

EXQUISITE, APART: REMOTENESS AND/AS RESISTANCE

Charles Walker, Angela Tiatia, Laurent Antonczak, Andrea Eimke, Clinton Watkins; *Colab*, Faculty of Design & Creative Technologies, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland 1142, New Zealand.

E-mail: charles.walker@aut.ac.nz

Abstract

It has become routine to characterise digital art as indicative of an assumed universal shift from 'traditional' practices towards novel forms of cultural production, interaction and consumption. Frequently, running parallel to this is the assertion that space, time and distance have been compressed, subsumed, augmented, eliminated or are unable to resist being replaced by relations, experiences or symbolic values. This collective paper is based on a panel presentation at ISEA 2013. It discussed five different research approaches that address theoretical, practical, philosophical and artistic possibilities of engaging with the realities of distance, remoteness or 'exquisite apartness' as loci of resistance.

Keywords: distance, remoteness, resistance, Pacific, digital art, mobility, academic sites.

Last, loneliest, loveliest ...

*Last, loneliest, loveliest, exquisite, apart
On us, on us the unswerving season
smiles,
Who wonder 'mid our fern why men de-
part
To seek the Happy Isles. [1]*

Written at the high point of the British imperial globalization project, Rudyard Kipling's romanticisation of physical remoteness – apartness - and the experiential qualities of isolation, difference and beauty it evokes, remains at the core of pervasive existential narratives of identity that link individuals, institutions and industries across a diverse range of creative and cultural practices in New Zealand and the South Pacific.

In our own age, it has become routine to assert that, with the emergence of digital technologies, time, space and distance have been compressed, subsumed, augmented or eliminated by relations, experiences or symbolic values. From this viewpoint also, the various modalities of digital art are frequently characterized as indicative of an assumed universal shift from 'traditional' practices towards novel or socially-mediated forms of immaterial cultural production and consumption.

Yet, for New Zealand, the most remote OECD country, with an agriculture-based economy and small

population, "the enormity of the globe" remains a significant factor. New Zealand culture has historically been shaped by the profound experience of remoteness; simultaneously material (distance from population centres, markets, cosmopolitan culture, industry, raw materials, pollution, audiences) and immaterial (metropolitan discourses, ideas, social networks, cultural capital). At the same time, this isolation also offers access to new forms of cultural capital (e.g. the rhetorics of nature, environmental purity, sustainability, self-reliance or cultural distinctiveness).

... exotic, apart

Angela Tiatia grew up between the small village of Fagamalo in Samoa, where her mother was raised, and Auckland, home to the world's largest Polynesian population. In 2012, she moved to Sydney with her husband and son. Tiatia's work emerges from this new in-between space; informed by research, which she describes as inward, into the ancestral homeland, but also outward looking, to the larger, cosmopolitan cities of the world. The three projects presented here offer nuanced, ambivalent perspectives on how the Pacific has been and continues to be viewed from such locales.

For over two centuries, the Pacific, in the Western imagination, has been synonymous with the notion of paradise. The European Romantic fascination with exoticism and remoteness of time, place and culture, created a rise in the production and demand of images of beautiful topless girls and women being depicted as sexual objects.

Tiatia appropriates a central, ubiquitous motif of these constructed images, the hibiscus flower. Not only an iconic and misrepresented image of beauty and nature, it also functioned as a signal of female sexual availability for Western men, depending on which ear it is worn behind.

The video work *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis* (2010) [Fig. 1] challenges this idea. In a filmed performance, the artist herself is gradually revealed, slowly and deliberately devouring a perfect red hibiscus flower, the Pacific Islander artist becoming present, visible and dominant.

