worlds to be chosen, disturbed, interpreted and navigated
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A Deep dive lecture transcript
26 February 2025

[*This text was first delivered as a lecture and has been lightly edited for readability. When spoken aloud, the difference between the English and Māori 'he' is clearer. I've decided not to provide a way of differentiating between them in text, instead leaning towards the ambiguity that* The Indefinite Article *itself establishes*.]

The question that *Choice!* invariably seems to have summoned is 'what is Māori art'? To me, the answer feels very simple—it is the sentiment emphasised recently by Ngarino Ellis and Diedre Brown in *Toi Te Mana*, that Māori art is art made by Māori.[1] It is the same sentiment George Hubbard expressed in the press release for *Choice!* when he wrote that 'Māori people making art can be seen as Māori artists, and art made by Māori can be seen as Māori art.'

And yet, when I spoke to another curator in preparation for this talk, he was eager to make clear that the divide that *Choice!* exposed was one that was very strongly felt within Aotearoa at the time: that despite the nuance we can now read into those histories, back then, shades of grey were not so easily identified. He wanted to convey the widely felt sense that there were two strong camps—very simply: the first heavily influenced by marae-centred artforms which embraced formalism as an expression of connection across past, present and future; and the second, trained in the context of urban art schools, which rejected this idea of constancy.

Naïve as it might be, I have a difficult time wrapping my head around this

1 Diedre Brown and Ngarino Ellis, 'Tīmatanga Kōrero – Introduction,' in *Toi Te Mana: An Indigenous History of Māori Art* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2024), 12.

time. I didn't see *Choice!*, I wasn't around for the debates of the 1990s. And, although the historicization of this period formed some (not much) of my training in art history, in the museum collections I've worked within, modern Māori art sits alongside contemporary Māori art, and most recent attempts at surveying Māori art in exhibitions and publications have considered their work within a shared history. The 'fires of destruction' which Hirini Moko Mead warned of—and which *Choice!* threatened to ignite—don't burn brightly for me.[2]

My role at Te Papa is curator of contemporary art. This does not include contemporary Māori or Indigenous art, which is the subject of another curatorial portfolio. While in practice we are often working across collections, the museum remains structured in a highly particular way, locating Māori art within the art collections and taonga Māori in the Mātauranga Māori collection. The question these divisions inevitably raise is the distinction between taonga Māori, toi Māori and Māori art. But, for me, the question that is more pertinent is the relationship between 'Māori' and 'contemporary'.

I borrowed the title of this lecture from Dionne Brand's *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck*. In the chapter 'An autobiography of the autobiography of reading', she argues that within the structure of that title, 'leading with the indefinite "an autobiography" leaves open the possibility of multiple autobiographies, of which this is but one iteration; it is particular but not individual.'[3] 'An' autobiography, she continues, 'gestures to the world of a reading self. It signals the complicated ways of reading and interpretation that are necessary under conditions of coloniality. It suggests that coloniality constructs outsides and insides—worlds to be chosen, disturbed, interpreted and navigated—so as to live something like a real self.'[4]

I'm drawn to Brand's emphasis on the act of reading and a (not the) 'reading self' for how it leaves open space for multiple readings, multiple selves. For it seems to me that what Hubbard was attempting to pry open was room for expansive, unrestrained, perhaps even untethered, expressions of Māori art, and that the criticism he received in response was primarily definitive—it focused on a binary: the question of what is and is not. I don't wish to canvas the reactions to *Choice!*, nor to analyse Hubbard's curatorial approach—things which Peter Brunt, Robert Leonard and Anna-Marie White have rigorously done, and I acknowledge the influence of their work on my thinking.[5] Rather, I want to consider what

2 Sidney (Hirini) Moko Mead, 'Ka Tupu te Toi Whakairo ki Aotearoa: Becoming Māori Art,' in *Te Māori: Māori Art from New Zealand Collections*, ed. Sidney Moko Mead (Auckland: Heinemann in association with the American Federation of Arts, 1984), 75.

