



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

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Mata Aho: Mana wāhine in contemporary art

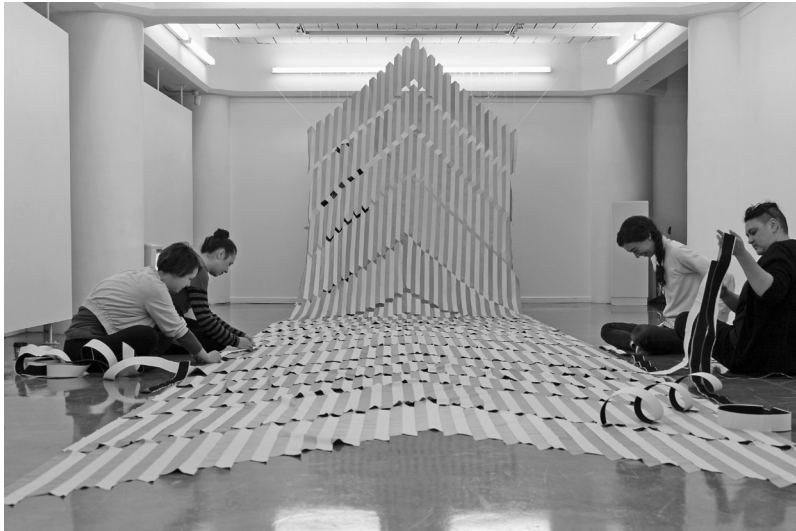
Tim Corballis interviews the Mata Aho Collective

MATA AHO IS a contemporary Māori women's art collective. Its four members, artists Erena Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) and Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne ki Wairarapa), work together on large, often textile-based, installations linked to mana wāhine—the 'empowerment and integrity of Māori women' as they put it in this interview. Their most recent finished work, *Kiko Moana*, featured in documenta 14, the latest iteration of the major international exhibition of contemporary art based in Kassel, Germany. As Matariki Williams suggests in this issue of Counterfutures, Mata Aho's involve-

ment in documenta 14 is a significant event, deserving of considerable attention.

I was interested in talking to Mata Aho about their approach to collective work, and how their artistic collectivity relates to political forms of collectivity. In individualistic Western cultures, collectivity is often considered a radical challenge. Mata Aho's responses to my questions hinted that it might be a more established aspect of Māori culture—less a radical decision than a normal part of the practice of Māori women.

What is political about their art? How does their practice relate to politics, to protest, and to the different worlds they move in? How do they navigate between their own communities and the Western oriented, international context of the contemporary art establishment? Mata Aho responded to this interview as a collective, each member having input at each stage.



Installing *Kaokao* 2014 at Toi Pōneke. From left to right Terri Te Tau, Erena Baker, Bridget Reweti, Sarah Hudson. Photo: Mata Aho Collective.

Tim Corballis

How did you first get together as a collective? Was there a particular agenda behind it, or was it more like four people who knew each other deciding to work together?

Mato Aho

We came together at a series of wānanga for artists and activists in 2011. After getting lost in kōrero about Māori Maidens, critical art theory, mana wāhine Māori, and moon phases we hatched plans to collaborate. Mata Aho quickly became four friends who enjoy making art together.

The secondary strength, or agenda if you like, is finding comfort in navigating art institutions together. Bringing our art—which has many influences but is primarily founded in mātauranga Māori—into a Western cultural construct, the gallery, can sometimes be a curious exchange. We don't have art dealers or managers but instead we support each other in striving for the best representation of our work.

TC

Do you still have links with the activist communities represented at the 2011 wānanga? Are you engaged in activism yourselves, aside from your art practice?

MA

Mata Aho's involvement with activist groups has been primarily where art can support a specific kaupapa or event. As individuals, we have been involved with organising wānanga and events like those that happened at Poupatatea Marae in 2011, and enjoy continued relationships with people in and around those groups and activities—such as Palmy Panthers and Kava Club.

TC

What connections are there between art and activism for you? Does your art express any of the anger at injustice and exploitation that often drives activism?

MA

Art and activism share whakapapa—a lot of the ideas around the transformation of society has its roots in the arts. Exploring our lived experiences as Māori who happen to be artists grounds our practice and the narratives that underpin our work. This approach encourages us to be less didactic about political issues while opening up spaces for the audience to explore with us. In that way, the context that the work is shown in and the dialogue that happens around it is very important.

TC

Why is it important for you to be engaging in Western art institutions? Does it take you away from your other communities of friends and whānau, and from the practices and institutions that ground mātauranga Māori?

MA

We do feel that it's important for us to be connected to Western art institutions because a significant part of our art influences have come through these institutions. Something we aim to do is negotiate what mātauranga Māori looks within those spaces. With *Kiko Moana* we brought friends and whānau into the work by asking them to contribute personal stories of their figurative and metaphorical experiences with taniwha.

TC

What does it mean to you to be working collectively? And what counts as your 'work'—for instance, is the collective practice itself

more or less important than the final outcome or exhibition?

MA

We relish in our ‘four-brain, eight-hand’ approach, which enables a sense of supportive freedom as we continually attempt to develop works that are bigger than what we can achieve in our individual capacities. Our strength as a group is our collective authorship. Our aim is to construct projects in such a way that it isn’t possible to tell who has contributed which part—and often we can’t tell either. In this way we leave our own pride at the door because the work isn’t about us as individual artists. We have a shared responsibility in producing the best quality work we can and through this are able to create large-scale art works that we would not be able to achieve individually. Throughout Indigenous art histories, especially women’s practices, this is not a new concept. Our practice is complex and through its development, very intentional. It requires constant communication. This way we can always agree in the direction a work is going. There isn’t one part of a project that is more important than another, it’s all relevant.

