-



dinary care taken in its mise-en-scène, and because the agent of that care was the monarch, a keen and reasonably able filmmaker in his own right who had caught the bug from filmmaking uncles as a boy in the palace.



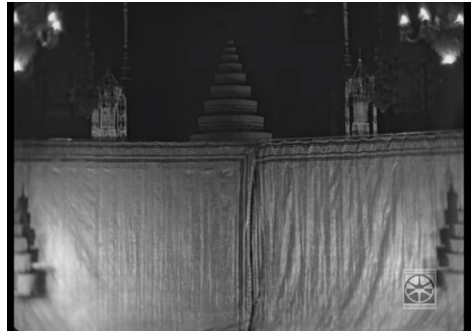
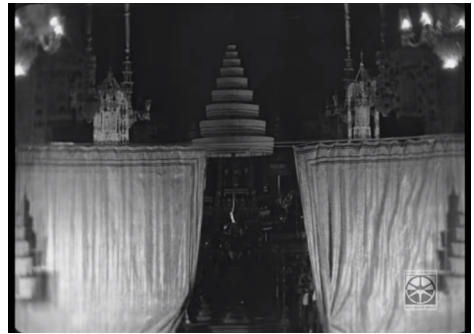
In some scenes we find ourselves in the position of an attendant body, at the foot of the throne, under the royal umbrella – a successful translation of majesty. A subtle lens flare that could scarcely have been bettered by digital post-production bathes the principal in an arc of divine radiance; our gaze, directed by way of gentle pans, comes to rest on his feet, just above eye-level and the heads of the officials and holy men.<sup>14</sup> But other shots register a *lacuna*, an awkwardness that is both technical and social, with the remote viewer put in impossible positions vis à vis the scopic regimes of Siamese sovereignty.



14 Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 251–293

15 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008)

One later scene, a tableau vivant prepared for the camera and clearly privileged in the montage, depicts the closure of the rites in the grand throne hall.<sup>15</sup> After an aloof shot with a few rows of audience, the king reading from some document, the tableau stutters into view, through several takes in which the composition is seemingly tweaked. We cannot know if these cuts were intentionally left in the reel, nor how many seconds were cut out, but it seems they were trials: celebrants wait patiently while the camera is set, the composition corrected.



Then comes the longest continuous shot in the reel, lasting forty-two seconds, with no movement save for the twiddling of fans, a little fidgeting, the glint of regalia. Adjustments seem to anticipate some coming event. A few detail shots

follow, before the tableau returns, held for another forty-two seconds as curtains are drawn, obscuring the worldly three quarters of the scene including the king, while keeping him at the centre of a strange new geometry. A pyramidal *gestalt* that had defined the picturing of majesty before this is displaced by a new one, defined by the cinematic proscenium. The umbrella remains a symbolic apex but becomes an awkward surplus or *parergon*, neither inside nor outside the scene, a flatter architecture framing not the choreography of monarchic charisma, but the strictly *visual* composition of a sovereign image.

Meanwhile, the unseen viewer imagined by this *mise en scène* is newly privileged, a new kind of witness: not a live, theatrical celebrant-body there in the palace, but a telescopic eye, seeing it from some remove, mediated and repeated. The camera has been raised up, somehow level with the monarch's head, not face to face – for the width required to take it all in sets us back a respectful distance, far enough apparently to avoid offence to his majesty – but nevertheless, *eye to eye*. This innovation we might have overlooked, had we not recently been reminded that the mediaeval sight-lines governing appearance of royal personages, and everyone's placement and behaviour at such occasions, have recently been renewed.

It is hard to imagine the impact, for ordinary Siamese in the 1920s, of this frontal view of His Highness – not the man in uniform walking amongst his subjects, but the sovereign *enthroned*, rigged up in this elaborate image-machine. It would have been novel to say the least,

and probably shocking. Both the camera view and the spectator's view vacillate between the theatrical and the cinematic, the lived moment and the record; between the sovereign enactment and the *enregistrement*, between the performative and the constative (Austin). If it is hard to get our heads around this ambivalence, it is because we see here a medium becoming sacral, but in the name of *both modernity and monarchy* at the same time; at once an image of rational verifiability and of non-rational consignment, of a consecration that was to be the last hurrah of a soon to be profaned sacred order.

### 3. SOVEREIGN SCENOGRAPHIES

I want to suggest that this kind of image of power, and empowerment of the image, is more prevalent than we might think in our modernity. I will sketch only a few examples I have collected of sovereign scenographies, by sovereign authors, in what might be loosely called sovereign media, from postwar Southeast Asia. It should be noted that although the settings are postcolonial, this is still very much a context of sovereign *flux*, in which artists, in league with political principals, might even find the latitude to “ignore the tastes of the people,” as Boris Groys puts it, and create a new political subject and “a new people.”<sup>16</sup> If we are not too picky about the forms this can take, it is discernible right across Southeast Asia, on both sides of the Cold War divide, but makes for a less progressive album than we would hope.

Like Prajadhipok, King Norodom Sihanouk was in the habit of making films with his family. Fictional and non-fictional, they were about

16 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: avant-garde, aesthetic dictatorship, and beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 74

<sup>17</sup> See David Chandler, quoted in Eliza Romey, 'King, Artist, Filmmaker: the films of Norodom Sihanouk,' in David Hanan, *Film in Southeast Asia: views from the region* (Hanoi: SEA-PAVAA, 2001), 107-118 (at 114).

<sup>18</sup> Eliza Romey, 'King, Artist, Filmmaker,' 108; and 'King, Politician, Artist. The Films of Norodom Sihanouk,' Master's Thesis, La Trobe University, 1998. On the political context, see Joanna Wolfarth, 'Royal Portraiture in the Cambodian Politico-Cultural Complex: Norodom Sihanouk and the Place of Photography,' *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies* 12 (2014): pp. 145–166 (at 157)

Cambodia and its history, and about himself.<sup>17</sup> As writer, director, producer, star – a sovereign author in every sense – he also made films about monarchy, which he then toured himself around the provinces. In *Apsara* (1966) his daughter, Princess Bopha Devi, performs classical Khmer dance with the Royal Ballet. In *The Little Prince* (1967), a little sovereign (played by Sihanouk's son, who is now king) hears disputes and dispenses wisdom and justice, on friendly visits to the villages with lots of bowing, scraping and foot-kissing. However feudal such scenes may seem, for Sihanouk these films were a means of creating a rapport with ordinary, provincial Khmer, and not in the name of nation but at the expense of their association with the state and elected officials. Though he abdicated in 1960, he remained sovereign over the cinema, setting up a national monopoly under the Ministry of Information and barring Western companies from entering the market.<sup>18</sup> But his agenda was less commercial than ideological. His scenography also exploited photography, architecture, urban planning, and spectacular mass assembly. In the capital Phnom Penh especially, his films documented and projected an urban elite's becoming worldly, framed by the Le Corbusier-acolyte Vann Molyvann, whose architecture became the set of this prospectus for Khmer modernity. Again, these sovereign images were no less modern for being made and shown under the auspices of a monarch.

Nor were the region's republics any less invested in this kind of sovereign framing. It would be hard to look past the 'conjugal dictatorship' of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, whose

19 Patrick D. Flores, "Time to Unlearn": Urgency and Practical Intelligence in the Southeast Asian Museum," *On Curating* #46 (June 2020) <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-46.html#.X9iEV5MzYe0>

"developmental art" took this sovereign scenography to a whole new, vanguard level.<sup>19</sup> To consummate her showpiece, the Cultural Center of the Philippines (opened in 1969), Imelda sponsored progressive artists and commissioned quite radical experiments in national encompassment, such as the participatory radio séance *Ugnayan* (1974) by the classically trained concretist composer and ethnomusicologist, José Maceda.

But such avid patrons, despite ample evidence of their vision, are still liable to appear in our histories as mere 'context.' Should not these *sovereign authors* be as central as artists in our reckoning with art's modernity? In its habitual focus on the state's instrumentalization of artists, art history risks underestimating the state's own formidable artistic mandate.

In Southeast Asia, the sacral functions of images can be hard to separate from their more mundane representational ones, and this may be as true for machine-made, reproducible images as it is for hand-made, devotional images. While that symbolic efficacy may seem a far cry from the culture of a modern, liberal democracy, it may be that our modernity is not as secular or disenchanting as we thought. For do we not invoke this 'sovereign' capacity of art when we demand that a colonial artifact be carefully repatriated, when a historic photograph becomes a portal for intercommunal reckoning, or when a portrait is said to stare down or defy some history of objectification? This kind of amplitude may well prove indispensable to the sovereignty – non-Western, non-supremacist, or non-human – of a cinema to come.

**David Teh** is a curator and Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, specialising in Southeast Asian contemporary art. He is CIRCUIT's curator-at-large for 2020/21.

