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Caring Deception:
Community art in the suburbs of Aotearoa (New Zealand)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
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New Zealand.

By
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Abstract

In Aotearoa (New Zealand), community art practice has a disadvantaged status and a poorly documented national history. This thesis reinvigorates the theory and practice of community art and cultural democracy using adaptable and context-specific analyses of the ways that aesthetics and ethics can usefully co-exist in practices of social change. The community art projects in this thesis were based in four suburbs lying on the economic and spatial fringes of Aotearoa. Over 4 years, I generated a comparative and iterative methodology challenging major binaries of the field, including: ameliorative vs. disruptive; coloniser vs. colonised; instrumental vs. instrumentalised; and long term vs. short term. This thesis asserts that these binaries create a series of impasses that drive the practice towards two new artistic categories, which I define as caring deception and the facade. All the projects I undertook were situated in contested space, where artists working with communities overlapped with local and national governments aiming for CBD and suburban re-vitalisation, creative city style initiatives, community development, grassroots creative projects, and curated public-art festivals. I worked within and around these structures, by practicing a methodology of caring deception. I applied a selection of artistic terms of engagement to vernacular structures such as public fountains, festival marquees, pop-up venues and community centres to negotiate deceit, resentment and care in the making of the art work. This thesis asserts that the methodology of caring deception creates a social ethics in action that can become embodied in the form of the art work.
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## Table of Contents

### List of images .................................................................................................................. 7

### Preface: The abundance of terms ..................................................................................... 9

### Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0: Caring deception .............................................................................................................. 14

1.1: Caring deception and community art ............................................................................. 17

1.2: The ethics of care ............................................................................................................ 23

1.3: Methodology .................................................................................................................. 26

1.4: The context: The suburb, development and community in Aotearoa (New Zealand) .... 32

### Chapter 2: The ethical impasse: The facade of the fountain

2.0: Art as disruption vs. art as ameliorative ......................................................................... 37

2.1: The Public Fountain (Tāupo, 2012) .............................................................................. 38

2.2: Local Time and For the Love of the People .................................................................. 43

### Chapter 3: The Post-colonial impasse: The facade of the occupation

3.0: The coloniser vs. the colonised ...................................................................................... 48

3.1: TEZA (Transitional Economic Zone of Aotearoa) ......................................................... 48

3.2: The Palisade of Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei ........................................................................... 64

3.3: Socialism and community art of the 1930s ................................................................... 69

3.4: Cultural democracy and TEZA .................................................................................... 72

### Chapter 4: The development impasse: the facade of the festival

4.0: Assets vs. deficits ............................................................................................................ 74

4.1: Wainuiomata Water Festival (2015) ............................................................................. 76

4.2: Greasy Pole and a Vacant Lot of Cabbages ................................................................ 86

4.3: Co-option of community art ......................................................................................... 89

4.4: Elbe’s Milkbar .............................................................................................................. 91

### Chapter 5: The impasse of instrumentalism: the facade of the community centre

5.0: Old McDonald’s ............................................................................................................ 100

5.1: Mementos and resentment ............................................................................................ 104

5.2: Boatsheds and car assembly ......................................................................................... 111
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0: Ministry for Vulnerable Suburbs.................................................................117
6.1: Conclusion.................................................................................................120

References........................................................................................................128

Appendix 1: Māori words and terms.............................................................144

Appendix 2: Documentation: The Public Fountain........................................145

Appendix 3: Documentation: The TEZA site..................................................147

Appendix 4: Documentation: Elbe's Milkbar.................................................149

Appendix 5: Documentation: Just in Time Community Centre.................150

Appendix 6: Documentation: Ministry for Vulnerable Suburbs..............151
List of images

