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# What Comes Over The Sea *In Pursuit of Venus*



*Always to islanders danger  
in what comes over the sea...*  
Allen Curnow, 'Landfall in Unknown Seas' (1942)

Undoubtedly, New Zealand artist Lisa Reihana's *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* is a work of tremendous significance and was a popular presentation at the 2017 *Venice Biennale*. Reihana found inspiration for her video projection in a famous nineteenth century wallpaper—*Les sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (Auckland Art Gallery tactfully translates this in labelling the sample in their collection as 'The Native Peoples of the Pacific Ocean'). Designed by Jean-Gabriel Charvet (1750-1829) around 1804, it was commissioned by the manufacturer Joseph Dufour et Cie to commemorate the Pacific voyages of Captain James Cook. Reihana employs costumed dancers and actors to enact a *tableaux vivant* based on Cook's journals and filtered through Dame Anne Salmond's *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: The Remarkable Story of Captain Cook's Encounters in the South Seas*.<sup>1</sup>

The work's title is densely packed. At its most direct it is a reference to Cook's mission to record the transit of Venus across the face of the sun (an event that occurs only twice every 243 years), the findings of which would help calculate longitude more accurately and thereby improve navigation for Britain's growing naval and mercantile empire. It also alludes to the attentions of European sailors to Tahitian and other indigenous Pacific women. The French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville dubbed Tahiti "New Cythera" after the mythological birthplace of the goddess Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans). The "infected" refers to the European venereal (from Venus in her aspect as goddess of love and carnal desire) diseases Cook's and other expeditions brought to the South Seas, as well as the infection of the Pacific by Western hegemony, exploitation and gaze. The abbreviation, *iPOVi* carries within it a subjective (P)oint (O)f (V)iew suspended between the I and the Eye.

The final iteration of *iPOVi* centres around five main characters: Cook, the botanist and naturalist Joseph Banks, who sailed with Cook on his first voyage to Brazil, Tahiti and then New Zealand and Australia (1768-71), and three Society Islanders, Omai, Tupaia and the splendid and enigmatic Tahitian, Chief Mourner. Pantomime lends itself well to the format. There is an element of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg and John O'Keeffe's popular and well-documented pantomime *Omai: Or, A Trip Around the World*, first performed in 1785, in which the historical personages take on the aspects of the stock characters of *Commedia dell'arte*. Omai (c. 1751-80) was a young man from Huahine, one of the Society Islands which include Tahiti, who joined the *HMS Adventure* on Cook's second voyage and arrived in London in 1774 as a feted exotic celebrity. Sir Joshua Reynolds, one of the major European portraitists of the eighteenth-century, painted his portrait. The library book-like borrowing of indigenous Pacific peoples had become something of a habit in the late eighteenth century. Ahutoru, a Tahitian, had been brought to Paris in 1768 by Bougainville. Joseph Banks befriended Omai, and his return to Tahiti became one of the reasons for Cook's terminal third voyage (1776-79).

The people of what would become French Polynesia were the most familiar Pacific people to Europeans at this time and formed an important diplomatic role between Europe and the South Seas. Tupaia (c. 1725-70) was a high priest, navigator and translator from Ra'iatea, another Society Island. He was largely responsible for Cook's successful interactions with New Zealand Māori, and even indigenous Australians despite not having a language in common. The Chief Mourner is striking in a masked costume of bark cloth, feathers and nacre, symbolic of everything about the Pacific world that lies beyond rationalist European comprehension, and a psychopomp between the

realms of the living and the dead. These five individuals provide what was missing from Charvet's romantic wallpaper: the trade of European goods for sex, the mutual incomprehension over notions of property and reciprocity, and the resulting misunderstandings – Banks culturally crossdressing and participating in the ceremonial terrorising of Tahitians with Chief Mourner (Banks as Harlequin in blackface in the aforementioned pantomime, subverting Enlightenment idealism), Tupaia trying to keep it all together, and, of course, Cook himself, herald of the rapacious British Empire.