# Sovereign Practices

SORAWIT SONGSATAYA

Kia ora everyone. I would like to start with some field research footage from an exhibition that I presented at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery in 2019. The work was called *Jupiter*, and it is a six-channel video installation; a combination of 3D animation and some footage that I recorded at a Thai kite festival in Buriram province.

I decided to show you this field research footage because I still find new ideas in it. I have always been interested in more-than-human subjectivity, and with this exhibition, I was focussing on the energy of the wind as a material that is not very visible, that is imperceptible. And with this idea, I focused on Thai kite design and cultural associations around the object.

The idea of working with kites and the wind occurred to me from randomly seeing a Matariki ad on Facebook. There was a slogan from that ad that said kites “connect heaven and earth.” Not only did this somehow reminded me of my childhood in Thailand, but it also made me think about kites as a sort of mediator between cultures. As we know, kites exist in many cultures, including here in Aotearoa. And because of this cultural link, I became curious about their roles and the ways that they reveal the imperceptible or the immeasurable nature of wind energy.

I spent three days at the kite festival in Buriram and I went back one morning to fly a drone. Accidentally, I captured this footage of a kite, flying and teasing with the full moon in the background. I ended up not having this footage in the final video installation, but I guess I’m sharing it with you here, because, as I said before,



Installation Shot, Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019) Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery





Production Still, Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019)

I feel that the research materials often are a little bit richer than the final work. With the final work, you put an end to something or you're trying to conclude something. But with research materials like these, they are not trying to be precise about anything. And they reveal more about the object, this kite in particular.

I also took a lesson on how to make a traditional Thai kite using bamboo and mulberry paper. This lady, her name is Orm, showed me these sophisticated ways of making knots. You have to do these very specific knots so that the frame of the kite won't break apart when you fly it.

I guess I chose to talk about this exhibition and show you this research footage behind it because, to me, I'm still unsure of how to approach the theme of the symposium. Sovereignty, to me, is quite loaded and difficult to talk about. Espe-

cially coming from a migrant position, living in a bicultural nation, in a way, I often feel like I don't have a right or ownership over anything here. So I guess, employing the kite motif, (which is an object that historically exists both in Thailand and Aotearoa), is a way for me to build that connection.

A lot of times I feel that my artwork is sort of making the pathway for me. As I said before, as an immigrant, as a Thai-born artist, I don't see many great examples of how I could produce contemporary art here that would fit within New Zealand cultural fabric. And there's not much communal support or groups of practitioners from similar backgrounds like myself, specifically from the Southeast Asian region. So, a lot of times I just made work to make sense of things or understand where I belong or could

belong. I guess I could say that this agency within my body of works establishes its own sovereignty.

These are images of the work that I exhibited at Te Uru. It was a six-channel video installation with some footage from the festival and some 3D animation of the kites. I also included footage of the wind turbines that I recorded in Makara in Wellington. The juxtapositions within the video work and in the sculptural objects offer these different worldviews – one that views nature purely as resources and the other as cultural.

Alongside the video, I also presented these objects that I made based on traditional kite designs that I had learnt, but I changed the material of the frames from bamboo to copper, and the body of the kite was wool fibre. So, there was this combination between conductive materials and insulative materials which resonated with electrical

energy produced by the wind turbines.

So, trying to come back to the subject of sovereignty. Coming from Thailand, as you've seen from the footage that David showed during his talk, it's hard for me to separate the Thai monarchy from the word. It's almost impossible because Thailand's national identity is so intrinsic and constructed with this royal family. And I guess that's one of the many elements that push me to approach subjects that are non-human or larger than human, such as the wind. Because I do see and recognise the sovereignty within the natural world, which is perhaps larger, more in control, more generous, and more encompassing.

With 3D animation, I guess I'm drawn to it because the software that I use (even though the animated footage may seem fluid and effortless, like the 3D kite flying) is actually based on math-



Production Still, Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019)

ematics. I have to add in numbers for the software to calculate and mimic the effect of the wind velocity, etc. So there are a few equations involved. But at the same time, how the 3D models of the kites move and behave, or the outcomes of the animated scenes are quite unpredictable and out of my control. So yes, specifically, with the 3D animation as a medium, it's a little bit similar to the kite object itself. The human stands on the land, mediating, trying to control and tease with this wind force, which is unpredictable and beyond control, and holding such a fragile object.

**Sorawit Songsataya** is an artist currently based in Pōneke Wellington. Their work “often makes practical use of computer softwares and organic material to explore simultaneous relations in materiality and beliefs imbued in diverse cultural milieux. Recent projects expand on various handcraft skills and new media while considering social layers of their home country and Aotearoa.”  
Artspace Aotearoa (2018)

# Podcasts

**ISRAEL RANDELL, RANGITUHIA HOLLIS &  
ALEX MONTEITH**

Rangituhia Hollis, *Across the face of the moon* (2020). 10 minutes 33 seconds, Digital Video, Sound. Commissioned by CIRCUIT with the support of Creative New Zealand.



**RANGITUHIA HOLLIS INTERVIEWED**

**BY ISRAEL RANDELL**

<https://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/circuit-cast-episode-92-rangituhia-hollis>

In this podcast Israel Randell talks to Rangituhia Hollis about his CIRCUIT Artist Cinema Commission *Across the face of the Moon* (2020). Listen to Rangituhia discuss his iterative practice, Japanese cinema, and what sovereignty means to him. 30 minutes.



**ALEX MONTEITH INTERVIEWED**

**BY ISRAEL RANDELL**

<https://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/circuit-cast-episode-93-alex-monteith>

“I was thinking about what you think is knowledge, what you find out through machinery, and what you find out through attending to things that you see.” Israel Randell talks to Alex Monteith about her new CIRCUIT Artist Cinema Commission *Deepwater Currents* (2020). 40 minutes.

Alex Monteith, *Deepwater Currents* (2020). 31 minutes 46 seconds, Digital Video, Sound. Commissioned by CIRCUIT with the support of Creative New Zealand.

# Expanded Territories, Expanded Practices

**DR. GREG DVORAK (JAPAN)**

**LANA LOPESI (NZ) & DAVID TEH (SINGAPORE)**

The following conversation features presentations by Greg Dvorak and Lana Lopesi, followed by questions from David Teh, who began the panel by acknowledging previous presentations by artists from Aotearoa who questioned the efficacy of the term 'Sovereignty'.

In the following panel Dr Greg Dvorak backgrounds a history of militarisation across the Northern Pacific, and artists whose practice subsequently utilise non-material or relational methods to assert their culture and community, sometimes in the context of wider regional histories, or international art events.

Lana Lopesi speaks from the position of the Pacific diaspora in Aotearoa to outline the multiplicity of Pacific identities, an ethic which centres the artist as the maker, and the "fight for the joyous and the beautiful and the imaginative, the speculative as political."

David Teh:

Welcome Lana and Greg. What I've noticed today is a tremendous reluctance to talk about sovereignty, or at least to put it in those terms. And this is very interesting to me. On one level, there's clearly an anti-Colonial aversion to the term. On another, there's the question of the difficulty of translation. (This) of course can be a Colonial problem, but it doesn't have to be. There's also great creativity in thinking of alternative terminology around the ideas suggested by the word 'Sovereignty'.

I'd like to say why I felt it was important to have Greg in this conversation.

As you saw with my presentation, I was determined that although this is a highly charged discursive area in Aotearoa New Zealand, the discussion should not be confined to that context. Our sovereignties are more and more intertwined, whether we like it or not. With that in mind, I was really keen for somebody who knows about the Pacific region in great detail and who has published a lot of scholarly research to speak, but also (someone) coming from different points of view.

Greg is from a European / North American background, but has lived for a long time in Japan. And I think even in that triangle, you find a lot of the possible contradictions and difficulties in transferring these terms. So with that I hand over to you, Greg. Thank you for coming.

Greg Dvorak:

Thank you very much, David. I also have some qualms about the word Sovereignty, depending on how we talk about it in the register of Northern Oceania. But first, I want to explain a little about whom I am to be talking about this.

I am an American although I haven't spent much of my life in the United States. I grew up in the Marshall Islands, which at the time was part of the US Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. At that time, the United States felt quite entitled to make sense out of the lives of Marshallese people, who would go on to become citizens of their own independent Republic of the Marshall Islands; and the people of what eventually would become the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Commonwealth of the Northern

Marianas (which ultimately remained an American territory).

These are geographies which I think are somewhat unfamiliar to people in Aotearoa New Zealand. Partly because of the vastness of Oceania. But also because those histories are very much divided by empire and colonial legacies – the British Pacific, the French Pacific, the Japanese Pacific, and so forth. My history is traveling between these places, but also trying to triangulate and navigate through those spaces in a way that is supportive to my friends and colleagues in the region. And again, to wonder even what the region is in the first place.

