

## Visual Citizenship: Visual politics and documentary practice.

In the following presentation I briefly consider some of the issues at stake within socially engaged photo-filmic practice in relation to visual politics. I then propose a framework relevant to relational, socially-engaged projects that is world-centred, and where the practitioner both occupies and produces an enabling space of visual citizenship, using several examples of practice that I have found inspiring and motivating, as well as offering some reflections on my own work in progress.

I am a lens-based artist and educator, thinking about and making documentary-based work that has a social engagement with the world. In both of these roles I have been asking myself questions about the kinds of photographic practices that might be “useful” in the extraordinary times in which we live. As part of this recent research, I have been closely looking at art practices that utilise an expanded understanding of the documentary form, and questioning the ways in which they may or may not be considered useful to those upon whom they draw as subjects and to those who view the resulting work.

Two recent high-profile artworks are useful to briefly consider here in relation to this wider question. Fijian-New Zealand artist Luke Willis Thompson is a contemporary lens-based artist whose works operate at the nexus of documentary and fine art practice, and circulate around notions of racial injustice. Willis Thompson first came to international attention when his film autoportrait was nominated for and subsequently won the prestigious Deutsche Börse photography prize early in 2018. The film’s subject is Diamond Reynolds, partner of Philando Castile. As is well-known, Reynolds livestreamed to Facebook the immediate aftermath of Castile’s fatal shooting by a police officer in their car while she and her young daughter were passengers, and this video became a viral sensation, replaying her trauma via millions of subsequent downloads. Thompson’s decision to “reclaim” Reynolds via his Warholian ready-made film portrait which showed her, silent and immense in glowing 35mm black and white projections, was deemed “facile” by art critic and writer Erica Balsom. His most recent work took the form of a very public vote of support for Black Lives Matter to be honoured, through the display of a huge billboard across the road from the headquarters of the Nobel peace Prize Committee. The B&W image was created by a long exposure of a young black man lying in spring grass and breathing. Again it could be stated that Willis Thompson uses the gesture of visibility of the Black body as an activist intervention. However, these interventions are problematic when viewed in the context of agency and action; as Harry Thorne of Frieze points out in relation to Steve McQueen’s large-scale project collecting group portraits of schoolchildren across London, the risk in these works is that of creating “large-scale participatory spectacle” which, while undeniably celebrating diversity and universality, also packages the sitters and the audience into a static binary without offering any real possibilities for participation, problematisation or politicisation of either group via the process or viewing of the work. Thorne says in relation to the *Year 3* project “The risk is that we will end up with projects that do not help communities, but use communities for acclaim, only

to discard them once more. Involvement does not equate to engagement. Participation is not praxis.”<sup>1</sup>

These critiques of photography and of those who employ it are not new. The complex and problematic history of the apparatus of photography and film-making has been widely discussed. Cameras have been and are tools used for ethnographic “othering”, surveillance and the conveyance of the hierarchical, patriarchal and colonizing gaze. Key theorists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have interrogated photography for its role in the desensitising of audience to suffering, the other-ing of marginal communities, the problematic and patriarchal nature of the “gaze” of the lens, as well as the creation of potentially dangerous typologies, the re-inscription of stereotypes and of course the ever-increasing potential of Orwellian levels of surveillance on the citizenry. The critiques laid out by Sontag et al are well-known, and have been interrogated themselves over time; however, lens-based practices remain rightly subject to intense scrutiny in relation to the complex arena of the ethics and politics of representation.

Photographic projects which utilise social engagement with the world as methodology have at their heart issues around authorship and agency. Even this brief examination of the complexities of intention and outcome within which they are enmeshed serves to highlight the uneasy relationship of individual practitioners to their subjects and to notions of social justice and representation. The apparatus and methodologies employed by practitioners are distrusted and misused as contemporary cultural tools of production of propagandist spectacle, as stated previously, or implicated in the demeaning of our relationship to the real and the subsequent propagation of “fake news”.<sup>2</sup> This ethical minefield surrounding the production and reception of lens-based documentary work has been identified as a potentially disabling barrier to meaningful practice.

The camera, however, despite its problematic and slippery history, is still an imperfectly-perfect tool for this field of operations. No other apparatus can so directly speak to representation, and in a post-analogue world the camera contains within its digital DNA the means for nearly infinite reproduction and dissemination of its outputs. Given all we know of its context and history, care must be extended to the methodologies and contexts within which the camera is operated. We can observe practices of care being operated to move beyond earlier, perhaps overly paranoid, critiques through the work of many contemporary lens-based artists.

