

Re-Mix: Eighth Festival of Pacific Arts

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AFTER THE MEDIA-ECSTATIC HYPE OF THE Sydney Olympics, the Festival of Pacific Arts provides an extraordinary contrast and a window into the global and non-global issues of the island world. Australian journalists and arts festival aficionados have had to trust that this Festival will occur at all. Accustomed to slick publicity and highly professional production, the non-Pacific Islander audience is thrown into a crisis of confusion and suspicion about the capability of the organizers to manage anything at all. Their increasingly frequent and frantic appeals for information, dates, events, programs, and tickets, are steadfastly ignored. Despite efforts to hasten the delivery of precious information, nothing will happen until the delegates arrive with the materi-

al in hand, just as the Festival is about to commence.

The key elements of the Festival of Pacific Arts are ceremony and celebration, encounter and exchange. The guiding principles are obligation and reciprocity, negotiation and consensus. As the host country of the Eighth Festival of Pacific Arts, New Caledonia is obliged to provide suitable venues, hospitality, transport and otherwise facilitate the arrangement for over 3000 visiting artists and other members of the delegations from over twenty Pacific island countries. The administrative infrastructure is provided by the South Pacific Commission, the Pacific nations' economic, social and cultural umbrella organization, which forms a company specifically for each Festival. The artistic



Figure 1. Drummers and dancers from Papua New Guinea.

Photograph by: Karen Stevenson.



Figure 2. Women from the Caroline Islands.

directors are appointed by their respective nations, and meet several times in the host country to discuss the Festival's theme, main events, and inspect possible venues. While the Festival's core activities take place in the capital city, decentralization is also important, and events are also organized with local communities in provincial venues.

The agenda for the two weeks of the Festival has not changed despite the desires to inject more professional management and organized programming into the growing range of events the Festival now covers. Some are seeking strategies that will bring Pacific talents to the attention of the international art world where they are hoping to make an impact. The inclusion of the Fourth Nouméa Biennale of Contemporary Art in this Festival was one such endeavor.

The principal events of the Festival of Pacific Arts are the Opening Ceremony, a specially choreographed pageant culminating in a magnificent full-dress parade of all the delegations; the Arrival of Canoes, a splendid welcome for traditional navigators; and the Exchange of Gifts, the solemn and

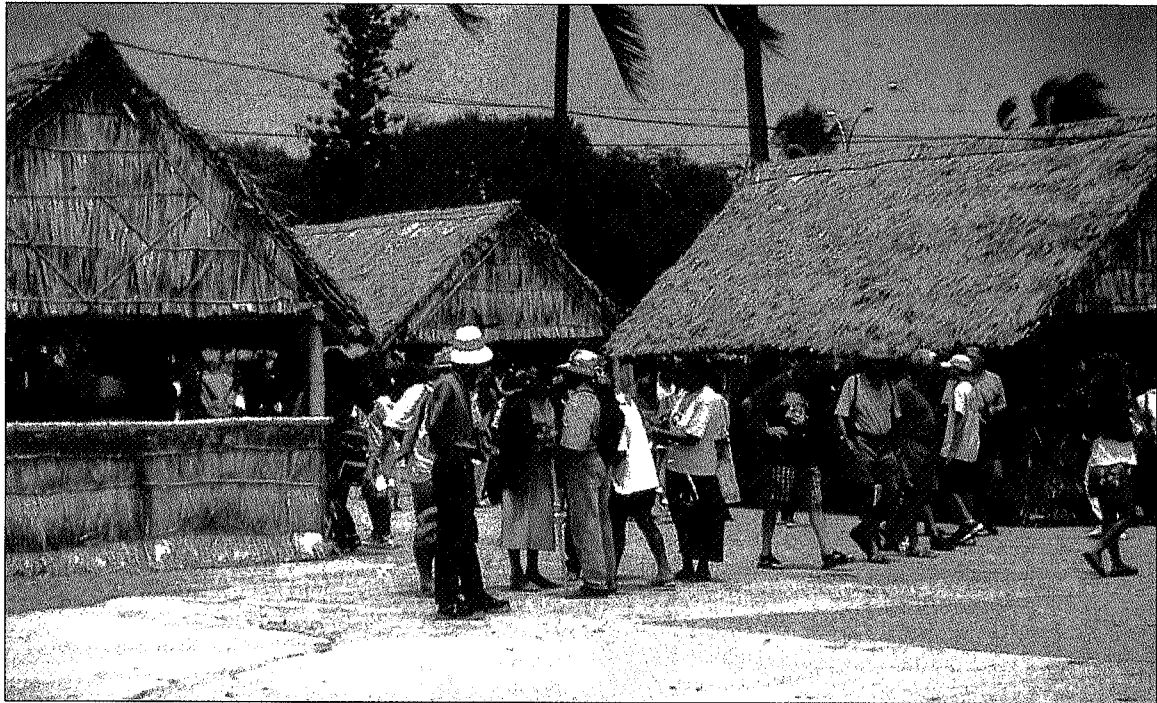
momentous occasion for high-ranking members of each delegation to present ceremonial gifts to their hosts. Members of each of the twenty-four delegations¹ participate in presentations of dance, art exhibitions, demonstrations and workshops across an extraordinary range of visual art forms, oratory, story telling, book launches, film festivals and feasting.

