

From our Beautiful Square

By Huni Mancini

The square is a shared space; it's as high and as wide as a figure with their arms outstretched. It signifies an enclosure, home, settlement; an expression of a spatial idea which has given shape to cities and buildings from ancient to modern times.¹ How is this concept of shared space affected during a period of global pandemic, in which we find ourselves confined to closed borders, in and out of successive lockdowns? As we are forced to circumnavigate our dwellings the world over, we might begin to rethink the parameters of home.

¹ Bruno Munari. *Square, Circle, Triangle*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2015. p.11.

Extremes of mobility and stillness, confinement and exposure, proximity and distance; some of the most dizzying experienced in my lifetime. Breaking news from all corners of the globe are fused with drifting, multiple thoughts; forgotten memories, pockets of silence, hopes, nagging reminders of pressing tasks, strange bursts of enthusiasm, and the deep, resonant sense of dread as I watch the world implode through the pixels of my screen.

This is where the landscape *From Our Beautiful Square* takes its cue, bringing together a range of local and international artists who respond to the immediacy of place. A reprieve from the perimeters of the digital screen, the endless scrolling through multiple timelines. Their works are mindful of their surroundings, attuned to the physicality of spaces occupied and the many transitions we make as we move between them.

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A series of new untitled works by Salome Tanuvasa respond to multiple ideas of place. Created on-site within the gallery and at home, these large-scale works apply a range of gestures to a variety of surfaces including fabric, unstretched canvas, and the walls of the gallery itself. They require different forms of labour such as painting, cutting and hand-stitching, each providing a sense of grounding in tactility and touch.

Her marks are in dialogue with their surrounds, responding to a sense of place that is as complex as the terrain we traverse. Alternating between painting and hand-stitching she

incorporates the sweeping contours and seasonal tones of New Zealand landscape with the curve and pastel hues of the gallery's stained glass dome. First built in 1934 as a radio broadcasting station, it housed New Zealand's first licensed radio station Radio 1YA, and was formerly home to TVNZ. The building is therefore associated with the significant force of TV and radio in mediating the country's early social and political life.² Designed with thick walls and a lack of external windows to prevent the transmission of sound, the building is shielded from its surroundings unlike others in the area—high-rises with walls of glass that transmit an uneasy combination of separation and exposure.

There is an acuity and brave tension in Tanuvasa's forms; they literally mark her presence and document her movements within the space. Joyful, fluid gestures merge with transitional autumn tones that are pronounced this time of year. Some of these forms are repeated from her previous works, by doing so they extend the spaces of her past into the present and mediate the proximities between near and far, creating a sense of continuity. As Hanahiva Rose writes, Tanuvasa is an artist who "makes marks across otherwise untraversable histories."³

Working directly onto the Alcove wall against the pale blue colour of distance, of expansive ocean and sky, the texture of longing. Her marks swim and dance in intimate exchange with

² Heritage NZ. '1YA Radio Station Building (Former)' *Heritage NZ*, accessed 13 June 2021, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/660>

³ Hanahiva Rose. 'A Pacific Diaspora: How Might We Trace the Movement?' *The sea brought you here*. Ed. Louise Rutledge & Sophie Davis. Wellington: Enjoy Gallery. 2017. pp.12.

the building, together spinning iterations of space into being, tracing the cartography of an unseen form, revealing a universe that is parallel to our own.

In addition to early broadcasting, the building retains an aspect of Auckland's original shoreline. Located on a ridge overlooking Horotiu bay—now the commercial centre of Auckland—it marks the spot where the land once met the sea. *Beneath the Shore* (2021), a new sound work by Amy Jean Barnett, reimagines the location's oceanic connection. Arranging underwater hydrophone recordings sourced from the Leigh Marine Laboratory within compositions of her own, Barnett's soundscape literally invites the acoustic environment of the Hauraki Gulf into the gallery space.

