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Roaming all levels

Nina Tonga on Walters Prize 2014
finalist performance art work *Mo'ui
tukuhausia* by Kalisolaite 'Uhila

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Homelessness is a complex concept, but, as its linguistic formulation suggests, it is often conceived of as the antithesis of home and all that an abode connotes. Home signifies many things: a physical place, a source of identity, a refuge from the outside world, and an anchor that enables economic and political participation. Those without a fixed home are often viewed with suspicion as ‘others’, ‘outsiders’, ‘vagrants’, or ‘bums’, and deprived of the social privilege of being seen or heard by others.¹ It is this personification of homelessness, and the tensions between home and homeless, private and public, that inform the Walters Prize-nominated performance *Mo‘ui tukuhausia* by Tongan-born artist Kalisolaite ‘Uhila.

In a relatively short period of time, ‘Uhila has created a series of live performance works that have implicated his body in extended and often precarious situations. In one of his most infamous performances, *Pigs in the yard* (2011), he cohabited with a piglet named ‘Colonist’ in an open straw pen for eight days. Throughout the performance, he mimicked the behaviour of his swine companion while he was exposed to the elements, and in full view of the public. In other performances, ‘Uhila’s body has been a conduit for personal and collective memory, offering a kind of performed autobiography. In the endurance performance *Stowaway* (2012), he lived in a cargo container for four days and nights as homage to the migration of his uncle, who arrived in New Zealand as a stowaway from Tonga. While these works recall Joseph Beuys and performance artists of the 1970s and 80s, I would argue that much of ‘Uhila’s practice derives from a lived experience of the body as a cultural and political entity. Collectively, his works oscillate between Tongan and Western notions of the body, space, and time.

Mo‘ui tukuhāusia

Definition: to be absolutely stranded; to be left destitute and friendless

Mo‘ui tukuhausia is a perplexing live performance that was created for the exhibition *What do you mean, we?* (2012), curated by Bruce E Phillips at the Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts in Pakuranga, Auckland. In response to the exhibition’s theme, which explored the psychology of prejudice, ‘Uhila developed an endurance performance in which he lived homeless on the gallery grounds for two weeks. The work’s title may be translated as a life exposed to the dew, left out in the cold, or at the mercy of the elements.² For the artist, it conjures a life of deprivation, the sense of hopelessness where you are constantly ‘hitting your head against

a wall’³ Equipped with only a shopping trolley of personal ephemera, he survived on donations from a food bank set up in the gallery premises, and lived in a makeshift shelter built with scavenged materials. ‘Uhila also adopted a black balaclava to conceal his real identity, commenting:

*That mask was my fence ... I had these gloves as well, so it was like an extra skin to hide my skin inside. I wanted to make people question: Is he European? Is he Chinese? Is he Tongan or Samoan? To question any perceived racism people might have.*⁴

While his total immersion in the performance may have been read by some as a theatrical staging, its ephemeral nature and real-life implications extended the work beyond the realm of theatrical performance.

Mo‘ui tukuhausia exists in a performative littoral zone (an area on a beach between the high and low-water marks) where the ‘real world’ and the ‘art world’ overlap.⁵ Its initial two-week duration framed it as a live experiment or a lived experience where the artist’s life and art were simultaneous. There were no extraordinary actions – quite the contrary. At times ‘Uhila slept inside the gallery, or simply loitered and sat outside the building, smoking cigarettes and watching the traffic and passers-by. He was not, however, entirely disconnected from the happenings of everyday life. The timing of his performance coincided with the passing of the late King George Tupou V of Tonga. The artist’s symbolic choice of black clothing, worn as a mark of respect and of mourning, connected him to life and time outside the performance.⁶

The overlap of art and life offers a new way of understanding ‘Uhila’s performance as being underpinned by several Tongan concepts: *tu‘a*, a social and spatial outside; *liliu*, to reform and change; and *haua*, the act of wandering.