Throughout the Festival, there is a revolving series of performances by dance troupes of all the delegations at a number of open-air venues (Fig. 1). The English term 'dance performance' minimizes and disguises the nature and complexity of these presentations. It hints at little of the complexities of self-adornment and costume, dance accessories, coordination and choreography of songs and dances (Fig. 2).

Before their performance one member of the Tokelau troupe explained that their presentation 'The Journey' had been specially prepared for the Festival. This collaborative work gave individuals the opportunity to contribute their expertise, whether in concept, ideas for choreography, chants and songs or other elements of the presentation, but the final decisions were taken collectively.

'The Journey' commenced with action songs, *fafale*, featuring coordinated movement with paddles while recounting feats of Tokelauans, then traditional chants *falehiva*, sung in an ancient language recalling the ancient history of Tokelau and *fahoi*, giving the genealogy of the discoverers of Tokelau. The performance then turns to the 'lost island', known as Swains Island, currently a territory of the United States. The presentation reveals the genealogy of people and their inherited links to the island, and follows with a challenge to the United States to relinquish it and respect the sovereignty of Tokelau. 'The Journey' concludes with a message to other Pacific Islanders, requesting that they resolve the conflicts of today, throw away their guns and find ways to make peace by reflecting on the theme of the Festival, "Words of yesterday, words of today and words of tomorrow".

The Craft Village is a thriving marketplace where leading craftspersons demonstrate their highly skilled specialties including tattooing, weaving fibres and featherwork, shell and bead jewelry, carving and engraving (Fig. 3). Among



Photograph by: Karen Stevenson.

Figure 3. View of the Artists' Village, Anse Vata, Nouméa.

the Pacific delegations. Often, these delegates have waited four years for the chance to get tattooed by a Polynesian master, or to buy a treasured item such as a fine Tahitian tivaevae, exquisitely woven hat or colourful bilum from Papua New Guinea. It is here that you can catch up on the latest of island fashion, items of body art and self-adornment. The Festival of Pacific Arts has been a catalyst for the development and innovation of artistic practice across a wide range of highly skilled crafts. One area that has been followed by several commentators is how the Festival has played an appreciable part in developing the intensity of interest, popularity and diffusion of knowledge about the art of tatau (tattoo) (Fig. 4).²

It is usual for the primary Festival events, especially spectacular dance performances (Fig. 5), to be conducted in outdoor spaces without great technical support in amplification and lighting (in theory, as they would be when performed in their own localities). However, in New Caledonia this program ran side by side with concerts of Pacific-style syncretic 'world music', reggae bands, small and large productions of contemporary theatre and performances by renowned dance companies filling all available theatres, entertainment centers and clubs. Contemporary art displays and workshops were put up in local galleries, town halls and

community centers, with one or two major exhibitions and seminars focussing on what can only loosely be called contemporary visual arts.

