



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

FIVE

2018

The continuum, the river: On the need for critical writing on Māori art

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KEI ROTO I a koe te rongoā. Mēnā he hiahia, me whakaputa. Kāore au e kōrero, “me pēnei, me pēnei”. Kei a koe.¹ This was the answer from curator Ngahiraka Mason to a question I asked at a City Gallery Wellington public talk. Her kōrero had addressed the work of Colin McCahon by exploring the state of race relations in the period she referred to as his ‘golden years’. Her talk unveiled new and interesting understandings as a particularly Māori—and very particularly Tūhoe—insight was applied to aspects of his work. I wanted to know how she reconciled both her personal and iwi viewpoints within an institution and canon that upholds McCahon as a sin-

1 There is no recording of the talk, however this text comes from a Tweet I sent recapping her answer: <https://twitter.com/TuskCulture/status/905349815638253568>.

gular genius.² The point I took from her kōrero, whether it was intended or not, was the disparity between a curator's nuanced understanding of content, and how an exhibition is produced for, and experienced by, visitors.

As a curator, I desire a reaction from visitors. I hope they are prompted to think further about the kaupapa and mātauranga that we have extrapolated and moulded into an exhibition. As a writer and editor, I desire engagement from readers. Bringing both of these spheres together, I understand the importance of having curated work critiqued by a writer. I also know how terrifying this experience can be, and how hesitant many people are about offering critique, or being critiqued. With these tensions in mind, this article considers how the practices of curation and critique complement one another, and how they work in concert to form the basis of a thriving arts ecology.

Unpacking the critique

Two recent articles from Lana Lopesi and Rosabel Tan have prompted reflection on both the necessity to write about the arts, and how we do so.³ What emerges from these pieces is the notion that critical writing is an essential component of the museum and gallery sector. As I have noted elsewhere, 'it writes an exhibition into existence and holds that moment in perpetuity'.⁴ Reviews,

2 As above, this is my Tweet of the question I asked: <https://twitter.com/TuskCulture/status/905349475446562816>

3 Lana Lopesi, 'Critical Infrastructures,' *The Pantograph Punch*, February 23, 2018, <http://pantograph-punch.com/post/critical-infastructures>; Rosabel Tan, 'The Critic in New Zealand,' *The Lancewood Foundation*, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://horokareading.com/the-critic-in-new-zealand-by-rosabel-tan/>.

4 Matariki Williams, 'Wānanga Kōrero: Our mana is inherent,' *The Pantograph Punch*, May 4, 2017, <http://pantograph-punch.com/post/dark-objects-the-dowse>.

reflections, critiques—whatever form they take—give us reference points to come back to as curators, artists, students, and researchers. They allow the exhibitions, and the works therein, to have a longer life—enabling the concepts involved to be extended by others in the future.

Negative assumptions about critical writing remain, particularly in museums and art galleries, and these require dispelling. One assumption about critical writing is that it is criticism for criticism's sake. This notion undermines the amount of work that goes into writing a considered response to art and exhibitions. In addressing these assumptions, and arguing for the need of critique, I am taking a leaf from Tan. In an interview with Radio New Zealand, Tan talked about the role of critics and the approaches they take. From her perspective, the critic is there to assess and respond to works and to share experience through writing that surprises readers and opens up new avenues of thinking. Despite the negative ways in which critics can be perceived, Tan maintains that they approach their role from a place of *aroha*: 'I think it's one of the most loving things you can do because you're taking the time to really think and engage with this play or this work'.⁵

In a similar vein, Australian writer and curator Chris McAuliffe suggests that 'the art critic, in simple terms, acts as a mediator between the artist or art work and the public'.⁶ The critic enables the public to access different ways of considering art. McAuliffe's affirmation of the critic's role comes, however, with a warning: 'Art criticism also limits artistic practice by lim-

5 Rosabel Tan, 'Reviewing the state of reviewing,' interview by Justin Gregory, *Standing Room Only*, Radio New Zealand, October 18, 2015. Audio, 10:50, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/standing-room-only/audio/201775101/reviewing-the-state-of-reviewing>.

6 Chris McAuliffe, 'Is "New-Art" Non-art? Critical Responses to Conceptual Art in Australia,' in *Practices of Criticism in Australia*, vol. 1, ed. Roger Benjamin (Brisbane: Art Association of Australia, 1986), 1.

iting discourse to an authoritative few'.⁷ As critical writing is inextricably linked to the artwork, what happens if the discourse is limited? What does this mean if only a few voices and perspectives are heard? The reason I ask readers to heed caution here is because minority voices are underrepresented in critical writing on museums and galleries. The discourse is, indeed, already limited to an 'authoritative few'.

As argued by Graham Coulter-Smith, 'ideology is, in the end, inescapable and the best form of criticism would be one which exposes, examines, and reflects upon its own ideological framework'.⁸ Critiques, then, need to provide insightful analysis of the work—with the critic reflexive about the foundation on which their analysis is constructed, and how this relates to the exhibition. Through examining the ideological frameworks surrounding our criticism we can open the practice of critique to different perspectives. As a Māori writer who yearns for more writing from a *te ao Māori* perspective, this appeals. Publishing Māori writers who are working within their own ideological frameworks would contribute to opening the new avenues of thinking Tan calls for.