3 Dionne Brand, *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 24.

4 Ibid.

5 Peter Brunt, 'Since "Choice": Exhibiting the "New Maori Art,' in *On Display: New Essays in Cultural Studies*, eds. Anna Smith and Lydia Wevers (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004), 215–242; Anna-Marie White and Robert Leonard, 'George Hubbard: The Hand That Rocked The Cradle,' *Reading Room* 8 (2018): 30 –53.

might be missed when our attention is too sharply tuned to these definitive questions, and spend some time approaching Michael Parekōwhai's *The Indefinite Article*, which has often been read in relation to its display in *Choice!*, from a different perspective.

Much of my recent research focuses on whakapapa as a framework for understanding New Zealand's art histories. Whakapapa, as a verb, is the action of placing in layers. It is from within these layers of connection—both known and unknown—that the world takes shape. Seen in this way, whakapapa extends beyond the lines of descent which we, in English, associate with its common translation as 'genealogy', to represent a connection to landscapes and ecologies; a source of knowledge and relationships; the transmission of stories and histories; an obligation to past, present, and future.

There are many reasons why certain whakapapa may not be known, recognised, or shared. But, as Ani Mikaere has said, even loss, and landlessness, and alienation, have their own whakapapa.[6] And, of course, the presentation of whakapapa always involves a selective emphasis: they are told in order to highlight particular connections. Perhaps, it is these whakapapa—those narratives we don't usually hear or share—that *Choice!* sought to address.

The temporal framework that whakapapa establishes presents a challenge to linear conceptions of past, present, and future. The whakatauki 'ka mua ka muri' is often invoked as an example of this. But while 'ka mua ka muri' is often translated as 'walking backwards into the future', its construction is more complicated than that. Rather than re-positioning our relationship to a linear chronology—turning one way, rather than another—'ka mua ka muri' locates past, present and future 'inside and beyond us', collapsing our sense of linearity.[7] This engagement with time challenges our understanding of the 'contemporary' as a temporal marker and resists the art historical emphasis on rupture and discontinuity as key drivers of development and innovation: it is an understanding of time concerned with growth, rather than deconstruction.

All of this brings us to Parekōwhai's *The Indefinite Article*, first displayed in *Choice!* and now presented in this exhibition. I'm going to give the artwork some brief context in its fullness, before approaching it from a few new angles. *The Indefinite Article* has been read as 'I am he' and 'I am he/hē'. Either way, it makes reference to the work of Colin McCahon, and his use of the phrase 'I am', which in turn quotes God in the Book of Exodus,

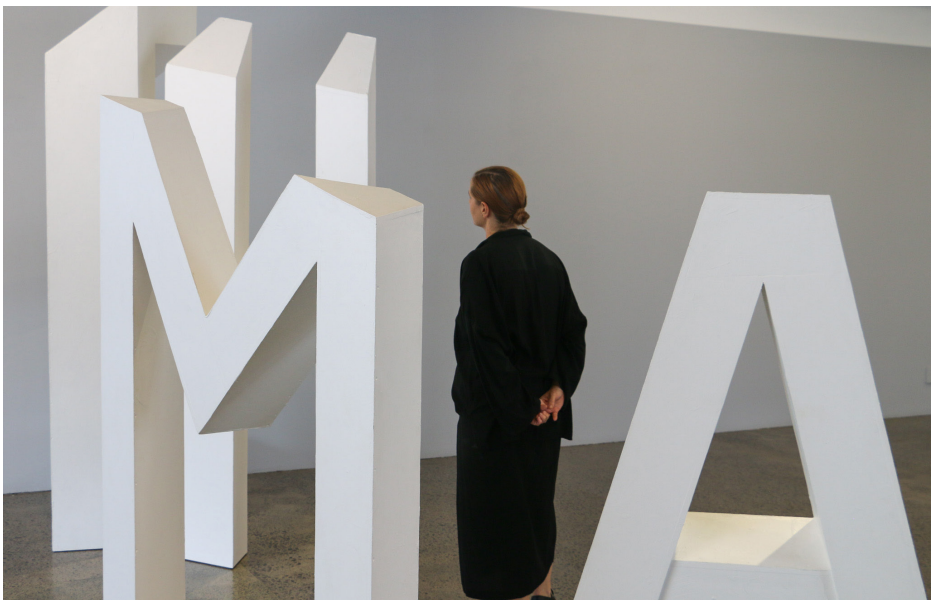
6 Ani Mikaere, 'Whakapapa and Taonga: Connecting the Memory,' in *Colonising Myths Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Wellington: Huia Publishers and Te Tāukupu Te Wānanga o Raukawa, 2011), 295.

