



REPORT ON CURATING  
UNDER PRESSURE  
SYMPOSIUM,  
CHRISTCHURCH, NEW  
ZEALAND, 5-8 NOV 2015

Dr Andrew Paul Wood

## Introduction

Ka tangi te tītī  
Ka tangi te kākā  
Ka tangi hoki ahau.  
Kia ora.

As the sooty shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) voices its presence  
As the parrot (*Nestor meridionalis*) voices its presence  
So too do I.  
Greetings.

It is appropriate that the 2016 Curating Under Pressure symposium in Christchurch, New Zealand, began with a traditional Thursday 5 November with a traditional Māori Powhiri (ceremonial welcome and challenge) at the Rapaki Marae (communal sacred place). The purpose of the Powhiri asserts the locality as tūrangawaewae, literally the “place to stand” of the Ngāti Wheke, hapū/subtribe of the dominant South Island iwi/tribe Ngāi Tahu. Visitors must be challenged as to their intentions before they are welcomed into the sanctum, their tapu (spiritual restrictions) lifted, decontaminated, so as not to interfere with the tapu of the marae. A helpful concept to remember here is that of utu – often mistranslated as “revenge” in the context of intertribal warfare, but in the broader context meaning “reciprocity” in order to maintain the balance of the cosmic order. This sets the tone of the city of Christchurch as a contested place in the continuing aftermath of the devastating earthquakes of 2010 and 2011.

The site of Christchurch has a history of being contested – between Ngāi Tahu and the Church of England settlers who founded the city in the 1850s, between civic and private interests, and between British and New Zealand identity. In the post-earthquake environment it is contested between the wants of the citizenry, local government, and a national government that has awarded itself unheard-of authority over Christchurch.

The significance of the time and place of the symposium deliberately coincides with the final week of Christchurch’s eighth SCAPE biennial of art in public space, which has for the last three iterations has had to respond to the challenges posed by this contested post-disaster environment – a theme raised multiple times in the presentations made by Christchurch symposium speakers.

## Day 1

Following the barbecue lunch reception generously hosted by the North Projects artist-run initiative, much of the rest of the day was taken up by three walking tours of the city.

The first of these tours was led by Dr Jessica Halliday around Christchurch’s remaining heritage architecture. The city’s built environment is very much part of the issues of the city as a contested site with various authorities granting themselves powers to order the demolition of damaged or structurally suspect buildings, resulting in the destruction of many of the city’s Victorian Gothic Revival and 20<sup>th</sup> century Brutalist architecture.

Barnaby Bennett took a tour around various “Transitional Projects” – interventions and recreational projects that began as grass roots initiatives as therapeutic events or as a activist protest at various undemocratic technocratic measures imposed by the government. These groups included GapFiller which has installed hundreds of temporary interactive community projects in the city, Greening The Rubble which created garden spaces in sites left empty by demolitions, FESTA (the festival of temporary architecture) and Life In Vacant Spaces which sought to connect empty commercial venues with artists wishing to put on pop-up exhibitions.

Some explanation of the use of the word “transitional” in the Christchurch context is required. “Transitional” has become jargon for a somewhat idealised and utopian activist-centred view of temporary interventions in the ruins as a stop gap during reconstruction until such sites will be filled by commercial or residential structures. In some ways it has been highly beneficial to the civic psyche in re-engaging the community with the inner city. In other ways it has turned from a number of well-intentioned grass roots community entities into something official, institutionalised and with a certain amount of political propaganda value. If one may draw a comparison with Heinrich von Kleist’s short story “Das Erdbeben in Chili” (1807), old and deeply entrenched patterns (in this case bureaucratic and social) have reasserted themselves over the initial phase of relief, gratitude, cooperation and good will. As was seen in presentations in the symposium, this eventuality has been a source of friction with other small and local community cultural organisations and groups, particularly as regards funding and degree of political response.

