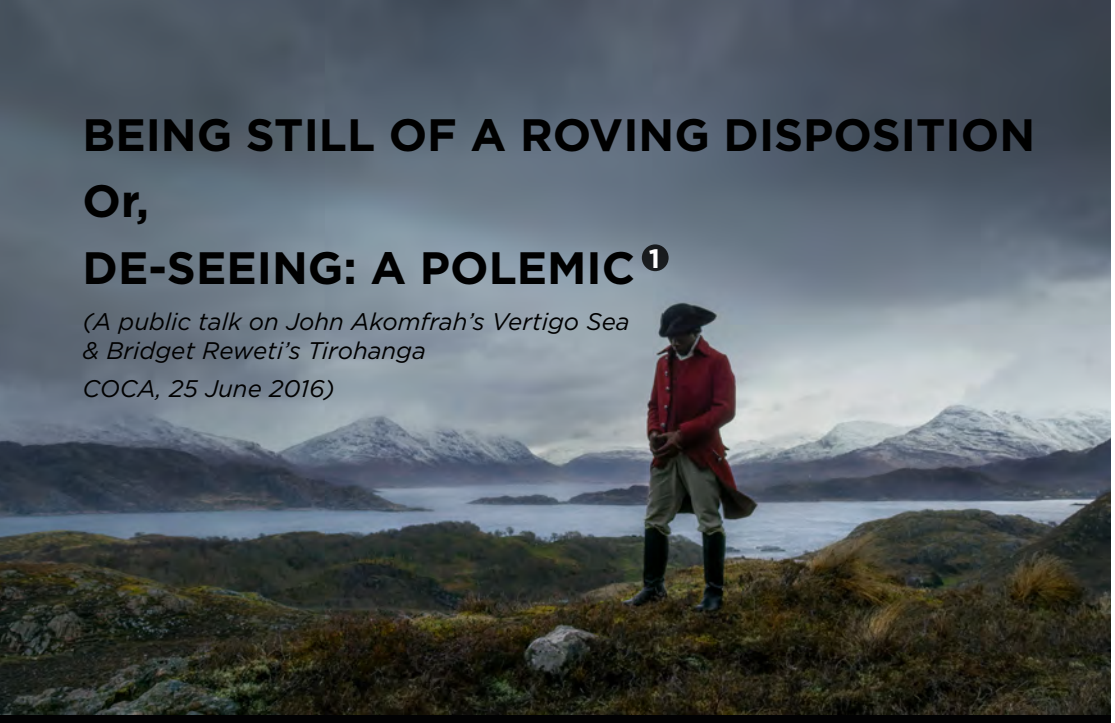
BEING STILL OF A ROVING DISPOSITION
Or,
DE-SEEING: A POLEMIC[1]

(A public talk on John Akomfrah's Vertigo Sea & Bridget Reweti's Tirohanga
COCA, 25 June 2016)



E aku nei, e aku rahi, e aku rau rangatira, tēnā koutou katoa.

Ko tēnei taku mihi ki te rohe nei. Aoraki, tēnā koe. Ka tiritiri o te moana, tēnā koe. He mihi ki a Horomaka, ki a Ka Pātiki Whakatekateka o Waitaha. He mihi ki te awa, ki a Ōtākaro.

Ki a Kāi Tahu, ki a Kāti Mamoe, ki a Waitaha, ki ngā tāngata whenua o tēnei rohe.

E ngā kaihautu i whakarite i tēnei wāhi mō tatou, ki a Amelia, ki a Paula.

Tēnā koutou tēnā koutou tēnā koutou katoa.[2]

COCA
TOI MOROKI — CENTRE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Cassandra Barnett
2016

OLAUDAH EQUIANO

Woven through John Akomfrah's three-channel video installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015) is a series of new scenes shot by the artist especially for this work. *Vertigo Sea* is otherwise an epic (48-minute) montage composed of footage from archival BBC nature documentaries, ocean-based cinemas both splendid and horrible, and recent news reportage. But Akomfrah's *new* scenes have a hand-coloured, painterly look and feature characters in period dress, posed in solitary contemplation within outdoor scenes like surrealist junkyards. Upturned chairs, old prams and a lot of clocks are strewn about amongst rocks and shrubs, beaches, cliffs, grasses and a lone cottage. The characters include a white man, a white woman, and – in the film's 4th 'chapter', after an intertitle that says 'The Sea is History: The Carribean 1781' – a black man dressed in the manner of Captain Cook, complete with tricorn. This man portrays Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo slave who in 1767 succeeded in buying his freedom. Equiano traveled widely working on ships, and also wrote an astounding autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). In this book he records that, in 1771, having recently returned from Greenland,