7 Alice Te Punga Somerville, "Inside Us the Unborn: Genealogies, Futures, Metaphors, and the Opposite of Zombies," in *Pacific Futures: Past and Present*, eds. Warwick Anderson, Miranda Johnson, and Barbara Brookes (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 74.

telling Moses ‘I am who I am’. This statement—I am he—contains the letters of Parekōwhai’s first name, Michael, that are present in the Māori alphabet, and omits the ‘c’ and ‘l’ which are not.

In a conversation between Kura Te Waru Rewiri and Hubbard, Rewiri identifies what she calls ‘a sense of isolation in [Hubbard’s] work and the artists [he] works with’.[8] I wonder if part of what she is responding to is this sense of the ‘I’ and its emphasis on an individual, rather than collective, identity. This is something I’ve struggled with in trying to understand *The Indefinite Article*—the way that it circles around these highly particular identifiers: ‘I’, ‘he’, and the absent but present ‘Michael’. Approached again, as ‘I am he’, the ‘he’ troubles that reading. In te reo Māori, ‘he’ is the indefinite article: a or an, as opposed to the definite article: the. ‘He’, then, is as Brand writes, ‘particular but not individual’, unlike the English personal pronoun ‘he’.

Looking at the installation images of this artwork, I was struck by how they captured new configurations of the text that I hadn’t previously considered, and the way this invites new readings of the work. Carl Mika writes on the whakapapa and ‘worlding’ of language, arguing that a Māori philosophy of language presents (rather than represents) the world.[9] The naming of taonga after ancestral figures is on one example of this, where the distance between the name, the ancestor the name refers to, and the object collapses, and all become equally material and present.



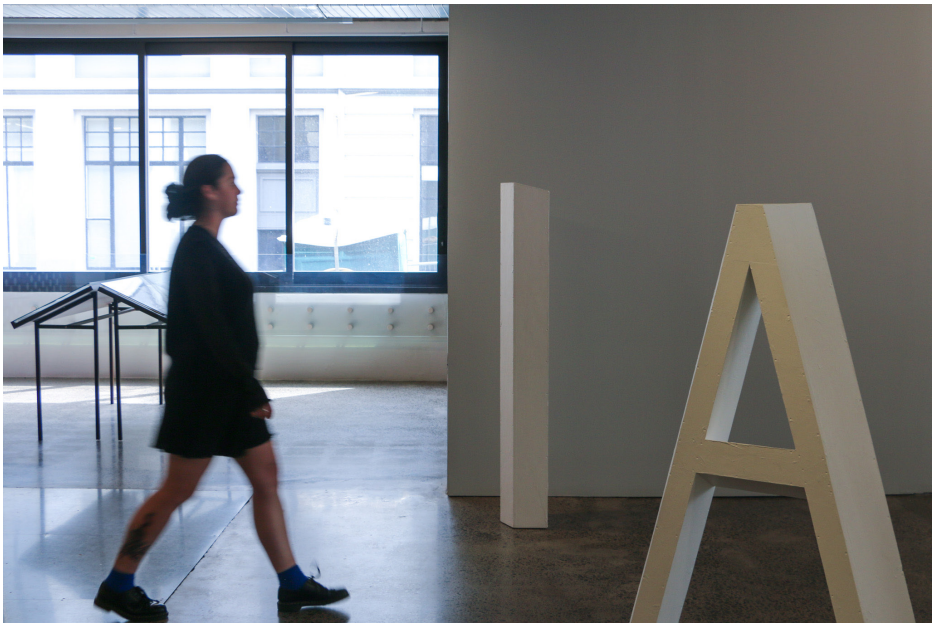
Michael Parekōwhai, *The Indefinite Article*, 1990. Wood, acrylic, 248.9 x 609.6 x 356 cm. Detail. Courtesy of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and Chartwell Collection, purchased with generous assistance from Jim Barr and Mary Barr, 1990.