Fig. 1. *Blood the river of life* (1973). Video still courtesy of David Mealing.........................34
Fig. 2. *The Public Fountain* (2012). The apparatus.................................................................38
Fig. 3. *The Public Fountain*. At Turangi mall.................................................................39
Fig. 4. *The Public Fountain*. Public forum “Geothermal power and development”........40
Fig. 5. Paula Atatagi at the commercial cleaners picket. 1999. *For the love of the people*. Photographer; Lynette Shum.................................................................44
Fig. 6. *Water Action 500m Law – Waitemata*, July 28 2013–1200-1600 (+1200).Local Time..45
Fig. 7. *TEZA New Mexico*. Site concept sketch. Tim Barlow..................................................49
Fig. 8. *The TEZA site* (2013). Built on the Creative Quarter site, Seaview road........51
Fig. 9. *Te Ao Mārama*. The spiritual hub..................................................................................53
Fig. 10. Construction work on *Te Ao Mārama*...........................................................................57
Fig. 11. PDT workers and Tim Barlow constructing the entranceway........................................59
Fig. 12. *Te Ao Mārama relocated to New Brighton community gardens in 2014*..............61
Fig. 13. *Palisade*, Fiona Jack, Ngarimu Blair. 2008.................................................................65
Fig. 14. *Te Ao Mārama*. Lit by Te Urutahi Waikerepuru, Stuart Foster and Kura Puke. ....66
Fig. 15. *Flaunntatiousness*, Wayne Youle, 2013 © SCAPE Public Art & Wayne Youle........68
Fig. 16. The TEZA pavilion with painted murals.................................................................70
Fig. 17. Video still youth video production. Wainuiomata. 2013...........................................75
Fig. 18. *Wainuiomata Water Festival 2015*........................................................................76
Fig. 19. *Wainuiomata Water Festival*. View to main-stage..................................................80
Fig. 20. Gavin Wallace and the Bush Fire Force lift *Rocketwoman* using water pressure......83
Fig. 21. Jenny MacArthur of street performers *The Life Guards*. ........................................85
Fig. 22. *Vacant lot of cabbages*. 1978. Barry Thomas. Wellington........................................87
Fig. 23. *Elbe’s Milkbar 2015*. Exterior nostalgia evening.....................................................91
Fig. 24. *Elbe’s milkbar*. Classic British bikes arrive.............................................................93
Fig. 25. Construction of the milkbar booths...........................................................................94
Fig. 26. Interior of the milkbar.................................................................................................96
Fig. 27. The vacant Trash Palace. 2015.................................................................................101
Fig. 28. Milkbar booths set up in the *Old McDonald’s café*..................................................102
Fig. 29. *Travails of the bomb-aimer’s daughter (Chp.3)*. Sally J. Morgan.........................105
Fig. 30. *The Titahi Bay Boatshed Festival*. Porirua. New Zealand. 2015..............................108
Fig. 31. *Just In Time Community Centre (JIT)*. Cannons Creek. New Zealand. 2015..................109
Fig. 32. *JIT Community Centre*. Te Rito Gardens. Old Porirua Hospital grounds...............111
Fig. 33. *JIT Community Centre* as the main stage at *Titahi Bay Boatshed Festival*............114
Fig. 34. Exterior view, *Ministry for Vulnerable Suburbs*. 2016..............................................117
Fig. 35. Interior view, *Ministry for Vulnerable Suburbs. Meeting room*. 2016..................120
Fig. 34. Promotion at the Big Day Art. (early 2012).................................................................145
Fig. 36. Construction at farm engineering company...............................................................145
Fig. 37. Close-up of the pressure cylinder.............................................................145
Fig. 38. *Vapours of the Oracle (2012)*. Hot geothermal face towel refreshment street stall...146
Fig. 39. The Creative Quarter site. Early 2013 pre TEZA..........................................................147
Fig. 40. *Te Ao Mārama* lit at night.....................................................................................147
Fig. 41. The TEZA entranceway.........................................................................................147
Fig. 42. Barbecue for New Brighton volunteer crew post TEZA............................................148
Fig. 43. TEZA noticeboard displaying “What does occupation look like” theme of the day...148
Fig. 44. TEZA entranceway travelling to become santa’s grotto for xmas.........................148
Fig. 45. Radio interview while training students to prepare classic Elbe’s sundaes.............149
Fig. 46. Nostalgia evening....................................................................................................149
Fig. 47. *Elbe’s Milkbar*. Teen electronic dance music (EDM) night.................................149
Fig. 48. Tim Barlow showing lime render technique in *JIT*. ..............................................150
Fig. 49. Set-up of *JIT* with hell-mouth in Cannons Creek.............................................150
Fig. 50. Amanda Joe uses *JIT* to promote a new community centre.........................150
Fig. 51. MVS view to the library and WWF presentation......................................................151
Fig. 52. MVS view to milkbar and Elbe’s Milkbar presentation.............................................151
Fig. 53. MVS view to the Community Artists Office.....................................................151