

Why do intergenerational exhibitions matter?

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A Deep dive lecture transcript

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[Karakia, mihi]

[Slide: Founding objectives document of Artspace Aotearoa, circa 1987]

In which time zone do we start to answer the question why do intergenerational exhibitions matter? Do we start here, in 2024 at Artspace Aotearoa, established almost 40 years ago, as stated in our founding objectives “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 in established venues.” Shall we start there and here? In the move to consider that wonderfully hopeful, but also ‘of its time statement’, we are immediately drawn to scrutinise. Which discipline is being discussed here? Time, surely, is a discipline, a mechanism used to categorise, separate, measure. If we can agree that time, while full of potential, is wielded as a discipline in late Capitalism, what might it take to undiscipline it? And what are the implications of this impulse when we place it in relation to exhibition making and the organisations in which they take place?

[Slide: an online stock image of a clock going through a blackhole]

Why do intergenerational exhibitions matter? In the frame of our annual question “do I need territory?” considerations on how we relate are fundamental. To say that relationships happen through spatial and temporal constraints might be banal, hence this excellent image, but it is essential to return to these core fields when we consider exhibitions and their making, where the various ways these parameters are addressed

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.

produce the politic of said exhibition.

Some of you may have attended my lecture earlier in the year where I asked “what can solo exhibitions do?” Examining standards of that exhibition format in the contemporary artscape, I took Jimmy Robert’s *Joie Noire* staged here at Artspace Aotearoa from April through July of this year as a focus. Some of you may have attended the lecture delivered by our recent guest curator and professor Tavia Nyong’o titled “What is a queer ancestor? Lessons from Audre Lorde and James Baldwin.” Tonight’s lecture in many ways folds into the space that is drawn out between the positions described in those presentations, essentially where established forms were necessarily reconsidered.

[Slide: notes made by Ruth during Tavia’s lecture.]

I’d like to share two images of the notes I made during Tavia’s talk. This first note says “homogeneous time of colonial-modernity.” The second note looks like musical notation for time keeping: C100,500,100,0. Ambivalence, with a question mark next to it.

These notes are useful for tonight where the consideration of history as a fixed form, that establishes authority, is disrupted by powerful but also fallible voices. It is these same powerful but fallible voices that, when placed in relation, form an exhibition.

[Slide: a brown vinyl spiral on the window in Ruth’s workspace at Artspace Aotearoa]

In this lecture I will circumnavigate the spiral and the tape measure in order to consider how we might instigate an exhibition making practice where the undisciplining of time is made to matter. The meaning of matter here is the physical substance of artworks as encountered in our world, as well what and how things come to matter, that is to become significant through established mechanisms primarily enacted through the unfolding of time. This is to say, I’ll discuss methods.

This circumnavigation will start with a long table, move to an exhibition I made in 2016, *Bad Visual Systems*, look at the two intergenerational-group exhibitions made here at Artspace Aotearoa since I have been Kaitohu Director, *Scores for Transformation* and *This is the house that jack built* and then spiral out to future activity. This lecture considers how relationships happen. Perhaps this impulse is a remediation of the count. While I’m somewhat cautious to do this, I must quote Badiou here: “everything that circulates falls under the unity of the count, while inversely only what lets itself be counted in this way can circulate.” I hope tonight we can de-establish this supposition somewhat.

[Slide: various images of Ruth's family around their table in the 1980s, 1990s, an early 2000s]

This table, and the image of it, enable time travel. The time travel I am able to do reflects the culture in which I have been inscribed through and into a table based culture. The impact of the primacy of this type of culture is something that our Assistant Curator Robbie Handcock will develop in our intergenerational-group exhibition next year. But for now, this table around which I grew up.

This table allows us to time travel. This is my family, around the family table over the years, Ngāmotu New Plymouth, Whakaoriori Masterton, Kirikiriroa Hamilton, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Captured here are at least three generations of whānau, some of these special people are no longer with us, so it is precious to see them in these images. To consider the tape measure: this table is 3.4 metres long and comfortably seats 18 people, and uncomfortably even more. It joined my family in the 1970s as Mum and Dad reached child number seven plus the regular guests and the need for a more expansive table was clear. When a local fabric store was closing down and their cutting table went up for sale at a low price my parents were able to purchase it.

[Slide: various images of Ruth's family around their table in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s]

The table, which is one single piece of Kauri, has a width of just over 1m and therefore is estimated to come from a tree that was at least 600 years old before it was felled and became this. The folding of fabric, the cutting through weave, the turning of that tree into the space for textile, and then into a dining room, becomes a complex, problematic, and magnificent diagram for considering time.

Consider the ancient Kauri discovered in the Ngāwhā area that through dendrochronology, the measurement of time via rings on a tree. Scientists were able to pinpoint the moment when Earth lost its magnetic fields as the two poles, North and South inverted, some 42,000 years ago.

