

# What shapes emerging practice?

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A Deep dive lecture transcript

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There are many different directions this talk nearly ended up at. The question I set myself, “what shapes emerging practice?”, is vast and vague. There are local and global trends and conversations, pedagogical approaches, institutional priorities, as well as personal, economic, and geographic circumstances. A supplementary question could be “what shapes a person?” I initially wanted to approach this with something tangible. The original idea was to take stock of calls-for-proposals in Aotearoa over several years to look at the relationship galleries have with emerging practice. I was curious about how we invite emerging practices to opportunities, and subsequently the words we use to describe the exhibitions we make from it. For example, we might see in open calls phrases asking for “underrepresented voices” or “urgent conversations”. These terms are obviously relational and I guess could have ended up being an exercise in tracking a history of the semantics of calls-for-proposals, which I personally don’t think is uninteresting but perhaps is a larger piece of work than this talk calls for.

In returning to the question I’ve posed, I did want to exclude certain variables from this—for instance, personal circumstance and education, both access to and the experience of—and instead focus on emerging practices and the galleries that exhibit them in an Aotearoa context. Upstairs, we are currently exhibiting our New Commissions exhibition, recently rebranded from the New Artists Show, which has been a long term annual offering of this gallery. This year we’ve also seen the inaugural *Aotearoa Contemporary*, a new triannual exhibition that sits alongside the newly triannual Walters Prize. And although it isn’t an emerging artist exhibition per se, their website copy does state that

Artspace Aotearoa is a public contemporary art gallery founded in 1987 by artists and arts workers, it continues to be artist-led. We work within a specific city context, and spiral out into national and international conversations that promote practices that present emancipatory world views.

there is an “emphasis on emerging and less visible practitioners”<sup>1</sup>. And, of course, artist-run spaces continue to be an important part of our arts ecosystem operating in between Artspace Aotearoa’s once-a-year focused offering and larger, less regular survey exhibitions.

My trajectory in terms of a curatorial practice began with artist-run spaces. I was a facilitator with play\_station in Te Whanganui-a-Tara for two years from 2019 to 2020. I wanted to start with the first exhibition I worked on there as a way to demonstrate how we executed a project from that position of emerging, both in terms artist and gallery. The exhibition was by Elisabeth Pointon, who is a good friend of mine and now works upstairs at Tautai as their exhibitions manager. The show came out of pub talk with friends. We asked each other about what we called our “lotto works”. What would you make if money and resources were no object? Elisabeth’s “lotto work” was a plane-towed banner riffing of an Art Basel Miami project curated by Adam Shopkorn titled *Plane Text*. In it, text work from 15 significant artists were flown above the fair over four days every three hours. Of the artists, which included John Baldessari, the estate of Sol Lewitt, and Jenny Holzer, all but three were men and all but one were white and Elisabeth’s project, as a brown queer artist, sought to ask the question “who gets space to speak and on what terms?”.

After some cursory research, we realised the project wasn’t as out of reach as initially thought. At the time, play\_station didn’t offer an artist fee (I believe a fee of \$250 per exhibition was introduced later that year after local council funding was secured for the first time) so the cost of the flyover was fundraised. We lived in a warehouse flat that we would often hold large parties in, so for this we held a fundraising gig with musicians Ana Te Kotiro, Alexa Casino, Womb, and Glass Vaults. This covered the cost of the plane hire and travel to Tāmaki Makaurau and back via bus, but not accommodation. Our solution to this was to take two overnight buses over two consecutive nights.

We arrived in Tāmaki very early on Sunday 20th January in 2019 with Elisabeth, myself, a photographer, and one local friend with a car who drove us to Papakura’s Ardmore Airport where the aerial advertising company Airbubble was based. They towed a sign reading SPECTACULAR, circling One Tree Hill four times around 1pm before returning to the airfield. We then rolled up the two metre tall sign, loaded it up on a bus, and took it back to Wellington that night. In this 48 hour trip, basically no one paid themselves, no one received per diems, and no one got any real sleep. We arrived back home early Monday morning, and I’m pretty sure Elisabeth and I both went straight to our day jobs.

Two weeks later, the resulting exhibition *WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT*.

would open at play\_station as the first show in our new location on Willis St. Despite pretty trying conditions, I still look back on this project as a measure of how I want to work with artists. Through conversation, we were able to extract an idea and, through work, make the most of what resources we had available to us to execute something we thought wasn't possible. And I think as I progress slowly through a curatorial career, exhibition by exhibition, artist by artist, I think of how to help translate ideas into reality using the most of the resources at hand. Here, I speak of resources beyond financial as well. How do you hand over your networks, your knowledge, and your access?

Elisabeth's flyover project became two other exhibitions with two separate flyover events. In May of 2019, play\_station would have a booth at the Auckland Art Fair where she hired the same aerial advertising company to fly a banner reading BIG DEAL to hit the viaduct, viewable from The Cloud's mezzanine floor. Later again that year in November, play\_station participated in Hobeinnale, a biennial in Hobart dedicated to bringing together artist-run spaces and initiatives from Australia and Aotearoa. This time, a flyover that was supposed to read OUTSTANDING didn't eventuate as pilots in the country were called on to support bushfire fighting efforts at the time.

