

Letter from New Zealand: the Post-Modern *Marae*
- Arnold Aprill, July 2007



There are no predatory mammals native to New Zealand. No cats, no dogs, no lions, no tigers, no bears. In fact, with the exception of one small brown bat, there are no native land mammals at all- no herd animals, no primates, no rodents. Over time, New Zealand birds lost their fear of mammalian predators, and in some cases, the ability to fly, and were undaunted by the arrival of humans on their islands, resulting in the rapid extinction of several species, including the great Moa, and in the eventual creation of nature preserves where vacationers can play with birds that do not fear being touched.

Arts educators are not birds, but I did find a similar lack of fear of predatory behavior at the 2007 conference of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Arts Educators (ANZAAE) in Wellington, New Zealand. I had been invited to the land of the Kiwi to speak on the partnership model developed by the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), and I was struck by how, well, *friendly* everyone was, and how the presenters, which included university professors and artists and teachers and curators and experts of all stripes, seemed to be more interested in presenting their presentations than in the sort of jockeying for status common at so many professional conferences. I found this refreshing, and the conference expanded my thinking in several key areas:

Respect for Indigenous Culture: One of the first things a visitor to New Zealand notices is that signs are in English and in Maori. The Treaty of Waitangi in 1842 recognized the existence of both cultures in New Zealand. All public school curricular frameworks are designed to honor this biculturalism.

The ANZAAE conference was launched with a *powhiri* – a traditional Maori ceremony for welcomes and rites of passage within a *marae* (a sacred space for convening spiritual and social gatherings) at Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand. We were received with the traditional welcoming gesture of *hongi* (touching noses) –not behavior typical of conferences in my Puritan country.

This is the first and only time I have experienced indigenous people as highly visible as teachers, artists, curators, administrators, and academics at an arts education conference in a colonized country.

We were welcomed by Arapata Hakiwai, supervisor of repatriation of sacred Maori objects and remains. He spoke of the importance of artistic expression as a marker of political health. “Where there is artistic excellence, there is human dignity.” Later, while he and I talked about his work on the *wharenui* (Maori meeting house) displayed at the Field Museum of Chicago, we discussed the conference itself as a kind of post-modern *marae*- a sacred meeting place across sectors for new social purposes.



Respect for Early Childhood Education: I attended excellent early childhood presentations by Lesley Pohio, Lisa Terreni, Kathy Sule, and Lisa Fuemana. The New Zealand Ministry of Education has developed a highly progressive, bicultural curricular framework for early childhood called *Te Whāriki*. This is clearly a living document. I saw early childhood educators at the conference holding their well-thumbed copies close to



their hearts. The name translates from Maori as “a mat for all to stand on”- referring to interwoven principles and goals that create a strategic guide for meaningful teaching and learning, interweaving concepts of Empowerment, Holistic Development, Family and Community, Relationships, Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication, and Exploration. These are not ineffectual clichés-

but very intentional and concrete organizers of “the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development.”¹ The entire extraordinary document is available on-line (see footnote).

Lesley Pohio presented compelling case-studies of the role of the arts in fostering collaboration among learners in early childhood contexts, in promoting children’s awareness of their own competence, in engaging parents as learners and as teachers, and in documenting student thinking and learning. She referenced Italian educator Carla Rinaldi’s concept of the arts as an occasion for “multiple listening” to student cognition, and the idea that “we want things to be difficult enough to create student resilience”. She also drew upon the thinking of Australian educator Margaret Brooks in seeing early childhood education as a context for children growing into the intellectual life of those around them. She shared fascinating examples of young children “researching” the visual character of cultural artifacts.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education has a policy of funding Centres of Innovation (COI): collaborations between university based researchers and early childhood educators to conduct action research initiatives and to serve as demonstration sites:

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=index&indexID=8303&indexparentid=10945>. Lisa Terreni and Kathy Sule, working as a higher education (Victoria University) / Head Teacher (Lyll Bay Kindergarten) team, conducted a study of how an art experience based on Maori legend, conducted in a Maori meeting house, could bring children and parents together to illumine cultural meanings for students of all backgrounds. The initial intention was to increase the arts skills of the teachers at Lyll Bay Kindergarten, but the team expanded their goals to increasing the cultural knowledge of this very diverse school by drawing on the expertise of the children’s families and communities. They decided to examine the story of Kupe, the great adventurer and explorer who, according