Tu‘a

Definition: back; space or place; time behind or beyond; space outside; exterior

Symbolically, ‘Uhila’s performance is located outside, as in the Tongan concept of *tu‘a*, a term that connotes a physical, social and temporal periphery.⁷ His transition from the ‘indoors’ to the ‘outdoors’, beginning the moment he passed the threshold of the front door of his home was also a symbolic stepping out of time: as the artist commented, ‘The 19th March, 6am, is when time

stopped. I left my watch, I left my family. I left them in the early hours as they slept.⁸ While this comment suggests a withdrawal from the measures and rhythms of everyday life, ‘Uhila’s performance compelled him to step into another sense of time, defined by his daily struggles to survive, to eat, and find shelter. For ‘Uhila, this meant to exist in the ‘shadows of time’, outside the daily routines and rituals that marked the passing of the day: the opening and closings of the gallery and the arrival and departure of staff.⁹ This sense of time is largely unknown in contemporary society, yet, as ‘Uhila’s performance highlighted, it is a reality for those who live on society’s fringes.¹⁰

‘Uhila’s voluntary homelessness was not intended to be hidden in the shadows, but rather to give ‘voice to the voiceless’. By the presence of his ‘homeless’ body, I would argue, he also gave visibility to the invisible. Like other site-specific performances of ‘homelessness’ by artists such as Germaine Koh (*Sleeping rough*, 2003), ‘Uhila’s work can be read as political action that exposed the gallery as a privileged space from which the homeless are excluded. This may have been most evident on the occasions when he sat outside the gallery facing the busy traffic of Reeves Road. Holding up the yellow exhibition poster with its question, ‘What do you mean, we?’, ‘Uhila challenged his audience to reconsider the social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, his presence around the vicinity of the Te Tuhi gallery raised questions about the role of civic spaces such as parks, malls, and galleries in creating and upholding such boundaries.

Liliu

Definition: to turn around; to turn or change into something else; to translate; to alter, modify, adjust

Another way in which the artist rendered visible the corporeal and psychological experiences of ‘homelessness’ was his use of cardboard signs. Rather than asking for monetary change, as might be expected from a common panhandler sign, some signs asked for ‘change’ in its societal sense. Others, written in the Tongan language, exposed the artist’s inner feelings and experiences. One sign had the words *fiekaia* (to be hungry) and *masiva* (to want or be in need); others expressed ‘Uhila’s disgust at his living situation. As well as providing the artist with a means of passing time, these signs also served to engage with his audience, and, perhaps, to subvert their expectations.

Clearly the real meaning of this work lies in the moment of encounter. Despite the largely passive nature of ‘Uhila’s performance, it elicited responses

from gallery goers ranging from revulsion to empathy. Several responses exposed stereotypes of homelessness. One person commented, ‘homeless people don’t wear balaclavas’; another said, ‘He should smell like urine and faeces. This guy smells too clean, I am not yet convinced.’ For others, his presence was seen as a threat, or provoked negative reactions in the form of verbal abuse. On one occasion he was spat on. From these responses, it is clear that ‘Uhila’s performance agitated the fragile social boundaries that demarcate private and public, included and excluded. His art may not achieve actual social change – that is yet to be determined – but it has definitely succeeded in opening up a debate about art, life, and ethical behaviour.

Haua

Definition: to be beaten about (by wind or rain); continually wandering about as if more or less insane

For the work’s second iteration at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, ‘Uhila has returned from Tonga, where he currently lives. For three months, he is voluntarily sleeping rough in Auckland’s central business district, an area of the city where the homeless are much more visible. This proximity to the existent homeless community is a confluence of art and life that is at the core of ‘Uhila’s work: the dangers of this situation, while not to be glossed over, may perhaps be seen as bringing a level of integrity to the work. The artist’s engagements with homeless resident around the gallery have revealed to him a new urban terrain defined by ‘safe’ areas and dangerous areas called ‘dead zones’.¹²