So which Pacific are we talking about? These 'Nesias' that we have, I think are highly problematic. Many in Aotearoa might agree. But if you look at the 'Polynesia' part of this, in some ways, it culturally makes a lot of sense, in terms of the shared cosmologies, languages and so forth. And that Polynesian story is very powerful, even through places like French Polynesia, where the French language generates yet another sub-region.

My focus (today) is really in the area that has been called 'Micronesia', although I would argue that this is a reductive and marginalizing term - 'micro' meaning 'small islands that don't really matter.' When I look at this region, I'm compelled also to ask; "What other forces have tainted this, or brought this about in the first place?"

But there are other Nesias. There's a 'Japanesia' that a lot of people don't even think about. Japan colonised Northern Oceania and has its own

fraught history of thinking about and Orientalising Oceania, which is often not even brought into play in these conversations. Japan's colonies in Micronesia stretched all the way from Palau across to the edge of the Marshall Islands, which is a huge swath of the Pacific. And the Japanese were in Micronesia for about 30 years as a relatively peaceful civilian presence, including Okinawans and Koreans who had been brought there and stayed as colonised subjects.

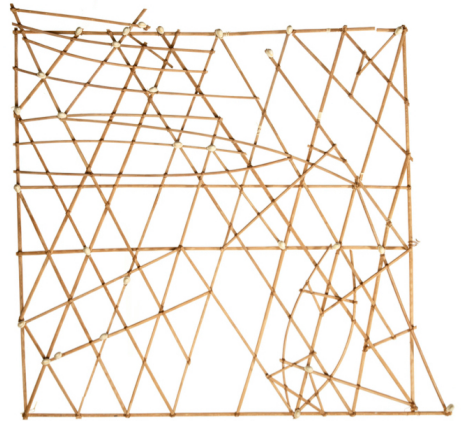
Then, you have Americasia, which, from its inception, is very much about an extreme militarisation that normalises the presence of military bases, planes, helicopters and missile tests. I grew up in Kwajalein Atoll where missiles are still tested every single month. There were 67 atomic tests conducted in the Marshall Islands, which totals something like one Hiroshima a day for nearly 10 years between 1946 and 1958. Not to mention that similar things were happening down in French Polynesia. And New Zealand was very engaged in the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movements of the 1970s, '80s and '90s.

But there tends to be an idea that Northern Oceania is just a very American place. And I want to argue that first of all, that's not true. Secondly, we can think about this region more expansively, as something like 'Macronesia' rather than Micronesia. Because this region – if we could call it a region – is so marginalised to begin with, there's actually a lot of potential for them (speaking collectively) to think outside the box.

These are people who navigated great distances to get there. That legacy continues today, but

there's a lot of awareness and lived experience of the intense colonisation and militarisation that continues up to today. It becomes an inflection in the way that artists and thinkers from the region are able to do doublespeak, and to work in spaces that are much more ephemeral and intangible, and in some ways, very oriented towards ritual and something that is probably not seen.

This is a vast region with thousands of islands; it is not just about Guåhan (Guam) and Hawai'i. Today I'm more interested in talking about those islands in between, and reflecting on the curatorial practice that I'm involved with right now for the Asia Pacific Triennial number 10, which is its 30th year, and scheduled to open in late 2021.



Marshallese Navigation Chart. Courtesy of Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, E432083

This is a Marshallese navigation chart. Sometimes it's called a stick chart. It has many different names, depending on its purpose, it could be a rebbelib or a mattang, and there are different kinds. This object was never meant to be brought

on board a canoe. It's an object that for Marshallese navigators was to be memorised, but it also is unique to every single navigator. The little white spots are shells that mark different intersections. But these different markings are not geographic points on a map in a Western sense. They respond to the energy of the ocean.

In fact it's quite reductive to talk about navigation in terms of just the people of the sea and the flows and the currents. To a navigator, this is the representation of ocean swells, of textures, of echoes. You have to think in terms of physics; echoes that are rippling off of islands, that could be felt with the body, embodied knowledge thousands of miles away from a sight of an island. It alludes to something that is perhaps more evocative of the unseen.

With APT, we've been working with navigators, singers and artists who work more in performance, or make work that might not last very long. We're thinking about energy and current and how that can be reflected not only in water waves, but also sound waves, air waves, all kinds of energy dimensions.

Navigation has been revived again and again. And it's a very important metaphor for sovereignty, for decolonisation, for reclaiming the narrative, for many people throughout Oceania. But this is particularly true in Micronesia, where they mastered some of the most elaborate and nuanced forms of navigation.

This is an image that I took in Guåhan in 2016. It's a very moving moment when the canoes



Navigation Revival at the Festival of Pacific Arts, Guåhan (Guam) (2016). Photo by Greg Dvorak

arrive, because it's at the Festival of Pacific Arts, and navigation is understood as an art that is embodied, practiced, felt, known, shared among the community.

I want to point to this navigation not only as a metaphor, but also as a sense of psychological and intellectual sovereignty in terms of: the agency of postcolonial awareness. Micronesians have been deeply influenced by America, But they've been there, done that. They've also been influenced by Japan, by Spain, by Germany, but more importantly, they have always known who they were in terms of their own cultural identities and ancestral knowledge. Most of them are independent countries now, and they all very much know who they are and where they are headed; as they navigate sovereignty itself.

I want to talk a little about decolonisation and demilitarisation. Micki Davis is a Chamoru artist we featured in the Honolulu Biennial. She made a film called *Magellan Doesn't Live Here* (2017). The first place that was really actively colonised (and it was literally 500 years ago) in Oceania, by Euro-





Marquita Micki Davis, *Magellan Doesn't Live Here* (2017) 5 minutes 11 seconds. Digital Video, Sound



United Artists of Belau (UAB) (Palau), woodblock carving (2009)



Samuel Adelbai (Palau), *Medad El Bai (Coming of Days Bai)* (1990) Acrylic on canvas

peans, was Guåhan. It was known by Magellan as the 'Island of the Thieves' because Islanders took canoes up to his boat and started pulling at the little bits of metal they found. He declared that they were all thieves and launched a big massacre on the village of Umatac in Guåhan, killing a large number of people, and then actually feeding their flesh to his starving crew. Really brutal and horrible stuff. This is what underpins the very first colonisations of the Pacific. Micki Davis' work speaks back to that, and to that navigation and what that means in that Guåhan context, where things are so heavily militarised, so heavily colonised and so forth.

Left is a piece from United Artists Belau, a Palauan collective from the 1990s whose work references militarism, colonialism, and so forth, using different kinds of vernacular practices. Woodcarving in Palau is quite big, as it was incorporated into the elaborate narratives carved into bai meetinghouses, and later popularized for the Japanese handicraft market by Japanese artist Hijikata Hisakatsu. These are very physical pieces.

This is Palauan artist Sam Adelbai's painting from 1990, a traditional bai meetinghouse in Palau, but painted with Pepsi cans around the columns that are holding up the Bai. There's a Jesus face at the very top representing Christianity, and there's a big mushroom cloud in the middle of the white triangle representing nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. Palau was one of the most courageously outspoken nations that resisted American nuclear tests and the dumping or transport of waste in their waters – a ban that is written into

their constitution. So this work is speaking back to globalisation, Americanisation, this American hegemony that is in their living room from day-to-day.

Beyond Indigenous artists from Micronesia, there are other Indigenous artists (from the region) who are also speaking to this kind of Trans-Pacific American presence, enmeshed with Japanese involvement.



Jane Chang Mi (USA), *ゴジラ/god'zila/* (2020) 96 minutes. Digital Video, Sound



Kapulani Landgraf (USA), *Hawai'i Ho'okuleana (to give responsibility)* (2016) Photographic collage

This is a more recent collage work by Hawaiian artist Kapulani Landgraf that was featured in the last APT. The names that you see here, Ka-ho'olawe, Mākua and so forth, are all places that have historically been rendered inaccessible to Hawaiians because of American military activity.

Jane Chang Mi is an American artist current-

ly based in Los Angeles, but she works around Hawai'i and recently in Japan. This work above, entitled *ゴジラ/god'zila/* (2020) takes all 32 hours of the *Godzilla* films (1954–present) made by the Toho Company in Japan, edits out the monsters and leaves behind the soundtrack. All of these movies are layered on top of each other, revealing repeated scenes of violence. Even without the monsters, you have this soundtrack of militarism, sounds of Japanese bureaucracy, and we get a sense of an enmeshed Japanese and American embrace that is still happening today. If you live in Southern Oceania, this is possibly not apparent. You wouldn't really sense just how intrinsically Japanese and American everything is in that colonial layer. Islanders in these spaces are moving ahead with different ways of unpacking that.