¹ Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki he whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media. p. 10
http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl3567_v1/WHARIKI.pdf

to legend, discovered New Zealand by chasing a great octopus into Wellington bay (where the school is located). Ako Pai Marae, the *marae* at Victoria University of Wellington College of Education's Karori campus, has a large painting of the legend in their meeting house. After extensive preparation of the students in understanding the legend of Kupe, the team arranged for the students and parents to visit the site together, and for the students to participate in a variety of dramatic and visual art activities to bring the legend to life. Lisa became the great octopus. Rawiri Hindle, one of the teachers from Te Kura Maori, the School of Maori Education at Victoria University, became the great Kupe. The students became little sea creatures that the greedy octopus was trying to gobble up. The students imaginatively "entered" the painting, discussed its meanings with their teachers and families, and created their own representations on a large roll of fine quality paper. The children continued to work on their representation of their experience back at their school, and the entire process was extensively documented and videotaped. A follow-up arts experience included the creation of an octopus sculpture on the school grounds. The initial goal of increasing teacher skills in the arts was expanded into a rich and resonant set of experiences for teachers, students, and families.

Lisa Fuemana presented on the importance of placing children's learning in the context of their own cultures, and how cultural artifacts need to be understood as not only attractive objects, but also as bearers of cultural meaning. She referenced Pasifika artists who think of their work in the context of powerful metaphors of broad social significance, including Filipe Tohi, who explores "the genealogy of lines"², seeing the decorative patterns used to bind together houses and canoes in his cultural traditions as literally part of his people's DNA. She also referenced theorists such as Peter and Dianne Beatson, who see the arts as serving essential social functions: "As well as arousing pleasures and constructing meaning, art is an agent of social cohesion. Its magnetism integrates isolated individuals into groups, groups into the nation, and the nation into the global culture. In performing this integrative function, the arts provide essential building blocks for the construction of social identity. The concept of community is central to an understanding of the integrative role of the arts."³

I was struck by how many of the core themes addressed in these presentations: "making sense of the natural, social, physical, and material worlds", "responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things", "stories and symbols of their own and other cultures" (*Te Whāriki*, 1996) are central themes of contemporary arts practice. It became clear to me that the concerns of early childhood education connect at a profound level to art-making as it is actually practiced in the contemporary world, and that early childhood educators have much to teach the arts community, the arts education

² Mahina, Okusitino (2000) "Tufunga lalava: the Tongan art of lineal and spatial intersection". In Simon Rees (ed), *Filipe Tohi: Genealogy of lines Hohoko e tohitohi*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery: New Plymouth.

³ Peter Beatson and Dianne Beatson (1994), *The Arts in Aotearoa New Zealand: Themes and Issues*, Massey University Press.

community, and the education community generally. It is my fond hope that there will be an early childhood keynote speaker at the next ANZAAE conference.

Respect for contemporary art practice: I was astonished to see the depth of commitment to contemporary arts practice. I saw more contemporary art galleries in the downtown sections of the relatively small cities of Wellington and Christchurch than I encounter in downtown Chicago.



I found the presentation by Rhana Devenport, currently director of the prestigious Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, to be a revelation. Her talk reframed the relationship between arts education and art-making in ways that illuminated and wove together for me a whole series of promising practices in my own

country and internationally. She sees conceptions of arts education emerging that do not create a dichotomy between arts learning and contemporary art making. She described approaches to arts learning that grow directly out of core elements of contemporary art, rather than seeing contemporary work as something that young people access only after they are entrenched in modernist and/or classical frameworks. As a self-described “biennale junky”, and having served as Manager of Public and Education Programmes for the 15th Biennale of Sydney, Senior Project Officer and co-curator for the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT), and Education Officer for the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), Ms. Devenport identified several significant trends in the interface between the education sector and the arts sector in Asia and globally:

- **Invitational Aesthetics:** In her years with the Asia-Pacific Triennial, her team developed an “invitational aesthetic”. Rather than commissioning artworks that are occasions for workshops in which young people copy what the artist did, the team began commissioning artworks that young people and communities interact with and co-construct. Much research had already been undertaken within the Education Section of the Queensland Art Gallery, and the Kids APT program grew naturally given this research and the ambitions and spirit of the APT. These innovations have become a hallmark of programming at the QAG with Olafur Eliasson’s interactive work, *The cubic structural evolution project 2004* touring Australia. A room was filled with white plastic Lego blocks, and the artwork arose out of the collective constructions of visitors to the gallery. For the 1999 APT, Cai Guo Qiang created a work involving people literally crossing a massive bamboo bridge to encounter an artificial rain-storm triggered by their presence. The bridge was coupled with audiences invited to create their own bridge-making “laboratory”. She showed a slide of an installation by Australian artist Craig Walsh from the 2000 Havana Biennale, in which a video was projected onto the trees in a popular public square, rather than remaining isolated in the rarified atmosphere of the Biennale. She is intrigued by strategies that destabilize the authority of the museum and of the artwork itself, blurring the space between the

work of art and the work of art education. She sees cultural institutions beginning to revision themselves less as showplaces and more as community centers and laboratories. She wondered if museums can increasingly become sites of learning, discourse, research and scholarship. “Universities spawn museums and galleries all the time. Why can’t museums and galleries spawn universities?”