Like fellow nominated art works *If you find the good oil let us know*, 2012–13, by Maddie Leach and *inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam*, 2012, by Luke Willis-Thompson, much of the performance takes place outside of the gallery and, for ‘Uhila, largely after hours. During opening hours, ‘Uhila plans to reside in the gallery, transforming the exhibition space into a shelter and a personal sanctuary.¹³ Similar to his first performance, he has opted not to self-document the work as so many performance artists do, meaning that it can only be experienced as a live encounter. Public sightings of him outside of the gallery, at the Auckland waterfront and along Ponsonby Road have, however, been recorded on the social media websites Facebook and Instagram.

When I visited the Walters Prize exhibition in July, ‘Uhila’s performance was notable largely for the artist’s absence. Inside the gallery, there were the remnants of a journey: a rusty old bicycle with a

teddy bear rolled tightly into a sleeping bag, and a shopping trolley parked in the corner filled with odds and ends. Lined along one narrow passage of the gallery an array of items had accumulated during his performance; a top hat, a blanket, empty drink bottles and a collection of reusable shopping bags. Along the walls, he had scrawled diary-like entries charting his movements, where he has slept, and the harshness of the winter conditions. Other writings reveal the artist's deepest thoughts and reflections: the passing of his father, prayers, and musings over the nature of performance art. In the gallery amphitheatre, further signs of life emerged: a small collection of food and a neatly folded blue blanket. As in its first performance, this work will unfold as the artist is living it. For the moment, the only stable element is the wall text bearing 'Uhila's name and the cautionary note that the artist is 'roaming all levels'.

Endnotes

1. Kathleen Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity*, University of New York Press, New York, 2004, p. 57.
2. Dr Melenaita Taumoefolau, University of Auckland, in communication with the author.
3. Kalisolaite 'Uhila, artist video, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2014.
4. Bruce E Phillips and Kalisolaite 'Uhila, 'Discussing *Mo'ui tukuhauia*', in *What do you mean, we?* Exhibition catalogue. Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Auckland, 2012, p. 51.
5. A term used by Ian Hunter to describe when the 'art world' and 'life worlds' overlap. See his essay, 'Other Ways and Meanings', *Public Practices*, South Island Arts Projects, Christchurch, 1994, pp. 21–24, and John Hurrell, 'Gangrenous Encounters: Outside the Littoral Zone', *Art Now*, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 1994, pp. 13–17.
6. Black clothing is worn as part of Tongan funerary practices to mark the period of mourning, which can last up to a year.
7. The term *Tu'a* is used to describe people of lower rank (commoners) as well as the location of *tu'a* in ceremonial contexts. See Helen Morton Lee, *Becoming Tongan*, University of Hawaii Press, Hawaii, 1996, p. 25.
8. Bruce E Phillips and Kalisolaite 'Uhila, p. 48.
9. Ibid.
10. Hsieh Tehching's *One year performance 1981–1982* also engaged with this sense of time. See Simone Menegoi's essay 'A Question of Time', *Mousse Magazine*, issue 11, November 2007, online at <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=62>
11. Bruce E Phillips and Kalisolaite 'Uhila, p. 51.
12. Kalisolaite 'Uhila in communication with the author, 23 July 2014
13. Ibid.

IMAGES NO LONGER AVAILABLE DUE TO LICENSING

Kalisolaite 'Uhila, *Mo'ui tukuhauia*, 2012, from the exhibition 'What do you mean, we?' at Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts 3 March 2012 – 6 May 2012. Photograph by Bruce

Phillips.

Kalisolaite 'Uhila, *Pigs in the Yard*, live performance art installation in Aotea Square, Auckland, 2011. Photograph by Jen Corbett.

Kalisolaite 'Uhila, *Mo'ui tukuhauia*, in the exhibition The Walters Prize 2014 at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 12 July – 12 October 2014. Photograph by John McIver.