> being still of a roving disposition, and desirous of seeing as many different parts of the world as I could, I shipped myself soon after in the same year... and we sailed from England ... for Nevis and Jamaica....There was a vast number of negroes [in Jamaica], whom I found as usual exceedingly imposed upon by the white people, and the slaves punished as in the other islands. (102)

I start with Equiano because *his* scenes in *Vertigo Sea* – in which his 'disposition to rove' has led him somewhere so different that he is, for a short duration, quite still – to me provide the film's heart. They are the counterpoint to the barrage of spectacularly devastating imagery of oceans, ocean life, ocean migrations (animal and human) and oceanic destructions (largely human)

that otherwise, overall, yield a relentlessly dawning shock, awe and horror at what 'we' have done. (And I speak, for now, as part of this 'we', a descendent and relative of the perpetrators.) As one reviewer put it, 'Our era of dominion has been an insanity' (Miller, 2015, n.d.)

Human hubris is certainly proven minutely and repeatedly throughout the endless scenes of carnage, gunshots turning to killings and skinnings of bears turning to larger slaughters at sea, and – what many reviewers have focused on – the gruesome, heartless shucking and hacking up of a massive whale carcass at the end. But I do not wish to replay those horrors for you here – the film does that enough. And I hasten to add that these scenes are cut with equally countless lyrical shots both aerial and close-up of the outrageous beauty of the sea (whom I know as Tangaroa) and his children.

Between this multitude of shots both harrowing and breathtaking you might find yourself experiencing some waves of recognition. This is material you may have seen before, indeed, nature documentaries are one of the staples of modern Western visual culture. And now, through Akomfrah's deft handling, his multiplications and cutaways and juxtapositions, through the deferral of instrumentalising narrative, and through the layered voiceovers and soundtracks and intertitles, you might find yourself realising once again *just how obsessively* we have exploited and consumed the earth's creatures, feared and conquered the earth's oceans, used and polluted the seas and waterways, and decimated or destroyed populations even as we gaze upon them in appreciative wonder. And so the affect builds, piling out of the cracks between this unflinching survey of beauty and brutality, this juggernaut of images; an affect of mournful self-realisation, of sublimity (paradise, even) lost, of heartbreaking sadness, and perhaps a touch of nausea or horror or trauma too, depending on your own disposition.

But I'm taking a long time to get to what I really want to talk about. Akomfrah (I think) wants us to go through all these things to get there. But the sadness is not the point. The sadness, like guilt, is a narcissism, a pleasure of sorts. It keeps us passive, paralysed, still receiving the art, still spectating the lushly theatrical scenes. Writing and speaking about it does the same thing – I find myself now offering up pieces of the carnival, this familiar carnival, for us to gnash our teeth at all over again. This worries me. And I think it worries Akomfrah too, how accustomed we are to this. He's using footage that already exists for a reason, reminding us that it has been played and played and played and watched and watched… and forgotten and forgotten. Perhaps now he is watching us writers play and replay it in turn. Watching us writers go on about the poor whales, prolonging our forlorn stupor.

Blue Whale Vertebrae, 1908
Courtesy Canterbury Museum

Let us go back to *Vertigo Sea*. Who is the victim of the human hubris and brutality? Whales, yes. Bears, yes. The sea, yes. The earth, yes. But also people. Resoundingly, African people – African people enslaved, African people thrown overboard, African people washed ashore dead, modern-day Libyan migrants crammed into dangerously small boats that, as voiceovers remind us, very often don't make it. I said that Equiano first appears in *Vertigo Sea* after the intertitle stating, 'The sea is history: The Carribean 1781'.