Compositionally, at least as seen at Auckland Art Gallery in 2015, the audience is engaged by a twenty-five by four metre wall with five projections scrolling continuously through thirty-two minutes. Exaggeratedly pantomimed vignettes materialise in fore, middle and background in contrasted scenes in Charvet's picturesque imagining of Tahiti. This serves as a stage upon which to enact a number of First Contact scenarios, climaxing with Cook's death in Hawai'i and the presentation of his deboned and cooked thigh to his crew in a gesture of reconciliation. In relation to this lack of temporal frame orientation, much reference in the official literature has been made to the construct of "Tā-Vā theory" developed by Pacific thinkers over the last decade. In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition at the New Zealand Pavilion, 2017 *Venice Biennale*, Auckland Art Gallery Director and curator of the project, Rhana Devenport describes this as;

*A limitless becoming, the temporal and spatial dimensionality of in Pursuit of Venus [infected], is one of its most radical elements; it eschews European readings in favour of engaging with metaphysical perspectives that include the recently articulated Pacific theory of time and space known as Tā-Vā... Tā-Vā differs from Aristotelian-founded, Western temporal and spatial metaphysics in its emphasis on perpetual cycles, and in this way it relates more to Henri Bergson's idea of duration while also offering something entirely new.<sup>2</sup>*

Arguably, it also has similarities to Deleuze's concept of "Immanence" and Christian theological conceptions about time, and while this has profound implications for Pacific philosophy, it doesn't necessarily translate visually because many of its signifiers already exist in the established Western tradition of simultaneous narrative, familiar from comic books to Giotto's fourteenth century Arena Chapel frescos. More successfully challenging of the white, Western gaze is Reihana's interest in Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay's notion of the "fourth cinema" from which an indigenous theory can be framed, as Reihana explains;

*The fourth wall is a cinematic term that describes an audience's invisible 'fly on the wall' viewpoint. Barclay considers it a privileging view, and in [the article] 'Celebrating Fourth Cinema' theorises an indigenous cinema where First Peoples control the camera rather than being the subject of its gaze... in Pursuit of Venus [infected] reflects these ideas by placing viewers as tangata whenua (people of the land). The resulting experience is that you are watching the foreshore action from behind the flora... This reverses the perspective to one of insider/tangata whenua rather than an outsider/audience member.<sup>3</sup>*

This is an exciting development: a significant disruption of the Western gaze of history painting, subverting its tendency to identify with the white (usually male) protagonist, objectifying, exoticising and appropriating the indigenous Other. Here, it is the white explorers who are the Other, though in a cautiously coded way that could be read by Western audiences as laughing with them as much as laughing at them. To what extent a Western audience might confuse this with an anthropological or voyeuristic gaze is uncertain.

Although it was a widely popular choice to represent New Zealand at the 2017 *Venice Biennale*, this was not without controversy. Additional parts were added in order for the 2015 iteration, so popular at Auckland Art Gallery, to qualify as a “new work”, resulting in the larger concept of *Emissaries*. Putting aside that Creative New Zealand (the government agency responsible for arts development) disregarded its own guidelines for older artwork to get *Emissaries* there, no amount of inserting new material was going to disguise the fact that it is still *iPOVi* at heart and anyone who saw it in Auckland, Brisbane, Melbourne and/or Singapore, would have experienced a strong sense of *déjà vu*. The later incorporation of a physical Cook and indigenous artefacts, for example, seems less installation art than *ad hoc* museology.

One of the new incorporated elements was indigenous Australian contact narratives, which seemed strange when Tracey Moffatt (considering her historical dislike being labelled an “Aboriginal artist”<sup>4</sup>) was presented in the Australian Pavilion exploring exactly those themes.<sup>5</sup> The principle difference being that Moffatt depicts white violence as congruous with the present and cyclical, whereas Reihana’s framing places it behind the *cordon sanitaire* of history. It felt safe and comfortable for Western audiences unfamiliar with the *Tā-Vā* worldview.

This presents a paradox because we acknowledge and accept the reality of indigenous solidarity, and in attempting to understand their worldviews we must appreciate that Western constructs like the separation of content and form, and anti-intentionality, don’t necessarily apply. Any criticism must remain consciously aware of that. And yet, for a Western art world audience there is inevitably the question of whether this isn’t still an appropriation of sorts, and in a climate where there is significant emphasis on the politics of late colonialism (“postcolonial” is a nonsensical term as it implies colonialism isn’t an ongoing reality for the colonised), this accumulation of contact narratives can be a liability, open to accusations of the commodified exploitation of a generalised collective trauma and a form of gatekeeping. While an international art audience can respond enthusiastically to the aesthetic appeal and the references to the historical European as Other, their appreciation of the subtleties is always going to be limited by their own geographical and cultural biases, with which Arthur Danto’s notion of an “art world” simultaneously exists within and without.<sup>6</sup>