An example of thinking into this caring position is expressed by Puerto-Rican filmmaker and video artist Beatrice Santiago Muñoz, who speaks of her apparatus as “an object with social implications and as an instrument mediating aesthetic thought”<sup>3</sup>. Muñoz speaks of the need to utilise the camera in a way that consciously agitates against the military-industrial complex within which much lens-based

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<sup>1</sup> <https://frieze.com/article/what-all-reviews-steve-mcqueens-year-3-tate-britain-have-got-wrong>

<sup>2</sup> Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image* - Journal #10 November 2009 - e-flux

<sup>3</sup> Beatrice Santiago Muñoz, artist statement, <https://uniondocs.org/event/2018-07-29-beatriz-santiago-munoz/>

technology has been developed. She says: “I’m interested in the 60 years of military presence, (in Puerto Rico) but there must be a way to think and look at it not from the military spectrum. Undo thinking like a drone, undo thinking like a machine, undo thinking like a person that builds a military dock.”<sup>4</sup>

Ariella Azoulay in her “civil contract of photography”<sup>5</sup> suggests that the photographic apparatus can be re-habilitated when it is used to create an essential point of visual connection between actor/s and witness. Photography can function as social practice in this civic sense by behaving as a responsible listener. Here it is useful to refer to Barry Barclays’ concept of Fourth, or Indigenous Cinema. Fourth Cinema is informed at a conceptual level by the guiding principles of Indigenous cultures and where these indigenous ways of knowing are the cornerstones of the film structure in terms of politics and methodologies. An example of such a methodology would be Barclay’s “listening” camera, which sits at the feet of its subjects, quietly and empathetically gathering the complex and polyphonic relationships between subject and lens, speaker and witness. Another would be the sense that the terrain of the film is that of a hui or gathering on the marae; where over a long period of sharing each person present has an opportunity to speak. As an example of these principles in action I reference the ‘listening camera’ of Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves.

Alves investigates the histories and circumstances of particular localities to give witness to silenced histories. Her projects begin in response to local needs and proceed through a process of dialogue that is often facilitated between material and environmental realities and social circumstances. Her work creates spaces of agency and visibility for oppressed cultures through relational practices of collaboration that require constant movement across all of these boundaries. An example of one of these spaces of agency can be seen in her 2004 film *Diothio Dhep*.

During a residency in Senegal Alves noticed a small island just offshore from a busy causeway. Moussa Gueye, a local high school student, whom Alves met in the countryside, explained that ‘Diothio Dhep’ means in the Serere language, ‘the small cemetery’, where respected animals such as cows, horses, donkeys and dogs are placed. But, Moussa explained it had fallen into disuse. When Alves asked him why, he said that his generation had forgotten the tradition. One of the results was that these dead animals were being dumped in the sea thereby contaminating the water used for washing clothes. For several days, Moussa and Alves visited *Diothio Dhep* and filmed there. From the road, people walking to fields or to town could see them. Speaking about what could they be doing re-introduced the word ‘the small cemetery’ into daily conversation and the possibility of its purpose could return. By the end of the week, a dead donkey had been placed on *Diothio Dhep*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.artslant.com/sf/articles/show/45765-beyond-beauty-beatriz-santiago-muñoz-on-how-to-truly-perceive-a-place>

<sup>5</sup> Azoulay, Ariella, Rela Mazali, and Ruvik Danieli. 2008. *The civil contract of photography*.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.mariatherezaalves.org/works/diothio-](http://www.mariatherezaalves.org/works/diothio-dhep/?searched=senegal&advsearch=allwords&highlight=ajaxSearch_highlight+ajaxSearch_highlight1)

[dhep/?searched=senegal&advsearch=allwords&highlight=ajaxSearch\\_highlight+ajaxSearch\\_highlight1](http://www.mariatherezaalves.org/works/diothio-dhep/?searched=senegal&advsearch=allwords&highlight=ajaxSearch_highlight+ajaxSearch_highlight1)

When thinking then about “useful” methodologies for my own visual practice-based research, and returning to Azoulay’s proposition, it is necessary to interrogate the definition of “citizen” in relation to visual politics.

Citizenship can operate locally, individually, communally, nationally and/or globally. According to Rancière, “politics [...] is that activity which turns on equality as its principle.”<sup>7</sup> In this light politics can also be seen as a struggle for visibility, and therefore there exists a visual aspect to citizenship. Civic participation can be defined as requiring listening, responsibility, participation and finally action. This action, Rancière suggests, is an intervention of some kind in response to perceived injustice.

In his 2017 book *Let Art Teach*, Gert Biesta argues for art as an encounter between subjects, culminating in a turn towards the world; this approach deprioritises self-expression and instead foregrounds the ongoing practice of creation of self in relation to the world. This turn towards the world in my own practice began with a significant commission from Penguin Books New Zealand. Penguin was about to publish the important research that had been conducted into Ta Moko, (the art of Maori Tattoo) by Professor Ngahua Te Awekotuku and her team at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, and I was asked to make a series of contemporary portraits for the book. There is not time here to talk in depth about the process of presenting myself (the sole non-Maori) to the team for scrutiny, the development of a set of ethics and consents for the subjects, and the nearly 3-year process of making the portraits.