With all these rich ingredients, how successful was the mix in New Caledonia? Regular festival-goers rate Papua New Guinea in 1980 and the Cook Islands in 1992 as the best-ever Festivals of Pacific Arts, and despite having comparatively greater wealth and resources than most other Pacific Island nations, New Caledonia missed this mark. Yet, as with past Festivals, it is the overall exuberance and creative energy of the participants that people carry away as their lasting memory of the Festival.

In Nouméa, inclement squalls disrupted some major outdoor events, including the opening ceremony, which was postponed. Apart from the weather, more people were dispirited by the locals' use of the Festival to their own advantage. RFO television and radio decided to strike causing a complete broadcasting blackout for the first two days. Also, there were fairly audible squabbles over dissatisfactions and discontent between local artists and government agencies that led some to boycott the Festival.

The cause of the boycott was nominal dissatisfaction with the current legal statutes (or lack of them) governing copyright, royalties and artists'

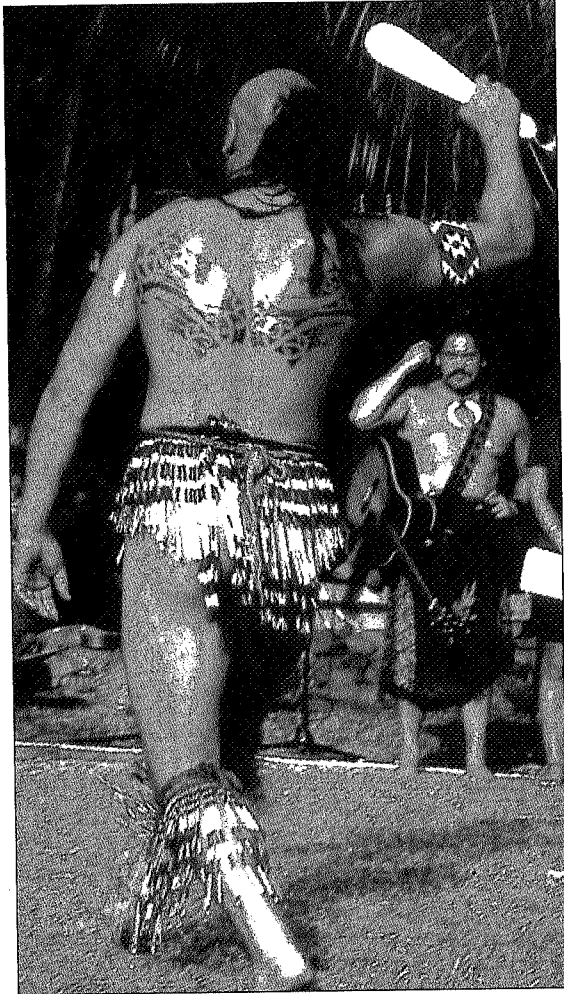


Figure 4. Maori delegate with tattoo.

rights. One of the local artists' grumbles was the lack of exhibition space, especially for the more avant-garde among them. The lack of exhibition space, more specifically, the lack of organized exhibition spaces selling local artists work as well as those arriving with their countries' delegations, was a distinct oversight of the Festival organizers. If they considered that the Fourth Biennale of Contemporary Art, which was incorporated into the Festival program, sufficed as the visual arts event of the Festival, they should have known from past experience that this would be insufficient.

There were some difficulties in attempting to structure the Fourth Nouméa Biennale of Contemporary Art as the major contemporary visual arts event into the Eight Festival of Pacific Arts. The Tjibaou Cultural Centre is the ideal setting for the Nouméa Biennale, an event that has not been so well placed in its previous incarna-