In Japan, Arai Takashi is a daguerreotype artist who is also referencing colonialism and militarism, in the Marshall Islands particularly. This is a beautiful work about the *Daigo Fukuryū Maru*, a boat that was irradiated by the American military nuclear tests in the 1950s during the Castle Bravo test at Bikini Atoll. In fact the boat was Japanese,



Araki Takashi (Japan) *Lucky Dragon* (2012) Daguerreotype photograph



Craig Santos Perez (Guåhan) *(De)Fence* (2017) Mixed media installation

which revealed to Japan that America was still continuing its disturbing and disgusting tests that caused so much horror in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I would also add to this that other Japanese artists, as well as Okinawan artists like Ishikawa Mao or Ishikawa Ryuci, also create art that also references these kinds of entanglements.

I would like to talk about expansion of region through poetry. Craig Santos Perez is a spoken word artist from Guåhan. *Praise Song for Oceania* (2017) is a video work that is an ode to Oceania in all of its complexity, honoring both the colonial and the indigenous, but also all of the sickness, the trouble, the radiation, the horror of all of this stuff. I really encourage you to find his work online and listen to the power of these voices. Here we see an installation work from the same year entitled *(De)Fence*.

As a Chamoru person from Guåhan, Craig's acts, his motions of decolonisation are very effective in terms of honoring the voice. And again, voice is something that is sometimes not noticed in art. Again, these are sound waves being projected out that can be encoded, that can subvert colonial voices, colonial noises. They also speak back to the traditions of navigation, which is all about knowing different chants, being able to recite these different spaces and places on the ocean's surface and so forth.

Working with the Asia Pacific Triennial in Queensland, I've been really honored to work with Pacific curators, Ruth McDougall and Ruha Fifta. Ruth and many of her colleagues began a way of curating work from the Pacific that was

more workshop-based. So much work that we see of the Pacific comes from amazing diaspora, in places like Auckland, for example, or Wellington and so forth. But going into those islands also, and trying to see their more independent understandings of what matters in art, really takes time and a lot of energy. APT spearheaded a number of these different onsite workshops.



Installation shot: Women's Wealth (Guåhan), Queensland Art Gallery, APT9 (2018)

A precedent for this was the “Womens Wealth” workshop that happened Bougainville, an island which has voted for its independence but is currently part of Paps New Guinea. For this, co-curator Sana Balai worked with several women over the course of two weeks, having all kinds of discussions, making work together, and sharing stories. And eventually those works were acquired by the Queensland Gallery and became a part of APT 9 (2018).

Now we're using a similar model in 'Macronesia', and we're thinking more along the lines of finding different artists who can speak to this larger expandedness, because Micronesia is not a cohesive whole, it's extremely diverse, it's extremely complicated.



Mighty Island (Guåhan), still from *I Matai (The Dead)* 2017

This is a still from a video collective called Mighty Island in Guåhan. They're mostly Chamorro artists, and this is a still from their work *I Matai (The Dead)* (2017).



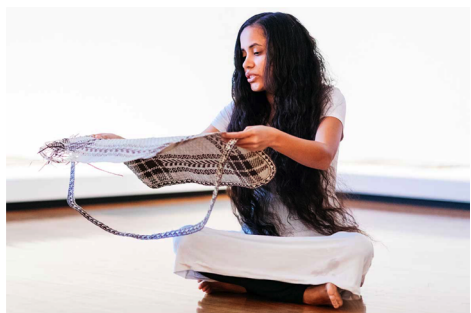
The Rookie Boys in Kosrae, Federated States of Micronesia. Photo by Greg Dvorak 2019.

We're also working with a collective called the Rookie Boys in Kosrae who are basically gospel singers, and they're all men. On first impression, it would seem like it's devotional music, but this powerful singing all throughout Oceania – especially in the islands of Micronesia – is very complex and very nuanced. It goes way beyond Christianity. It's very much about celebrations of life and survival and overcoming all kinds of obstacles.

These are flowers made out of wire, but the wire is actually harvested from the earth on an



Marshallese woven flowers with recycled wartime Japanese wires. A public domain photo from the Marshall Islands Government



Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner (Marshall Islands) at Asia Pacific Triennial 9 (2018). Image by Greg Dvorak

island called Wotje in the Marshall Islands. During World War II Wotje was one of the places most militarized by Japan. Women work together taking Japanese military cable and recycling them into flowers, which has become quite an art form in the Marshall Islands. This is another way that everyday art can reference decolonisation and demilitarisation.

I wanted to draw this to a close by talking a little bit about art as ritual, and to honor the work of my friend and collaborator, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner.

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's practice began with her work as a spoken word artist. Her voice is extremely charismatic. It has a lot of energy. She is slowly owning a legacy of being tapped into a history of chanting, storytelling and navigating in the Marshall Islands. There are many people who have that past, but it has been devalued by colonial histories.

This is her performing a piece at the APT 9. In workshops, she studied with elders to make these jaki-ed mats, which utilise very sacred weaving practices in the Marshall Islands that have recently been revived by a group of women. Kathy took that training and then deconstructed this mat. She talked about this as a ritual reflecting on the harm that was done to Marshallese women through nuclear testing; thinking about reproductive health, about post-partum depression as a metaphor for the birthing of a new nation in the Marshall Islands; and pushing back against American and Japanese hegemony. Really powerful, deeply encoded stuff.

Another work of hers that really speaks to this is *Anointed* (2018). In this work, she actually goes to Enewetak Atoll where there's a big nuclear dome that's covering up all of this nuclear waste from the 1950s. And she places these small coral stones on this irradiated space, exposing herself to a lot of radiation. But that act of putting stones on a tomb is a very Marshallese way of honouring ancestors, honouring the dead and making some sort of connection between these different spaces. She's demarcating, re-territorialising space, and also making that very American, very militarised landscape something that is Marshallese. She's returning it to the Marshall Islands.

She's also a climate change activist. She went to Greenland and worked with Aka Niviãna, who is also a poet and climate activist, from the Inuk Indigenous community there. And they mourned the loss of land in Greenland caused by the melting of ice, and the rising of the seas in the Marshall Islands that was caused by that. Both exchanged gifts as part of this ritual, mourning what it means to live in our world today.

That's pretty much what I wanted to share with you today. I hope that gestures a little bit towards that expandedness, breaking down some of these different assumptions about what colonialism might mean, what militarism might mean, what Macronesia versus Micronesia might mean. And trying to honor that maybe there is some hope for the word 'Sovereignty' within this, because I think that there is interest among people in the North Pacific to really, really push away the United States and really speak back to it. These



Kathy Jetřil-Kijiner (Marshall Islands), *Anointed* (2018) 6 minutes 18 seconds, Digital Video, Sound. Image by Dan Lin



Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Aka Niviãna, *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018) 6 minutes 31 seconds. Digital Video, Sound. Image by Dan Lin

are very strong voices. Hawai'i and Guãhan are respectively a state and an unincorporated territory of the United States. But the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia are independent. For them to actually break away from US control as they did in the 1980s and 1990s was a very, very big thing and required an incredible kind of bravery. They are currently in what we call Compacts of Free Association with the United States, which means that on paper they are independent, but they're still in many ways influenced by American hegemony. The United States has the right to put military bases there and do whatever it wants in some ways,

but at the same time they have seats in the United Nations, they can speak up, they can speak back. They would consider themselves to be 'Sovereign', but that all comes with many strings attached.

David Teh:

Thanks very much, Greg. I have lots of questions, but I think we should move straight on to Lana. I'd like to hear her point of view on some of the things that you've raised, but also to hear about what she's been working on. Lana.

Lana Lopesi:

Thank you both David and Greg. To preface,

I wanted to do a bit of bridging because like lots of us, I'm trying to work out how I can meet this conversation. Both in relation to what's been said throughout the day, to the Artist Cinema Commissions that I saw yesterday, but as a broader conversation.

I'm going to come at it from a very particular localised idea, specifically to my position of being in the Pacific diaspora here in Aotearoa.

Firstly, the oneness notion of sovereignty is important and interesting. However, all enlightenment-era philosophy, (which was trying to make sense of the world through this Euro-centric notion of universality), fails to take into account the multiple ways of being.

I've been thinking about Walter Mignolo's 'decolonial option' as a way of fracturing the assumptions of universality. Mignolo argues that one approach to modernist thinking is through a reversal and localising of it. That (concept) offers me a theoretical break from this modernist sovereign narrative (and an opportunity) to rescale it. To be able to have conversations around sovereignty from Indigenous points of view, from Pacific points of view, we need to do this rescaling of modernist sovereignty so that it's at the same size of other ways of seeing, understanding and practicing sovereignty.

The other thing I wanted to talk about was the 'colonial imaginary', because what we're calling sovereignty has this inherent hegemonic and supremacist quality.