1781 was the year of the Zong massacre when over 130 slaves were thrown overboard a ship, to their deaths – in a bid by the slavers for insurance money on 'their' dead slaves. Equiano, who survived Africa, survived the middle passage, survived slavery, survived seastorms and even English civilisation to die of ill health in his fifties, was alive to witness the Zong indignity, too. Just as we, with Akomfrah, are alive to witness the indignity of unwanted migrants and refugees. As well as the subjection of Africans through history we are reminded of other sea-related brutalities against people. The hundreds of thousands of refugee Vietnamese 'boat people', drowned at sea in the 1970s. The Argentinian *desaparecidos*, dropped to ocean deaths in the Dirty War's death flights of 1977-8. But the diversity of cultures and subcultures of people thus abused does not shield us from the knowledge that the abuses depicted all stemmed from pressures applied by imperialist powers (and still do).

So, I suggest, this film is not primarily about the environmental crisis – as if the environment, like the sublime, like films and film histories and banks of videotape and photographic archives, were something we are still outside of. Nor is it about a humanitarian crisis – as if the crisis was about those poor humans over there, the ones in the pictures and on the screens and in the boats, who 'we' still fail to feel our connection with. It is a film about a crisis in *you* and *me*. About the crisis of how we *look* and how we *see*; how we *connect*. It is about the crisis that is imperialism, which doggedly persists in the way we (or some 'wes') wield cameras and create scenes, scenes which place 'us' on one side of the screen or lens – over here, god-like, with seemingly spotless hands, gazing upon a world we are not a part of but would control – and dirty reality on the other side.

Even the more formless, more abject moments of this seeing are sublime (at the very least they give a visually-mediated pleasure of overwhelm-ment). Even when we are deep, deep in water molecules, beyond the blood and blubber, well beyond the killings or other decisive moments, awash in this medium so at odds with the technology – aqueous, fluid, mobile, vast, saturated and saturating, blue-green-turquoise-emerald-white, glassy, flat, calm, frothy, turbulent, crashing, churning…. all the marvellously affecting 'material' realities of water, with their very real power to overcome us in our physical bodies – even then, we remain on this side of the mediation.

Our visual technologies have triumphed, we can descend under water and look, capture, extract, abstract from it these qualities *minus* their full force, power and potency. Minus that. Our seeing is all conquering. Our cameras can go far or close, outside or inside, above or below water. But we don't get wet. There's abjection and viscera and guts and organisms' insides. There's formless stuff, this overwhelming sublimity of

the formless,[3] and yes, some affective crossings with it. But still, they are mediated; always there is this distance. We don't cross over, we don't get wet. We never have to feel the sludge on our hands.

Every archival documentary shot represented in *Vertigo Sea* of a dying creature or a traumatised person is something *someone* chose to film, *rather than intervene in*. The very creation of imagery of killings creates precise subjectivities for us as viewers. Passively witnessing, observing, watching, spectating, not-intervening subjectivities. Subjectivities with miraculously clean hands. These are old points, similar to those made by Susan Sontag[4] years ago, but they do seem to fall on deaf ears. The indolent resignation to violence invited by such imagery is called out by Fred Moten in his 2003 book *In the Break: Black Aesthetics and the Radical Tradition*. Moten decries

> the ease with which … scenes [of violence against slaves] are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity… they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes… At issue here is **the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator**. … how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consquence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other…? (3, my emphasis)

Similarly, bell hooks (2013) has said (responding to the film *12 Years A Slave*),

> I'm tired of the naked, raped, beaten Black woman body. I want to see an image of Black femaleness that alters our universe in some way. […] Why is there no world that wants to see the life someone like me leads as a Black female? Economically self-sufficient, solitary, disciplined, writing? Why is that not interesting, not as interesting as images of if I were being beaten, raped, if the scars were on my body? That's what concerns me more than even the sentimental slavery or whatever is, why are we not – where's our decolonised image?

Clearly, the Equiano figure in part redresses this: economically self-sufficient, solitary, disciplined, even writing. But I am at this stage still concerned with the effects of the main, archival footage used in *Vertigo Sea*. We must also mention the production values of that replayed archive, which speak loudly of the value the West has placed on making and having such imagery (over and above, for instance, housing refugees). They index the priority of the global industrial cinema machine – and we could add, the global art system – over other people, other beings.[5] Over our very embodied sociality, relationality and entanglement in this world. They materially index a value system, and an ethos, in which images rule.