- **Relational Aesthetics:** She referenced the work of cultural theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, examining art as a series of meaningful relationships, rather than as a series of valuable artifacts. She described work from Biennales and Triennials that were aesthetic expressions of artists’ relationships with others: a catalogue of the personal items of a newly-found long-lost relative, an exhibition of the reluctantly cast-off items of the artist’s mother as she gradually moved into her first new home. Ms. Devenport showed slides of the work of Cicada in the current show ‘New Nature’ at Govett-Brewster who led a workshop that created micro-climates - miniature eco-systems – throughout the nooks and crannies of inner-city New Plymouth, challenging our assumptions about the relationship between the natural world and the built environment. She wondered whether relational aesthetics were especially appealing to contemporary Asian artists, working out of long traditions of barter and exchange embedded in long-standing relationships, as opposed to contemporary Western artists, who tend to think of aesthetic exchange as expressions of anonymous market forces. The poignant, beautiful works she presented suggested new frameworks for thinking about the work of arts education.
- **De-acquisition:** One of her duties at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is the identification for potential de-acquisition of arts-works- the selling off of items in the gallery’s collection to acquire contemporary works. The thinking is that if Govett-Brewster is to remain a site of contemporary innovation, the aesthetic must be one of on-going renewal and change, not one of acquiring and hoarding.
- **Gallery Babes:** She described initiatives in which young mothers and their toddlers were made to feel very welcome in galleries together, directly connecting contemporary art to early childhood education!

Over and over again, she challenged us to rethink our assumptions about arts and learning.

Sally Morgan, Professor of Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, also presented on new approaches to the relationship between cultural institutions and young people by examining the practice of Sally Tallant, Education Programmer, Serpentine Gallery, London:

“Developing strategies of engagement which are not formulaic and which respond to the rapidly changing demands of society is an opportunity to create places where art can be encountered. Places where meanings are constructed, where gaps in language are opened and critical moments in learning are possible.

These encounters are transformative and it is the responsibility of curators, museum directors educators and artists to ensure, through innovative and intelligent programming, that the highest quality of engagement is available to all audiences.” -*Sally Tallant*

Professor Morgan made the sly observation that commercial galleries are creatures of fashion, and that what we could do to encourage more socially engaged work in commercial galleries is to suggest to them that socially engaged work is all the rage. Another highlight of the conference was the screening of Eduardo Carrillo’s award-winning 3-D computer animated documentary “Little Voices”. This remarkable work seamlessly integrates computer graphics with frank interviews with children displaced by war in Columbia.

I have often encountered concepts of cultural integrity that posit an opposition between the arts of indigenous peoples and contemporary art practice. With many Maori artists at the forefront of the contemporary arts world, this opposition does not seem to hold in New Zealand.



Respect for Space: With a little over 4 million people living in a little over 100,000 square miles (Chicago has 3 million people living in 234 square miles), there is a lot of open space in New Zealand, and the reports I had heard are true- it is a very beautiful country. I walked the streets of Wellington, visited museums and galleries, ate a wide variety of Asian Pacific foods, and saw the exhibition at City Gallery Wellington of Laurence Aberhart’s haunting photographs of displaced communities. I enjoyed the wonderful mix of Victorian architecture and contemporary public art.



After the conference, I visited arts education consultant Helen Cooper and her family in Christchurch, and they gave me a tour of the area. It is definitely not Illinois. I could see the Alps of New Zealand out the window of their home, as



well as their aging sheep Nero chewing cud and cropping their lawn. We went to the local aquarium and I saw a real live Kiwi in the half-light of a special viewing room. Throughout the trip, the crisp, clear air of the July New Zealand winter was a welcome break from the sweltering heat of the humid Chicago summer.

And as I was preparing to leave for my long flight back to Chicago, Helen's young daughter Rosy bid me farewell by revealing the installation of shells she had constructed in the family living room. Somehow, this wonderful mix of kid cognition, natural artifacts, and aesthetic choice summed up the trip in just the right way.

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