The final flyover in what ended up being a trilogy was realised with the help of City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi. With the help of Wellington City Council's public art fund, facilitated through the gallery, the final banner reading OUTSTANDING was flown and all three banners from the flyovers were shown in the foyer space. The City Gallery exhibition was a solo presentation for Elisabeth and not necessarily contextualised as an emerging practice, but this project is something I wanted to bring up because of its trajectory across multiple exhibition formats. In the text for our current new commissions show upstairs I wrote that:

The artists in *Permissions* are at the stages of locating their practices in relation to their worldviews while orienting themselves as "emerging" through various art world territories. This fringe position affords an agility that allows them to occupy and trespass artist-run, public, and commercial galleries, sometimes all at once.<sup>2</sup>

The City Gallery exhibition opened at the end of 2019, meaning all the activity I've just detailed occurred and was exhibited within the space of one year. This is a perfect example of that trespassing, or cross-occupation, rather than upward trajectory.

The project itself was self-reflexive with regards to the position of

emerging artist—who gets to speak, where and how—and City Gallery acknowledged the wider support the project had as a whole, stating in the exhibition text:

Pointon garnered community support to pull off her dream project: roping in friends and repurposing her flat as a party venue for fundraising, working with artist-run-initiative Play\_station, and establishing a collaborative relationship with an aerial-advertising-banner-towing company.<sup>3</sup>

The work that Elisabeth did, and that we did with play\_station, becomes part of the narrative and therefore part of the value of the project. Without ever really acknowledging this as an emerging practice project, the gallery folds in the struggle of artmaking and universalises it as something worthwhile rather than a question of access and resources.

I mentioned at the start Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery’s new venture with *Aotearoa Contemporary* but we’ve also seen *Spring Time is Heart-break: Contemporary Art in Aotearoa* at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, that are perceived, if not articulated, as emerging artist shows. Concurrently to Artspace Aotearoa’s current exhibition, we also see Gus Fisher Gallery’s foray into a similar format with their emerging artist show *Three Approaches, Three Rooms* featuring Christian Dimmick, Peter Simpson, and, sharing with Artspace Aotearoa, Dayle Palfreyman. But the last large-scale institutional show billed as a forthright emerging artist survey I believe was *The Tomorrow People* held at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery in 2017. It featured 25 artists from across Aotearoa with the constraint that they would be under 30, a parameter that was later loosened to include a few older emerging artists. It’s authored by Tina Barton, Stephen Cleland and Simon Gennard, which represents three generations of curators that were working at the gallery at the time. The curatorial statement begins with:

The Tomorrow People is an exercise in future-oriented thinking. The exhibition brings together a selection of works by twenty-five artists who offer urgent, resourceful, and playful possibilities for navigating their times.<sup>4</sup>

I remember in the lead up to the show, after word of the exhibition’s formation was getting around, the buzz it caused in my circles. The curators were scouting, and although I believe Wellington curators have always had a great culture of attending art events up and down the career scale, their presence at certain galleries and openings suddenly had a different weight to it. Personally, I remember having a show at play\_station titled *Love You to the Wrist and Back* which Tina Barton requested to

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<sup>3</sup> “Elisabeth Pointon: What Goes Up.” City Gallery Wellington, <https://citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/elisabeth-pointon-what-goes-up/>  
<sup>4</sup> Christina Barton, Stephen Cleland & Simon Gennard, “The Tomorrow People”, <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/h84sqrxl/production/e6019a623be98de26acc321aca34f73077b6d778.pdf>

attend early. We allowed her in even though I was still installing a custom wallpaper one hour prior to the opening. I thought Tina's visit was for sure my ticket into *The Tomorrow People*, but it was not to be. A few of my peers however did make the cut, such as another good friend Christopher Ulutupu who I also went on to work with in a curatorial capacity. I do remember the opening being a genuine celebration for those in the show, that their work had been recognised by legitimate curators at a legitimate art gallery. This felt significant for us at the time. To see our peers' work in established institutions allowed us to imagine ourselves there.