The place of women in the contemporary globalisation project is again taken up in a second video work, *Edging and Seaming* (2013) [2]. (no new paragraph) On the right hand side of a split



Fig. 1 Angela Tiatia, *Hibiscus Rosa Sinensis* (2010) © Angela Tiatia

screen, a woman is seen over-locking edges of baby muslin cloths in the garage at her home that has been her place of work for the past 35 years. The woman is Tiatia's mother, one of a generation of Pacific Island migrants to New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960s, initially welcomed as part of an immigration policy designed to stimulate manufacturing industries. There was a backlash against these migrants in the 1970s, when Pacific Islanders were represented as taking jobs away from New Zealanders. This culminated in the infamous and terrifying "dawn raids" by police to return "overstayers" back to the islands. In the 1990s companies began moving work offshore - resulting in job losses. In a moving image in *Edging and Seaming*, the mother is filmed sewing her final 10 bundles of work for the manufacturer that is moving production to cheaper contractors in China. (no new paragraph). On the left-hand side of the screen we see a large a clothing factory in Guangzhou, China that manufactures for NZ, Australia and US companies. On her very first trip to Guangzhou, the artist had the opportunity to speak with some factory workers, and heard their stories of moving from rural China to the cities for work in order to send money back home to their families. The familiarity of these stories provided a striking reminder of those same feelings and emotions - hope, longing, pride, fear and responsibility - that had filled the stories of her mother's generation migrating from the Pacific to the cities of New Zealand. So this is not a polemical work about the exploitation in the factories - but more about how people, a world apart, are yet connected by a common



Fig.2 Angela Tiatia, Neo Colonial Extracts (2011) © Angela Tiatia

migrant story and their shared economic power/vulnerability.

The effects of globalization – such as the movement of populations from rural to urban centers - are well documented. This work addresses the internal impacts of globalization – the psychological impacts and changes in social structures in the rural areas. Globalisation affects the body where the individual becomes mechanized and machine-like. And unfortunately, in the end the workers are dispensable as corporations themselves migrate, like humans, from one remote part of the globe to another in search of cheap labor.

The third of Tiatia's works explores the notion of the remote place itself as consumable. For the modern explorer, the excitement of the remote and the exotic is increasingly mediated through the language of advertising, and experienced as comfort and leisure. Paradise is yours – it's just a flight away

Neo-Colonial Extracts (2011)

[Fig.2] is set in the failed Sheraton Resort, in Vaimaanga, Rarotonga, Cook Islands [3]. The NZ\$122 million resort development, with allegations of Italian Mafia involvement, was stalled in 1998 following the arrest of several key people involved. As guarantors, the Cook Island Government was almost financially crippled by the abandoned development - the balance totaling approximately half of the nation's debt.

The work explores the impact of tourism and foreign investment in remote places such as the Pacific – where, on one hand, it provides desperately needed income and jobs, but on the other, it affects the locals' cultural and occupational identities as the options for work become limited to work as servants,

cleaners, gardeners or security guards for holiday makers.

Tiatia's documentation brings the current reality of the abandoned resort into slow focus. The incomplete, and now derelict, luxury chalets are reclaimed by the vegetation of an erstwhile paradise. Exhibited as a dual projection, footage of the decaying resort is coupled with a single long take of a nearby tour boat pictured floating, solitary and unused. Also exhibited is material evidence of the scale of the debt - purchase agreements, bank statements and architectural plans found onsite by the artist. As a solemn memorial to the Cook Island's tourism industry, *Neo-colonial Extracts* reflects upon the consequences of globalisation on a developing island nation. For Tiatia, this situation has all the guises of imperial colonialism – except instead of national sovereignty being suppressed, we now experience personal sovereignty being suppressed by the new colonials - the corporation. At another level, the imagery of this resort that was never finished also evokes a sense of a nation swept up in the promises of corporations, and other shadowy global figures. Whether national sovereignty, in this context, is suppressed is moot. Yet it is almost certainly compromised.

Erewhon Calling

Clinton Watkins' work engages with affect through the construction of layered immersive experiences of sound, colour and scale. In opening his presentation with his early video work, *Continuous Ship #1* (2005) [4], Watkins alludes not only to common New Zealand themes of sea and landscape, but also to spatio-temporal distancing and the 'world wide webs' of earlier centuries; the maritime shipping lanes and Pacific

navigation routes that made the remote European and Pacific settlements of New Zealand possible.

The moving images of huge cargo vessels crossing Auckland's Waitemata Harbour show no discernible evidence of human presence. The affective impression is of vast, flat bands of intense colour. The work recalls national flags or the abstract expressionism of Ellsworth Kelly or Mark Rothko, and is accompanied by a visceral noise that adds to an almost sublime sense of isolation and unease.