Nor should the subalternity of the artist act as a magical forcefield against criticism when the work has knowingly and consciously been placed in an apex Western art world context like the *Venice Biennale*, frequently described in the general media with the execrable cliché “the Olympics of the Art World”, where it meets the Benjaminian arcade of twenty-first century interconnectivity and globalisation. Also, was the *Biennale* audience aware that Reihana was subtly mocking their cultural pretensions, which she refers to as the “festival gaze”?<sup>7</sup> Charvet exists at the beginning of mass culture (Damien Hirst’s late capitalist giant bronzes at the *Venice Biennale* the same year may very well be the end)—the reification of appropriation, or as art historian Melanie Mariño says, “the condition whereby aesthetic products are reduced to the level of the commodity(-sign) and aesthetic value is absorbed in the system of (sign)-exchange.”<sup>8</sup> Not incidentally this is also a reasonable description of part of the process of colonisation. It lends itself well to an art that, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, “plays with it, and is included in the game. It can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, alter it; it never disturbs the order which is also its own.”<sup>9</sup>

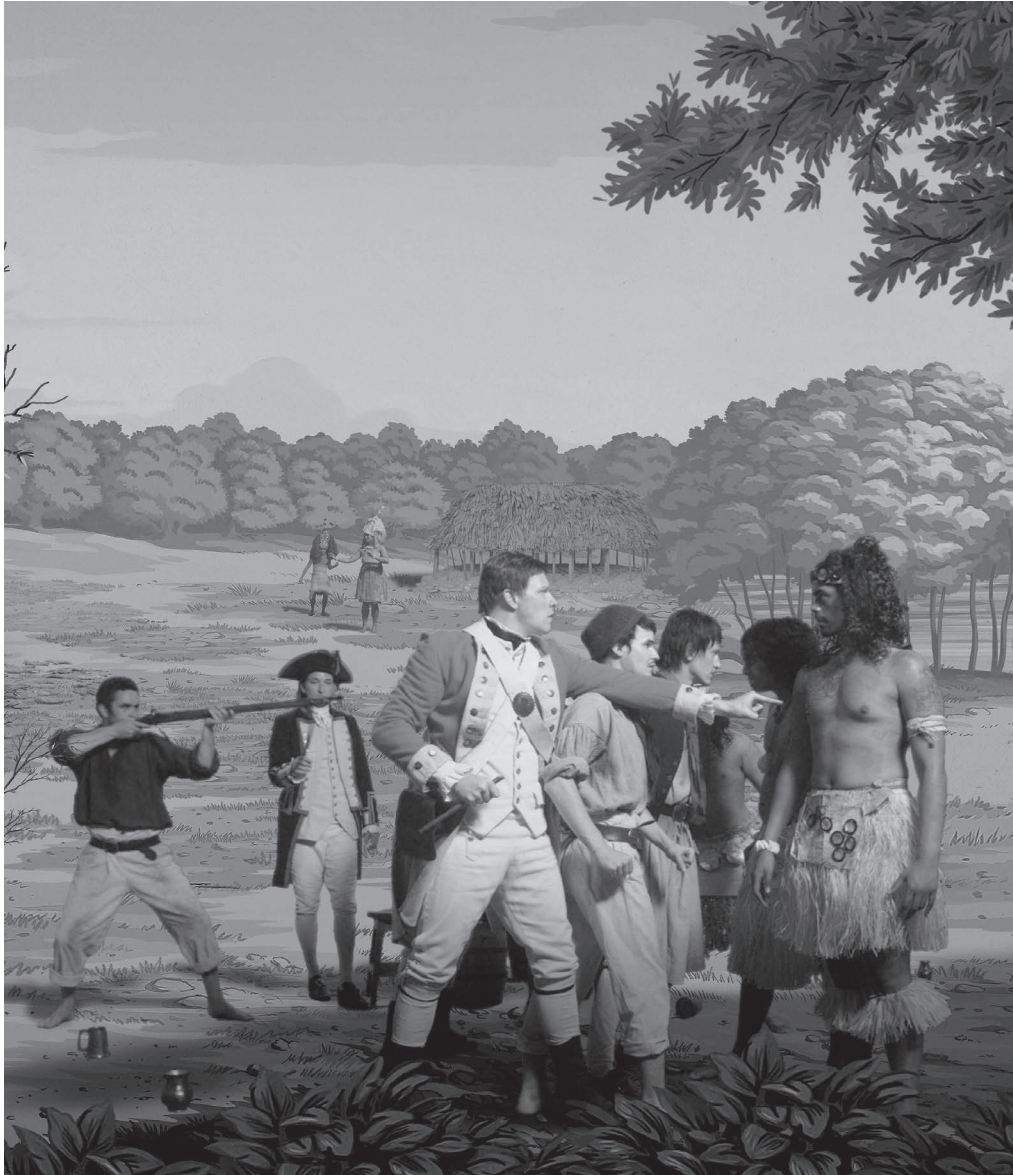
Contrast this with *Raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, set course to the centre of an ever-setting sun!* (2015-17) by New Zealand artist Nathan Pohio, a photographic billboard installation shown in Kassel and Athens as part of *documenta 14* (by far the more interesting international art event that year) within the same timeframe, which is also concerned with a *Tā-Vā* worldview in terms



