

Compliancy, consideration and the cusp

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The idea for this exhibition was given to us by our supervisors during an early-morning group meeting. Michael Parekowhai and James Cousins sat in front of our year group and instructed us to “get off our arses,” like they had in their days at Elam School of Fine Arts. In their final year, they took over an old telecommunications building as a last big hurrah for their year group. From their experience they told us that this opportunity would not only offer the public a glimpse into our work as emerging artists, but would truly give us a show of our own, without the restrictions and scrutiny of the end of year graduate show. With the aim of accommodating up to the 95 students in our year, the huge range of practices were too diverse to connect with an overarching theme. Instead, the word of the day is context, context, context. The context of the cusp, the edge, the cliff-face of graduating, leaving one institution and learning to navigate others. The cusp is looming and it is significant.

Professional and creative practice is transforming in the face of drastic changes in our social and economic environment. Most of us are Generation Rent, the cost of living and property ownership rising exponentially since the 1980s without a corresponding increase in salaries (Howden-Chapman et al. 111). With the addition of our burgeoning student debt, it will be harder for our generation to fund our artistic practices, harder to afford artist run spaces and studios, harder to find new spaces to exhibit work. Our tutors first scoffed at the thought of turning to a public body like Auckland Council, urging us to wait until another student came forward with an uncle’s garage or warehouse. But with policies of deregulation and our government shedding almost all responsibility of new home lending, property ownership has become significantly delayed or unachievable for many on low and middle incomes, especially in larger cities like Auckland (112).

Auckland is changing. The demographic is shifting and spiking, new populations are moving in and our massive Los Angeles-like-sprawl has to somehow catch up. Two big plans are about to unfold, the Unitary Plan decides what can be built and where, with the aim of making Auckland a more compact and high-quality city, while the Long Term Plan upgrades our public transport system with the aim of connecting our most far-flung constituencies (Auckland Council 2012, 2013). It’s the biggest development to occur here in decades. Many spaces bought by Auckland Transport now lie empty, some for years, either waiting for demolition for the City Rail Link project or for a new leaseholder. This is the fate of Black Note Bar on 223 Symonds Street, offered to us by Auckland Transport. Previously a Māori music bar, it lies in an economically stagnant part of central Auckland. I remembered learning from a talk last year by local historian Edward Bennet, that unlike Karangahape Road, the area of upper Symonds Street never recovered from the construction of the motorway spaghetti junction behind it.¹ Businesses there often come and go. We jumped at the offering knowing that it was the perfect opportunity to learn the ropes of the changing conditions of creative practice. We can’t always rely on an established art gallery or conventional art space – more and more artists will be instead occupying bars for a couple of weeks a year.

¹ Edward Bennet is a Karangahape Road historian and somewhat of an Auckland icon. He takes guided tours through the area which I highly recommend. For more information, see <http://www.kroad.com/heritage/>.

We need to be more resilient and also more curious, both resisting the power structures that leave our generation in greater hardship than our parents, but also adapting and becoming more place-based and audience-focused.

Many exciting things come from working with the Council. Working with a public body means working in the public's interest. The dream is for us as artists to break out of private practice and contribute to community building, working together with Council to make Auckland more vibrant and liveable. There are also some restrictions that come packaged in this partnership. Artists have far less control and agency over the space with the stringent regulations and red tape. Three weeks out from the show, a fire compliancy issue almost saw us losing the space entirely and moving to a shoddy office space and mechanics workshop down the street. Michael had also warned us early on about possible limitations that could arise and urged us to ask, "what are the antagonisms and conflicting agendas that come from working with a public body?" So far none have come to fruition but these are still important considerations. We're part of the democratic landscape now. The rate payer is serving us, but are we serving the ratepayer?

There are residents living above us, a barbershop next door is lending us their Wi-Fi, artists showing in the community garden are pulling out weeds during a local working bee. And even as we tried to pay respect to the area and its history there was heart-break and irony as the students from a white institution, The University of Auckland, took over the bar and had Council smear white paint over a beautiful mural of Māori creative practitioners and figures such as Ralph Hotere. Building on my previous point about the difficulties faced by the housing crisis, it's important to note that the hardest hit are Māori and Pasifika (especially as state housing schemes didn't apply to Māori for a good part of the 20th century) (Howden-Chapman et al 107). Thus, another important consideration of working with a public body is that by default the artist is connecting with the same state bodies responsible for catalysing the crisis. Is our work a nice little intervention into a largely unused part of town or are we merely an extension of a state arm that often quashes, squashes and oppresses?

This is the cusp, the new world we're thrown into of a new creative practice and a new Auckland. These issues have to be considered constantly and must be navigated accordingly. We're moving into a denser, more diverse and more connected city, we're rubbing shoulders with new bureaucratic circles, traffic engineers, fire chiefs, with lobbyists, politicians, local Iwi, and migrants. We have to act appropriately and with new sensitivity. Clashes, confusions and red tape shouldn't deter us. As Chantal Mouffe has proposed, in the public arena difficult relationships and "antagonistic" interactions are key to a healthy and vibrant democracy and in creating better political and social conditions for all (Mouffe). Artists, "get off your arses," fight, and be excited. Help rewrite the language we speak and the cultural fabric of Auckland city.

Works cited

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