

What can solo exhibitions do?

Ruth Buchanan

A Deep dive lecture transcript

1 May, 2024

This lecture took place at Artspace Aotearoa within the installation of *Joie noire* by Jimmy Robert.

[Karakia, mihi]

In this lecture I will sketch out a set of relations that attempt to go towards the question at hand: what can solo exhibitions do? As well as going towards the curiosity that approaching questions, all questions, can spark within us when we take them as tools to reappraise automated positions, behaviours, or attitudes. So this lecture is a proposal. We can think of these observations as an engine that you may choose to turn on, or turn off, when considering solo exhibitions here, today, and moving forward.

What can solo exhibitions do? In going towards this question we must acknowledge that there are *at least* three protagonists who may have skin in this particular game and that each of these protagonists would necessarily answer this prompt differently. What can a solo exhibition do *for* me as an artist? *To* me as an audience member? *With* me as part of an organisation?

Tonight I will move between all three of these perspectives, because this talk, like all exhibitions, and indeed life, is live and therefore contingent. I will argue that like all exhibitions, solos make a fundamental contribution to societal encounters with art history and *from* what and *for* what art history is constituted. Key to this argument is shifting standard understandings of history (in whatever area of specialisation) from being viewed as a fixed immovable object to a dynamic expression of values and processes from which such standards emerge. That is to say, 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 opportunity here to wildly reform the scaffold onto which we inscribe ourselves, our stories, and the ways in which we shuttle into the world. This can be done by constituting elements of life that includes contemporary art and the making of exhibitions, art history, but equally, politics, education, media, the environment, health care, and so on.

So here we are in the world, where the art world belongs too. First we'll zoom in to this particular organisation then we'll zoom in further, to this particular exhibition, and then finally we'll zoom all the way out, to those frames just described, then at the end there will be a chance for questions, and I hope there will be some!

What do solo exhibitions mean in this context, where we are? Artspace Aotearoa was established in 1987 to create forum and platform for contemporary art and, as described in its earliest objectives document, it aimed to:

1. Support and encourage the development of new forms of art.
2. To provide facilities where artists from various disciplines can exhibit, install, perform or screen work that for reasons of either medium or content cannot be accommodated elsewhere.
3. To provide forum for the discussion of issues in the arts.

So we can see that fundamental to the purpose of this particular organisation and how it expresses itself is prioritising access for artists and audience to emergent and timely considerations in the contemporary art world. Key to enabling this access is an exhibition programme.

Many of you will have visited the gallery over its almost 40 year history and some of the hundreds of exhibitions solo and group which have contributed in significant ways to our evolving arts landscape in Aotearoa. You may have experienced the varying ways each director expresses the essential purpose of this organisation as I've just described it via the founding document. The expression made by each director, as with the protagonists entangled in solo exhibition making, is necessarily differentiated. This unfolding difference is a cornerstone of the identity of this organisation and one of its key strengths.

I come to the role of Kaitohu Director as an artist and have participated in over 100 exhibitions myself. Of those, some of the most challenging and rewarding have been what can be categorised as solo exhibitions. The experiences of making exhibitions with, for, against and sometimes outside of organisations formed the approach I wanted to bring to considering the exhibition programme here at Artspace Aotearoa and the particular rhythm it takes.

Each year our programme is anchored by our annual question, around which our programme orbits. This orbiting creates a richness within our activity as an organisation, connecting all the work we do by building up layers around the question. We build depth, like rings on a tree than a linear count. This year's question is "do I need territory?" We consider each of our exhibitions as proposals, rejections, and/or celebrations of this question, adding up to what these types of large but necessary questions tend to instigate—further questions. As an organisation, we talk about the annual programme as one exhibition in four parts, as a score, but also as a forest, an ecosystem. The rhythm we play highlights why we use this word, ecosystem.

[Ruth spoke freely here about the exhibition structure drawing from the natural world: The year begins with the poupou show, where two senior artists lay the groundwork and like the senior trees of a forest they establish the health of the soil. This is followed by the solo exhibition which we consider the bulldozer, or perhaps the controlled burnoff, which tends to offer challenges. Following from that we arrive at the group show, what we consider as the reseeded period with an intergenerational and international focus, before ending our year with the Chartwell Trust New Commissions exhibition of three emerging practitioners, the new growth.]

