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How to make
political video art
in
New Zealand.

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for a Masters in Fine Arts

Massey University, Wellington.

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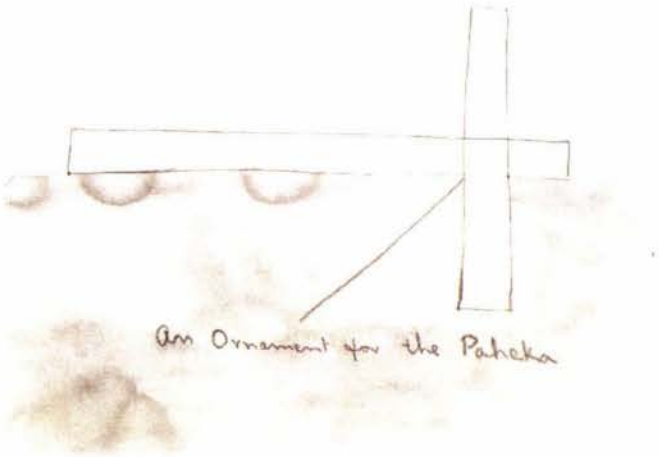


1. Colin McCahon. *An Ornament for the Pakeha.* Undated (Hohaia, O'Brien, Strongman, 2001, p. 131).

Introduction

I started this thesis with the question how is it possible to make political video art in New Zealand? This came out of my desire to understand better the issues for artists currently making political work, as I found that in my practice I kept returning to political themes. It soon became apparent that I needed to include my journey out of community work into an art practice. It also seemed important to acknowledge a significant discovery, that for me, the process is often as important as the art produced. Therefore this paper includes an explanation of my change from community worker to artist, and its relevance to my art practice. And, a discussion about the importance of process: while the central and more pertinent question remains throughout, how to make political video art in New Zealand?

I begin looking at philosophy, confessing my assumptions about morality and looking at the struggles within postmodern subjectivity: and its implications for content in art work.

The next section considers the modernist ideas of the *Situationists*, and of *Joseph Beuys*, and their hopes for the fusion of art and life, followed by reflections on my past involvements in community work. I then track the intention shown in the work of Beuys into the postmodern era looking specifically at the work *Intervention to aid drug-addicted women, Shedhalle* by the Austrian Art Collective *Wochenklausur*, considering their pragmatic, contextually-specific gestures of art. I look at two of my own works, *Weeping Waters* and *Untitled*, focusing on the importance of the process while making the distinction between the process and art.

The next section begins with a brief but important discussion about the artist as public intellectual in the section titled *Public speaking*, before I look at one of the most significant issues in this paper, how to avoid making didactic work. I analyse a quote by philosopher Jacques Rancière and consider strategies to avoid making narrow and shut down art.

The next section considers two moments in the history of video art that I consider have relevance to my research. They are the beginning of video art in the mid 1960s in America, and the idea that television had by the 1960s become the dominant interpreter of local and international events. The second part of this section looks at the attitude of the *Young British Artists* (yBas) in the 1990s toward popular culture, art history and

academia. The final section of the paper looks at the work that I made toward this thesis that was not mentioned in the main body of the writing.

To clarify what I mean by political, these are the issues I have looked at this year. I address my frustration, as a Pakeha New Zealander, over the 2004 Seabed and Foreshore Bill. I address environmental concerns; specifically private car use and air travel. I also consider New Zealanders' obsession with home renovation, and finally the extent of American fear relating to terrorism within the New Zealand context.

Subjective philosophies: assumptions and practice

I have found that I continue to return to similar themes in my work. These are the important concerns of environmental and justice issues. In the developed world there is unprecedented access to information on global issues and scientific research. We are constantly battered through the media with statistics and global and local woes. For me as an artist this necessitates art with political content, which has meant reconciling philosophically a number of questions. Why do I believe anything is important? And *if* I do consider that certain things are important, how do I proceed in a postmodern context of subjective opinion?

Here it would be useful to come clean with my basic assumption, which I acknowledge as a mystical point rather than an academic one. On occasion, I have experienced the world as "Pi" in Yann Martel's (2002) novel *The Life of Pi,* with, "a sense of presence and purpose" (p. 63). Or as Nick Cave (1996) would sing, paraphrasing Kant, "The starry heavens above me, the moral law within, so the world appears." One could write many words about both the above statements. My stance is within that moral purpose.

Because I experience the world as a moral place, this guides my actions within it. Existentialism claims that, "... Human beings exist without justification (hence "absurdly") in a world into which we are "thrown," condemned to assume full responsibility for our free actions" (Audi, p. 256).