I think of the colonial imaginary as being the

way in which colonised peoples and places have been imagined and historicised in art, literature, science and cartography. As you pointed out Greg, this is still something that Pacific artists and scholars have to contend with today. So these modernist ideas, we can't just break from them, we have to address them, especially when we're talking about ideas of sovereignty within creative practice. In that rescaling, we can't underestimate the ongoing power and pervasive nature that the colonial imaginary and enlightenment/modernist-era thinking is having today on our artists. The fact that the future APT is still contending with this is evidence that it's still something they have to think through.

I felt like I needed to do that for grounding because there's a risk that we can be talking past each other instead of having a generative conversation around these ideas that I think we're all invested in. I don't think we can assume that there is a shared sense of sovereignty. There's not, and we can't assume that all artists feel like they have a sense of creative sovereignty to start with either.

I'm finally going to talk about art. I'm pulling that term 'creative sovereignty' from Métis art critic David Garneau and how he uses it in terms of the category 'Indigenous art'. I'm also thinking with Samoan/Persian artist and curator, Léuli Esh-rāghi's notion of Sovereign Display Territories, in which he talks about a need for Indigenous artists to have control over 'Sights', 'Sites' and also Citation in the sense of possessing creative sovereignty.

My current research is looking at contemporary Moana artists from a digital native generation and their art specifically made between 2012





Ahilalalapa Rands' *Lift Off* (2018) 3 minutes 23 seconds. Digital Video, Sound.

and 2020. There is a really clear expression by the artists that coming through art school, they were trained and disciplined to make art in a way which satisfied the appetite of a larger and mostly white arts community here in Aotearoa and (in) the institutions. And so, not only is there this bigger, pervasive, colonial imaginary and matrix of power built into all of the mainstream systems and structures that we're part of here in Aotearoa, but there was also the sense that Pacific artists felt they were being trained and encouraged to make (art) in a way that had a legible Pacific politic and also involved the reproduction of Brown trauma in a way that served audiences, but depleted themselves as artists.

For this particular group of artists, their creative sovereignty is a notion of safety. (It) comes from a mode in which the artist holds that sense of power, or finds a mode of practice, which centers themselves as the maker – rather than a mode of practice which tends to the gaze of others. Their sense of creative sovereignty has no real legible

form, which to me is a really expansive component.

It looks like speculative futures and Ahilalalapa Rands' *Lift Off* (2018). It looks like illegibility and a sense of joy and Louisa Afoa's wallpapers. And it can look like exchanges which centre on Indigenous modes of kinship rather than colonially-mediated relationality, which is a really hard task across Oceania when there are so many divisive histories of colonisation, which impact our very ability to talk to each other. This creative sovereignty makes room for other people's points of view, as well as other creative sovereignties.

I feel like I'm really trying to fight for the joyous and the beautiful and the imaginative, the speculative as political. These qualities in artwork, I don't think would often be interpreted through a politic of sovereignty, but when you think of all the things in which these artists are working through to get to a space where they're actually producing in a mode which builds them up and doesn't deplete them, I feel like that's the ultimate



Installation Shot: Louisa Afoa, *Orion* (2017). Image courtesy of Sait Akkirman.

example of creative sovereignty.

I wonder then, if creative sovereignty for racialised bodies is working against the way in which you are expected to work. It's being a glitch in the system, it's being disruptive. Because you're not expected to work in ways where you have control over that voice. Even getting to that point where you actually know what it is you want to make, away from the disciplining that we go through, and the external pressures of responsibility to wider community, is actually quite a radical thing to advocate for.

So I suggest an expansive notion of sovereignty is actually a fractured one, in which sovereignty as we use and understand the notion in English is needed or required to shrink into size in amongst many other things. And only if we accept that,

can we have these relational, generative, expensive conversations across modes and ways of being.

David Teh:

Thanks very much. That was very rich. Greg, if you'd like to respond? I think there's some obvious points of connection and parallel between your two contributions. I'd really love to hear what you thought.

Greg Dvorak:

Thank you so much, Lana. When I talk about region, I'm very troubled by these boundaries and also the kinds of conversations that are happening in different kinds of ways throughout Oceania. I even have found recently in my own practice that I like to use both Pacific and Oceania. 'Pacific' really references Magellan. He started that whole ball

rolling with calling this place the Pacific. Margaret Jolly has referred to this as 'double vision,' where you have both thinking in those colonial terms or contending with that baggage, but also really wanting to carve out space. So when I say 'Oceania,' it's sort of more in terms of that Epeli Hau'ofa-ian gesture towards constant expansiveness.

But in terms of being a glitch in the system, being disruptive and carving out those spaces, that seems to be something that is common among all of the artists that I've worked with. I don't know if I would call it sovereignty, but it has something to do with having space for each other's conversations, being able to engage with each other, listening for each other.

At the Festival of Pacific Arts in Guåhan a lot of people were really looking to Guåhan as a new space (for) opening up these conversations. I saw a lot of people coming from different parts of Oceania, particularly a big contingent that was coming from New Zealand. They wanted so much to engage. But just to cite the example of some artists, they were being bussed around on these American school buses, sleeping in these public schools way off site, very close to a military base. While discovering the vibrant, exciting communities that they were hoping they might find, they were also discovering that they were in a highly militarised landscape and recognising just how hard it could be in that space to resist that, to work in that, to carve out these spaces. So I guess I want to really push for specificity. There are very different things happening in different places. And opening up common dialogues and conversations really mat-

ters right now.

I have to say too, in my work at the Honolulu Biennial, working with Māori and Pacific curators I've discovered that the conversation has expanded so much in Aotearoa. These conversations around art really haven't been able to happen in Northern Oceania very much at all. It's almost as if there needs to be some playback of what happened down South. Although people have been enduring very similar struggles, both North and South there's wonderful collaboration around art all kinds of stuff happening down in Aotearoa that Northerners have not been able to experience. The same kind of art infrastructure really hasn't been able to be facilitated under the constraints of American hegemony. There isn't enough funding for it either. There's really nothing that supports any of this stuff. So just in terms of practical matters, these are also really important issues.

David Teh:

Thanks, Greg. I wanted to ask you guys one more question. One of the things you talked about is intangible forms, and you spoke of an orientation towards ritual or devotional idioms as representing an important space for non-colonial agency. Then Lana, in your talk, you referred to forms that couldn't be named so easily. In both of these, there's a resistance to the kinds of reification that go on in an art market, art history and perhaps under the purview of art institutions. And of course, you're both actively engaged in negotiating these things. Lana, would you like to respond to what Greg has said about that, because I'm also conscious that the glitches that you're advocating

for might actually take us away from ritual or devotional forms.

Lana Lopesi:

I think firstly, it's not one or the other. I wouldn't really separate them, but just acknowledge that the artists I'm talking about are participating within the western art market – as we are also today – but they also come from ways of being, and seeing the world, which are not of that. But artists are artists because they love form and they love making. And that's really exciting too.

So I also feel personally a bit of a hesitancy to separate them, but rather, to let Indigenous artists be complicated and have all these multiple facets to them and their experiences. And I think that's actually been the struggle of my research. I know that there is something in these artists that makes them make in the way that they do. We have this relational concept of 'Va' in Samoan and the (artists) sit in these relational spaces, which are not just the art community they're in, but also the families they come from. It's the lineages that Carl Mika addressed before. It's the wider socio-political things going on, it's Indigenous global kinship structures or relational things that people are negotiating in this Indigenous international art market.

There are all of these things happening and it's really hard when we then have to catch them in the English language, or we have to translate something intangible into a tangible form, like writing. (I'm a writer for a living, and I know that there's an irony there.)

I've talked about creative sovereignty to-

day, but I've actually understood it or come to it through a Samoan concept of Mau, which I think is possibly an equivalent, but maybe that comparative argument is not that helpful. Ultimately this is a western art history and it is the English language. And I think Carl Mika addressed it too; sometimes you just can't fix things. I think that's something that we could lean into, rather than constantly try to fix, even though that's what our universities and our jobs as writers and curators want us to do, but we could actually harness and hold on to that.

David Teh:

Greg, I wonder if you could just talk about your experience with art institutions? You've been involved with some big ones. Do you feel as though the prospects for leaning into the non-material and the intangible and the informal, do you feel like that's improving in contemporary art organisations or do we have a long way to go?

Greg Dvorak:

That's a great question. The jury is out, but I'm optimistic. Working with APT, I've seen curators I have met there have to negotiate incredible bureaucracy with the Australian government and various conventions of how museums and galleries are expected to function. Under those pressures, how do you talk about something that is actually very ephemeral, that could only happen in a certain way? That could be very much about respecting spirits, dealing with something that is not about the material, really? I think they've made big strides in that direction. There's more and more of an honoring of that or trying to find

some way of dealing with that.