So, in the current expression of the organisation's purpose, solo exhibitions are given a very particular role. They are asked to fundamentally challenge all three of the protagonists that I described in the intro: artists, audience and organisation and conjure many of those impulses described in the early objective documents too.

As an organisation we invite an artist into our whare to make a solo exhibition, like many other organisations, but one of the driving impulses here is to reconsider the terms of engagement of this type of invitation. Solo exhibitions have long been platformed as key to advancing a standardised progressive professional arc for artists, and in parallel a site where an organisation may gain kudos for presenting a certain 'hot' moment of expression of an artist and their practice. While I acknowledge this is legitimate, and that we are all aware of the entangled contingencies that are involved in continuing to support and present works of art as artists and as organisations to enable 'the next thing to happen', it can also produce an extractive, and exhausting dynamic for the artist that fuels new-ism, a tool we know from both neo-liberalism and imperialism. I argue that sometimes, perhaps the hottest thing can be to go deep, go back, go in. Opportunities for artists to return to previous work within the bounds of that key solo exhibition format are few and are far between due to the mechanisms of new = value, but *for* an artist the pathway to reconsider work, particularly pivotal works, can offer a totally exhilarating

terrain and deeply rewarding way of working *with* an organisation. And subsequently, a rethinking of who gains ground and how becomes possible. The results for an audience can be exhilarating too. The examples of this are numerous but in our region this year, consider Louise Bourgeois at Sydney Modern, and Peter Robinson's reconsideration of his felt grid works here at Artspace Aotearoa.

And this matters when we consider territory as the issue of who gains ground under which circumstances as fundamentally addressing scripts of power that repeat. In facing these repeating systems, it becomes fundamental to reconsider reductive application of considering resources and their use. As we all face the brutal rhetoric that evolves into policy under our current government, and how they view our environment largely as material for extraction, it is essential to take these questions back to a home ground and home scale and consider how we, in many, many small ways consider our access to and use of resource and dispute the ideology of growth. There are many artworks that contain within them a multiplicity of lives, where one outing, two outings, three, maybe even four may not suffice. At Artspace Aotearoa we wish to offer the opportunity to dive in deeply into an artist's practice when working with us on a solo exhibition. Programming in this way is sustainable programming.

A work that contains that multiplicity of potential is *Joie noire*, by Jimmy Robert which we are lucky to sit within now, albeit silent.

Before I walk you through the work that we'll dive into, I'll introduce Jimmy a little. Jimmy was our inaugural Goethe-Institut Visiting Practitioner and was born in Guadeloupe in 1975 and now lives between Berlin and Paris. He works across a range of media—including photography, sculpture, film, video, and collaborative performance—gently breaking down divisions between two and three dimensions, image and object. He studied at Goldsmiths, London, was a resident at the Rijksakademie Amsterdam and is now a professor at UdK, Berlin. He has had major solo exhibitions at, amongst others, Moderna Museet, Malmö; Centre National de la Danse, Paris-Pantin in collaboration with Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Museion, Bolzano; Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham; and The Power Plant, Toronto.

What we present here is the fourth iteration of *Joie noire*, and its first in exhibition form. It was commissioned by and premiered in 2019 at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin in 2019. *Joie noire* began as a reflection on his collaborator and friend Ian White who was a significant voice in performance, critical film theory and worked as an artist, curator and educator. Jimmy and Ian worked closely together for almost a decade, primarily with performance, until Ian's death in 2013. This

reflection evolved into an expanded deep dive for Jimmy into his ongoing considerations of spectatorship and desire and he syphoned this thinking into two particular zones, AIDS and the crisis surrounding its emergence and club culture. The work is a meditation on grief but also its opposite, euphoric joy.