The use of sound as a measuring device allows us to consider the materiality of seawater; always in perpetual motion, expansive and containable only through interventions in space, so dense that light cannot pierce through its depths. Sound makes the edges of the gallery porous, it dissolves boundaries by casting us into the distant mass of the ocean. We can think of sound as being carried by a transmission of waves, "a reverberation between bodies in proximity; or, as necessary, over land and under sea by cables and wires; or between satellites."⁴ In becoming acquainted with this realm we are also confronted by the grittiness of the sound artefact—the technology which acts

⁴ Hanahiva Rose. 'A Pacific Diaspora: How Might We Trace the Movement?' *The sea brought you here*. Ed. Louise Rutledge & Sophie Davis. Wellington: Enjoy Gallery. 2017. pp.11.

a barrier against the full torrent of the senses.

The clang of sonar and underwater construction, the roar of cargo ships and boat engines, the blast of seismic testing; anthropogenic sounds demonstrating the ecological impact of humans on the ocean. While arranged subtly by the artist, in reality their acoustics are amplified for marine life due to the way sound waves travel underwater.⁵ Barnett demonstrates how our presence in and upon the ocean interferes with these creatures' abilities to orientate themselves in the space, presenting a world in the process of being colonised in the most quotidian ways.

In Gallery One we are confronted by the towering presence of cardboard and tarpaulin. *Building monuments and folding forts upon a slippery ocean and a moving sky* (2021) is a new sculptural work by Jeremy Leatinu'u which imagines another world and what you can build with the materials at hand.

The cardboard box and tarpaulin have both a concrete presence and mutable softness. They are a vessel, container, shipment, carrier of goods, protection from the elements. Yet they can also yield to physical pressure or dampness, and take the shape of items which they drape. At once fixed and ephemeral, these commonplace objects might represent the fast pace of industry, where flexible materials and formations are increasingly preferred

⁵ Sabine De Brabandere. 'What do you hear underwater?' *Scientific American*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-do-you-hear-underwater/>

over eternal, durable ones.⁶ Leatinu'u's first configuration is a monumental mass and presence, a mark or intervention that alters the form and visual experience of the site, thereby allowing us to perceive the location with a new appreciation of its formal and volumetric qualities. The surrounding negative space is made more visceral by a narrow pathway which permits us to move.

Labour is central to the installation. Materials are ordered from suppliers and assembled onsite, drawing on the labour-intensive methodologies of stacking and building found in factories and warehouses. Leatinu'u opens up this labour to the public, who are invited to assist in a number of configurations alongside him. Their ongoing involvement creates a kind of living labour, relating to what Karl Marx termed, "Labour as the living fire that shapes the pattern."⁷ We can think of the transformation of Auckland's original shoreline, in which Shortland St, the city's first main thoroughfare and centre of commercial focus, was a place for transferring both goods and settlers from ship to shore.⁸ Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the Waitematā was also a centre of trade for Māori and several sites in the area are noted as landing places where waka were frequently moored, such as *Te Whatu*—

⁶ Dietmar Rubel. 'Plasticity: An Art History of the Mutable.' *Documents of Contemporary Art: Materiality*. Ed. Petra Lange-Berndt. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 2015. pp.97.

⁷ Dominic Rahtz. 'Indifference of material in the work of Carl Andre and Robert Smithson,' *Documents of Contemporary Art: Materiality*. Ed. Petra Lange-Berndt. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 2015. pp.68.

⁸ Auckland City Council. 'Auckland City Heritage Walks: Auckland's Original Shoreline.' *Auckland City Council*, accessed June 13 2021, <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/arts-culture-heritage/heritage-walks-places/Documents/auckland-city-heritage-walks-original-shoreline.pdf>

a rocky ledge located at the foot of present day Shortland St.⁹ Successive transformations to the waterfront have thus resonated out from this street; a metropolis in perpetual becoming, extending itself into the sea, supplanting the contour of headlands and bays with the perpendicular lines of ports, the horizontal planes of land reclamation.

The facade of *Building monuments and folding forts upon a slippery ocean and a moving sky* has the appearance of machine self-patterning. It draws on the quality of repetition—an order that is not rationalistic and underlying but simply that of continuity. In the sculptural work of Minimalist artists like Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt, repetition is a strategy which escapes the relational composition of systems built beforehand, *a priori*, that express a certain type of thinking and logic that is irrelevant to the current place.¹⁰ Leatinu'u's compositional arrangements have no centre, no logically determined point of focus. He is not interested in the interior space of these materials, but rather, their externality; the idea of being on the outside. Their presence might challenge what is considered valuable inside a gallery context; their value derives not because they're rare or individual, but because they are reliably the same. Sameness can be a desirable state; an antidote against being singular, alone.

