

Makeshift's *Kauri-oke* challenges socially engaged practice: looking forward towards new forms of social imagining, dwelling and remembering

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For the 5th *Auckland Triennial* the collaborative duo working under the name Makeshift—Tessa Zettel and Karl Khoe—produced *Kauri-oke!*, a portable karaoke machine constructed in Sydney from recycled Kauri wood and shipped back to the timber's origin of New Zealand. The *Kauri-oke!* unit was set up at the Otara weekend market in South Auckland on the first two Saturdays of the *Triennial*, when the artists provided the chance for people to sing a range of popular folk songs. In recognition of the market context, the songs selected for karaoke were predominately Maori and Polynesian with a focus on those that featured lyrics dealing with home, journeys and remembered landscapes. After being facilitated by the artists at these initial scheduled times, the unit was exhibited inside Fresh Gallery and made available for enthusiastic participants to wheel out and operate at the market on any given Saturday, or even other times if desired.

While *Kauri-oke!* offers an entertaining audience experience and cleverly negotiates a concept through materials, it also raises a number of questions in terms of strategies for community engagement, site specificity and participatory art that are consistent challenges for socially engaged practice. The suburb of Otara is notable for its high proportion of Pacific Island residents and specific socio-cultural milieu, confronting this project with a particular context that cannot be overlooked. There was a real necessity for the project to avoid appearing as a sort of colonial exploit whereby the artists bring their preconceptions of what is good for this community and presume how they would like to be engaged and represented. There was the added difficulty that practical circumstances prevented a prior research trip for the artists, meaning the well-intended idea had to be proposed from a distance, perhaps informed by online research and some conversations with locals, but proposed without direct experience of the South Auckland community it was intended for. The artists hoped to address the concern of how nostalgia plays into our readings of the past and the places we once knew, as a thoughtful invitation for participants to reflect on their complex histories through the performance of song. But how would the work integrate with South Auckland in a meaningful enough way to prompt reminiscence of times and places so different from the artists' own? How would they ask the right questions and connect with people?

It is nearly twenty years since Hal Foster admonished contemporary art for appropriating anthropological strategies, disputing how artists are granted institutional authority to come in and work with a community without questioning the nature of the collaboration, turning the subsequent project into an exhibit of cultural proxies unless underpinned by rigorous reflexivity.¹ In 2002, Miwon Kwon revisited the arguments around site-specific art and locational identity with *One Place After Another*, expanding the discourse with analysis of the relationship between artist and community, the limitations and possibilities:

*As the artistic, political, and ethical pitfalls of community-based art become more visible and more theorised, the need to imagine alternative possibilities of togetherness and collective action, indeed of collaboration and community... may be the only way to imagine past the burden of affirmational siting of community to its critical unsiting.*²

More recently Claire Bishop has consolidated her perspective on participatory art in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, articulating the lack of aesthetic criteria when working with people as art.³ These few examples are just part of a broader ongoing debate, but reveal some of the difficulties, the potential for exploitation or disingenuousness inherent to this project, merely through its participatory form.

Critiques of socially engaged practice are familiar though, even mundane. Makeshift are aware of the troublesome nature of engaging communities from previous experience; and Hou Hanru's curatorial premise for the *Auckland Triennial* encompasses these cautions in the central theme: '*If you were to live here...*', inviting artists to imagine themselves in this place. So the apparent tensions of working with the Otara community are encapsulated within the framework for this project, the concerns that Makeshift were tasked with addressing, and locational identity to be found and explored through the experience and materials of *Kauri-oke!*

The native Kauri wood used in construction of the unit was long ago stripped from New Zealand forests for use in Australia, and was sourced, appropriated and returned home for this project. Estimates suggest that of the lush Kauri forests once covering New Zealand, around half were accidentally or deliberately burnt, and much of the rest sold for a return sufficient only to cover expenses. Today, the remaining forests are under threat from disease, while Kauri is being considered as a long-term carbon sink to offset industrial and agricultural pollution. For Maori, the tallest trees in the forest traditionally had chiefly status and in the north of New Zealand, Kauri held the highest rank. Combining these associations the timber deployed in *Kauri-oke!* acts as both a functional material and communicative device for exploring ecological narratives, stories of migration and postcolonial discourse.