of non-teleological and non-linear time, where perspective remains stationary and the destination is brought to the traveller rather than the other way around. In this case the work consisted of two found photographs of the 1905 visit of the Governor General of New Zealand and his wife, Lord and Lady Plunket, to Tuahiwi to visit the elders of Ngāi Tahu. Enlarged to a massive size, there is a similar timelessness and hierarchical ambiguity (originally commissioned by Christchurch's SCAPE festival of art in public space, the Plunkets in their motorcar are towered over by the Ngāi Tahu leaders on horseback); it manages to convey a universal political message about indigeneity and imperialism without diluting itself by being overly literal, and entirely earnest in its desire to participate and communicate. But this is not a judgement on merit, merely a contrasting comparison. Putting all that to one side, there has been very little discussion of *iPOVi*'s more general and aesthetic critical context. Within Reihana's oeuvre, *iPOVi* is more sophisticated, resolved and accomplished than the kitsch-prone (not necessarily a pejorative) imagery of her *Digital Marae* series (2001), and whether intentionally or not, forms an appealing alliance with the two-screen videowork *Tai Whetuki/House of Death Redux* (2015-16), which acts as a kind of Book of the Dead as a spirit crosses over into the Māori afterlife. If the "ten years in the making" figure is accurate, then that would put the inception of *iPOVi* around the time of *Colour of Sin: Headcase Version* (2005), a sound work played through salon hairdryers, which, like most of Reihana's work, is intended to be a totally immersive experience.

Wellington-based art commentators Jim and Mary Barr noted the resemblance of *iPOVi* to white South African artist William Kentridge's *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015) which similarly uses actors and dancers in a stylised, multi-channel video work projected onto large screens in a meditation on life, death, joy, disaster and disease.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, less focused and not as subtle as Reihana's work. One could possibly also consider aspects of Ghanaian-British artist John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*, also 2015, and a long tradition of panorama painting as public spectacle, and perhaps (and I mean this as a complement) the craft and magic of Disney imagineers. Comparisons have also been made to the work of German artist Bridget Ziegler's *Shooting Wallpaper* (2006), Russian collective AES+F, to which one might add a hint of Kara Walker, and even Pierre et Gilles (the latter particularly in the digital still prints, though without the French duo's deftly camp humour). Although it has been a project long in gestation, it seamlessly coincided with the *zeitgeist* of moving image work at the time. Ultimately, however, everything must take its cue from Charvet's neoclassicism, something Reihana achieves with sophisticated adroitness. The poses and attitudes that seemed painfully overdetermined in *Digital Marae* (2001) are an asset in the stylised universe of *iPOVi*. Neoclassicism is the aesthetic projection of authority and hegemony – it is a colonial and imperialist aesthetic. It is also the aesthetic of Orientalism and the projection of Western fantasies on far off places. In the case of *iPOVi* it's on some level at least, a self-conscious parody of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry as the subaltern's protective camouflage while negotiating the dominant narrative of the coloniser. Reihana's use of it is postmodern but must be carefully distinguished from Charles Jencks' definition of postmodernism as adopting neoclassicism as a counterreformation against modernism, and a reconnecting with humanist traditions.<sup>11</sup> Most contemporary Māori art has never, even at its most conceptual or abstract, completely lost touch with the representational and imminent (contrasting with abstract modernism's transcendental sublime). To represent someone is to contain something of their *mauri* (lifeforce, essence) and *mana* (prestige, honour), hence the reverence among Māori for the paintings of C. F. Goldie (1870-1947) and Gottfried Lindauer (1839-1926). In *iPOVi*, even Cook and Banks are accorded a degree of respect.