Rob Garrett, curator of SCAPE 8, took a tour of the seven public art works commissioned by the biennial. The commissioned artists were Nathan Pohio, Pauline Rhodes, Hannah Kidd, Fiona Jack, Judy Millar, Peter Atkins, with a permanent legacy commission from Antony Gormley. Garrett explained his curatorial concept of selecting intimate and discursive works with a specific focus on reengaging the local community with the inner city.

This was followed by refreshments at The Physics Room contemporary art space which allowed participants the opportunity to see the exhibition *the blue-grey wall*, curated by French curator Barbara Sirieix and featuring the work of artists Madison Bycroft, Pauline Curnier Jardin, Eglè Kulbokaitė and Dorota Gawęda, Chloé Maillet and Louise Hervé and Zoë Paul.

In the evening Russell Brown, blogger/citizen journalist and editor of Public Address blog, gave the opening keynote address on the effects of the earthquake on people he knows personally and how social media networks facilitated reportage of the quake.

The evening concluded with drinks at Smash Palace, itself something of a transitional project and local institution.

## Day 2

On Friday 6 November the first day proper of the symposium began at the University of Canterbury with a welcome by Lynne-Harata Te Aika (Former Head of Māori and Indigenous Studies at the University of Canterbury), representing Ngāi Tahu. The audience was informed as to how the city of Christchurch is built on swampland and how in

precolonial times the local Māori lived in communities about it with the current site of the city being merely a place of food gathering and physical transition. Failures by the colonists to honour the deed of settlement in relation to Aotearoa-New Zealand's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) between Māori and the British Crown (again, Christchurch as contested space) eventually led to extensive final reparation in 1986, the signing of a new deed of settlement in 1998, and following the earthquakes, an agreement between the Christchurch Earthquake Rebuild Authority (CERA) and Ngāi Tahu agreeing in principle to a "re-indiginising" of the city by visually incorporating a Ngāi Tahu presence into the fabric of the city.

This was followed by Bettina Senff (Director of the Goethe-Institut New Zealand) who delivered Leonhard Emmerling's greeting/provocation in absentia, which asked the audience to consider whether SCAPE 8 represented a paradigm shift from the usual heroic and grandiose rhetoric that normally surrounds such events, but which would be highly inappropriate in the context of a still recovering and contested urban space.

Then Deborah McCormack (Director of SCAPE) continued in this vein, speaking briefly of the ethics of curating and the responsibilities to the public in the context, particularly the great difficulty of putting public art in the inner city in and around what was a cordoned-off, constantly changing disaster zone.

As the conclusion of the welcome, Elka aus dem Moore responded to the Powhiri of the day before, noting the importance of rituals of welcoming. She recounted the Māori creation myth described at the Powhiri: In the beginning Papatūānuku (the earth mother) and Ranginui (the sky father) lay clasped together until their sons trapped between them (the Māori pantheon) forced them apart, and how thunder is Tāwhirimātea the storm god's resentment at this intervention. More apropos perhaps, in Māori tradition, earthquakes are the fury of the unborn god Rūaumoko who cannot now leave the womb of Papatūānuku. Aus dem Moore also spoke of biennials as political and cultural seismographs following natural disasters and political pressure. She also raised the interesting point about the global ripples of terrible events, suggesting that the 2004 Indonesian Tsunami and the death of Princess Diana in 1997 were the first two truly global expressions of grief, and asked the question: "what do we learn from disasters? This question was to inform much of the symposium around the issues of how to conceptualise new curatorial strategies against limitation and oppression, international solidarity, communication, and curatorial ethics.

The first session, "Biennials in times of disaster", consisted of Blair French (Curator of SCAPE 6 & 7, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia), Rob Garrett, and via Skype Brooke Davis Anderson (Executive Director, Prospect New Orleans/US Biennial), moderated by Jenny Harper, Director of Christchurch Art Gallery).