Derrida and Kant consider, in different ways from the Existentialists, the impossibility of understanding anything as true with any certainty. Immanuel Kant combines rationalist and empiricist philosophies. The Rationalists said that all human knowledge is found in the mind. The Empiricists said that all knowledge of the world comes through our senses. Jostein Gaarder (1995) explains in his book, *Sophie's World,* "the rationalists had almost forgotten the importance of experience, and the empiricists had shut their eyes to the way our own mind influences the way we see the world" (p. 271). Quoting Gaarder again, "Kant made the important distinction between "the thing in itself" and "the thing for me." We can never have certain knowledge of things "in themselves" We can only know how things "appear" to us" (p. 271). I agree, this situation means one is unable to be sure about anything.

Derrida is a contemporary contributor to the discussion of no absolutes. He claims that understanding of self and all things is through language, and language is unstable and permeable in its meanings (Elwes, 2005, p. 161). Therefore we can know nothing for certain of ourselves or the world.

Derrida also said he does see a way forward with his ideas about law making. He considers that we only have access to justice through law, and that a literal interpretation of the law will not always act on the side of justice. Derrida suggests we move towards justice by being aware of the limitations of the law and be ready to deconstruct laws that are not working towards justice. This is not a rejection of the law: just clearing ground for new law or a new judgment to take place. He cites Kierkegaard saying that the new

judgment is a "leap," taking a stand when there is no adequate justification, "a kind of madness" (Gutting, 2003, p. 871). It needs to be said, that this law does not act outside of the previous construction of law it still needs justification. This new decision will be subject to continual deconstruction (Gutting, 2003, p. 871).

I think Derrida's pragmatic and contextualized adaptation of law provides a model to ground content in art work. It is arguable that all work takes a position, though that discussion is outside the parameters of this paper. But if work does have an opinion or proposition, one should make those comments with the awareness that they are a kind of 'mad judgment' or a 'leap of faith,' for the present moment. This question is tackled again in a different way by philosopher Jacques Rancière and will be discussed later in the text.

2. Murray Hewitt. *Untitled Mega*, video still 2007.

All of my work for this MFA thesis raises issues and takes a position. *Untitled Mega* (Figure 2) consists of a carefully composed shot of every Mega Mitre Ten warehouse in the country at the time of shooting: from Albany in Auckland to Invercargill in the South Island, 21 in all. The work pauses for 10 seconds showing the comings and goings of shoppers at each location before cross-fading to the next. The sound for this work is *Amazing Grace*. I plan to show this work in a church using an electric pipe organ. The building I have in mind was built in the 1940s by the Christian Scientist church. The building is concrete and architecturally influenced by art deco: it is not a large cathedral. I anticipate the music will be consuming and clichéd, but also triumphant and emotional. The church rooms are regularly used by the general public and I anticipate a number of these people will be at the showing as well as colleagues and staff from the university.

The content for this work raises a number of issues. The first and obvious one is the religious dedication to home renovation of many New Zealanders. The other is the somewhat less obvious issue of sweat shop labor. Mega Mitre Ten sells many products made through sweat shop labour. The writer of *Amazing Grace*, John Newton, was a redeemed slave trader. The work is open and acknowledges that, while I have an opinion, I do not think I have an exhaustive grasp of the issues but, that they are worth talking about.

The Moderns: Using art and its processes to combat the 'Spectacle'

In this section and the other titled *Postmoderns* ... I have chosen as a catalyst to talk about my own work, Joseph Beuys, the Situationists and the Wochenklausur Collective. Like myself, all these artists have political motivations and intentions in their work.

To begin I want to clarify how I am using the terms modern and postmodern in this section. I use them in respect to the idea of grand narratives. Crudely put, modernism would say there is one story that can explain and save us. Postmodernism would say there are many stories: our perception of truth is subjective, individual, pragmatic and deconstructed. Therefore when I talk about the Situationists and Joseph Beuys as modernists, I speak of them believing that there was one remedy: one philosophy and practice that would resolve the ills of society. And when I speak of the Wochenklausur Collective as postmodern, I mean they do not believe there is one overarching remedy to society's ills. Their response is pragmatic and locally specific.

The Situationists formed in 1957. In 1967 both Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem released books explaining the Situationists' ideas. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord wrote (Ford, 2005, as cited Debord, 1994),

> ... a society devastated by the shift from use-value and material concreteness to exchange value and the world of appearances: "The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life." (p. 102).

Both Debord and Vaneigem were attempting to identify and explain the alienation of modern consumer society, referencing Marx's idea of alienation. Simon Ford (2005) talks about the implication for art he found in Vaneigem's book *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.

> According to Vaneigem the roles of artists and poets would eventually be subsumed under a "collective effort", thus ending art's dependence on specialization: "there are no more artists because everybody is an artist. The work of art of the future will be the construction of a passionate life." (p. 109).