The title of Watkins' mixed-media ISEA presentation came from Bruce Russell's 2012 book on experimental sound in New Zealand. [5] The title, *Erewhon Calling*, mashes up the Clash's 1979 album *London Calling*, a reference to the metropolitan broadcasting of culture to the remote outposts of empire, with Samuel Butler's 1872 satirical utopian novel *Erewhon, or over the range*. A reversal of *nowhere*, Butler's work has been cited as the first contribution to literature by a resident of New Zealand, a place synonymous with 'the far corners of the earth'. The confluence of recorded sound and remote transmission has also been a key concern of Watkins' own work.

In Butler's book, the land of Erewhon depends for its security on both its distance from civilization, and on the presence of a field of stone sculptures that channelled the wind to generate such 'horrible noise' that 'however brave a man may be, he could never stand such a concert'. As Bruce Russell wryly observes, this might also describe the experience of listening to contemporary New Zealand experiments in sound [6].

Watkins explicates the processes of experimental audio production in this



Fig. 3 Clinton Watkins, from *Erehwon Calling* (2012).

peripheral cultural setting; a DIY, low-fi, analogue approach to practice, historically necessitated by scarcity of resources, now adopted for the purposes of, in Watkins' terms, "capturing the experience of electricity through music" and "sculpturing" sound using self-made electronic devices.

The DIY ethic extends to modes of distribution. "A man on the South Island", Watkins tells us, produces hand-made records; cheap, lo-fidelity, good for 100 plays – a recognizably New Zealand aesthetic; quirky, odd and yet strangely iconic [7].

Remoteness and mobility

Laurent Antonczak is a multicultural entrepreneur, provocateur and academic researcher working across Digital Strategies (branding, visual communication, social media, transmedia, information architecture) and emerging technologies (web & mobile devices). He is co-founder, with Max Schlessler, of the Mobile Innovation Network Aotearoa (MINA) and operates globally, with particular interests in New Zealand, France and Japan.

MINA's *24 hours/24 frames* project is described as "a collaborative documentation of the mundane". It records daily life at one-hour intervals to make a two minute narrative linking people in disparate global locations.

Antonczak draws on this work to develop remote learning programs and collaborative studios organized across institutions and time zones in Europe,

the Americas and the Pacific. The difficulties of working in disparate location and time zones also afford new opportunities to develop novel pedagogies. As Antonczak notes, students work in remote time frames anyway ... often fulfilling assignments at 4a.m, while he sleeps. Recent projects explore the potential for mobile devices to connect Maori youth to continuing oral traditions of storytelling, and contribute to language preservation.

The civic potential of Antonczak's work resurfaces again in *E'Vaine Toa* (2012), which was filmed and edited on location in Rarotonga. Working in collaboration with the Cook Islands National Council for Women, a mobile documentary captures the voice of women and encourages their participation in governance and leadership [8].

The Liminality of Remoteness

"We should not be defined by the smallness of our islands but in the greatness of our oceans. We are the sea. We are the ocean. Oceania is us" [9].

Andrea Eimke, a German national living for the past twenty years on Atiu in the Cook Islands, investigates notions of liminality and hybridity from the interstitial perspective of the migrant.

Homi Bhabha describes Liminality as that "fantastic location of cultural difference where new expressive cultural identities continually open out, performatively" and the "paradox of hybridity" as "a gesture of translation

that 'keeps open' the question of what is to be (German, or Pasifika, etc)." [10]

Atiu has an area of only 27 square km, yet it is the third largest of the Cook Islands, with a population of around four hundred and fifty people in five villages. One hundred are under the age of 18, and approximately two hundred and thirty are over 60, including one Filipino, one British, two Germans and three European New Zealanders.

Even though the influences of British Missionaries and New Zealand officials remain present in today's dress style, architecture and administration of the remote island, many daily-life activities remain little changed since before the first European contacts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The country has been independent since 1965, connected in free association to New Zealand, which grants all Cook Islanders citizenship. Invaders, preachers, traders, whalers and adventurers have passed through the islands and left behind their marks, in spiritual, material or genetic forms.