French spoke of how the idea for a symposium on curating in disaster situations arose in a conversation between himself, Leonhard Emmerling and artist Mischa Kuball during the decompression period following SCAPE 7, and how his curatorial vision for SCAPE 6 and 7 were largely informed by the flow of the Christchurch landscape and the Avon River that flows through it. He positioned Christchurch artist Julia Morison's legacy commission *Tree Houses for Swamp Dwellers* for SCAPE 7 in a context of rethinking and repopulating the post-quake city, new uses for abandoned building stock, and the problems of completely reconfiguring the building plans for artist projects when the 2010 earthquake struck just three

weeks before SCAPE 6 was ready to launch. He noted that the earthquake created a particular resonance and urgency for participating artists Héctor Zamora (Mexico City) and Ahmet Ögüt (from Istanbul, based in Amsterdam) given their personal experiences of severe earthquakes, while encouraging other artists to rethink their works in the new context.

Of course the inner city of Christchurch was largely intact following the 2010 earthquake. It was the 2011 earthquake that resulted in the main destruction of buildings, the loss of 185 lives and ongoing emotional, social and financial trauma. This event resulted in the cancellation of SCAPE 7 until 2013. Curatorial focus turned to providing a physical, emotional and memory-based space of connection among the Christchurch citizenry. Some works were deemed no longer appropriate to go forward with because of new possible readings in the post-disaster environment. Consideration had to be given to the way an environment in flux affected site specificity. New strategies arose, including rolling out works one by one or conducting them in other cities (the latter approach helping to encourage a national dialogue about the quake, but alienated Christchurch residents who resented not having access).

Garrett spoke of how he had themed SCAPE 8 around an aspirational approach where public art met people in their lived situation, from a starting point of asking: “is this the right time to do anything?” Garrett’s SCAPE was to be a much more intimate and human-scale event, eschewing the usual heroic blockbuster rhetoric of biennials in order to focus and include the established and evolving local community, selecting artists whose work offered a conscious rather than passive experience and redirecting attention to the physical location. This was particularly important in a rebuilding city where physical space is constantly changing, in order to reconnect Christchurch residents physically and emotionally with an inner city that they had been consciously avoiding. Reasons for this avoidance include absence of retail space, relocation of commercial activity to the suburbs, difficulty in negotiating the space, and traumatic memories.

Garrett drew parallels with his experience in NARRACJE 2013, in Gdansk, Poland, where he was tasked with curating interventions in the Długie Ogrody neighbourhood which was socially disenfranchised, had only ever been partially inhabited since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was still partially ruined from bombing during the Second World War. He spoke of trying to create a similar re-engagement, building a bridge into the community psychogeography of memory and community beneath the surface (he frequently used the anatomical metaphor of “soft tissue”). He concluded with the observation that the experience of public art is primarily a social one that people often visit in groups, thereby coming with a readymade discussion group and thus fostering dialogue about public space. He noted that unless people physically occupied the city they could not be expected to be invested in the city, and suggested that there were three main reasons for this disconnect in Christchurch: that many people were still in domestic and emotional difficulty, that people in the relatively unscathed western part of the city were either disinterested or experiencing survivor guilt, and an excess media and political focus on the rebuild over community issues.

After some technical difficulties Davis Anderson spoke via Skype from the US about how following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, curator Dan Cameron and Americanist Rich Powell were brought to New Orleans to talk with stakeholders in the local art community in a public meeting. They recognised that New Orleans was ripe for a biennial-type event because it was

already well known nationally for its distinct culture, cuisine, architecture, and tourism attractions. Prospect was conceived as the first large scale international biennial in the US. It was unusual for such an event in the US because its public funding came from federal relief funds rather than the more typical arts and cultural funding, and is an Independent Non Profit entity receiving no funding from civic or state government.

Prospect was able to raise US\$ 4 million and was highly successful in re-introducing the rest of the US to New Orleans, however it also went US\$ 1 million over-budget resulting in friction with the local community who felt that while Prospect was touted as project of post-Katrina recovery, but that the overspend was at their expense (an impression not helped by most of the funding and administration being based in New York), despite the money actually going in to infrastructural repairs to make venues useable. The resulting community alienation meant that Prospect 2 was delayed (Davis Anderson joked that it was “a biennial on a triennial schedule,” and has indeed since become triennial) and greatly reduced in size and scope, funded with a mere US\$ 250,000, making very little impact on the local and national art worlds.