But I'm also pessimistic. For example, the Oceania Exhibition that happened in London and Paris in 2018 was a really incredible wide-reaching exhibition, but at the same time so much in that was about material history and colonial collecting. "Material stuff" is not the only art that actually has value.

In Western art circles, it's common for curators to seek out some individual who's doing some really cool, funky practice that's very visual, very material, very tactile, something that is just going to wow viewers and collectors. In many local communities throughout Oceania, and particularly in rural Northern Oceanian places like Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the emphasis on art is often different. You're finding people talking about art, (but) usually more in the context of culture and community or genealogy. So their art is more about the connections that they have with each other, about genealogies, about the spaces in between, and often also the non-visual and performative. Up in Micronesia, and especially in low-lying atolls, there is not as much rock or wood or other materials to make work with, and the environment is so harsh that it does not last. Much of their art has long existed in the world of song, dance, and ritual, or in the weaving of intricate mats and other important objects. It is art that is more embodied, performed, passed on than art that can easily be displayed in museums and galleries.

So even encouraging people in the "art world" to even *notice* what constitutes art in Micronesia

has been very challenging. I don't know if it's getting better or not, because I think that people in the art industry still really want to be able to put their money behind something that they can collect and sell and thrust into that capitalistic system.

**David Teh:**

I was going to ask that. There are many parallels with the region where I'm working, both in terms of the material / non-material split, and of relationality or kinship and these other forms or other sources of meaning, if I can put it that way. There's still a long way to go in Southeast Asia, where right now everybody's celebrating that a new page has been turned in the museumification of culture. But in some ways it takes us a step away from some important cultural histories that we ought to be attuned to.

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**David Teh** is CIRCUIT's 2020/21 curator-at-large. David is a curator and Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, specialising in Southeast Asian contemporary art.

# Listening to the archive

ANDREW CLIFFORD (NZ), ANA ITI (NZ) &  
DAVID CHESWORTH (AUSTRALIA)

How do archives illuminate the present and shape the future? What are the power structures that underpin an archive, and what agency does an artist have in activating and interpreting these materials? What does the archive tell us through its gaps and how do we correct it? Are archives autonomous and fixed, or can the archive be fluid and performative, to tell us new stories and adapt to new contexts?

The following text is edited from a panel which featured presentations from Ana Iti, David Chesworth and Jasmine Togo-Brisby, with an introduction / moderation by Andrew Clifford. For a response to Jasmine Togo-Brisby's presentation see the AURA Student Critical Forum.

## Andrew Clifford:

This session, in the notes, I think it's called '*Listening to the Archive*', or '*Speaking through the Archive*'. I quite like the fact it could be both, actually; that's great.

We conventionally think of archives as very static things; repositories for information that lives in basements, a final resting place for records that are fixed, a place for preservation of documents within mountains of archive boxes, which you access through monolithic information systems, catalogues and so on. These frameworks, systems and sorting terms let you in or out of the archive and decide what you can find in there.

The more information you have in an archive, the harder it becomes to find anything. And they are infinitely growing, because in theory we're going to keep adding to them. The richer an

archive, the less visible anything in the archive is, perhaps. You can become buried in the archive, metaphorically, maybe literally too. So, what and who is in the archive, and how can we make anything of that, are questions I've wondered.

But the research I've done about archives in the past suggests it's a pretty rich place to go. Especially if you put aside the idea of the archive as I've just described it, and instead think of the archive as a more fluid space, something that can be negotiated. And that's one of the reasons I like the idea that this session's called '*Listening to the archive*', because perhaps the archive has its own voice.

Perhaps we can speak back to the archive as well. While we were waiting for the bus this morning, Rachael Rakena and I somehow settled on the idea – because I couldn't remember the title of the session – that we were 'annoying' the archive. Or was it the archive that was annoying? I can't remember. But nevertheless, we're going to have a bit of a pick at this concept.

Of course, it also has to be said that the archive, as with collections and galleries and museums, are all Western constructs within which the Western art world gets digested. A lot of what Carl spoke to this morning sets us up to consider the archive as something that can be activated, interpreted, and to think about how you reveal what is actually in the archive. The fact that archives can themselves perform, and that you can perform the archive are some of the things that these projects will look at.

To put it into terms that Carl gave this morn-

ing, it's the idea that you can have a living archive. The idea that the archive, as a record of something from the past, is something we look after in the present because it's something we want to have in the future. It's going to outlive us as an historic document, but it's actually something for the future. And that's quite fascinating. So how do we fix or preserve that history? And should it be fixed or set?

That idea of collections is also in Lana and Greg's earlier conversation. If we start to bring more of an Indigenous viewpoint to how we think about archives, that's a whole other conversation. We have to perhaps dismantle or renegotiate what's in there, but also realise that there are other frameworks that might be more useful.

That sets the scene. Most of you will have seen Ana's film last night at the screening. She's got some other work to add to the conversation and then David in Australia will present some of his work and then we'll have some conversations. So over to you, Ana.

Ana Iiti:

Kia ora, everyone. Big thank you to everyone who is not outside enjoying the beautiful day today. I thought that maybe I could talk a little bit about my research that I did to produce the work that was in the Artist Cinema Commissions.

*Howling out at a distance* (2020) came out of an interest I had in a Māori language newspaper *Te Pipi Wharauroa* (1899-1913). I came across this paper totally by accident. I was browsing Papers Past, which is a massive online repository



of scanned content. I came across an example of *Te Pipi* where they used this special type that I had never seen before. I was really confused and excited. In the physical paper, part of it uses a special type, but it's quite hard to see, especially at a great distance, such as the screening last night. But I was really struck by the special type, because to me it represented the idea that te reo Māori couldn't be encapsulated by the Roman alphabet or maybe that wasn't the best way for it to be written. I had never really thought about it like that before.

Then I came across a physical copy of the paper. When I got it, I really wanted to read the whole thing, but I'm a learner of te reo Māori, so that process was very challenging. I spent two weeks putting this text through translation software on the internet, looking at it, seeing that it was incorrect and then trying to mediate what all that information was about. Sometimes I was able to gather the gist, particular sentences or words or phrases jumped out and I totally got what it was about. At other times, it was completely opaque and very confusing. And when we think about the archives or the historical context that we exist in here, that is the same experience, a kind of difficult document to get to the full truth of.

If you haven't seen the work, I have A4 sheets of paper and I lay them on top of the newspaper. They have little holes cut in them and those holes isolate particular phrases or words. The work is about legibility and gray areas in understanding and communication. But also, it was quite hard to read on the big screen, that's not quite purposeful, but it was there! (laughs).

But anyway, those different phrases are all about wanting to have a conversation or learning, loneliness. All of this stuff is part of being a reo Māori language learner.

I'm going to show you a sample from a different work that I made that was also deeply linked to the embodied engagement with the archive. It's quite an old work from 2016 called *Treasures Left By Our Ancestors*. It was made for an exhibition called *Passionate Instincts*, which was at The Physics Room.

At that time, I was doing some research into another project. I thought some information that could help me would be at the Canterbury Museum. I actually had not been there since I was a child. When I did go, I ran into these dioramas and they're pretty offensive, basically. I was really struck by the fact that they were not able to depict a human Māori ancestor standing upright. Every

single person in these dioramas is crouched over.

And I remember going there as a kid but I do not remember thinking about this exhibit at all. That really troubled me because, as I got older, I was able to understand the way that places like museums or other archives present information to us and how, when you're not necessarily literate in what that means, you can really just accept what someone shows to you as a fact or the truth. You can't necessarily... well, I wasn't able to critique that. I think I'll leave it at that and I'll pass it over to you.

Andrew Clifford:

Kia ora, thank you, Ana. Now we're going to bring in David Chesworth from Australia.

David Chesworth:

Thank you so much for inviting me. Before we begin, I would like to pay my respects to the



Ana Iti, *Treasures Left By Our Ancestors* (2016) Digital Video, Sound

people of the Wurundjeri nation, whose land I'm on today. And I'd like to pay my respects to past, present and future elders and leaders and acknowledge that land was never ceded to us.

The piece I'm going to talk to you about is called *Indexing the Cylinder*. And it was part of a four-part exhibition curated for West Space Off-site in Melbourne by artist and curator Tamsen Hopkinson (Ngāti Pahauwera, Ngāti Kahungunu). The other three artists in the show are Huni Mancini, Phil Dadson, who I think might be in the audience today, and Lucrecia Quintanilla. We were all asked to respond to a concept of sounding the archive. The title of the online exhibition was *Performing the Archive*.

In *Indexing the Cylinder*, the cylinder in question is a wax version of a recording cylinder like this, which predated the more well-known flat records.

In the 19-minute video I recount my memory from 20 years ago of hearing a cylinder recording of an Aboriginal person singing a song. It was an imitation of bird song or a frog. I can't remember which.