Akomfrah's artwork, in creating a different kind of distance from the archival footage, asks: How does it *feel* to *see yourself* watching so much death? How does it *feel* to see this (our?) imperialist culture's *obsession* with creating images of conquest, sacrifice and domination? He wants us to remember (both the brutality and the beauty, for he implies they cannot

be unshackled from one another), to check our hands – and to check our vision. *How* are we seeing? Are we noticing what our watching has done to us, as subjects? Are we noticing what our image-making has done to the world? Have we noticed how many deaths *condition* these images' existence? Of course *Vertigo Sea* exists to have us ask these things of the archive. Yet the archive also endures in Akomfrah's work of thickly-knitted quotations. Thus the question arises: Is *this* film, *Vertigo Sea*, in playing the imperialist archive back to us until we *see* it, also complicit in reproducing imperialist seeing? Is *this complicity* the real vertigo of which Akomfrah speaks?

John Akomfrah, Vertigo Sea, Installation view
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016
Copyright Smoking Dogs Films

On this note of ambivalence and uncertain allegiances and accountabilities I want to add one more layer to the mix. The question of pronouns, and of identification. If you haven't noticed yet, I have been using the terms 'our' and 'we' advisedly. My 'we' has been assuming a cultural connection between you, me and the seeing human subject at stake in this discussion. Indeed, we are united in our status as witness-spectators of this footage. But we are not the same, and no 'we' should presume sameness. So as we are given Africans, Vietnamese, Argentinians, imperial powers, victims and perpetrators (not to mention all the other mammals and non-mammals in the piece) to direct our witnessing-spectating at, *who* do 'we' identify with? What is *your* place in this picture? What is *mine*? And what for that matter is Akomfrah's – which 'we' is he? There may be an imperialist seeing at stake here; there may be 'human' hubris to lament. But that can't be the end of the story. It is not possible that we all are seeing this footage in the same way; it is not possible (is it?) that *we all* identify with *all* the protagonists here.

So – despite the vertigo, the danger and seeming complicity at every turn – *and* despite the beauty and lyricism counterbalancing everything – I resist identification. I resist complicity with the universalised imperial gaze. I go back to Olaudah Equiano. The freed slave, roaming. Practising freedom. Running off his trauma? Roaming. Yet *still*. Calm. Witnessing? Yet *active*. Still roaming, all the way to today. I wonder what he thinks when he reads that review, the one that says of human endeavour, 'Our era of dominion has been an insanity.' Does he think 'Yes, our era of dominion has been an insanity.' Or does he think 'Yes, YOUR era of dominion has been an insanity…'? Does he include himself among the humans of which English speakers speak? Who are these humans?

I see in Equiano – a figure so intersected, so multiple, existing in the cusps and cracks between so many things – a chance to rethink. A chance to go back and ask him (pausing here for breath, because we've suddenly remembered that he might have ideas and views of his

own) how 'humans' are referred to in his language, and whether they too feared the earth so much as to always be trying to tame it, and whether their relations with other people were as savage as those of the people with roots in Europe, and whether they saw themselves as somehow separate from the world and everything in it... Equiano, who cuts in at an angle on the matrix of influences Akomfrah re-presents. Equiano, who (as imagined by Akomfrah) resists our gaze, but does not gaze out to sea on our behalf either.[6] Equiano who can not be captured. Equiano, who, right now, stands there, hangs his head a little, and pauses, just pauses, suspended somewhere between passive spectatorship and instrumentalising action. Somewhere else. Perhaps wondering how to begin to tell us *how he sees*. Or whether to speak to us at all. Because some things – shock horror – are not ours to know.

Akomfrah's Equiano reminds me of the Caribbean theorist Edouard Glissant, who, using a different 'we', states, '[T]hose who were forced to leave as slaves do not return as slaves, but as something else: a free entity, not only free but a being who has gained something in comparison to the mass of humanity. And what has this being gained? Multiplicity. In relation to the unity of the enslaving will, we have the multiplicity of the anti-slavery will. That is what we've gained, and that is the true return' (see Diawarra, 2009, pp. 58-9).