8 Kura Te Waru Rewiri and George Hubbard, ‘Brownie Points: An Interview with George Hubbard,’ in *Kororangi: New Maori Art* (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 1996), 37.

9 Carl Mika, ‘Worlded Object and Its Presentation: A Māori Philosophy of Language,’ *AlterNative* 12(2) (2016): 166.

In this image, there is a similar collapsing of distance, between ‘mā’, the word for ‘white’ and the whiteness of the word itself. It illustrates Mika’s idea that ‘a concept and a real thing are equally material,’ or that ‘form and thought are the same’ by giving material presence to language and its meaning.[10]

Mā is also a grammatical particle that indicates future possession and is used to show relationships, for how it establishes a hierarchy between possessor and possessed. Read in this way, it has the potential to challenge the circularity of ‘I am he’, suggesting the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘he’ is perhaps not neutral.



Prompts, 2024. Installation view.

And here, ‘ia’. Like ‘he’, ‘ia’ is a pronoun. Unlike ‘he’, ‘ia’ is not gender-specific, and so seeing it in the artwork upends some of the gendered associations of the phrase ‘I am he’.

‘Ia’ can also mean current, flow, or refer to the beat of a haka. I’m interested in how these interpretations of the word all connect into something wider or larger than themselves, and how each involves movement. I’ve taken to thinking of the letters in *The Indefinite Article* as the pulses in a beat, which can be combined and divided with varying effect, each a different presentation of—and into—the world.

Parekōwhai’s *Atarangi*, which is in Te Papa’s collection, was also shown in *Choice!*. Like *The Indefinite Article*, it plays with language and its symbols. ‘Atarangi’ means shadow, and the shadow cast by this sculpture are the letters it forms when turned on its side: h, e, ‘he’, ‘he’.

10 Mika, ‘Worlded Object,’ 167.

‘He’ is, as we know, an English masculine pronoun. It is the answer to a question that, in the context of *The Indefinite Article*, remains uncertain, prompting the declaration that ‘I am he’. And, in te reo Māori, ‘he’ is the indefinite article: an or a, not the. ‘Hē’ can also mean wrong, which frankly makes me wonder if it’s possible I’m approaching this all incorrectly, but perhaps that is the difficulty it is intended to present.

Assembled from oversized Cuisenaire rods, or rakau, *Atarangi* gestures towards the Atarangi Method, a reo Māori learning approach that encourages speaking the language in an immersion setting, using the rakau as tools for constructing simple sentences. In the Atarangi environment, language takes this new, brightly coloured, abstract shape, which might shift from one moment to the next. This lively relationship between language and the world, then, pushes firmly against what Mika calls ‘greatest deceptions imposed by colonization’: the idea ‘that language is somehow separate from the complete whakapapa (genealogy) of the world’.[11]

Dionne Brand writes that in reading, she does not aspire to inclusion, but rather to be addressed. That is the challenge that Lubaina Himid is picking up: the question of how Black people are being represented in the popular media and to who this representation is addressed. ‘Eh?’, in that context, presents a question: ‘what?’, or ‘really?’. From ‘He’ to ‘he’ to ‘eh’. It’s an exclamation that’s familiar to most of us, through the work of McCahon, and Peter Robinson, and Gordon Bennett. But while I might now place Himid in that whakapapa, she is unlikely to identify it herself.

‘What can an understanding of language do’ asks Himid at the end of her poem, ‘Audience as performers’. It’s a question that all the artworks in this exhibition ask: what does language offer, what does it resist, what might it conceal?

Himid and Parekōwhai share an unstable, uncertain ‘I’: an ‘I’ that involves and implicates us, the reader. ‘Who do I want to be’, asks Himid. ‘I am he’, responds Parekōwhai. But I don’t see this as an isolated ‘I’—the ‘I’ which seemed to trouble Rewiri in the wake of *Choice!*. Rather, it’s an ‘I’ that exists within a whakapapa: one of many layers, all in constant and shifting relation—some comfortable, others challenging—an ‘I’ which is never ‘me’ alone.

11 Mika, ‘Worlded Object,’ 166.

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