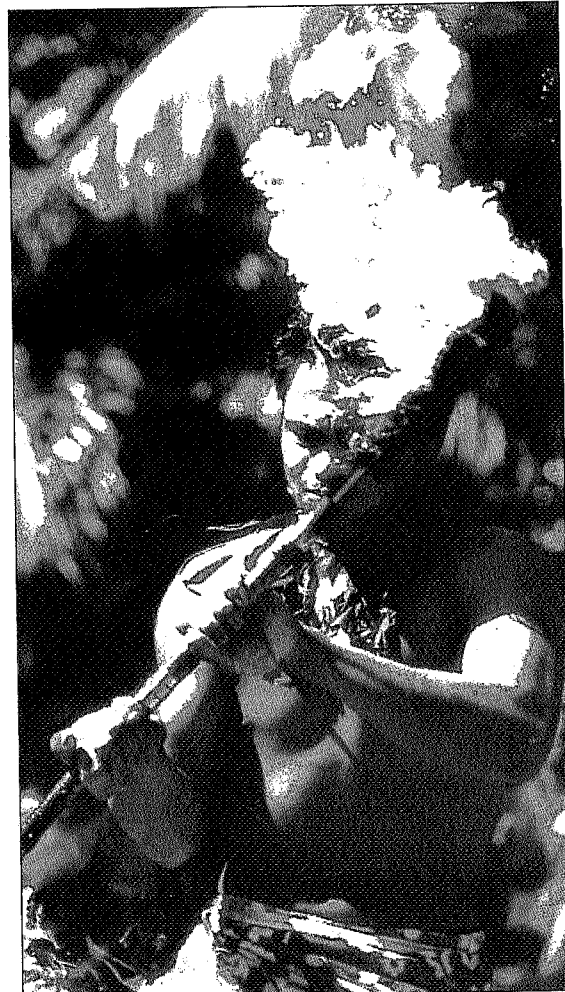


Figure 5. Samoan fire dance.

Photograph by: Karen Stevenson.

tions. It has grown into an event that suits the fairly cosmopolitan local artists, many of whom (whether *Kanak* or from a multiplicity of other ethnic backgrounds) have traveled and exhibited overseas. The boycott by some of the local artists, who may have used the shield of copyright issues to cover schisms in local art politics, skewed the selection. It was a pity that we did not see some of the recent work of leading Kanak artists (many women among them) who have liberated Kanak art from its strict traditions into the freedom of individual expression. Nevertheless there was a good representation across a diversity of practices, including the masterful transformation of decayed wood into Jean-Michel Katé's sculpture *L'Igname*, a symbol bearing all the dignity of Kanak men for whom it stands. Hélène Janet's photo collage of her peripatetic voyages with her poster of a nude

man snoring, Happening EuroPacifique 1997-2000, was amusing and Florence Guiliani's basket/cradle/shield was a thoughtful multi-media statement about the ebb and flux of the new country taking shape out of diverse influences.

The conflict between the Biennale and the Festival concerns the nature of a biennale per se, which, even if it is a good event for New Caledonia's artists, may not be the best vehicle for all Pacific artists (see Lewis-Harris this volume). This begs the really big question, that is, whether the selection criteria for a biennale are really representative of current arts practice across the Pacific as well as globally practiced visual art forms?

There are avant-garde artists from the Pacific region intent on conquering worlds of art far beyond their shores, but most of them come from the countries where there is a strong (even dominant) culture of Western art - Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia and Hawai'i. Artists who live and work in the urban milieu of these countries are aware of and adept at creating cutting-edge contemporary works that fit the bias of international biennales (post-modern reverential, conceptual, new media, high technology). Among them are Brook Andrew, Brenda L. Croft, Ani O'Neill, Jim Vivieaere, Lisa Reihana, and Herman Pi'ikea Clark. It is not only the choice of work, but its placement and conjunction with other works in the Biennale that are part of the professionalism of Biennale accomplished artists

In contrast to these cool post-modernist works was the huge, painted canvas prepared by a group of artists from Mangkaja Arts (Fitzroy Crossing). Placed on the floor, it was used as a dance ground for the artists' performances. 'Yilimbirri' and 'Wayamalpajarti Kurtal' as well as the work of Papua New Guinea artists Venatius Gadd and Igsie Jimike. Michael Mel, the curator for Papua New Guinea³ has challenged several international arts events to accept performance as an integral part of the perception and process of creating 'contemporary visual art, Papua New Guinea style'. For the Biennale, Gadd and Jimike stepped from the audience and demounted their artworks from the exhibition installation. For Gadd this was a towering, concealing mask, a construction of long grass over cane with grass skirts and painted face masks attached, in the style of his own lan-

guage-culture group of Madang. Gadd's series of five oils on canvas, expressions of village life, were on the wall behind the mask. For Jimike it was *Nāma Yafa*, a cane, fabric and feather assemblage that he took down and put on his back (not his head). The artwork also included a cirlet of plumes as part of this dance costume.⁴ The intricate dance steps caused the white plumes attached by springs to the back of the construction to move in unison, an extraordinary effect but one he said was incomplete unless performed by a group of dancers.