A month after the opening of *The Tomorrow People*, the Pantograph Punch published a fairly critical review by Chloe Geoghegan. Chloe was the director of Blue Oyster Art Project Space in Dunedin from 2014-2017. I can't find the exact date her directorship ended, but I speculate a recent departure from the job or knowledge of imminent departure encouraged a freer tongue in this instance. One call made from the perspective of her position was the amount of work that had come directly from artist-run and independent art galleries. She wrote that:

...a great deal of the work in *The Tomorrow People* has been pulled straight from 2017 independent project space programmes. The most overt example is Ammon Ngakuru's *Shelter for Amnesic Relatives*, Blue Oyster's June 2017 exhibition. Other exhibitions by Quishile Charan and Isabella Loudon were still on at Enjoy and Toi Poneke as *The Tomorrow People* opened. By lifting works from extremely recent debuts, these smaller commissioning spaces – fighting to be relevant in the niche nexus – start to function as nurseries for larger institutions to pick over without a further thought. With this in mind, what does *The Tomorrow People* contribute to the field of emerging art in Aotearoa?<sup>5</sup>

This statement brings up two things that I have been thinking about recently: one is how to resist that tendency towards prospecting when working on these kinds of exhibitions. Another is what is the whakapapa of an artwork and how do you ensure it's respected? This is an expansive way to think about and acknowledge all the people and histories involved in a practice. Of course, established galleries have the protocols and contracts to ensure they are credited for the work that they support. Artist-run spaces, however, often don't understand that what they are doing is commissioning. The work of people and places like play\_station, Meanwhile, RM Gallery, and several others over the years is embedded in the practices of so many. Earlier this year we had Natasha Conland and Sarah Hopkinson in this room speaking about Daniel Malone's work at Gambia Castle and its impact over 15 years later. And for those who remember what came from where, and who's not in the credit line, it can

feel like an affront.

In a more direct critique of *The Tomorrow People*, Chloe raises recent “exemplary” exhibitions that delve into emerging practice. She cites Artspace Aotearoa’s 2017 New Artist Show *New Perspectives* as one example from earlier that year. She writes that:

Six of the artists featured in *New Perspectives* reappear in *The Tomorrow People* – some with the same works. ... despite the awkward overlap, there are reasonable differences between *New Perspectives* and *The Tomorrow People*. *New Perspectives* was an invitation for emerging artists to join the Artspace community – to connect with outgoing Artspace Director Misal Adnan Yildiz’s specific curatorial philosophy of active engagement. On the other hand, Barton’s exhibition is more of a curatorial exercise that seeks to learn about the new generation as oppose to Yildiz’s ideology of engaging with.<sup>6</sup>

The exhibitions *Aotearoa Contemporary* and *Spring Time is Heart-break* perhaps did heed these calls as both have had a significantly stronger focus on newly commissioned work. I believe all of *Aotearoa Contemporary* were presentations of new work, as was the vast majority of *Spring Time is Heart-break*’s 25 presentations. If we include Artspace Aotearoa and Gus Fisher’s current exhibition, this totals to about 55 presentations of new art over the last year, the majority of which we could consider as emerging. Not included in this are Aotearoa’s competition format exhibitions, such as Whakatane’s Molly Morpeth Canaday Award and Waikato Museum’s National Contemporary Art Award, which undoubtedly attract a large contingent of emerging artists. What’s also not included are other public galleries such as Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, the Physics Room and Blue Oyster who have long histories of developing emerging practice, late stage emerging practice, and the transition beyond.

Turning now to what Artspace Aotearoa currently delivers in this area, the format over the last two versions of this show has shifted to how it’s been delivered in the past. Speaking to the earlier question of how to resist a tendency towards prospecting, I believe the rebrand from the New Artists Show to New Commissions helps in part to alleviate the fetishisation of the young, hot, and new. The New Commissions format focuses on longer form engagement with our new commissions artists and we work alongside them at every stage of how a new commission might unfold. This starts with the very proposal of what that new work might be, to managing a production budget, to working with contractors, to install planning, and even media training for interviews and artist talks.

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6 Ibid.

This year we also introduced a mentorship programme to sit alongside the working relationship they have with myself and the gallery, with the idea that they will have access to conversations and guidance from more senior practitioners related to their areas of research and interest. This year we had Yana Dombrowsky M'Baye paired with Shannon te Ao, August Ward paired with Judy Millar, and Dayle Palfreyman worked with our Kaitohu Director Ruth Buchanan, all of which aims to foster and support an intergenerational kaupapa. All of these changes are made with the artists' futures in mind so that they can utilise these experiences into whatever next projects they undertake.

The model that we are now delivering does have its limitations. Our parameters for selection are that the exhibition consists of three artists based in Tāmaki Makaurau. This is to ensure we can deliver the level of engagement we strive for with the resources we have. For us and our aspirations, this currently isn't realistically a scalable offering. And I think Aotearoa needs more offerings. I haven't really addressed much of the question I set out to explore, but have touched on a slightly different question: what is the gallery's responsibility to emerging practice?

Over the last few months with the exhibition upstairs open, and in the lead up to this talk, I've encountered people who seem frustrated with the term emerging itself, or a frustration of how to move beyond. When are you no longer emerging and how do you know when that's happened? I think to be able to steer away from being preoccupied with this, there needs to be different pathways forward. With the few artist-run spaces currently running in the country, it can feel like you're able to "complete the circuit" within three to four shows. If there are more abundant and diverse opportunities for emerging artists to practice exhibition making, then it could feel less like opportunities are exhausted before you're ready to move into the next "step" of your career. So I think pacing becomes the secondary consideration, having a range of pathways that allow for a range of career timelines, incubations, and growth.

Ngā mihi.