Of course we could spend time unpacking what these perspectives are, and what it means to write from a Māori perspective, but that is trying to resolve the unresolvable. If you try and put a barrier around what qualifies as a 'Māori perspective', this barrier would likely be built over, around, and on top of. When it comes to defining the undefinable, I would prefer to take the words of the late Cliff Whiting (Te Whānau-ā-Apanui):

7 Ibid.

8 Graham Coulter-Smith, 'Criticizing Peter Tyndall: Politics versus Play in Post-modern Criticism,' in *Practices of Criticism in Australia*, vol. 1, ed. Roger Benjamin (Brisbane: Art Association of Australia, 1986), 26.

Wherever we are on the river, we are part of the river. . . . If we are Māori we believe in the past, the present, and the future, we are all part of this, the flow of it all, if we believe in the continuum we are part of that continuum, there are no differences.⁹

Similarly, my previous manager, Dr Wayne Ngata (Te Aitanga a Hauiti, Ngāti Ira, Ngāti Porou), has said to me that everything is knowledge, but the physical manifestations differ with art being at the ‘sharp end of knowledge’ due to its ability to provoke and innovate.¹⁰ By thinking of knowledge, particularly mātauranga Māori, in this way, the continuum within Māori art forms is visible. Further, the disciplinary divisions separating contemporary Māori visual arts from mātauranga Māori and taonga tūturu are contested.

This kōrero around what is or isn’t mātauranga Māori, what is or isn’t contemporary Māori art, what is or isn’t kaupapa Māori, continues—as evidenced by two recent symposiums that answered these questions with further questions.¹¹ This is both a good thing, and a frustrating thing. Good because it is counterintuitive to force a definitive answer onto amorphous concepts that are simultaneously in the process of cultural reclamation; frustrating because, as a researcher, definitive answers are very helpful. Regardless of these kōrero, Māori artists are producing work, and it is imperative that they are supported through being written about.

This is not to say that Māori art is not written about, but rather that it is important to consider who is writing about it, and from what worldview. To reiterate the point from Coulter-Smith

9 Rangihiroa Panoho, *Māori Art: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory* (Auckland: Bateman Publishing, 2015), 124.

10 Dr Wayne Ngata, personal communication, October 16, 2017.

11 These events were: ‘If we never met—A wānanga on curating indigenous art’ hosted by Pātaka Art + Museum at Takapūwāhia Marae, Porirua, December 2016; and the symposium ‘Tai Ahiahi /// Tai Awatea: Curating Contemporary Māori Art,’ City Gallery, Wellington, September 2017.

regarding the need for reflexivity in writing, it is important that we consider how writers position themselves when writing about art—as a piece of critical writing can assume authority. As a wahine Māori, it is a natural process to state my whānau history in my writing or biographical notes, one only needs to look at the practice of mihimihi to understand how Māori reference our very origins when greeting others.¹² My whakapapa isn't provided as a means of legitimising my viewpoint; rather, it provides context as to why I read things in the way I do.

Critiques from different worldviews

To illustrate the ways in which writing about art can differ in Aotearoa, I will look at two pieces published around the same time, but authored from different worldviews. First, the prominent Pākehā writer, curator, and arts commentator, Hamish Keith. In 2007, Keith published *The Big Picture: A History of New Zealand Art from 1642*, a history that includes an exploration of the contemporary Māori art movement that started in the 1960s. He begins his history in 1642, the year Abel Tasman saw Aotearoa. In reference to the struggle for recognition faced by the artists that later became known as the 'Māori modernists', Keith states that: 'To escape from those confining models and the conservatism of customary culture, the only choice for young Māori artists was internal expatriation—to flee the marae for the metropolis'.¹³ This is a problematic statement for a few rea-

12 For further information of mihimihi, the definition from Te Taura Whiri is simple and accessible: <http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/te-reo-maori/tikanga-maori/mihimihi-en-nz/>

13 Hamish Keith, *The Big Picture: A History of New Zealand Art from 1642* (Auckland: Godwit, 2007), 201.

sons, not least of all because it asserts that the artists viewed the marae and metropolis as mutually exclusive. It is a position that fails to account for the cultural overlap these artists experienced. To contextualise Keith's statement, it should be noted that the urban migration of Māori was already in full swing at this time. The artists seem not to have been inspired by the need to escape conservatism—which isn't to say that Māori were devoid of conservatism—rather, this movement to the metropolis needs to be situated in a wider social context.