As Jimike and Gadd are both university art school graduates, now teachers, they could lucidly explain their concurrent relationship between their abilities as leading artists in Papua New Guinea's contemporary society, and as individuals engaged and committed to supporting the cultural practices of their respective clan lineages. Jimike also explained that, after spending weeks in the preparation of these complex structures only the precious part, the feathers are retained and the rest discarded.

The inclusion/exclusion game of what is/is not Biennale style 'contemporary art' was debated on a television show the morning after the opening. Sero Kauautonga, an accomplished painter from Vanuatu whose work was in the Biennale, expressed surprise that Gadd and Jimike had included 'traditional' elements in their presentation. Sero and other long-term members of Vanuatu's Nawita Association, distinguish their contemporary arts practice from the strong presence of the living traditions of their country essentially on the basis of materials and style.

The Australian selection, curated by Rea, endeavored to be inclusive of different regions and practices of Aboriginal art, but few artists seemed to have actually taken part in negotiating their place in this setting and the dialogue going on in the Biennale and its Symposium. Although the curator's rationale was to emphasize younger, emerging artists, the selection seemed random, with often only one work per artist; the rationale for their selection was difficult to assess, except as standing for 'the diversity of Indigenous Australian art'.⁵ Torres Strait Islanders were overlooked in this selection, a pity as they have many cultural and genealogical links with neighboring Melanesian countries, especially New Caledonia.

Photograph by: Karen Stevenson.



Figure 6. Tuvalu women dancing.

The Biennale became unstuck because it was really part Biennale, part survey of contemporary art practice in the Pacific. The selection was heavily skewed towards urban-based artists and dominated by Australia, New Zealand and New Caledonia. There were no Tokelauan artists represented. Artists who had not been selected for the Biennale, came to the Festival with a roll of paintings under their arm looking for a chance to display and sell their work in a market significantly greater than any opportunity they may have in their home country. The cool post-modernist component seemed inward looking and detached. Dominated by paintings, interspersed with photographic works, some sculptures and a few installations, it lacked any engagement with other practitioners and artforms presented at the Festival.

If you took a walk through the Artist Village immediately after a walk through the Biennale, you would find a rainbow of different, wonderful and inventive objects or artworks. These ranged from the funky plastic beadwork from Nauru, to the virtuosity of *tivaevae* (Tahitian and Cook Islander appliqué and embroidered quilts). One also noticed the magical outbursts of color and

effect achieved in the dance costumes, accessories and fine mats made by the imaginative hands of weavers from Tuvalu, Niue, and Wallis and Futuna (Fig. 6).

The communities of the smaller island states make great efforts to prepare for the Festival, as it represents perhaps the single grand occasion where they can proudly show their cultural heritage. Their artists are reaching out in all directions, local and global. In many Pacific societies there has been a renaissance and re-evaluation of their core culture, and communities have gained confidence and pride in the sustaining values of their own heritage. As well, there are increasingly more fields of endeavor and creative expression connected to rapidly changing and developing world trends, needing new kinds of creative energy from Pacific artists.

As such, the Village should either be enlarged or better conceptualized. Audiences keen to watch dance performances and the major gift exchange ceremony found the inadequate open-air dance space at the Village frustrating, as they craned to see any view of the events over the heads of the first three rows of people (Fig. 7). The hut constructed for each country in the Village at Anse Vata was too confined and cramped for many types of work to be properly displayed and demonstrated.

In response to this burgeoning need the South Pacific Commission had devoted part of its exhibition space to a small but impressive display from the National Museum of Palau, where the next Festival will be held in 2004. This was shared by a dignified group of senior Maori weavers demonstrating their virtuosity with feather cloaks, as well as experimental multi-media body adornment and jewelry artists Sofia Tekela-Smith and Niki Hastings-McFall. The South Pacific Commission also sponsored an exhibition development workshop for the Pacific Islands Museum Association and an arts and crafts marketing workshop for women's development groups, nurturing the protection of cultural heritage and self-sufficiency models of economic development.