Prospect 3 is a return to form developing out of a realisation that part of the problem was that the local non-art audience had been left out of the development of the first Prospect and had never had a chance to prepare themselves for it or develop an understanding of how a biennial functions and therefore were not invested in it. A decision was made to use the non-event years to re-enlist alumni artists in an outreach programme to reach out to the traditionally non-art stakeholders in order to foster long-term sustainability and empower those stakeholders in engaging and educating their community about the biennial context. Another aspect of this was moving the major part of the operation from New York to New Orleans so that it could be felt to be a legitimate part of the community.

Prospect resulted in a number of beneficial cultural and economic spinoffs for New Orleans aside from increased cultural tourism. New Orleans was already a collection of communities highly appreciative of culture, but the greater emphasis was on decorative and folk arts. Prospect greatly expanded the interest of local collectors in acquiring contemporary art and has committed to the vision of fostering New Orleans as a contemporary art hub. Prospect was also responsible for a major influx of younger cultural practitioners who came as Prospect tourists, fell in love with New Orleans and stayed, resulting in the mixed blessing of gentrification of some neighbourhoods. Although Prospect will remain a fixture of New Orleans for the foreseeable future, in its early stages it was mooted as an itinerant biennial event along the lines of Manifesta in Europe, with specific mention of the possible benefits of the model for Detroit, a city in the grip of economic collapse.

The second session of the day was “Art strategies in times of disaster”, moderated by Aaron Kreisler, Head of Ilam School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury, and featured Azhari Aiyub (a writer from the Banda Aceh in Indonesia), Syafiatudina (Project Coordinator and Curator, Made in Commons, KUNCI Cultural Studies Centre, Yogyakarta, Indonesia), and Tim J. Veling (photographic artist and lecturer at Ilam School of Fine Arts).

Kreisler noted in his introduction that any criticism of the curator’s distance from their audience was contrasted by the observation that the curator was also part of the audience.

Azhari began with a description of the issues of operating in Aceh province under the pressures of a natural disaster in the form of the 2004 tsunami which killed half the population, and the manmade disaster of the occupation by the Indonesian military in the wake of local insurgency from 1976 to 2005. He spoke about the establishment of Aceh's Museum of Human Rights Abuse based on oral testimonies as a counterpoint to Indonesian military propaganda during martial law (echoing the tsunami museum opened by the Indonesian government in 2009) and how the museum also functions as a centre for human rights education of younger Acehnese.

Syafiatudina described how the earthquake that struck Yogyakarta in 2006 had become a "turning point" which all discussion of the present social context referenced as the moment when "everything changed". She talked about the condition of survival as an occasion for learning and how curating serves life and finds its function facilitating and mediating a durational process between public discourse and private conversations, subverting top-down information systems in an authoritarian structure, and noting that "art connects the grounded experience of people to the possible future and offers an alternative way of viewing the present". This was illustrated by the example of long term squatters being granted official status as legal inhabitants by the local chiefly authority during the post-quake grace period.

Veiling spoke from a personal and emotional perspective where photography is an act of taking that needs to be balanced by finding ways of giving, and how following the Christchurch earthquake he lost the desire to take photographs and particularly did not want to document the earthquake because of the associations with the sensationalised "quake porn" of the media and the insensitive, voyeuristic snapshots taken by private citizens on their mobile phones. He overcame this by realising that he had a right and an obligation to record what was happening in his own home context with his own authentic flaneurial voice. This resulted in two bodies of work – *Orientation* which mapped out the city with close-ups of smaller details of larger images (Barthesian *puncta*) and *Support Structures* (a typology of the buttresses and scaffolding holding up Christchurch buildings reminiscent of the work of Berndt and Hilla Becher).

In the follow-up discussion, reference was made to the idea proposed by Naomi Klein in *Shock Doctrine* (2007) that exceptional events level pre-existing social and local political structures. Syafiatudina suggested that the concept of "compassion fatigue" applied more to western societies where capitalism frames humans as units of production and that this didn't apply well to the Indonesian context of close-knit communities and emphasis on extended families.