The work is very much about me, from my colonial, settler position, trying to remember and access this recording, which has since disappeared into some archive. It's now become most accessible to me through my memory. The artwork explores the distance between the initial utterance, its capture, and the persistence of the utterance, as both an object and a memory that resides within me. It brings up questions of ownership and where that utterance actually resides.

The words you hear being spoken in the artwork were actually me speaking into an iPhone. I was making notes as I was out walking, for a proposal for a performance lecture. But when I heard



David Chesworth, *Indexing the Cylinder* (2020) 19 minutes, Digital Video, Sound

the recording back months later, I was struck that it had an incredible immediacy and vibrancy as I thought out loud about my relationship and connection to the original recorded utterance. In a sense, the recording of my voice was attempting to reach back to reimagine, repossess and somehow reclaim the original archival recording, and to articulate the many issues and contradictions that that entails.

Andrew Clifford:

A couple of questions to draw out some of these issues: I guess the first is to look at the official sense of what an archive is; this idea of the authenticity of the archive, that it's the official record, and it documents things that have happened. It provides the evidence that researchers might look to in telling their stories, but it substantiates any particular stories of course. Those stories that have been put together by those people who put those particular items in those archives, it's a version of history, a version. And it perhaps flattens history to one that's been made popular and doesn't allow for other stories as well. Maybe we could say that the archive gives us the sovereign story.

But that archive also holds a lot of inconvenient truths that are counter to that story. There are other stories, and also there are stories that the archive doesn't tell us about, that need to be put in there. And the way we access the archives, or negotiate or interrupt the archives are really useful.

In saying archives, I'm also thinking of collections, museum displays, and other ways that these

histories are presented to us.

So I wonder if you both could perhaps comment on how those issues, which are very present in all the works, inform their thinking? Work in counter to or interrupt the official narrative that's being presented.

David, perhaps you could start? The object you focused on there, as the work makes clear, asks more questions than perhaps it answers, what is its evidence of?

David Chesworth:

For me, there are three archives in play.

I have this recollection of that event that happened 20 years ago, which is of listening to a recording that happened a hundred years prior to that. And I guess I have created a mental archive – an archive of my imaginative interpretation – of that utterance.

But there's also a material archive where the recording was physically inscribed onto a wax cylinder. Vibrations were actually indented into this cylinder as it rotated. A big recording machine was brought into the place where this event happened. And a lot of setting up was necessary for that.

What I heard was a cassette transcription from the cylinder. So thirdly, there was a transduction into this electromagnetic world of a cassette. It was that recording that entered into my memory twenty years ago. And then, in retelling that story, I have generated a new recording on an iPhone, which materialises my memories of the initial ut-

terance.

And of course, now we have this clunky re-telling that I'm now doing over the internet, where I'm explaining how the memory of that event of hearing the recording made an impression on me that is now stronger than remembering the actual content of the original wax cylinder recording.

So there's the material archive of the wax cylinder recording and then finally there are what you might call archival mediations, where, over time due to various restrictions and the hiding of this recording through indexing, my memory of the archive has become more accessible than the physical archive. So I am interested in all those archival interplays.

Andrew Clifford:

Ana, how about you?

Ana Iti:

I guess what I liked about the question was the acknowledgement of the authorial nature of the archive. In my experience, when you look at somewhere like a museum or a collection, it often represents a particular person's interest. When I think about the work that I made for CIRCUIT, my way of disrupting that historical collection of writing was to lay my own interpretation on it. I don't know if that's the right thing to do or not, but that's a way that I can reconcile that information.

Andrew Clifford:

Something that came up in the previous session with Greg and Lana, and which is partic-

ularly pertinent, is the way collections privilege the physical. These things that aren't perhaps even meant to be collected, exist in the moment. By locking them in a storeroom you almost divorce them from time and space and all those other things that are part of what they are.

I'm particularly interested, with David's work, how he takes a cylinder back out into that landscape, which the cylinder is meant to represent, and that huge rupture between the record and the thing in that case, how the physicalities perhaps doesn't translate. Perhaps another topic; the ruptures, which, you mentioned a number of times as well, how these things that become fixed in history through the archive become divorced from the present and then the future as well. They are almost lost or contain something that isn't relevant anymore.

I'm not sure if I'm heading towards an actual question here but, maybe David, if you want to start in terms of your thinking about taking that object out into that landscape, which is a much more sensory space perhaps. A space of sound and smell and emotion and subjectivity.

David Chesworth:

That's true. I think and recollect better when outdoors walking. That this mirrors the site of the original recorded song adds a certain sensory resonance. In the initial recording, the Indigenous elder was singing the song of an animal, I think it was a bird. To what degree was that song a sensory representation? Then after that point, the sensory representation became translated and inscribed

materially – the wax cylinder is a material encoding of that sensory utterance.

It is interesting how archiving turns most emotional sensing (and these intangible experiences that we want to preserve), into objects or texts. There's always this translation or transduction that's taken place and that changes the initial utterance into other things and maybe adds to, and modifies it. In my case, in my memory and imagination, the archival record has become divorced from the tangibility of the initial utterance.

Andrew Clifford:

I think, in quite a similar fashion, Ana's work operates as a way of getting around that rupture, not only to act perhaps as a glitch within the archive, but also as a bridge, perhaps, to reconnect with those things by inserting yourselves into the archives.

Ana Iti:

For me in the work that I showed you in the museum, I wanted to put my body in relationship to that thing because I wanted to understand it. I wanted to understand who was in it and what that meant, because when I looked at it, there was something there that I couldn't get to. The same thing with the looking at the paper and looking at those words and the language and stuff, there's a total different thing about physically feeling something or being with it and, yeah, I think you got it on the head.

Andrew Clifford:

Great. Thank you.

**Andrew Clifford** is the director of Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery in Titirangi, Auckland. Andrew previously worked as the curator at the University of Auckland's Centre for Art Studies. He is also a well-known arts writer with contributions to *Art New Zealand*, *Art & Australia* and Hong Kong-based *Art Asia Pacific*.

**Ana Iti (Te Rarawa)** is an artist based in Te-Whanganui-a-Tara. Often employing sculpture, video and text, the artist's recent work explores the practice of history making through shared and personal narratives, attempting to open up space for more subjective experiences and feeling.

**Dr. David Chesworth** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is an internationally recognised artist and composer who has worked with electronics, contemporary ensembles, film, theatre and experimental opera. Together with Sonia Leber, Chesworth has created installation artworks using sound, video, architecture and public participation.

# Aura Student Critical Forum

**MELESEINI FALEAFA, ILENA SHADBOLT,  
KATE DONALD, LUCY JESSEP & MATT TINI**

Nominated by their tutors or selected by application, the AURA Student Critical Forum featured five undergraduate students from school across the country. Each student was supported by CIRCUIT to attend the Artist Cinema Commissions and the CIRCUIT Symposium in Wellington. The following is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place the day after the Symposium, on 25 October 2020, during which the students reflected on the day's conversations from their perspective as emerging artists.

## Mark Williams:

Okay. So here we are on Sunday, the 25th of October 2020 with the AURA Student Critical Forum. I thought we should start by going around the room and explaining briefly who we are. So I'm Mark, I run CIRCUIT. We present a symposium every year, the word 'Symposium' meaning new knowledge. The idea is that we all come together as a community, have a conversation around a topic and see what comes out.

A big part of the project is the inclusion of international voices. So we get this cross-cultural perspective from in and outside of New Zealand. And of course amongst our own community it's cross-cultural as well. And, we commission some new works and they become part of the discussion too.

## Meleseini Faleafa:

My name is Mary Jane, but my name is actually Meleseini. I am from the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland.

Kate Donald:

I'm Kate. I'm at the Ilam School of Fine Arts. I'm majoring in film, which I think is a bit different (Elam) – we have majors. My practice this year has been more based around collection and the cataloguing process, and reworking that through objects that surround me in my everyday life. Just very banal objects.

Ilena Shadbolt:

My name is Ilena and I'm at Elam School of Fine Arts at Auckland, in my second year. Right now I feel like my practice can't really be defined by anything. It's still wildly different from project to project. But this year I've focussed a lot on self-curation on the internet, archival footage, nostalgia and lineage. And what it means to like be myself at this point in time, everything that's led up to that. I tend to work in film and photography, but I've been trying out sculpture, painting and drawing.

Matt Tini:

Kia ora. My name is Matt. I'm from the Whiti o Rehua School of Art here in Wellington. My practice is self-portraiture photography, and I work with ideas of autonomy, cultural authority, authenticity and appropriation. I see my practice moving from photography within the next year towards moving image.