However, those processes were seminal

for me in beginning to deepen an understanding of the indigenous standpoint in Aotearoa-New Zealand, to my own complicated position in relation to that, and to the potential role for me of non-indigenous ally<sup>8</sup>. Through the making of these photographs, I began to reconsider assumptions around the relationship of the photographer to the subject of the photograph, and encountered aspects of Māori protocol and tikanga (cultural practices) that really challenged my established epistemological beliefs.

I began to engage with these concerns through visual research into land use. My research was framed by Land’s lens of indigenous alliance, and is situated in what Emily Apter refers to as the radical pastoral; works made in this critical margin explore ‘the links between territorial habitat and intellectual habitus; between physical place and ideological force field, between economy and ecology.’<sup>9</sup> As I develop these ideas and methodologies further into my current project I am utilising Erica Balsom’s proposals for a reality-based community, one that values documentary as operating within an opacity of care, and which also asks the viewer to stay with difficult work, to use empathy and citizen witnessing as strategies to enact social change. This project has unfolded through a working relationship that formed with Keith and Mercia Woods of the Ngati Rangī iwi or tribe in the Central North Island of New Zealand. I first met Ngati Rangī elder Keith at his home when working on a commission for local tourism. I had come across a tiny lake nestled in the foothills of the volcano Ruapehu. Lake Rotokura turned

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), ix.

<sup>8</sup> Land, Clare. *Decolonizing Solidarity*. Zed Books, 2015. EBL Ebooks Online. EBSCO host, n.d, [www.ebscohost.com](http://www.ebscohost.com). Web, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Apter, ‘Critical Habitats’ *October* 99, Winter 2002, p 23.

out to have personal significance for me, and when I went to meet Keith to learn more about this, I found it was also significant for the local iwi. Water is a renewable resource, a “clean” energy in a time of intensifying global warming. However, water also operates as a spiritual resource for many cultures; the small lake Rotokura was once known as the “Lourdes of the Pacific”. She was well known for her healing powers, which are said to issue from the volcanic crater by which she is connected via a tunnel that opens far below. In further meetings, I became aware of the massive impact the Tongariro Hydro Power Scheme has had and is having on the indigenous people of this area. The Scheme provides a large portion of energy into the National Grid, and requires the damming of many waterways; 22 rivers have been diverted from the *Whangaehu* headwaters alone. These headwaters issue from the crater lake of the volcano Ruapehu, the first ancestor and very sacred entity to Ngati Rangī. In recent times discussion of the “personhood” of our natural world has permeated mainstream conversation. While in the West this seems like radical new thinking, for Māori rivers, mountains, trees and all aspects of *Papatuanuku* (Mother Earth) have always been ancestors. Below the dam structures on these waterways the streambeds are dry. Tiny quantities of water escape from an outlet to the right of this frame, a hard-won concession from the Genesis Energy corporation. The appropriation of such a central spiritual and physical element of tribal life is a continuing perpetration of the trauma of colonisation on these people. I have worked alongside the Woods in an educational context since 2014, and over that time I have created a series of visual outcomes that reflect on the relationship between Ngāti Rangī and the national power company, with whom the tribe have engaged in slow and patient negotiations for the return of their waters and lands. The Woods have for decades opened their home and these lands to strangers. By sharing their world-view they hope to sow seeds that can help to heal our planet. I have approval from the elders of the tribe to work with them in reaching a broader audience with their long story of negotiation for a level of autonomy over their ancestral lands and resources. In the ongoing making of this work, I look for guidance to Kaupapa Māori Practices (Māori approaches) sourced from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s text *Decolonizing Methodologies*.<sup>10</sup> Although this series of hikois, or purposeful journeys, has been paused by COVID, my intention is still to bring this audio-visual material together in amplification and dissemination of the voices of Ngati Rangī people.

Aroha ki te tangata

(A respect for people)

Kanohi kitea

(The seen face, that is, present yourself to people face to face)

Titiro, whakarongo...korero

(Look, listen...speak)

Manaaki ki te tangata

(Share and host people, be generous)

Kia tupato

(Be cautious)

Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London; New York: Zed Books, 2012.

(Do not trample over the mana of people)

Kia mahaki

(Don't flaunt your knowledge)

Politics, Rancière claims, has at its heart a sense of equality, even if proven by its absence. Visual politics is therefore, through all aspects of its production and consumption, constructed from, & hardwired into these signifiers of social relations; equal and (more often than not) unequal. World-centred pedagogic and artistic practices offer challenges to co-design collaborative methodologies for active engagement with these visual politics in ways that do not deny the ethical minefield, but are not disabled by it. These reflections offer a framework within which to test and explore limits, constraints and problems within the critical contexts of the communities for whom they are centrally important.

I would like in closing to share a short clip with you in very draft form that will hopefully speak much more clearly than any presentation I might write. Thank you.