Perhaps the densest session that day was the first of the afternoon, "Post-quake Christchurch responses. This involved no fewer than eight participants: Sophie Bannan, Grace Ryder, and Sophie Davis (co-founders of North Projects), Chloe Geoghegan and Ella Sutherland (former directors of Dog Park Art Project Space), Melanie Oliver (Director of The Physics Room), Lara Strongman (Senior Curator at Christchurch Art Gallery), and Sarah Murray (Curator of Human History at Canterbury Museum).

Murray began by outlining the difficulties of collecting and exhibiting the Christchurch earthquakes within the museological framework of collecting, preserving and exhibiting, and the dilemma of waiting too long and losing ephemeral material, or not waiting long enough and face accusations of insensitivity. Museums were described as places of civic healing

through their ability to showcase a variety of community voices as demonstrated by a number of exhibitions and the creation of an off-site earthquake exhibition. Particular attention was paid to the ethics of collecting examples of tributes to earthquake victims and how much the curator must rely on instinct to make ethical decisions under pressure.

Strongman spoke of the pressure on public art practices to be “useful” in joining cultural capital to financial capital while retaining critical agency, and the multiple agendas that attempted to assert control over the primary narrative. She also made to Christchurch’s particularly provincial culture where any intervention to the built environment is hotly contested and where culture and public expressions of intellectual activity are regarded with suspicion (though personally I think that might be overstating the case). Strongman also mentioned uncommissioned, unofficial public art in the form of graffiti, blogs, cartoons, the placing of flowers in the tops of ubiquitous road cones (first initiated by Henry Sunderland, a local practitioner and art teacher at Christchurch Polytech Institute of Technology). Reference was made to art in the post-disaster neoliberal-inspired austerity environment functioning as a social tool, critique, communication, and of the compensatory aspect of art in an environment that “calls for action” (a renewal of the Victorian concern for the social agency of art). Various Christchurch examples of public art were offered as illustrations of Miwon Quon’s three categories of public art: non-site-specific so-called “plop art” that exists *art pour art* which acts as a civic locator of space, functional art integrated into public space, and art in the public interest with the intention of social reform.

Oliver gave a brief overview of The Physics Room project space from its origins in the early 1990s as the site-less South Island Art Projects collective, which evolved into the current organisation with a permanent exhibition space. Olivier then explained what it was like to come into the directorship early in the recovery phase. The project space was in the cordoned off area of the city and a temporary exhibition venue was in use in the southern inner city suburb of Sydenham. The Physics Room’s main audience demographic – 25-35-year-olds interested in contemporary art – had left the city in large numbers due to the loss of affordable accommodation, studio space etc. Relatively normal aspects of operations such as providing key performance indicators for funding bodies like Creative New Zealand (CNZ, the Crown funding agency) had become redundant. When the permanent space became accessible again, its centrality to the city centre rebuild made a compelling context to expand to a broader category of external public events, performances, talks, and even venue hire for private events. This facilitated a return of younger artists to the city and a reconnection of Christchurch to a national and international network of practitioners and institutions, with a philosophy of “business as usual.”

The next two groups offered an interesting insight into the post-quake dynamic of Activists versus Artists in the competition for public funding and public attention, and the criticism posed by Activists that the Artists were more interested in their engagement with the global art processes than responding locally to the earthquake.

Bannan, Ryder and Davis spoke about the difficulties as art students establishing North Projects in the post-quake context in 2014 when the so-called “resilience” narrative had captured the public imagination at the expense of engagement with conceptual and not necessarily earthquake-related art. North Projects established itself in a leased artist studio that had previously been converted from an earthquake-damaged flat, opening at a time when

the CNZ recovery fund had largely been dispersed. Their mandate was for low cost-high quality exhibitions supported by a gift economy and often funded by Bannan, Ryder and Davis themselves. They felt marginalised by the usual funding routes because their model was consciously unsustainable with no potential for growth, non-charitable, non-business and on a periodic lease, despite various interest groups leveraging the narrative of Christchurch as a centre of innovation and culture. North Project exists as a small-voiced presence in a highly contested fabric, generated for a specialised audience and with no intention of taking on public responsibility.