TC

Do you take that attitude from your collaboration—of leaving pride at the door, of collectivity—with you and out into the world? Why is it important? Is it only important in the art context, or are there other places where you practice this?

MA

It’s so much harder to achieve that same level of detachment in our individual practices. We find that it’s a lot easier to present and talk about our collective work, and to stand behind it with confidence, because it’s a shared responsibility. The desire to lift each other up is greater than a fear of tall poppy syndrome, for

example. The collective is a good framework to practice trust and detachment for other scenarios. That's not to say we don't experience tension or friction in our work, but that's usually for some practical reason like that we've forgotten to eat because we are pushing to get something finished.

TC

You also have a wider participatory practice (as in the *Taniwha Tales* collected as part of *Kiko Moana*). How does this larger collaboration relate to the 'smaller' collaboration between the four of you?

MA

Working collectively has brought about an appreciation for a multiplicity of understandings. With *Kiko Moana* we wanted to explore the variety of ways that people experience the concept of taniwha, so it was important for us to get perspectives from lots of different people. We asked our immediate networks (friends and whānau) to participate. We talked with a variety of people, some whose only experience of taniwha was from a book, and others who had experienced more first-hand encounters. Each is as valid as the next, and collectively they build a wonderfully rounded concept of what taniwha can be in 2017. These personal reflections informed part of the conceptual basis for *Kiko Moana*. We found that there were three main themes that ran through each taniwha tale: taniwha as protector, taniwha as communicator, and taniwha as traveller.

The second reason was that we found comfort and security in travelling with these stories from our family and friends. As Mata Aho tends to shy away from ideas of individual ownership or authorship in our work, *Taniwha Tales* was an extension of that, giving more people a stake in *Kiko Moana*. This gave us motivation and confidence through the daunting task of exhibiting at documenta 14.

TC

I am curious about the role of politics. Art and politics can sometimes seem like completely separate spheres. Or, on the contrary, art can sometimes seem political through and through. How do you see your art? What—if this is a meaningful question—is its politics?

MA

Mana wāhine, namely the empowerment and integrity of Māori women, is the mātauranga Māori that forms the basis of our work, including processes of research, development, and wānanga. We employ it as a philosophy through which to view our histories.

Through much of New Zealand's recent history, Māori women have led protests, been the instigators of change, and powerful leaders in their respective fields. Yet in spite of all this undeniable strength we are often invisible within the wider community. There are so many women in the creative sector doing incredible things, but who are only known to those who work immediately alongside them. Visibility is afforded to those who have a platform, and for Māori women to be visible, we have to achieve to the highest possible platform to get the smallest recognition.

Mana wāhine is also the established framework we use to achieve our current and future goals, which for us as artists means the ability to make artwork. An integral aspect of mana wāhine is whanaungatanga—to connect deeply with others and stay grounded and accountable. Whanaungatanga offers the opportunity to nurture intergenerational relationships and we cannot stress enough the importance of having tuākana and tēina.

TC

How do you see yourself inspired by histories of Māori women's protests? Are there specific references or practices in your work that reach back to that tradition?

MA

We've been very lucky to have spent time with and been taught by Māori women artists, such as Kura Te Waru Rewiri who experienced making art during the Māori renaissance and the challenges of developing an art career at that time. The Haeata collective was a group of Māori women who created Hineteiwaiwa as part of the *Mana Tiriti* exhibition in 1990. This followed *Kohia ko taikaka anake*, an exhibition hosted by the National Art Gallery—which a number of women artists pulled out of because of the way they were positioned in relation to their male colleagues.

TC

Counterfutures has included writing from and about a whole lot of political traditions: Marxism, communism, socialism, anarchism, feminism. That's a whole, contradictory bunch of Western 'isms'. Are those isms meaningful to you and to your practice?

MA

As a collective our worldview is grounded within mātauranga Māori, which is, in itself, both porous and responsive to the environment. Political influences filter in, and having an awareness of the ideologies behind these 'isms' is important for us when it comes to negotiating space and being intersectional across those spaces. Although many aspects of these movements do contradict, they have also resonated within Māori communities at different times as they all address—in some form—the economic and cultural systems that marginalise people. A point of difference, however, is that Māori self-determination is tied specifically to Aotearoa, and

everything, all of the historical and cultural struggles that Māori face, all flow out from the land.

TC

Are there specific examples? Are there texts or other forms of influence that have been important to you in your practice?

MA

The most important influence in our collective learning has come through wānanga, spending intensive time with tuākana and learning about their practices, knowledge, and experience that way. Recently, for example, we spent a week in Hokianga with Dr Maureen Lander who taught us techniques with harakeke, which we are looking at adapting and applying to an upcoming work.

TC

How, if at all, would you say mana wāhine relates to all those isms?

MA

A really important aspect of mana wāhine—and our primary concern as a collective—is how our work can support and address the issues that our communities face. From there, it expands out to creating meaningful relationships with other Indigenous artists and their communities; that is our priority as a collective. As to how mana wāhine relates to those ‘isms’, the value really lies with the people who work within those spaces—we are always open to forming meaningful relationships with people who are also interested in supporting Indigenous movements.

TC

What are the most important issues your communities face?

Could you describe the process by which you hope to address them in your work?

MA

One particular issue that we are interested in pursuing further in our work is the historical framing and representation of women's stories. Women's roles within cosmological narratives can often be to assist a male protagonist to fulfil his quest or impart knowledge. We are interested in presenting atua wāhine, and women in general, as the protagonists within these narratives. Our process for this will be a combination of exploring a chosen material and collaborating with others whose contribution can provide another context and access point for the work.

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