Another distinctive quality of Kauri is that it relies on depriving its competitors of nutrition in order to survive. If we take this metaphor of the Kauri as a material with strong references for Makeshift, it could also reflect on the complicated definition of communities, collaboration and our broader trans-Tasman relationship.

The 5th Auckland Triennial

*If you
were to
live here...*

Curator
Hou Hanru

10 May
— 11 August
2013

Auckland Art Gallery
ArtSpace
Auckland Museum
Franklin Gallery
George Fraser Gallery
Gos Fisher Gallery
ST PAUL St
Silo Park

113 CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART+ CULTURE BROADSHEET 42.2 2013

Entry

A triennial is not simply an exhibition. It is an event to engage both local and international communities of creators with issues relevant to the evolution of everyday life. The title of the 5th Auckland Triennial, *If you were to live here...*, is a trigger or starting point which aims to provoke and promote discussion about how contemporary art can influence urban transformation in Auckland.

Central to the project is the idea of 'here'. An ever-moving and evolving concept — to 'live here' does not only mean to dwell here, but to play a role in the reinvention of 'here'.

Focusing on the dynamic relationship between art, architecture and social change, the Triennial will inhabit the city of Auckland through collaboration, involving various sites and institutions, to create projects in response to the specific context of Auckland and New Zealand today.

If you were to live here... prompts us not only to consider private space, but to reflect on

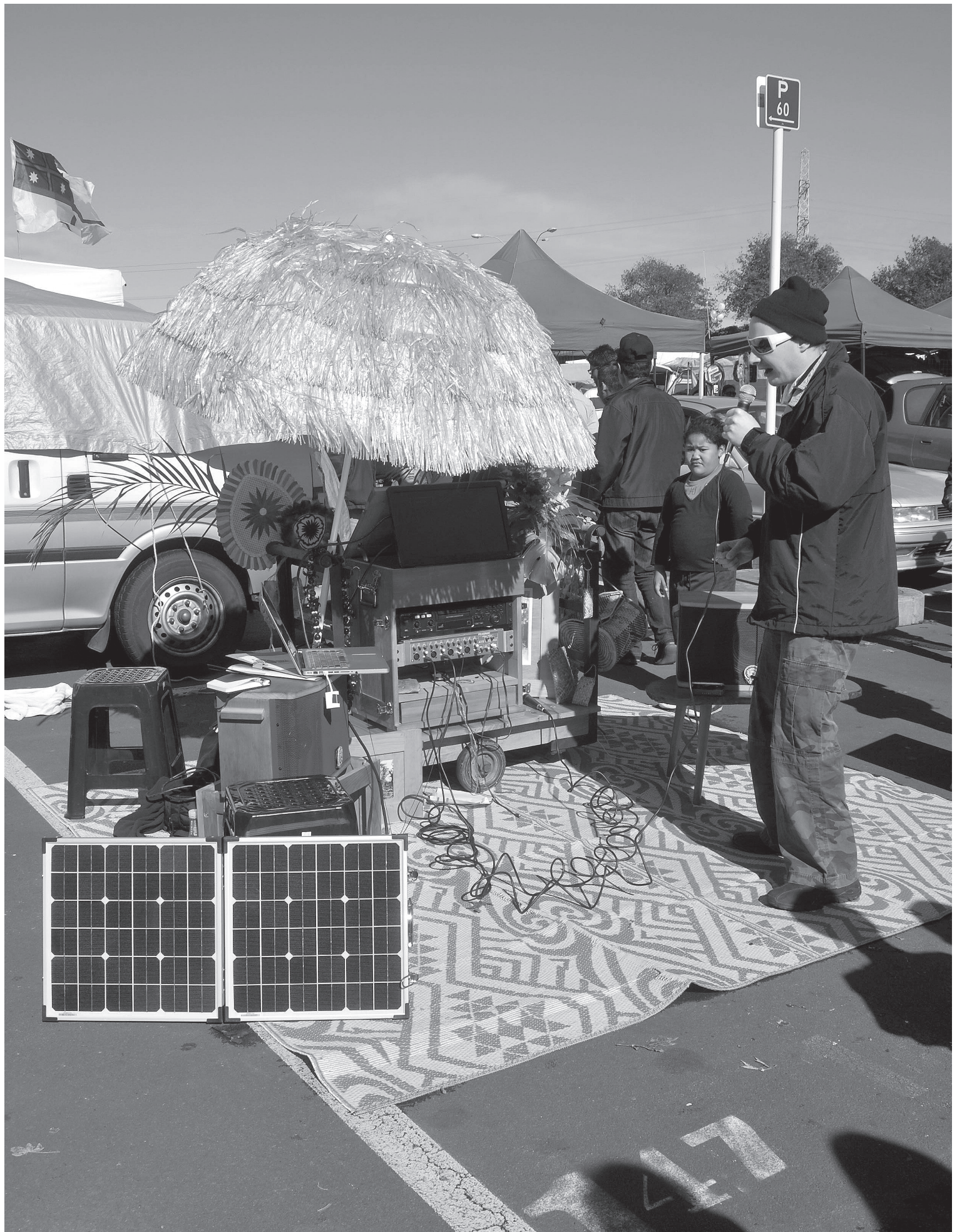
the public sphere, and the Triennial presents opportunities for individuals to interact, share and exchange ideas that give rise to a locality relevant to our time which is built and sustained by creative exchanges. To live here is to live with others to make a new 'here'.