Eimke's work examines how the space between two cultures is experienced, and explores ways in which this might be visually expressed through the construction of fibre and textile art works. Material elements from European and Polynesian cultures such as cloth, fibres, and thread, and non-material elements like concepts and rituals, are investigated for their potential to transcend the



Fig. 4 Andrea Eimke, *Third Space II* (2011-13). © Andrea Eimke

boundaries of their original culture to reveal the liminal space as source of energy and change.

Eimke's pre-migratory knowledge of the history and techniques of European Lace revealed striking similarities to the production of Polynesian bark cloth. Both materials served as precious commodities in their respective parts of the world, gifted as tokens of respect between islands/countries, tribes and families.

Eimke's first work on liminality, *Third Space* (2010), was installed at the Takamoia Theological College's Mission house, the first stone house on Rarotonga, constructed in the early 19th century under the direction of European missionaries.

The work combines Polynesian bark cloth with European gauze, a woven cloth, and interfacing, a non-woven material, stitched together with machine-sewn lace. 24 panels of different widths and lengths are suspended from the 3.50 metres high ceiling in a space of 6x 6metres. Visitors are invited to enter the space and walk between the panels, their presence and interaction with the panels completing the work. The daylight and fresh breeze entering the exquisitely restored old house, combined with the sound of bird songs and hymns that frequently filled the space, created the perfect environment for the light-weight textiles.

An expanded version, *Third Space II* (2011-13) was shown as part of the Love

Lace exhibition, at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.. Here, allowing the viewers to walk in between the panels was not possible and the installation had to be enclosed by a railing.

A fan provided only slight air movement, and the recorded clicking sound of Atiu swiftlets, skillfully installed by the Powerhouse sound engineer, replaced the natural bird songs. The black walls and the sound of the swiftlets who use their clicking as echo-location in the darkness of Anatakitaki Cave on Atiu resulted in an impression quite different from that left by the original version.

Concluding remarks

In addressing issues of distance from, and resistance to, global art discourses, the panel participants also implicitly recognised the "place" of academic institutions – as influential sites or intersections of local and globally-inflected practices. Panel members are themselves situated within academies that increasingly "locate" (what counts as) art; by setting agendas, validating credentials, resisting / complying, fostering/constraining, structuring, legitimizing, or valorizing emerging ecologies of research and practice. It is perhaps ironic to recall, at this point in our institutional trajectory, that the historical, pre-digital,

Modernist project grew from a resistance to the academicisation of art that had occurred in the nineteenth century.

Yet, as institutions increasingly open themselves to various forms of engagements with stakeholders, communities and industries, we would do well to recall the Dean of Architecture at Columbia University – and New Zealander – Mark Wigley's provocative reminder that, as both artists and intellectuals,

".. we have to maintain vigilantly the space of doubt, questioning and so on. That is the space of the university ... a place disconnected from the pragmatic realities of the world in order that individuals can open themselves up to other possibilities ... and to the unknown future of society" [11].

References and Notes

1. Rudyard Kipling, *The Song of the Cities: Auckland* (c.1895)
2. Angela Tiatia, *Edging and Seaming* (2013) <http://www.citygallery.org.nz/exhibition/angela-tiatia-edging-and-seaming>
3. Angela Tiatia, *Neo-Colonial Extracts* (2011) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=882AkUqqvAw>
4. <http://blip.tv/frieze/clinton-watkins-cont-ship-1-2648348>
5. Bruce Russell (ed.), *Erehwon Calling: Experimental Sound in New Zealand* (Auckland, NZ: Audio Foundation CMR, 2012)
6. Russell [5] p.12
7. A reference to Peter King, the owner of King Records Worldwide, Ashburton, NZ. King makes lathe-cut records that are not necessarily that short-lived (his website claims the polycarbonate he uses has a higher longevity than vinyl, though this does seem unlikely). <http://peterkinglathecutrecords.co.nz/info.htm>
8. <http://vimeo.com/55147342>
9. Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2008)
10. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 219).
11. Mark Wigley, interview with Charles Rice, UNSW, June 2004.