[Ruth speaks freely here, showing slides from the original performance in 2019 which she was able to attend. Notes from this section:

Waiting outside with the bouncer. In the red room, the voice of Ian White reading from Jessica Milford's *American way of death*, a critique of the funeral industry. This was extremely disarming, having known Ian, his voice, his passing. Guided by KW staff into the main big room. Waiting. Things happened, smoke, smell –poppers–two dancers Jimmy and his double Courtney performed parts of *Agon* by Balanchine, Douglas Crimp. Dancing steps to soundtrack elements, strong smells. Courtney reading, a combination of Jimmy's own writing and quotes from ACT UP. For me this was exceptional experience, leaving was sure it was 4 hours, but was just 45 minutes]¹

Working this complexity from the performance into an exhibition was exciting, and challenging with the goal to enable the work to take on a new life. Not as ephemera of a performance, something we might be familiar with as a form and set of problems in its own right, but as an exhibition of its own agency. This aspiration was absolutely suited to the framework of a solo exhibition at Artspace Aotearoa given that Jimmy and the host organisation were open to reasserting what the solo exhibition can offer. We developed this over a period of about a year slowly unfolding it considering, each element, what was essential and what was not essential.

[Ruth spoke freely to the core elements of the exhibition: the cue sheet, the 'red zone', the 'blue zone', the photograph, the video, and the ephemera each of which were activated on a timer, so the whole exhibition was choreographed, with a total length of 30'33 minutes.]²

Contrary to what solo exhibitions have often been asked to do or understood as doing, that is to locate the artist as the central agent or even as a proxy of an art institution, Jimmy has opted to relinquish much of this and engage an alternate power-engine that privileges generosity but also risk and confrontation for the audience. This solo exhibition makes dancers and carers of us all—triangulating between the disarming disembodied voice in the red zone through to the erotic invitation to lay back on the stage and listen to the musical soundtrack. What this

¹ See attached cue sheet of the original performance which provides an overview of the flow of the original performance and was included in the exhibition *Joie noire*, at Artspace Aotearoa.

² Refer to the exhibition guide and images online to get a fuller sense of this.

solo exhibition does is redeploy the territories of attention, reception, consumption and invites us to sign a different kind of contract as audience members. Whether your contract is three seconds long, or the 33 minutes of the full 'loop' the exhibition requires, is a decision the viewer gets to make.

Let's return to the sketch presented earlier in the talk of a canonical approach to solo exhibition making that advances in a linear way and has often been prioritised in the constructing of art and its histories. In this dynamic, solo exhibitions, arguably, enable the artist, but also the institution to sublimate the artwork in some way, seeking to entrench and enclose it. What I wish to propose is that solo exhibitions are central to our art world, in the world and therefore must be live, must be contingent, must be diverse in their form, and must be robust enough to take the breaking down of territories and the disciplinary codes that shape them.

What I am proposing is closer to what is described by Deidre Brown, Ngarino Ellis, and Johnathan Mane-Wheoki in their 2014 Gordon H. Brown lecture, "Does Māori art history matter?". In the lecture the co authors describe the arrival of Pākehā to Aotearoa and the bringing with that a sense of the primacy of linear time and the impact it had on toi Māori by placing an emphasis on chronology, presuming work, methods, and even paradigms "get better" over time. This western ideology of measure placed on toi Māori created a significant rift in the assumed capacity of toi Māori, as it asserted standardised models of expression. The chronologicalisation of expression not only attempted to *contain* expression and place it in a legible row it also *flattened* it. Brown, Ellis and Mane-Wheoki argue that Māori time is necessarily three-dimensional and moves dynamically, this understanding can be applied to all parts of life including toi.

This understanding is sensible, the more three-dimensional, the more whole, and the more capable of capturing the fullness of experience, the moments of pain, the moments of joy.

Thinking in this way specifically toward solo exhibitions also makes sense therefore, as key to the art world in the world. A solo exhibition, yes, can place an emphasis on standard concepts of legibility and this can produce insightful experience for a viewer, and certainly a product for an organisation to promote. But solo exhibitions can and, in my view should also be enabled as a format to deviate, deform, open out widely and invite a somatic recoding where we all participate in navigating the "what" of the work under various contracts of viewing enacted in parallel—the artist, the organisation, and the audience. In taking this approach invariably all three protagonists are addressed with the consideration of not only what should happen next, but what *could* happen next.

Ngā mihi.