Other outlets and fringe activities included, La Maison du Temps Libre, which opened its doors "in the spirit of the Festival". This active community center at Kutio, rapidly became an impromptu venue into which visiting and local artists freely



Photograph by: Karen Stevenson.

Figure 7. The audience trying to glimpse a performance, Cultural Village.

mixed their creative spirits and energies in exhibitions, mixed media workshops, performance and concert nights, some planned and many extemporized. Patrice Kaikilekofe and co-workers at La Maison du Temps Libre extended their arms and their energies to welcome and encourage locals and visitors into collaborations of visual arts and contemporary dance throughout the day and night.

Further out, at Mount Doré, one of the municipalities of greater Nouméa, the Town Hall officials were engaged in negotiating a sister-city status with the delegation from Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia. This involved much feasting, dancing and celebrating as well as signing accords. La Marie de Mont Doré (Mont Doré Council) also presented a well-designed didactic exhibition on New Caledonia's multi-ethnic population. It explained how, when and why the waves of immigration of French, Polynesian, Arabic, Asiatic, Antilles, and even English and Irish, had arrived and settled. Their descendants now make up just over 50% of the population. The Festival strongly emphasises indigenous culture as the foundation of Pacific societies, but somewhere along the line the realities of *métissage* (intermarriage and intermingling

of cultures) have to be given due recognition.

The skills and confidence of contemporary artists and performers, in music, dance, theatre, visual arts, and all the possible fusions between these forms of creative expression have become increasingly apparent in successive Festivals. New music, experimental dance, a wider vision of visual arts, are now providing a new scope of events as strong and dynamic as the distinctive core of Pacific artistic heritage expressed in the Festival.

It is becoming apparent that the Festival of Pacific Arts may need to reinvent itself. Perhaps the present configuration of the festival, held once every four years at a different venue, is no longer enough. A re-mix may be necessary to allow the Festival, or festivals, to encompass more and different types of events commensurate with the different layers of interest, range and scope of artistic activity that are such an important part of life and living in the Pacific.

Notes

1. For the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts in New Caledonia, delegations came from American Samoa, Aotearoa New Zealand (Maori and Pacific Islander delegations), Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegations), Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kingdom of Tonga, Kiribati, Guam, Hawaii, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Norfolk Island, Northern Marianas, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Rapanui (Easter Island) Samoa, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Wallis and Futuna. The Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Pitcairn did not participate in this Festival.
2. In the Toi Maori Aotearoa: Maori Arts New Zealand publication for the Festival, *He Kupu Tisri*, Julie Paama-Pengelly takes a critical look at issues and cultural contexts around the practice of Ta Moko within the history and practices of tattoo.
3. Mel was an artist/curator in the 1996 Asia Pacific Triennial and curator in the 1999 APT. His art performance events have broken conventions and boundaries, yet have received critical acclaim for their striking concept and realization.
4. This is one of the most striking of Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands elaborate assemblages worn by related kin groups at public performances (there are no adequate words in European languages, nor experience in mainstream Western arts events to describe the

type, nature and purpose of assemblages constructed for dance performances in Papua New Guinea Highlands' societies, quite apart from estimations of their aesthetic and cultural value). I have a series of photographs available, showing different interpretations of this form from the 1960s to the present, which show how inventive it is possible to be within an inherited tribal art form.

5. See essay by Rea in the bilingual catalogue of the *Biennale d'Art Contemporain de Nouméa* and far greater detail on *Australian Indigenous Arts* and the delegation for the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts in the Australia Council's publication prepared for the event, *Australia's Indigenous Arts*. This review is particularly concerned with the visual arts component of the Festival.

References

Agence de Developpement de le Culture Kanak. 2000. *Biennale de Nouméa D'Art Contemporain*, Nouméa: Centre Culturelle Jean-Marie Tjibaou.

AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS ARTS.

Ngā Tāonga o Aotearoa - Treasures of New Zealand: Māori art at the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts in Kanaky/New Caledonia.