Joseph Beuys is popularly credited with Vaneigem's quote of, "Every human being is an artist." Beuys combined his interest in the Situationists with the spirituality of Rudolf Steiner and Wilhelm Lehmbruck's sculptural idea, to build his own theory of *Social Sculpture* (Beckmann, 2001, p. 96). It is this social sculpture aspect of Beuys' work that I want focus on. The following quote probably best reveals the modernist utopian hope for social change present in the above art practices. In 1973 Beuys wrote:

> Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build 'A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART'... EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER. (Tisdell, 1974, p. 78)

An example of this ideology was his work for Documenta 7 in 1982, where Beuys planted 7000 oak trees in Kassel, titled descriptively, *7000 Oaks*. Beuys endeavoured to bring his ideas directly into the material world, particularly on a political and

environmental level. I refer to these movements because I agree with their intention for art to be involved in social change. However I have problems with the methodology of fusing art with life. I also disagree that fusing art and life would be the total remedy for the negative effects of consumer society.

It could be argued that Joseph Beuys and the Situationists are the forebears of the current practice referred to by Nicolas Bourriaud as *Relational Aesthetics* (2002). It could also be said that this practice seems to be the sensible choice for an artist wanting to be involved in social change.

Postmoderns: Art and its processes, a new praxis for community work

In Grant H. Kester's book *Conversation Pieces* (2004), Wolfgang Zinggl, from the Austrian art collective Wochenklausur, acknowledges Joseph Beuys' work but discerns differences with their own community based relational work. Zinggl speaks of their pieces being pragmatic and locally responsive rather than the modernist grandiose "sublimation of art and life" (p. 101) that Joseph Beuys longed for.

Intervention to aid drug-addicted women, Shedhalle is a well known work by Wochenklausur. This work involved gathering in a boat on Lake Zurich: politicians, journalists, sex workers and activists. They spent the next three hours, out of the light of the public and media scrutiny, discussing the issue of drug addiction that was causing many women to turn to prostitution to support their habit. Over the course of several weeks the collective organized dozens of these trips including as passengers over sixty key figures from Zurich. The response to this was the creation of a boarding house where drug addicted sex workers could have a safe place to sleep, eat and access services, which eight years later still houses twenty women a day (Kester, 2004, pp. 2-3). This project is a great social contribution and the collective insist it is art rather than social work or activism.

The problem is that this kind of art is too close to community work for me. The last job I had, before I made art the focus of my time, was as a Family Youth Worker at Odyssey House in Auckland. Odyssey was and is a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre which

currently also involves treating solvent and methamphetamine users. I was responsible for individual clients as well as the family therapy side of the three youth programs. This meant running the fortnightly Multi Family Groups, where the young people's family or care givers would come and we would work through themed sessions; on addiction cycles, depression and many other issues.

Prior to this I worked in Wellington with young people of a different kind, mainly in Christian churches, and along with this, lived in various kinds of community homes. These Wellington groups had strong left political leanings and social justice concerns, which meant a lot of the group activity was focused around community projects, such as running a homework club at the local college, raising money and awareness of landmine issues, attending street marches, working at the local soup kitchens and visits to third world slums.

I mention these previous work environments to give some context to the way I make art. The important issue is, whether I consider 'relational aesthetics' art or not, it is too close to community work, and I do not feel suited to this work, or that this is the way I want to contribute to social change.

3. Murray Hewitt. *Weeping Waters*. video still 2008.

In contrast while preparation and interactions for my work *Weeping Waters* (Figure 3) has elements of relational work in the process, I do not consider this the art. The process involved asking permission to use the *Raukura*, in a video project. The followers of Te Whiti O Rongomai and Tohu Kākahi wear the Raukura (three white feathers) at the back of their heads. Atiawa's website explains.

> The three elements as represented by Raukura are, - An acknowledgement of spirituality and spiritual forces – the importance of making peace with yourself and with others – the necessity of maintaining goodwill, despite conflict. (Atiawa)

I wanted to use this symbol, in particular the representation of it that Michael Smither painted for the cover of Dick Scott's book *Ask that Mountain* (1975). I wrote to Michael

Smither. He said he was happy for me to use the image but that he had given copyright to the people of Parihaka. I contacted someone on the board at Parihaka to see if it would be alright for me to visit and discuss my project. They were happy for me to do that. I had to present my project, as it turned out, to three groups of people at the Pa. Each of the speakers started by thanking me for coming to ask. I consider this interaction an extremely important part of the art making process: this process is as important as the art itself. The work itself aims to address my own anger and disappointment over the Seabed and Foreshore legislation passed in 2004, which I consider an injustice.