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Revamped as part of *Emissaries*, *iPOVi* sat interestingly in the context of a *Venice Biennale* mostly themed around the Trump/Brexit meltdown of Western (read Global North) endgame capitalism, and in terms of previous New Zealand deputations, seemed quite a departure from the more internationalist, post-internet relational aesthetics of Simon Denny in 2015 and Michael Parekowhai in 2011. Some commentators thought that Reihana's work was regressive and not particularly challenging. Auckland-based critic Anthony Byrt felt, "it affirms what we already know", writing;

*Over the years, Venice has also taught New Zealand some harsh truths. One is that it's really hard to make the European art world care about our postcolonial politics. We saw this when we sent Michael Parekowhai in 2011. His project was big and expensive too – all those bulls and carved pianos – with overt Māori content. People here fell over themselves to declare how wonderful it was. In terms of overseas attention, though, it fizzled. *iPOVi* faces exactly the same challenge.*<sup>12</sup>

One can hardly say *Emissaries* "fizzled". British critics loved it especially, but that's not surprising given that Cook retains a certain fetishistic lustre in the UK as a culture (anti-)hero with new cachet in the era of Brexit jingoism and white guilt. Waldemar Januszczak of *The Times* said it was the best work in the *Venice Biennale* and "This ambitious riveting animated sequence that took ten years to complete deserves to be recognised as one of the key artworks of recent years."<sup>13</sup> Anthony Horowitz of *The Telegraph* was no less gushing.<sup>14</sup> Carola Padtberg of *Der Spiegel* wrote, "It is a delicate, thoughtful contribution: how strongly do the clichés still determine our thinking?"<sup>15</sup> and Jennifer Higgie for *Frieze.com* said it was, "like a waking dream that visualises the complexities of colonisation and belonging, communication and engagement via song, dance and performance."<sup>16</sup>





This was all breathlessly reported back in the New Zealand media.<sup>17</sup> An element of cultural cringe lingers yet in the archipelago, and as poet and editor Charles Brasch wrote, “distance looks our way”.<sup>18</sup> The NZ at Venice website for *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries* states that it “disrupts notions of beauty, authenticity, history and myth” and its counterpoint of seductive beauty and political message is both striking and the source of its *jouissance* or *frisson* is difficult to pin down, even once we have digested the theoretics of “the fourth cinema”. We might look to Susan Best of Griffith University’s notion of “Reparative Aesthetics”.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on Affect Theory, Best outlines an emerging artistic approach that sugarcoats political engagement by cloaking it in seductive beauty and anodyne ambiguity, so as not to alienate its audience. This has merit as a possible context for *iPOVi* and *Emissaries*, given that there was no particularly angry response from the usual white and fragile suspects, no accusations of politically correct revisionism in letters to the editor pages, nor indeed even a pause over the bellinis and blinis. But the work doesn’t tidily fit into that sort of category, as the postcolonial commentary is right there on the surface, front and centre, and more in keeping with what Best describes as “paranoid” discourse, that is to say, a direct and emotive critical protest, even if in a very understated way. *It never disturbs the order which is also its own*. Another, and perhaps a better framework for discussion is Bruno Latour’s concept of “iconoclasm” where the image is destroyed, but it is unclear whether this is a positive or negative result in a muddying of the lexical and deictic – the subversion and negation of likeness, a nested cultural negation of the cultural negation of colonialism.<sup>20</sup> This seems to resonate with what the artist herself has said:

*I chose to transgress the wallpaper’s conventions. Well aware of the slippery nature of viewpoints and truth, I deliberately included scenes that show the risks of encounter and cultural conflict... I used several techniques in my attempts to resist what I describe as the “festival gaze” (brown bodies on show).<sup>21</sup>*





Of course, this potentially sets up a problematic dichotomy that precludes the possibility of artists and curators of colour being a complicit part of that festival audience. Earlier, I referred to Tracey Moffatt, an Australian artist who is on record as wanting to be acknowledged as an artist (in the universal sense), rather than an Australian indigenous artist (although, ironically, that is how the Australian and other media tended to frame her 2017 *Venice Biennale* contribution). Not every person of colour is necessarily coming to the work from the perspective of being indigenous, nor does every non-Western viewer, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, identify as particularly marginalised. As other economies flourish and political influences shift, the international art world is increasingly pluralistic and diverse. What does such a work offer them?