Geoghegan and Sutherland continued in a similar vein having started in the post-quake environment in 2012, having successfully acquired private sector funding for the Dog Park Art Space. Like North Projects this was very much a continuation of the Artist Run Initiative lineage rather than a direct response to the earthquake, with an intention to encourage a diverse range of practitioners from outside Christchurch's pre-existing art milieu to generate exhibitions. They spoke about the criticism they received from "transitional" activists (people primarily not from visual art backgrounds) for not directly addressing the earthquake, and raised the view that art, being open ended, existing for its own sake and often addressing contradictory ideas, was not always the best conduit for effectively addressing some issues.

This was followed by a World café session which allowed the audience to form smaller groups for chaired discussions of the issues raised.

The evening concluded with the SCAPE Closing Keynote address given by Gabi Ngcobo (Founding member of the Centre for Historical Re-enactments and co-founder of Nothing Gets Organised in Johannesburg, South Africa, and a Co-curator of the São Paulo Bienal, Brazil). Ngcobo began by noting the marginalised experience New Zealand has to the global biennial circuit by noting that "no one says the word 'overseas' like a New Zealander". Using a metaphor of looking at the local environment through the window of the arts institution, she spoke movingly of the construction of memory in post-Apartheid South Africa, making reference to Derrida's observation that "one chases after something to make them flee". She spoke of the problematic Johannesburg Biennials, launched after decades of South Africa's externally imposed isolation, which spoke more to an international art audience than a local one, stimulating local artists to explore how small scale interventions could decolonise the landscape of a South Africa that was a "country not yet a nation". Among the pivotal points offered for consideration were the university-centred protests around public art works commemorating historical figures of the colonial past, the student uprising of 1976, and the *Fr(agile)* project in the Alf Kumalo Museum archive of protest. Solutions were described as not coming out of individual decisions, but social revolution out of necessity.

### Day 3

The programme for Saturday 7 November concentrated more on the idea of political and economic pressure. Elka aus dem Moore of ifa introduced the day by talking about the biennial as a tool for making contemporary art possible and visible, but also how this made it an attractive format to political entities as instruments of propaganda and tourism. Aus dem Moore also spoke of the demands created by having multiple shareholders, including civic and governmental foundations, running independent agendas. Reference was made to the

temporary nature of biennials, the problems of censorship and boycott, and specific examples in the Moscow biennials, the St Petersburg Manifesta, the Gwangju Biennial in South Korea, and the Ukraine Biennial.

The first session of the day was “Dialogues: Institutions and counter narratives”. The speakers were Róna Kopeczky (acb Gallery, Budapest, Hungary), Azar Mahmoudian (independent curator, Tehran, Iran) and Alisa Prudnikova (Commissioner/Artistic Director, Ural Industrial Biennial, Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation), and was moderated by Misal Adnan Yıldız (Director, ARTSPACE, Auckland,).

After a reminder from Yıldız that the artists, too, are subject to pressure, the session began with Prudnikova’s experiences with the Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art based in Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk Oblast, Russia. Yekaterinburg was described as a former industrial city in the vacuum left by the end of the Soviet era, where artistic production is affected by censorship, a contest for resources, and the erasure of the ideological traditions of the Soviet past by the imposition of a post-Glasnost official culture derived from so-called “traditional values” but with no clear definition of what “traditional values” might mean. In his context the contemporary art biennial is seen as an instrument of mobilisation in the transition from Soviet to Post-Soviet and industrial to post-industrial society, superseding the mass instruments of mobilisation characteristic of industrial society. The Ural Biennial had to take into account the success or failure of cultural actors to engage with the local community (one couldn’t help but be reminded of the 2008 Czech film *Karamazovi* which fictionalised similar circumstances), and the awkwardness of industrial spaces as installation sites. In the Russian context even the private has its political dimension, which has an impact on the flavour of the art. In dealings with Moscow bureaucracy a lack of response is as good as an affirmative, an “Imaginary Moscow” given the distances involved from the centre.