4. Murray Hewitt, *Untilted,* video still, 2007.

Another work from this year was *Untitled* (Figure 4). The process toward the final video was as important as producing a piece of art. This work was intended to investigate how

American fears over terrorism affects New Zealanders. Perhaps the full extent of these fears was seen in November of this year (2007) when the police carried out, "Operation Eight" (Jackson, 2007). The operation consisted of a series of raids on various homes of activists throughout the country most notably a very heavy handed, and most probably illegal, approach in Ruatoki on the East Coast.

The project was envisaged during a conversation with an American visitor. They wanted to see the US embassy in Wellington. They visited, not going into the compound just observing and taking some photos from the street. When they were driving through the city they were stopped by police and questioned why they were taking photos of the embassy. I found this difficult to believe, so I endeavored to make an art project that would test this situation. I proposed to film myself washing the American flag outside the embassy. I inquired through a friend to a former head of security at the embassy, what would be the likely outcome if we turned up and tried to film. His response was that the embassy would immediately ring the police and we would be removed. I got in touch with a friend who was a lawyer to give advice on the legalities of filming on the street outside the embassy. He advised that we were not allowed to block public access or trespass. Setting up a table with bowls of water on the large traffic island in front of the embassy, at the end of a cul de sac would not be dangerous, trespassing or block public access. We wrote to the embassy explaining our intention. Within a couple of weeks we had an email from the city council asking us to fill out application forms for film permits and the purchase of public liability insurance to cover possible damages up to a million dollars. This was the beginning of a 3 month process. We had written to the police

explaining what we hoped to do and invited them to be present. They were fine with us proceeding as long as we informed the embassy of the date and time. We decided to go ahead without the council permit, as from my lawyer's perspective there was no legal reason why we needed the permit. This caused tension at the embassy but since we had turned up with a lawyer and a letter from the Wellington Area Commander of police they reluctantly allowed us to go ahead. When our contact at the council heard we had gone ahead with the filming they were disappointed. To quote the email, they said everyone needed to comply with their processes to keep the region film friendly,

> – and a lot of that is achieved by simply keeping communication flowing between film makers and relevant local authorities, public and businesses. When any of these people are surprised/ignored by film crews that is when there are consequences for the industry down the track ... (July 19, 2007)

The process was successful in revealing some of the complications and lengths the embassy was willing to take, regardless of the artwork generated from it. I was disappointed that two people in the process, the contact at the city council and the head of security, appeared to be negatively affected by the work, but at least the work had affected some political awareness.

Public speaking

Carol Becker (2002) writes in a chapter entitled *The artist as public intellectual.*

> In our collective Western Consciousness, and probably our unconsciousness as well, we do not have images of artists as socially concerned citizens of the world, people who could serve as leaders and help society determine, through insights and wisdom, its desirable political course. (p. 12)

Becker's comment is true to the extent that in our New Zealand context it is not common place to have an artist elected to city council or parliament, though this exclusion is not exclusive to artists. Historically there are plenty of examples of artists or art movements that have affected politics. The Situationists, Wochenklausur and Joseph Beuys, already mentioned, are only a few of many. It is how they influence the desired political course that may be more difficult to identify. The work by the Wochenklausur collective discussed earlier and the dynamic of public intellectual discussed below, go part of the way to understanding how art can contribute to political direction. Also both *Weeping Waters* and the *Untitled* U.S. Embassy work gave opportunity for those involved to reconsider the way they relate politically.

I consider the artist to be a public intellectual; in the same sense as a writer is a public intellectual. The writer publishes a work and their ideas are discussed in the public sphere, or considered privately by the individual: likewise the same is true for visual art shown in a public exhibition.

This paper makes the assumption that in general an individual and a community can be affected and changed by art. But there is not time and space to discuss it as part of this paper.

Political or moral messages: subordinated aesthetic considerations

This section deals with the main issue as I see it, how does one avoid being didactic? Eleanor Heartney, in her book, *Defending Complexity: Art, Politics and the New World Order* (2006), states:

> The idea has taken hold that politics is like a virus, sucking all the aesthetic sophistication and formal intelligence out of an art work, and leaving behind only an empty husk of tired propaganda. But while it is true that there is nothing more tedious than an art work which exists only to triumphantly inform us that "racism is bad" or "war creates innocent victims" blanket dismissals of "political art" remove an important tool for understanding and, perhaps, even changing, the world in which we live. (Introduction)

I completely agree with Heartney's statement, and also have made didactic work. In my experience making work that is overstated with a single message leads to a dismissive response, either positively or negatively, in both cases confirming the viewer's prior understanding. If the viewer agrees with the gesture they will think "I agree," and probably think no more of it. Conversely if the viewer disagrees they may think the artist is just a "leftie" or whatever the case may be. In either situation the potential of the experience is reduced.