This diagram of time opened via this table is alive, and entropic, or perhaps, metabolic. It instigates the consideration that time eats itself or it eats us and only comes into its full creative force (rather than the manifestation of capitalist disciplinary codes) when we allow it to fold and feed, when time is enabled to become a fleshy engine for a transformative process.

[Slide: Ruth as a young girl pouring water into a container, Ruth's brother celebrating his 15th birthday]

The majestic force of this tree x the pouring of the water from this small girl's hands into a vessel x the blowing out of a teens candles. Here, this 3.6m x 1m table is both tape measure and spiral. This is a whole, wild, timescale, a diagram that is alive.

[Slide: Ashleigh Taupaki making her work onsite at Artspace Aotearoa for *This is the house that jack built*]

And these considerations matter when we make exhibitions if we agree, as I insist, that exhibitions are indeed live, that they are not documents of a finished thesis. This matters because exhibitions are ultimately a format to instigate transformation through relationships. This in turn has necessary, and expansive implications for the future of art, how it is made, presented, narrated, collected, and stored.

I want to point to an image I made of Ashleigh Taupaki as she installed her drawing on site in the current show, and I encourage you to spend time with it. The scale of relation employed by Ashleigh undoes the fixity of history, and this is exaggerated even further here in this image which is intimate: my shadow, her work. A fallible and powerful voice, a relationship that transforms.

[Slide: exterior view of Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery]

What is a fallible voice, an intimate voice? How does that apply to exhibition making? Applying intimacy to monolith was key to my approach to developing *Bad Visuals Systems*, an exhibition mounted in late 2016 at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, located within the Art History department of Victoria University, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. This gallery opened to the public in 1999 and is located directly above my former whānau home, the inside of which you have seen some photos of, and where I lived at the time of the gallery's opening.

The gallery is cut into the side of the hill, almost as a prosthesis added to the older Hunter Building. Designed by architect Ian Athfield, this building bridges the Hunter Building and stretches out from it. A crucial part of the architect's brief was that one of the interior walls had to be 11 metres long to permanently host a key work in the University's collection, a large painting by Colin McCahon. This was on display until the late 2000s when then Director Christina Barton was able to rehouse it and open up that area of the gallery up to the programme.

[Slide: thumbnails of installation views of *Bad Visual Systems*]

While the painting was gone, the wall remained of course. So when the conversation started on how to navigate the exhibition,

this history with the McCahon, the location in the university, and my whānau relationship to the site all played a role. When I considered the site, which connects the upper and lower parts of the hillside Kelburn campus, providing 350 metres of exhibition space across three visually interconnected levels I saw a possibility to redeploy disciplines. I saw an opportunity to enable transformation through relationships not yet coded in established narrative.

I was invited to make a solo exhibition but I responded by inviting two artists from different generations, both my seniors and both significant to me, to join me in the process, Judith Hopf and Marianne Wex. This gesture offered a not-so-coded critique of the way in which art history tends to single out individuals. I chose to embed myself in a shared and emergent discourse. By folding the work of art history into the very structure of this exhibition and the research required to develop it, I occupied art history's aims and effects and circumvented much of the institution's standard processes. Occupying the institution in this way allowed me to develop an insistent and subjective protocol, where I moved freely between the roles of artist, designer, curator, editor, and researcher. Sometimes the institution enjoyed the badness of it, and in other instances it showed the hardness.

I won't go into further detail on the works, this is an overview of installation shots included as a fold out at the end of the exhibition's catalogue. What is important to emphasise here though is that the ability of exhibitions to eat their own time-format and enable necessary intergenerational exchange within an ecosystem has informed the approach to the annual intergenerational group exhibition we do here at Artspace Aotearoa.

[Slide: view of work by Rosemary Mayer in *Scores of Transformation*, Artspace Aotearoa]

Each year at Artspace Aotearoa we do one group show. It is situated right in the middle of the programmatic calendar which we consider as a score or dramaturgy that unfolds in a particular rhythm. We also consider it as a ngahere, a forest. The year begins with the poupou show, where two senior artists lay the ground and like the established trees of a ngahere 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 be a position that challenges. Jimmy Robert's show is an excellent case in point. Following that we arrive here, at the group show, considered by us at Artspace Aotearoa as the reseeding, which chimes perfectly with what is happening in the natural world as we transition from winter to spring before ending the year with the Chartwell Trust New Commissions, the new growth.

When considering the group exhibition as reseeding it is, essential to not think of this as a monocrop. As with the homogeneous time of colonial-modernity, we know by now that for an ecosystem to flourish it is essential that it be as diverse as possible, because each of us need each other. To achieve this, it is necessary therefore, that the group exhibition is multi-context, international, and intergenerational.