Regardless, *iPOVi* is a work that successfully juggles popularity and significance. Yes, there was a lot of hype, state-sanctioned and otherwise, and that can obscure the finer and subtler pleasures to be experienced in the work. It is a profoundly democratic aesthetic production in the Benjaminian sense, that it can be collectively and publicly experienced, intensified in that the individual can curate their own interaction with the work depending on how they site themselves. It challenges and overturns many stereotypes, flirting with others, sending a political message by means of a most delicately diplomatic, romantically seductive sensibility. Whether *iPOVi* is a contender for a role as some kind of Pacific *Guernica* I don't think anyone can say, but it will certainly cast a long shadow over contemporary indigenous art-making about the late colonial condition.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: The Remarkable Story of Captain Cook's Encounters in the South Seas*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Rhana Devenport, 'Emissaries: A New Pacific of the Past for Tomorrow', *Lisa Reihana: Emissaries – New Zealand at Venice 2017*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland, 2017, p. 22. The article by Barry Barclay referred to can be found in *Illusions: New Zealand Moving Image and Performing Arts Criticism*, Number 35, Winter 2003, pp. 7-11

<sup>3</sup> Rhana Devenport, 'An Interview with Lisa Reihana', Rhana Devenport (ed.), *Lisa Reihana: In Pursuit of Venus*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland, 2015, p. 17

<sup>4</sup> Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 327

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Searle, 'Tracey Moffatt Review—Horrible Histories from Australia's Venice Envoy', *The Guardian*, 10 May 2017; <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/may/10/tracey-moffatt-my-horizon-australia-pavilion-venice-biennale>; accessed 2 February 2018

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Danto, 'The Art World', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 61, Issue 19, American Philosophical Association. Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, 15 October 1964, pp. 571-584

<sup>7</sup> Rhana Devenport, 'An Interview with Lisa Reihana', op cit., p. 6

<sup>8</sup> Melanie Mariño, 'The Parody Aesthetic', Miwon Kwon (ed.), *Tracing Cultures: art history, criticism, critical fiction*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994, p. 94

<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Charles Levin trans., St Louis: Telos Press, 1981, p. 110

<sup>10</sup> Jim and Mary Barr, 'The Other', *Over the Net* (blog), 19 May 2016; <http://overthenet.blogspot.co.nz/2016/05/the-other.html/>; accessed 30 January 2018

<sup>11</sup> Charles Jencks, *The New Classicism in Art and Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1987

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Byrt, '2017 Venice Biennale: The popular option, but...', *Metro*, 30 November 2015; <http://www.noted.co.nz/culture/arts/2017-venice-biennale-the-popular-option-but/> accessed 2 February 2018

<sup>13</sup> Waldemar Januszczak, 'Art Review: Venice Biennale', *The Sunday Times*, 21 May 2017; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/art-review-waldemar-januszczak-venice-biennale-xt8lhpf5l>; accessed 18 February 2018

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Horowitz, 'The Real Star of the Venice Biennale? It Isn't the Art', *The Telegraph*, 22 May 2017; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/italy/veneto/venice/articles/anthony-horowitz-at-the-venice-biennale/>; accessed 18 February 2018

<sup>15</sup> Carola Padtberg, 'Kunstbiennale in Venedig: Diese Pavillons müssen Sie gesehen haben', *Der Spiegel*; <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/kunstbiennale-in-venedig-diese-pavillons-sind-die-highlights-a-1147512.html>; accessed 18 February 2018

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Higgie, '57th Venice Biennale: Arsenale Pavilions', *Frieze.com*, 12 May 2017; <https://frieze.com/article/57th-venice-biennale-arsenale-pavilions/>; accessed 18 February 2018

<sup>17</sup> 'Lisa Reihana's show at the Venice Art Biennale a 'must-see'', *New Zealand Herald*, 27 May 2017; [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11864158/](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11864158/); accessed 2 February 2018

<sup>18</sup> Charles Brasch, 'The Islands', *Disputed Ground*, Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1948

<sup>19</sup> Susan Best, *Reparative Aesthetics: Witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016

<sup>20</sup> After the argument of Joseph Koerner, 'The Icon as Iconoclasm', Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel eds, *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, Karlsruhe: ZKM and Cambridge Mass, and London: MIT Press, 2002, p. 47

<sup>21</sup> Rhana Devenport, 'An Interview with Lisa Reihana', op cit., p. 6