There are two important points to identify from Heartney's statement. First is a tension between form and content. Second, what is the imagined dynamic that occurs for the viewer? The Collins English dictionary (1979) defines didactic this way, "intended to instruct, esp. excessively. 2. morally instructive; improving. 3. (works of art or literature)

containing a political or moral message to which aesthetic considerations are subordinated" (pp. 412-13).

Jacques Rancière, in a recent issue of Art Forum International (Carnevale & Kelsey, 2007, March) makes very insightful comments about the dynamic between a viewer and art with political intentions.

> For example, emancipation can't be expected from forms of art that presuppose the imbecility of the viewer while anticipating their precise effect on that viewer: for example, exhibitions that capitalize on the denunciation of the "society of the spectacle" or of the "consumer society" -bugbears that have already been denounced a hundred times-or those that want to make viewers "active" at all costs with the help of various gadgets borrowed from advertising, a desire predicated on the presupposition that the spectator is otherwise necessarily rendered "passive" solely by virtue of his looking. An art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops *wanting* to emancipate us. (p. 258)

I think Rancière assumes a few things. First is that the audience is educated about the "society of the spectacle". The informed art viewer may well be, but I doubt all the audience will be: even within established fine art institutions. The second is the assumption that the show is in an academic situation. To be fair Rancière is being interviewed under this assumption, by a well respected art journal. But it does need to be said that not all art is shown in this environment. If for example a show was set up in a local community hall, then it would be sensible to assume a different level of literacy and concerns from your audience. Hence one may make work that if seen in an academic environment could be viewed as didactic, or in another setting, fully engaged. The third issue is similar to the first: is the audience aware of all the effects and forms of

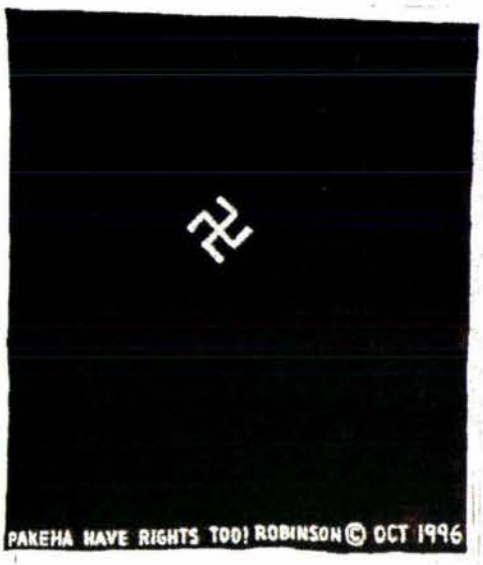
consumerism, and are they resolved in their response to it? Consumerism is not slowing down. It is different from five or ten years ago, and what of our complicity with both the "spectacle" and "consuming", however well informed? As I see it the question is, how are artists to talk about these issues? Surely these issues are not out of bounds because they have been spoken about before, or their frequency of occurrence. Or maybe the argument is that the viewer has become deaf to these issues as a result of over exposure, which is what I think Rancière is really saying. I agree, but the problems still remain. Broadcast television and the advertising industry have certainly not stopped their messages. An artist's silence is not the only response.

That said Rancière identifies some very important strategies for art making today. First he talks about art being emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the "authority of the imposed message" (p. 258). We understand from philosophy cited, postmodern theory and hopefully experience, that no one world view or individual has an exhaustive grasp on any given issue. Therefore artwork needs to make clear to the viewer that this is a subjective opinion. The artist's voice needs to sit quietly, or be one of many, or any other strategy that respects and incorporates other possibilities and opinions.
The second point identified by Rancière is that work should not assume every viewer is the same, and therefore everyone who sees it will be affected in the same manner. Everyone brings their own experience to the work and so will have a different response.

The third point is that artwork needs to, "renounce ... the univocal mode of explicating the world" (p. 258). Or put another way, it needs to make clear what it says is not based

on an accurate account of the world, but a subjective one. This is the same issue discussed earlier when Immanuel Kant was quoted saying, we do not experience the world as it is; we experience it, "as it is for me" (Gaarder, p. 271). Rancière is challenging the contemporary artist to adopt a strategy in their work that incorporates these elements.

Strategy



5. Peter Robinson, *Pakeha have Rights Too*, 1996 (Bell, 2000).

Peter Robinson uses a strategy in his work *Pakeha have Rights Too!* (Figure 5) that integrates Rancière's ideas. In 1996 he showed two works at Peter McLeavey's Gallery in Wellington. One *Pakeha have Rights Too*! the other *Maori have rights too!* The former painting caused a controversy apparently being the most argued-about painting by a living artist in New Zealand. Earlier in the year I interviewed Peter Robinson. I asked him if he had any particular strategy in making this work. From this conversation I gleaned that he included in the work mixed messages and contradictions making the meaning slippery.