The Lab, situated at Auckland Art Gallery, is an open laboratory and plays the role of a think tank or brain of collective intelligence, becoming a platform for research and public debate and forming a core element beyond the exhibition.

Inviting artists and contributors to imagine and answer the intriguingly complex question, 'If you were to live here...', the 5th Auckland Triennial promotes debate about a basic but often ignored issue: the vocation of artistic production today in a world oscillating between crisis and opportunity. This will eventually contribute to revitalise urban life itself.

Hou Hanru
Curator, 5th Auckland Triennial





In addition to the Kauri, the unit incorporates handmade materials purchased from the Otara market, in this way absorbing and integrating physically with the site. *Kauri-oke!* is designed so that it can continue to collect new songs throughout its life at the market and while exhibited at Fresh Gallery, lending it the ability to act as a kind of responsive community archive. Adapting its surroundings, inviting and incorporating input from participants, the project might be embraced, empowering people and stimulating collective reflection through songs and performance. A Trojan horse of sorts for contemporary art, it may spark consideration of place, history and identity, with not only entertainment value but also a more serious outcome. However, there was also the possibility that the unit will sit like a lonely novelty at the market, used only by members of the art community that have ventured out to see the work in action.

For there are really two audiences who will access this project: the usual Otara market-goers; and the contemporary art audience who search it out. When Hanru curated the 10th *Istanbul Biennial* in 2007, he similarly utilised a number of nontraditional exhibition spaces, including the old textile markets. Disused shops were converted into exhibition spaces, with some artists attempting to coexist beside the other businesses and their clientele, and others treating the site as they would any other space. No doubt there would have been some unexpected encounters with the regulars and some level of exchange, but the main audience seemed to remain the art tourists that were lured to this unusual location, possibly bringing some financial return through rent of the space and increased trade for the other shopkeepers. For *Kauri-oke!*, occupying a site amongst the bustle of the market, accompanied by the noisy banter and barter across tables of food, crafts and bargains galore, it is difficult to predict how much impact it will have had. Do people want to sing karaoke on a Saturday morning, or are they more concerned with nabbing a cheap deal on some fresh fruit and veg?