Mahmoudian spoke of the capacity of art to both bypass and be hijacked by political restrictions in the context post-Revolutionary Iran. In the last few years of post-Revolutionary thaw, touring survey shows to Europe and North America as cultural diplomacy, sponsored by foreign oil companies, and usually framed in an exotic orientalist framework of Persian culture being “unveiled” or “revealed”. Mahmoudian talked of the need to create alternative models of exhibition where art would not be serving propagandistic purposes, but rather give artists (marginalised intellectuals of the Islamic Republic) greater visibility in an international framework. This thinking resulted in the Tehran Biennial – named as a symbolic continuity with the previous Tehran Biennials of the pre-Revolutionary period – and legitimising using the exhibition spaces of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art – one of the Shah’s last vanity projects prior to being deposed.

Kopeczky discussed the various individual and collective forms of artistic protest against cultural political pressure in Hungary since the conservative-right government of President János Áder came to power in 2012. The Áder government consolidated all national authority for the visual arts into the highly conservative Magyar Művészeti Akadémia. This was counterpointed by the activities of the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, and later initiatives such as NEMMA (a pun on “no MMA”) the campaign to defend artistic autonomy in Hungary and the OFF-Biennále Budapest in April-May 2015 consisting of a voluntary collaboration between practitioners and organisers, and funded by the private sector.

The second session of the day was “Dialogues: Be Polite: Responses to political pressure. The speakers were Zasha Colah (independent curator and co-founder of Clark House Bombay, India) via Skype, Shannon Te Ao (artist, lecturer at the Whiti o Rehua School of Art, Massey University, Wellington) and was moderated by Megan Tamati-Quennell Curator of Contemporary Māori, Indigenous Art at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington).

Colah began by outlining conditions of oppressive occupation by the Indian military in the north-eastern Seven Sister States (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (ASPA). Colah spoke about the situation in Nagaland contested between military authority, unequal access to the law, and ethnic and political privilege. Collaborative initiatives like the Black Rice project offer a possibility of a camouflaged crossing over a “line of privilege of expression”, coded in local indigenous production of knowledge, “not speaking for or to, but nearby”. In such a context symbolic victories and coping strategies are often more meaningful than direct confrontation. It was noted that the BJP party-centred Hindu Nationalist agenda had slotted into the colonial structures left behind by the departed British Raj. Hindu Nationalism has attempted to overwrite the various indigenous narratives of the north-east with a fiction of national unity. This extends to the retention of the colonial museums with their “intriguing and offensive” dioramas of the tribal groups prone to errors and inaccuracies in the depiction of tribal knowledge. Artistic strategies subvert this with tribally-coded knowledge and the creation of non-site “invisible museums”.

Shannon Te Ao spoke of the difficulty of being an ethnic minority while working within the racial and identity politics of Australia, and specifically of his experience of being a participating artist in the controversial 19<sup>th</sup> Sydney Biennale. This event was notable for the protests surrounding the chief sponsor Transfield’s administration of what are effectively offshore prison camps for the dubiously legal detainment of asylum seekers. This revelation led to a number of artists pulling out at least temporarily in protest and led Te Ao to collaborate with blogger/citizen journalist Murdoch Stephens of [www.doingourbit.co.nz](http://www.doingourbit.co.nz) to create an adjunct component to his Biennale contribution in criticism of Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers.

A World café session political pressure followed, before the next session: “Dialogues: Strategies of inclusion and exclusion”. The speakers were Sepake Angiama (curator of the education programme for Manifesta St Petersburg) and Alex Monteith (artist, lecturer at Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland), moderated by Bruce E. Phillips, Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Auckland).

Angiama talked about joining the itinerant European Manifesta biennial shortly before its 2014 iteration in St Petersburg. This was to coincide with much political and social turmoil in Russia – the enactment of anti-LGBTQI+ laws, civil war in the Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimea, the shooting down of flight MH17, the controversies of the Sochi Winter Olympics, and the ban on foreign produce. This atmosphere placed numerous constraints on an event which saw itself as being about openness and inclusiveness, complicated by international boycotts, the reality of everyday censorship under a regime highly sensitive to criticism, and the convoluted Russian bureaucracy. Angiama’s role as curator of the

Manifesta education programme became central in negotiating and mediating for inclusion in this contested space, factoring in the difficulty of responsiveness under these conditions.