Lucy Jessep:

My name is Lucy. I'm studying at the Ilam school of Fine Arts. I'm also majoring in film. My practice over the last few years has been in perfor-

mance, video and sculpture. A lot of my practice looks at surveillance technologies, and how cameras can change behaviour or spaces.

Mark Williams:

Thanks guys. I'm interested in what presentations were most valuable for you and why? Meleseini what was the most interesting part of the weekend for you?

Meleseini Faleafa:

The symposium. I really enjoyed hearing what Lana Lopesi had to say about creative sovereignty and sovereignty as a concept. I also liked Rachel, and how she's found new words encapsulating that seem the same, but in a Māori/Pasifika context. Did anybody else have any thoughts on Lana or Rachel's presentations?

Matt Tini:

Lana was just so energetic. There's just so much to it. I couldn't quite process it at the time. I wrote down her idea of rescaling... I think she said 'modernist sovereignty'? Kind of running off of what David was talking about, which I also didn't quite fully understand. But I think what I found interesting between from that particular forum was, I got a sense of how loaded the topic of sovereignty is within a Pacific colonial context. It needed that voice to reframe where the conversation was going. I'm not sure why exactly.

Ilena Shadbolt:

There was one thing she said, the expanded version of sovereignty is actually a 'refractive' one, it can be simultaneously individual or collective





Image: David Teh presents at the 2020 Circuit Symposium. Supplied.

or centric to a culture. I found it interesting how much people tended to want to swap ‘sovereignty’ out with autonomy, or, what was the other word?

Lucy Jessep:

Agency.

Meleseini Faleafa:

I felt personally that when Lana was talking, there was a feeling of affirmation and validness. I don’t know if it was because I am Pasifika, but in some way I understood what Lana was saying.

Coming into the symposium, I didn’t know what Sovereignty means in all these different contexts and altered ways. So it was overwhelming,

but very necessary to talk about. And I think that’s what Lana did.

Mark Williams:

I liked when Lana talked about ‘modes of working that build up artists and don’t deplete them’. What’d you think that might have meant?

Kate Donald:

She seemed very much to be vocalising the experiences of the artists she’s worked with, which wasn’t something that the other speakers seemed to bring. And particularly that expectation for works to be coming from a place of trauma.

I guess she was identifying an expectation of

what works from these communities are meant to be and seeking to broaden that.

Ilena Shadbolt:

And depleting yourself to be palatable for generic audiences. I guess art institutions are still held up by the white, usually male gaze.

Mark Williams:

She had this other phrase about being a 'glitch' in the system. How does that idea translate in your own practice?

Matt Tini:

In my work there's a lot of rejection of the expectations of a contemporary indigenous experience. One thing that I'm working through is to stop being so polite all the time. Sometimes I feel like I'm just bending to people's expectations... I'm trying to learn to just be bold and to say it as it is.

There were a few people yesterday on the panels who I was like, 'I want that energy', but there's still this part of me that is still uncomfortable from that. For me, that's part of being a glitch, being outspoken about things that need to be spoken out about.

Lucy Jessep:

Yeah. I felt that when Ana Iti was talking about her work in the Canterbury Museum and she described the dioramas there as offensive. Straight out, she was (saying) these were offensive. That's so valid.

Ilena Shadbolt:

I found it really interesting how, when she

was young, she didn't remember thinking they were weird or bad or anything. Even myself, when I was younger, it was just how it was. The education system needs to be rewired from the very root.

Lucy Jessep:

It's especially weird... we have art history courses on these topics. So they're lecturing you about educational systems and institutions and how they're problematic. And you sit there and you're becoming a critical thinker and becoming able to have conversations about these issues. Yet the lecturers are coming from institutions that do all those things still. And it's a weird spot to be, learning how to critique your own institution.

Kate Donald:

Growing up in North Canterbury on a farm, we would go on school trips to Canterbury Museum and be taken around these exhibits. For a lot of children that have grown up in those (rural) environments, that's part of the very small exposure that you have to depictions of Māori people. It's so troubling that it's only ten, 15 years ago and such a formative age.

Lucy Jessep:

Those dioramas are still there. I went to the museum last week, they haven't changed.

Ilena Shadbolt:

So when the institutions lecture us about institutional critiques, while it's good, in a way it's just performative because things are still standing.

Lucy Jessep:

And they're aware of that. Our art history lecturers are really great people and they talk about these things so well, but they also understand that they have to facilitate these roles in order to be able to get this type of information out there.

Ilena Shadbolt:

Which links to what Lana was saying participating in systems that are depleting you. And that weird condition of being aware of it but still having to participate.

Mark Williams:

Matt, you mentioned some other people you found inspiring. Who were they?

Matt Tini:

In terms of boldness, but also managing diplomacy, Jasmine Togo-Brisby. I think twice she got asked the same question, and she could have said "Oh, I already talked about this. Weren't you listening? But it was said in a way that wouldn't embarrass someone, but still very clear.

The topics she was talking about were deeply traumatic. But linking back to what Lana was talking about, it seemed like art was a space where she could deal with traumatic things for healing and reconnection to her ancestors. And the way she presented it was very raw and very genuine.

Looking at the whole symposium and the structure of it, (Jasmine's presentation) was almost like a bit of a glitch. There were some quite heavy academic presentations (but) hers was from a place of experience. It got me thinking about using academia as a tool for criticality, but being careful

to not let academia erase real lived experiences, or continually put us under that lens as subject.

Mark Williams:

Sorawit mentioned something along the lines of: "being someone not from Aotearoa, there's not really a structure here to support me".

Meleseini Faleafa:

Being from a migrant background and then being immersed into this bicultural nation, there's no aspiration for sovereignty. The idea of power or authority, you don't want it. We're just trying to get by, just trying to fit in.

And also what Rachel (Rakena) was saying about how sovereignty has never brought us peace. It's only brought us pain and it reminds us of colonisation. That definitely resonated with how I feel in my institution, just being and existing and just being Brown.

Mark Williams:

Was there an alternative term that seemed more useful for you?

Meleseini Faleafa:

I liked how Rachel was talking about 'agency' and how agency gives you your own unique authority over your practice and what you make. And I liked Carl Mika.

Matt Tini:

Carl's presentation gave a really interesting, cyclical nature to the symposium, talking about language and the complexities when you're talking about a topic from one world perspective. For ex-

ample, from a te ao Māori perspective, if you're using another language such as English, it has a very European worldview. They don't quite align.

Rachel mentioned how the word 'sovereignty' in New Zealand is so heavily connected to the British crown, that it's difficult to separate that element from that word. I think that opened up opportunities for other people to talk about phrases that they prefer, or ways that they prefer to frame it. It helped me to kind of think about the power of language and how it frames different ideas and how we can use that.

Ilena Shadbolt:

Language is something that featured heavily between the lines of a lot of the presentations. (It) wasn't talked about directly. It was in Carl Mika's one, but mis/translations and how language can kind of frame the talks, but then also like world-views and how you move in the world.

Kate Donald:

I think (it) really showed how much we forget how blanketed everything is by colonisation and European and Westernised ideas. So you have that thing where they're trying to explain how something can mean so much more than we can put into the English language.

Mark Williams:

What about in terms of your practice, Lucy, what was the most valuable thing that you could take away and put in your toolkit?

Lucy Jessep:

I found this really hard. A lot of my practice has looked at taking control of your own image. I think it relates not so much directly, but all of my works look at surveillance and acknowledging how other people were viewing you. Also just being in uncomfortable spaces. Thinking about how you're put in relation to other people. Thinking about the camera as a tool. There's not necessarily direct correlations and relationships, but there are things that relate, especially using film and maybe moving image as a way to understand yourself in relation to things that are happening in your environment or...

Ilena Shadbolt:

What you just listed sounds really directly related to the concept of sovereignty and autonomy.

Lucy Jessep:

Yeah. But even that's an example of ... like, you seem a lot more comfortable using the phrase, 'autonomy' to relate to your practice. That's just such an example of the power one word to encapsulate the idea so much better. Just swapping those phrases has such a profound impact on how we regard our practices.

Kate Donald:

Maybe sovereignty doesn't have just one definition and we just pretend it does.

Ilena Shadbolt:

David said, in some traditions, art objects have sovereignty, (whereas in) modernism it was the tendency to attribute artistic genius to the person. But film is such a collaborative effort. I was

thinking ‘how can we even represent a collective sovereignty when everyone has so many different backgrounds and so many different experiences?’ But film brings together people working towards this ultimate product.

Lucy Jessep:

You can’t really completely corroborate all these different experiences, but as a platform film kind of mediates and creates a space that does that.

**AURA Student Critical Forum** featured five undergraduate students from three institutions: Meleseini Faleafa and Ilena Shadbolt (Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland) Kate Donald and Lucy Jessep (Ilam School of Fine Arts, Christchurch), Matt Tini (Whiti o Rehua School of Art, Massey University, Wellington).

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