Makeshift recognised that negotiation with local music lovers was necessary to assist in the selection of songs; that New Zealand music, like any other culture, is specific to this place and people. What songs are popular in Otara right now? Does 'How Bizarre', Otara Millionaires Club's big hit in 1996, have any cache these days? How about Scribe's Hip Hop classic 'Not Many'? Or is Tina Turner simply the best? Makeshift asked for songs that evoke memories, the old favorites that people would recognise, that have certain resonance and have been played frequently. In creating a platform for hosting popular music to be selected and performed by local people, it is the words of the musicians and the voices of the community participants that were given authorship, visibility and ownership through this project, and perhaps this is the critical aspect.

Bringing their karaoke unit into this environment but relying on popular culture as source material, it is hard to assess whether Makeshift could make something that shifts, that is transformative, or if it will simply be seen as convivial fun. It is unlikely that the historical tensions between Polynesian and Asian cultures at the markets will play any role in this work. The wider context and local politics, such as the recent creation of the Auckland Super City that saw Manukau's Len Brown being elected as the inaugural mayor for the whole Auckland region in 2010, will probably not surface, or indeed have any relationship to this project. Coming back to the problems associated with socially engaged practice, it will be interesting to note whether the underlying intentions for the project to engage complex histories are manifest in the market audience experience.

Another recent karaoke project presented in Wellington by a group working under the name Has Potential, *Karaoke Stories* (2013) offered very few songs to sing in their temporary booth, and was instead aimed at collecting the stories that visitors wanted to share in relation to the songs, leading to a tangible record of collective memory. Makeshift with *Kauri-oke!* created an archive of music and the actual performance of the songs seems key, rather than the anecdotes and commentaries from participants, perhaps a missed chance to capture and incorporate these.

Page 113; Makeshift, *Kauri-oke!* (gallery installation view), 2013
Opposite: Makeshift, *Kauri-oke!* (Otara market), 2013
Photos courtesy the artists

As suggested with their name, the notion of the 'makeshift' substitute or temporary structure is also important for these artists and the work that they make. *Kauri-oke!* is made to exist momentarily, to play a role in this community for the duration of the exhibition, a sketch or test structure that enables experimentation and disruption of routine. Coming back to the values that some critics demand of socially engaged practice, is there the potential for a more long lasting project? As a collaborative art practice, Makeshift has an interest in social and environmental sustainability. Could *Kauri-oke!* live on in Otara as a regular karaoke booth? Is there a potentially meaningful relationship being forged? Does sustainability mean that the project needs to be ongoing, or is this temporary intervention enough to leave a mark?

This venue has been used for art previously, such as a video work by Jeremy Leatinu'u made from a performance at the Otara market a few years ago where the artist simply sat amidst the busy foot traffic, a grounded moment of stillness against the tide of people and trade. The work was quiet and contemplative, not particularly momentous or challenging, but memorable for the subtlety of the artists' intervention. Presented in an art gallery setting, the recorded responses of passers-by revealed that the performance itself was easy to ignore, and it seemed that was partly the point: to counteract the everyday. For Leatinu'u, the distinction between the everyday activities of the crowd and his art practice was clearly defined and the performance always intended to be exhibited as documentation.

The act of Makeshift assimilating with the Otara market is less responsive than Leatinu'u's peaceful meditation in public space, and it is unclear the degree to which they have incorporated these social exchanges as part of their work. Even though there are various hazards associated with community engagement, concerns that are heightened in a New Zealand context due to the centrality of postcolonial discourse here, it is the inability to assess the aesthetic value of socially engaged work that is a further unsettling factor for *Kauri-oke!* In terms of participatory practice, there is a level of trust in the artists required despite the chance of failing, since to avoid engaging with difference in order to protect a community precludes any positive outcomes. But to evaluate whether a project was worth taking the risk for, seems dangerously immeasurable.

Notes

¹ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge: Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996

² Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*, Cambridge: Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002: 153

³ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London and New York: Verso, 2012

Makeshift participated in the *5th Auckland Triennial: 'If you were to live here...'*, 10 May–11 August 2013