I responded saying the painting does work that way, but also, while all that was going on, beneath it you are pretty sure you know what his view is. He agreed (Robinson, Interviewed June 2007).

Robinson's use of contradiction and slippery meanings adopts two of Rancière's strategies. It undermines the authority of the message and throws doubt on the possibility of accurately and exhaustively understanding the presented issue.

6. Murray Hewitt. *Jessie's Girl*, video still 2007.

In my work *Jessie's Girl* (Figure 6), I have addressed an issue Rancière may consider out of bounds due to over exposure. The work consists of 18 local petrol stations filmed at night while it is raining. The shot rests for 30 seconds on each station, contemplating the drift of people and vehicles, before it cross-fades to another station. The soundtrack is *Classic Hits Nightclub*, from the easy listening radio station *Classic Hits*, recorded in a car. This includes *Angels* by Robbie Williams, Rick Springfield's *Jessie's Girl*, awkward song requests and station ID's.

My intention was for the viewer to reconsider their relationship to cars and oil, and the connection to weather. I chose the sound for its comfort and convenience, similar to our use of cars.

I aim to focus my attention on the formal qualities of the work, making it as beautiful and painterly as possible. My hope was that the viewer could enjoy the aesthetic, and if they chose to go further, the political possibilities. When I showed the work in my first critique people took a while to pick up the political intentions: though when it was mentioned they were not surprised. I think it works as a piece of art, it is quiet and open though the environmental questions I wanted to raise may be too subtle, or eclipsed by readings about petrol stations. I tried to address the concerns of Rancière and Heartney as mentioned above. It is not saying the world is a particular way unequivocally, nor has it neglected the formal qualities. In support of Rancière's comment that every viewer is not the same, not everyone experienced the work as open. In a later critique a member of staff thought the inclusion of the music overstated the content.

Rancière, is urging the artist to be aware of current philosophical discussion. He may well argue, as I myself would, that popular culture, for the most part, absorbs and functions within these frameworks. For example though many people might think and believe in a way that is consistent with postmodernity, they may not have a label for it. The most important point to take from Rancière's comments, though it sounds a contradiction, is that an artwork emancipates when it stops *wanting* to emancipate us (Carnevale & Kelsey, p. 258).

Resistance to the Interpreter

7. 1.2: Sony AV 3400 'Portapak', 1968
(Meigh-Andrews, 2006, p. 17).

In this section I want to have a brief look at video history. I want to pick up on the two aspects that inform my practice. They are: the beginnings of video art in America in the 1960s and the attitude in more recent times of the Young British Artists (yBas).

Video art in America was born into a time of high personal and political faith. Marita Sturken writes (Hall & Fifer, 1990).

> Video art was introduced at a time when the art world was undergoing upheaval, as artists questioned the traditional art object through nonmarketable art forms such as performance, conceptual art, earthworks, and body art. It was also, appropriately, a time when the power of the media had been overwhelmingly reaffirmed, just after the on-camera assassination of this country's first "media president" and in the middle of its first "living room war." These social and political events were delivered to an eager audience via the medium of television, whose role as the primary interpreter of events had only recently been established. (p. 107.)

Sturken identifies one of the core issues for many early video artists that of television becoming the "primary interpreter" of events. Though there has been with the internet, a

broader spectrum of analysis. I suggest that broadcast television is still where most people get their news and understanding of local and international events.

There is a myth about Nam June Paik and the beginning of video art in America. The story goes that Nam June Paik brought a Sony portapak in 1965. This purchase coincided with the Pope's visit to New York. Paik hired a taxi and filmed the procession. He kept the camera running non stop and finished filming when the tape ran out. He showed the work at a café later that day alongside the television reporting of the visit. Paik's witness of the event was in real time and played for an hour .The media coverage was heavy with broadcast conventions, voice overs, ad breaks, editing, dramatization, flashbacks etc. Paik's work was a direct challenge to the monopoly of mainstream media, and their crafting of society (Elves, 2005).

My practice has sympathies with the beginnings of video art. I hold similar concerns, but at a different moment in time. I also have a hope that video can be used to critique, resist and present alternatives to mass media, still the dominant interpreter. The concerns of the 60s are still present if not magnified with the intensity and exposure to television. In my opinion the present political agenda of western nations to stereotype, dramatize and over simplify the present "war on terror" is an example of a dominant and limited television interpretation.

I discovered an early example of controlling the media in the research for my work *Weeping Waters.* The most significant event in the Parihaka story was when Te Whiti and

Tohu and some 2000 of their followers were taken off their land in 1881, after protesting peacefully for years about the injustice of land confiscations. Dick Scott (1975) writes about the media blockade.