Early in *The Big Picture*, Māori art and history are overtly 'othered' by Keith when he states that it

only has significance if we also expect that Māori art, unlike our own or any other, was not capable of evolution or change. This is a dangerous and damaging idea, which over two centuries has contributed to a distortion of our view of Māori art and its dynamic energy.¹⁴

Keith's 'our own' excludes both Māori art and Māori readers, yet it simultaneously argues for a more nuanced understanding of Māori art. The separation between 'our art' and 'Māori art' positions Keith's viewpoint as outside Māori art. Elsewhere in the book Keith assumes the authority of being able to write about Māori art while situated within the Western school of art history. Particularly striking here is the assumption Keith makes, as a Pākehā, when claiming that Māori 'customary culture' is conservative.

To counter this passage, I turn again to Mason and a 1998 seminar paper she presented on Ralph Hotere. Mason suggests Hotere's work is generated by a distinctly Māori mode of comprehension:

14 Keith, *The Big Picture*, 20.

For me, it is not coincidental that Hotere is Māori and uses Māori language in his paintings. By engaging in this oral tradition, Hotere is positioning himself as narrator and performer of *mōteatea* . . . a narrator who has a contemporary audience that can appreciate both the visual and the oral traditions.¹⁵

Through the writing of this wahine Māori, the holistic nature of a Māori worldview is applied to art. Mason's interpretation of Hotere's work links it to a form of *waiata* Māori steeped in history and animated by dynamic language. This reading is attuned to the innate Māori understanding that everything is interconnected (as suggested in the earlier quote from Whiting), and it helps dispel the idea that for Māori to succeed as artists the *marae* must give way to the city.

The landscape for critical writing in Aotearoa

More Māori need to be writing critically about art, and to have the freedom to write about it from any perspective they see fit. The caveat here concerns where this writing will go. The aforementioned *Pantograph Punch* is one of the few online platforms in New Zealand for this kind of writing that has a commitment to honouring the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.¹⁶ Additionally, if writing is not online then the associated costs to publish increase exponentially. Not being online also means the writing is less accessible for future researchers, artists, and curators. Diversi-

15 Ngahiraka Mason, 'Hotere and Mōteatea—Hei Kōrero,' in *Hotere: Seminar Papers from Into the Black*, eds. Roger Taberner and Ronald Brownson (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 1998), 61.

16 In the interests of transparency, it should be noted that I am the editor—Kaupapa Māori, at *The Pantograph Punch*.

fyng the representation of critical art writers is just one part of a wider issue when it comes to securing writing about exhibitions in museums and galleries. A cursory glance at the major art periodicals in Aotearoa reveals how few Māori artists have their work written about, and how few of these publications regularly feature Māori writers.

Another point to bear in mind is that critical, considered, in-depth writing requires time. For a writer, this means being remunerated for their time. For a publication, this requires funding to pay writers. A recent example of the way financial support has impacted the coverage of art in Aotearoa was the 2017 Venice Biennale and documenta 14. New Zealand's presence at the biennale is supported by The Arts Council of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa. In 2017 the chosen artist was Lisa Reihana. This was a significant year for New Zealand art in another way, as Ralph Hotere, Nathan Pohio, and the Mata Aho Collective were selected to show at documenta 14, an exhibition that has been held every five years since 1955, and is one of the most critically-acclaimed art exhibitions in the world. This was New Zealand's first appearance at documenta 14, and it was significant that all of the artists selected were Māori.

Here we have two significant international art events in which all the artists representing Aotearoa are Māori. The events had overlapping timeframes, with documenta 14 running April 8—September 17 in Athens and Kassel, and the New Zealand Pavilion at the biennale running May 17—November 26. In terms of exposure, there was a marked difference in how these events were reported. For example, Reihana's *Emissaries* was covered on Radio New Zealand by presenter Lynn Freeman, who was supported by Creative New Zealand to report from Venice about the biennale. The biennale featured on the station's following programmes: *Morning Report*, *Nine to Noon with Kathryn Ryan*, *Upbeat*, *Standing Room Only*, and *Sunday Morning*. Arti-

cles were also published in the *Listener* and *Metro*, as well as an item on Three's television show, *The Hui*.

By contrast, documenta 14 received coverage from specialised publications with smaller reach than the national broadcaster and mainstream media. There were two mentions of documenta 14 on Radio New Zealand, and a news article on Māori Television's *Te Kaea*. A range of pieces were written for the online critical arts sites *Pantograph Punch*, *Eyecontact*, and *Contemporary Hum*, as well as another article in *Art News New Zealand*, all of which arguably have smaller readerships than the *Listener*, *Metro*, and the website *Noted* that consolidates these magazines. Given the achievement of all these Māori artists, this disparity is disappointing. This is not to disparage the amount of coverage that *Emissaries* received; rather, what would be preferable is if the artists shown at documenta14 received the same amount of exposure, and across a broad range of media offerings.

Thinking about these issues has shown me that the canon needs to be challenged; the established ways of accessing and writing about art need to evolve. If the role of a critic is to help others understand these stories, then bringing critics from different and under-represented backgrounds into the discussion would enrich readers by offering them a diversity of perspectives through which to view art. These moments, these works, need to exist in perpetuity. We need to write ourselves into the canon.

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