Monteith presented on her experience of the political difficulties of being a documentary artist making work prior to the peace agreement, about the part of Northern Ireland where she grew up, and her involvement in the New Zealand activist movement to have the Tino rangatiratanga Māori sovereignty flag on the Auckland Harbour Bridge. The rest of her presentation dealt with the way her work finds a direct social engagement between groups like the surfing community and environmental issues like the oil spill pollution caused by the grounding of the *Rena* container ship on the Astrolabe Reef off Tauranga in 2011. She cited Gayatri Spivak's assertion that "who will listen is less crucial than who will listen."

The final session of the day was "Dialogues: The Global South" with Dr Ruth Watson (artist, lecturer, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland) and Dr Zara Stanhope (Principal Curator, Auckland Art Gallery). Watson spoke about her experiences on being invited to contribute text to the 2015 Phaidon book *Map: Exploring the World*, incorporating artworks referencing maps, and the lack of openness of Northern Hemisphere to acknowledge the true diversity of mapping systems in the predominantly oral traditions of the "global south" such as Aboriginal Australian song lines. There was some debate over the validity of the concept of global north and global south.

#### **Day 4**

Although I was not able to attend the programme for Sunday 8 November, at the New Brighton Club in the seaside suburb of New Brighton in the far east of Christchurch, Matt Walters from Aranui Community Trust discuss the wider Christchurch context and the ideas discussed in the Word café sessions of the previous two days were returned to as small groups attempt to produce working manifesto of curatorial ethics.

#### **Conclusion**

Curating Under Pressure was a successful and well-received event that did much to make the Christchurch arts and curatorial community feel part of a larger global dialogue when quite often, especially in the post-earthquake context, it seems provincial, isolated and remote. It reinforced the infinitely flexible and adaptable nature of the Biennial format to stimulate and mediate necessary discourse under the most difficult and even overtly hostile conditions. Even when different kinds of political and disaster pressure are placed on a sliding spectrum of scale, the strategies for adapting and functioning are often structurally similar.

As I finish compiling this report, news comes of the attacks in Paris. Our thoughts are with them and we acknowledge that "pressure" may strike unexpectedly at any time.

## Author

ANDREW PAUL WOOD – BAhons (Otago), Postgrad Diploma Museum Studies (Massey), MAmerit (Cant), PhD (Cant) – is a cultural historian, art and literary critic, translator, broadcaster and independent curator based in Christchurch, New Zealand. He has taught art history and theory at the Christchurch Polytech Institute of Technology, the Design and Arts College of New Zealand, and the University of Canterbury. He has written for *Art New Zealand*, the *New Zealand Listener*, *The Press* (Christchurch), the *Sunday Star-Times*, *EyeContact*, the *Sydney Review of Books* (Australia), *Art Monthly Australia*, *Public Art Review* (USA), and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany). He has previously worked with The Physics Room, Canterbury Museum, SCAPE and the Christchurch Arts Festival. He has curated a number of exhibitions in Christchurch and was on the curatorium for the 2012 *Shared Lines: Sendai-Christchurch Art Exchange* (New Zealand-Japan, commemorating the Christchurch and Fukushima earthquakes), *Endangered Visions* as part of Manilart 2014, Manila, Philippines, and was on the 2010 selection panel of the Asia New Zealand Foundation's Korean arts residency. In 2012-13 he presented an arts segment of CTV's morning show and currently hosts the "Artery" radio programme on Plains FM. In 2008 Wood received a professional development grant to travel to Europe for a month and was a guest of the Goethe-Institut and German Federal Government. His areas of expertise are national identity, postcolonial and postmodern "new history" art, European refugee and émigré artists in the Australasian context, and Asia-Pacific art.