⁹ Auckland City Council. 'Appendix 1: City of Auckland District Plan Central Area Section - Operative 2004,' *Auckland City Council*, last updated 17 March 2006, <http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/council/documents/central/pdfs/annexure13g.pdf>

¹⁰ Rosalind E. Krauss. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 1977. pp.244.

For those of us with multiple places we call home— overseas and across borders—the desire to be somewhere else at this moment can be especially urgent. The exhibition’s three films speak to this space of excess and the complicated parameters of home in a post-pandemic world.

The first is Hiraki Sawa’s *Dwelling* (2002), in which an animated, miniature fleet of aeroplanes fly across the interior of an empty apartment. This is a utopian scene; elusive in its goal and borderless in scope, a fantasy of both escape and belonging. Through a relationship between scale and distance, the film reflects an encroachment of virtual spaces into real ones, a struggle for union between illusion and logic. These tensions can be generative, as Karen Barad writes in *What is the Measure of Nothingness?*:

Virtual particles are not in the void but of the void. They are on the razor edge of non/being. The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The vacuum is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what could be.¹¹

Displayed within Tanuvasa’s painted Alcove, *Dwelling* further plays on a logic of interiority and exteriority, proximity and distance; teasing out the body’s division of inside and outside, and perhaps also, questioning the idea of a private, inner self.

¹¹ Karen Barad. ‘What is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice.’ *Documenta 13: 100 Notes-100 Thoughts*. Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz. 2012. pp.13.

Perched at high angle in one corner of the Dome Gallery is a TV monitor displaying *Climbing Around My Room* (1993) by Lucy Gunning. We are forced to contend with the awkwardness of scale, distance, and looking as we observe a woman in a red dress circling the limits of her domestic space. While in a cycle of perpetual, physical motion, she is also met with resistance along the way—collecting bruises and dust as she balances and contorts her body along its narrow, tactile surfaces. She is inscribing herself within its four walls. Bruno Munari writes, “While the square is closely linked to man and his constructions, to architecture, and to harmonious structures, the circle is unstable and dynamic. It is related to the divine, eternity; since it has no beginning and no end.”¹² A figuring, refiguring the space, a measuring of its limits where observation is inseparable from that which is being observed.

This leads into *From My Window* (1978-1999) by Polish artist and filmmaker Józef Robakowski, on view within Gallery Two. Filmed from his apartment window in Łódź, Poland over a 22 year period, Robakowski documents the changes in his neighbourhood, charting the country’s transition from post-war socialism and into a market economy. In it, Robakowski views the world from within. The exchanges between himself and viewer, in which he provides commentary on the comings and goings of people in the neighbourhood, are reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954). In this film the protagonist Jeff’s voyeuristic gaze

¹² Bruno Munari. *Square, Circle, Triangle*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 2015. pp.99.

is presented as an escape from intimacy, a way of side-stepping his real-life emotional demands. Like Jeff, Robakowski seems to mediate a conflict between detachment and need, right up until the film draws to a close in 1999 due to the construction of a five-star hotel that eventually obstructs the view from his window.

Finally, within the close confines of The Booth is a new sculptural and video work *Notes on time* (2021) by Deanna Dowling. Here the artist has stripped away coats of paint, gib and board exposing the layers which have been built up over the years upon the gallery walls. She creates an interior form that is born from the idea of hands gradually removing surface areas through touch, transferring it away over time, with a result that resembles the concentric rings of a topographical map.

Dowling uses a circular, iterative technique of sanding that is searching, in pursuit of something. This process excavates or uncovers the cyclic nature of architecture and how we cover up the many lives of buildings. In viewing the results we become alarmingly present with a living awareness of the layers of history that have shaped the immediate surroundings. Dowling invites viewers to have a bodily relationship to this history, in the way we might connect to the natural environment. With very fine sandpaper the artist creates a glossy patina, inviting us to literally reflect upon the Booth's full interior by way of its mirror-like finish.

Stripping away reveals the contradicting layers of history that co-exist within the places we inhabit. Teasing them out, giving them a name, documenting them, allowing them to converse. This

dialectical space is a kind of knowledge, proof that we are moving among knowledge worlds.

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