[Slide: view of work by Sara Gómez in *This is the house that jack built*, Artspace Aotearoa]

This image shows our current exhibition *This is the house that jack built* which explores the ways in which value is often measured by the flattening emphasis on material wealth. Beginning with the earliest work in the show *Mi Aporte* (My Contribution) by Sara Gómez from 1972, we are connected to post-revolution Cuba where concepts of value were very much scrutinised...

[Slide: view of work by Ashleigh Taupaki in *This is the house that jack built*, Artspace Aotearoa]

....and looping all the way back to resistance to confiscation of land by the crown here in Aotearoa in 1872 as told by Ashleigh Taupaki via drawings made on site in the gallery....

[Slide: view of work by Kerry Deane in *This is the house that jack built*, Artspace Aotearoa]

....and coming back closer to our current situation, to Māpura Studios located in St Lukes which provides resources and support for artists from the disabled community. This painting by Kerry Deane represents the first time one of their artists is included in a mainstream gallery exhibition since their founding in 2000.

Connecting these contexts and timelines, requires the spiral as the measurement. What is value when the count is remediated in this way?

[Slide: view of work by Rosemary Mayer in *Scores of Transformation*, Artspace Aotearoa]

Let's turn to *Scores for Transformation* from 2023 which again drew in multiple contexts, and generations. Here we begin with Rosemary Mayer who was a prolific artist, active in the New York art scene. This work of drawing and collage *Passages* from 1976 was made on her one and only trip to Europe and posits an intimate history of the relationship between beauty and commerce via the Medici Dynasty no less...

[Slide: view of work by Rosemary Mayer in *Scores of Transformation*, Artspace Aotearoa]

...and Ghosts, created in our gallery by Mayer's niece and executor of her estate, Marie Warsh, out of papers, ribbons, cellophane, string and sticks. These ribbons now decorate my daughter's bunk bed...

[Slide: view of work by Quishile Charan in *Scores of Transformation*, Artspace Aotearoa]

... through to the work made by Quishile Charan in her home studio with her whānau and constructed in such a way that at the end of the exhibition the work could be turned into pillowcases and gifted to them. These pillowcases are currently on view at Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Galleries at AUT as part of her doctoral presentation.

Again, I haven't covered the depth of these individual works but rather wish to show you 'the why'. What do we enable when formats of established discipline such as time, such as group exhibitions, become undisciplined enablers of meaningfully complex exchange? What becomes possible when considering the impact of the Medicis on the Western canon through the lens of an experimental conceptual artist working in the 1970s—in relationship with an emerging practitioner working today here in Aotearoa who insists on the necessary consideration of whānau; sacred tikanga, authorship, labour? I argue that what becomes possible in this scenario is relationships that engender transformation, for the artists, the organisation, and of course the audience. Transformation as form plays with scale, and can be meaningful at a small or a large size: consider the morsel on a plate as in my home, consider the new name for an organisation, as in my workplace.

This is an approach to exhibition making that is absorbed by the potential of undisciplining time and considering complex, live relationships, that is to say emergence. This does not produce the so-called opposite of discipline and establishment which is chaos but, instead enables compensatory response and co-existence.

Zoom out from here, this specific part of our programme and how it applies to the whole, various tones are elevated through the poupou exhibition from established artists, the solo exhibition, and the new commissions. Zoom out even further, consider the implications for our wider arts ecosystem if organisations took the approach of working in commune rather than competition, clearly acknowledging the unique strength of their fundamental purpose and how this, with the right kind of corridors between, bolsters the entire terrain, the entire territory. Consider

what might be possible!

[Slide: postage stamp designed by George Hubbard, 1996]

Spiral out: tape measure in hand, the clock being eaten by the isometric pillar, the intricate shadows of flowers, the wavy line, the note, the candle, the vessel pouring, the scholarship of the morsel.

We end here, with this image of a spiral, a stamp made by curator George Hubbard in 1996 as part of a series.

The poupou exhibition for 2025 will in part return to *Choice!* Curated by Hubbard in 1990 for what was then Artspace. This seminal group exhibition was not intergenerational but has played an extremely significant role between generations of artists and organisations of our ecosystem. In my research, I have been in conversation with various people involved in the exhibition, and one of them gave me this stamp. This, to me, was the ultimate intergenerational moment.

What better way to cast off into the intergenerational force of exhibition history than by engaging the spiral? What better way to cast something into an unknown future, than with a stamp, the sending of a message?

This is why intergenerational exhibitions and the methods that shape their making matter; because they set up meaningful corridors of exchange, productive friction, and timely reflection that engage the fleshy engine of the powerful and fallible voice of the artist, the organisation, and the audience.

Ngā mihi.