> Bryce had ordered a press blackout on his march. No reporters were to approach the scene: only official accounts would be released. Journalists who had been threatened with arrest if they disobeyed saw it as a point of honor to defy the ban. Some were arrested but five got through. Traveling across country, clothes torn and wet with dew, they reached Parihaka ahead of the troops to tell Tohu their story. They were immediately invited to stay. 'We quite understand why the government is ashamed that the country should know what it is doing' he said, 'but we have nothing to be ashamed of.' (p. 115)

A particular mix of pop culture and art history

I have included the Young British Artists (yBas) in this paper because their attitude and influences are similar to my own. The yBas video practice will be briefly discussed in relation to the first video artists.

In the 1990s the yBas included video in their portfolios while revealing very little knowledge of the history of the medium. For them experience of pop culture through television and music videos was not the enemy as the early practitioners considered, but just another site of creative material. It is suggested by Catherine Elwes (2005) that the promoters of British art at this time were governed by commercial interests. It worked in their favor to say little about the history of video art, as it is easier to promote something seen as new (pp. 160-161), and not in opposition to art as a commodity - which was an important ethos for the first video artists. Their apparent ignorance of art history in general and their attitude to political issues, is touched on in Matthew Collings' much criticized book *Blimey* (1997).

> ... now that the mood has moved on from political correctness, which reached its height in about 1992. Young artists are just naturally politically correct now, because they never were anything else. So their art can be free of correctness in the sense of correctness being the main statement. They just think they are correct in their lives so that frees their art. Good thinking young artists! And they don't feel any pressure to read anything hard any more, like social theory books or investigations into the structure of language. (pp. 16-17)

Collings goes on to discuss a work by Damien Hirst the vitrines, *A Hundred Years,* and, *A Thousand Years.* The vitrines are two six-feet-square glass cases with black framing connected with a circular hole. Inside is a severed cow's head, flies and maggots, and an insect-o-cutor: there was a small lifecycle going on (Collings, 1997). This was a typically sensationalist and shock approach closely connected to the British punk scene of the late seventies, yet the work has a clear point of reference to artist Frances Bacon, and theories such as minimalism.

When I presented this paper in a symposium earlier in the year two people questioned my assertions about the yBas lack of knowledge of the history of video art. One point raised was that in Britain there was a lot of discussion around the use of video for surveillance at this time, and that the yBa's were aware of this. Another person mentioned a work by Gillian Wearing *10–16*, where she collected audio recordings of children between the ages of ten to sixteen talking about rites of passage, over that seven year period. She then got adult actors to mimic edited parts of the individual texts (Ferguson, De Salvo, Slyce, 1999). The seven year age bracket being in reference to the influential British documentary *7 up*, which visited and filmed a group of people every seven years of their life. It was suggested that in both cases the artists had a very sophisticated understanding of how the medium was used, with which I completely agree. But both comments were talking about the artists' understanding of the use of the medium, not referring to past video work. It was an example of the artists using the medium in a way that engaged with normal life. John Slyce (1999) writes about Wearing,

> Wearing is more a product of British documentaries – broadcast into her home and family life as a young teenager in the mid-1970s- than the offspring of early video artists working in the same period." (p. 83)

As with Hirst, Wearing was aware of art from the past but she is equally if not more influenced, by television and popular culture. Like the Young British Artists, I have grown up with music videos, documentaries and movies. All these areas have influenced my work, more than my knowledge of video art.

8. Murray Hewitt. *Untitled*, video still, 2007.

My work *Untitled* (Figure 8) has influences from a number of sources. The work is a one minute forty second drive-by of a gowned figure standing next to a tree, behind some white Arum lilies: wearing a crash helmet, shooting a stationary car. The clip is in slow motion 10% of the original speed and viewed in silence. The crash helmet the shooter is wearing is a symbol for me of the 1981 Springbok anti tour protester, which I saw on

television news reports when I was a child. In my mind was a hand held shot from *Quiet Earth* or *Smash Palace*, taken from a moving car of people in a paddock. It has also been mentioned to me it reminds people of gothic landscapes from movies like *Vigil*, *Sleeping Dogs* or more recently Florian Habicht 2003 movie *Woodenhead*. Or on a lighter note, the shooter looks like one of the sand people from George Lucas's *Star Wars*. This work has multiple references.

Studio

In this section I give a brief explanation of the one work included in this master's thesis that has not been discussed so far, and a brief description of the work *Weeping Waters.*

There are two distinct ways that I have worked with video this year. One is performative, where I have set up a site, characters, costume and narrative. The editing has been minimal, basically just documenting the event. The other way has been to take myself out of the picture and carefully point the camera and witness specific sites and suggest readings by adding music.

9. Murray Hewitt. *Drowned Out,* video still 2007.

This project *Drowned Out* (Figure 9), consisted of me singing a song with an acoustic guitar, at night, in front of an enormous lit billboard next to the Wellington airport. The billboard was celebrating 50 years of nationhood in Malaysia, by advertising holidays flying Malaysia Airlines to Kuala Lumpur for "serious shopping", or Sipadan Island for amazing diving. During the course of the first shoot, just as I began to sing, a jet took off and drowned out the singing, which was amusing at the time. Thinking about this while watching the footage later, I thought the term "drowned out" was relevant to climate change and the cause of this drowning was from to one of the worst polluters about, jet fuel. The final work was me singing a *Midnight Oil* song *The river runs red,* which was unable to be heard as a result of the sounds of jet planes taking off, landing and taxiing which sounded for the duration of the song.

I'd like to give some further explanation and description of the work *Weeping Waters.* This work is a return to a performance style of video. It is a personal response to the Seabed and Foreshore legislation passed in 2004. I am dressed in white Canterbury rugby shorts, a black singlet and a matt black 1970s crash helmet with the Raukura cut from vinyl on the back. I am standing on a beach in the Wairarapa at the foot of a huge sand slope. With anger and increasing discomfort, I kick a red white and blue soccer ball up the slope seemingly endlessly: the ball returning no matter how hard I kick it. As mentioned earlier, the crash helmet worn by protesters of the 1981 Springbok tour, is in my view a symbol well known to New Zealanders over the age of thirty, for legitimate and worthy protest. The black singlet references to, for example; landscape painter Colin McCahon's black singlet, New Zealand farmers, or the kiwi bloke around the barbeque.

The white Canterbury rugby shorts are symbolic again of the kiwi bloke. The red white and blue soccer ball is a symbol for the crown. I want the work to be subjective and obscure focusing on this strange and painful action or therapy. I do not imagine people will understand it straight up though I hope it will be alluring and puzzling enough for them to want to understand and make a story. The title of the work is the English translation of the Maori Waitangi.

There are a number of coincidences with dates in this project. The Raukura is the symbol of Te Whiti and Tohu who were taken off their land in 1881, 100 years before the Springbok tour. Last year 2007 on November 18th was the 100 year commemorations of the passing of Te Whiti. And the work is about the Seabed and Foreshore legislation passed in parliament on November 18th 2004.

Showing the work

I plan to show these works in the community at a church in central Wellington. I have proposed to use four rooms, a meeting room with large windows out to a rooftop car park. A prayer room off the meeting room, the auditorium and the basement hall. Some of these rooms are regularly used by community groups not affiliated to the church.

Part of my reasoning to show in this setting is to have the work in the community environment rather than a gallery setting. The church will inform their congregation and all those that use the building about the show. I am aware that the audience will be a mix of people connected with church and my colleagues and university staff. I am interested to see how the different viewers receive the work particularly in relation to the issue of didacticism. I plan to show, *Mega Untitled, Weeping Waters, Jessies Girl* and the untitled shooting drive by.

Conclusion

How is it possible to make political video art in New Zealand? The first conclusion is a seemingly obvious one but has far reaching consequences: that I am postmodern - my experience of the world is subjective. Hence I answer the research question subjectively. How can '*I*' make political video art ...? These conclusions are justified in the sense that they are relative to others who have attempted to make work about politics, but they will inevitably need deconstructing and revision to be applicable to future situations or new contexts.

The most important conclusion from this research is the need to control the delivery of the content in any work. I agree with Rancière that the viewer will only be emancipated when they feel that the art is not trying to emancipate them. Therefore if your intention is emancipation (and mine is) strategies need to be present within the work for it to have any effect on the viewer. These strategies need to adopt Rancière's three observations. The work needs to acknowledge that it does not have an exhaustive grasp on the presented issue, that what it presents is not based on an accurate account of the world, and finally, work should not assume all viewers to be the same. The other issue within this section is the context. I argue that in certain situations - non traditional art settings - the content should be more obvious. This is not to become simpler or narrower in its ideas, but arguably more obvious in how it communicates those ideas.

Other conclusions have been identified from reflection on my practice over the course of the year, and previous employment situations, rather than strictly through reasoned academic argument. The first is the discovery that by nature I am not a community worker. This has affected my thoughts about 'relational aesthetics.' Though to me this seemed a logical and appropriate way to make political art, I had already discovered through my previous employment, that I was not suited to this kind of work. Secondly when looking at the work of the yBas, I identified influences and attitudes toward popular culture, art history and academia that are similar to my own. Thirdly I recognized that often the interactions, research and learning involved before I film a project, are as important as producing the video. They are the central reasons why I make art.

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