Glissant's African-diaspora multiplicity also brought England Akomfrah (who migrated from Ghana as a child). It brought to that geopolitical centre Akomfrah's view of the imagetic archive and its technologies (and vice versa, this 'centre' brought those technologies into Akomfrah's view). *His* view, the view that intervenes, turning that image-technology inheritance (coming as it does from the same rationalist, clock-loving cultural tradition that conducted mass African slavery) upon itself, in a moment of enforced self-critique, a long moment, 48 minutes long.

I end this section with a question: Is this historically-oriented self-critique, with its agonising remembering and unavoidable complicity, where we are condemned to stay?[7] Or are we able to take a leap, as Akomfrah's imagining of Equiano suggests we might, onto paths that approach difference differently? (And is the answer different for each of us?)

And with this, from the roving, multiple, imaginary, inscrutable Equiano, and from Akomfrah's askance, diasporised, multiplied, montaged, but also Eurocentric global image currency (participating in the Venice Biennale, et cetera, as the work has, with immense success) – let us wander to Bridget Reweti's more singular, guarded place. To a different entanglement. To Aotearoa, to Tauranga Moana and the West Coast of Te Wai Pounamu.[8] From Equiano dreaming of distant homelands to our own centre (and I speak as Māori now, a different 'we' again), to a different perceptual realm, to different homes. At our own centre, can we go further in decolonising the gaze?

POUTINI AND WAITAIKI

Bridget Reweti's art installation *Tirohanga* features several two-channel video installations (comprising both digital moving images and moving camera obscura images), as well as camera obscura stills. In part, *Tirohanga* responds to and draws from the same lineage as *Vertigo Sea*: that long technological evolution leading up to the current insatiable camera gaze of global capitalism. But Reweti is responding to some different, earlier moments of that history – specifically, its roots in the *camera obscura*: proto camera, ancestor and much earlier actualisation of the desire to gaze from a separating distance. She is also responding to the way the European technologies and aesthetics of the imperialist gaze became coupled in Aotearoa New Zealand with tourism and conservationism to create the myth of an untouched wilderness[9] – as crystallised on a thousand postcards.

Like John Akomfrah, Reweti re-mixes this technological legacy with contrasting realities from her own non-European inheritance. The latter include a long occupancy within and with her land as tangata whenua, and stories from her iwi that express that long relationship. Like Akomfrah, Reweti takes the 'sublime' trope of the imperialist gaze[10] and re-orients it. Akomfrah gave us Olaudah Equiano, facing away, subject of his own looking. Reweti gives us her mum and sister, also mostly facing away, subjects of their own looking. These are figures with whom the artists share kinships of sorts (while we perhaps do not – again viewer empathies and complicities are questioned). They turn their backs on the imperialist gaze, resisting objectification or identification, refusing to look *with* or *for* us, while also refusing to open to our looking. These figures become emblems of opacity and resistance *and* of autonomy, self-sovereignty, tino rangatiratanga, action and agency.

And what are Reweti, her Mum and her sister *doing* with their agency, with their tino rangatiratanga? They are – very

ordinarily – erecting tents on outdoor sites in Nature. But (it transpires) these are camera obscura tents. So once they're up, the whānau gets to sit in them and gaze at those sites as *scenes*, projected on the tents' inner walls. Tangata whenua become momentary tourists, spectators – not of the landscape, but of the imperialist gaze itself. 'Oh, so this is what it feels like to objectify the whenua,' they seem to be thinking, drolly.

There are shades of this in Akomfrah too. Akomfrah's archive gave us a vast, kaleidoscopic, Darwinian array of flora and fauna united by an association with seas and oceans (some but not all identifiable as the Atlantic). Reweti gives us some very localised sites, also bordering water, on the Aotearoa Conservation Estate: tranquil beaches, bush clearings, dappled sunlight, sparkling waters… But both come with quotation marks: here's something from the archive. Both warn us against too blithely filing their artworks under Environmentalism (or Ecology or Conservationism or any other English-language classification of 'nature problems'). And when Equiano gazes across the 'cut' at what others' looking does, we are reminded that the creators of that archive are not exactly his (nor Akomfrah's) ancestors. He sees it differently than they.

As for the Reweti's whānau, they gaze studiously, impassively upon the strange sight/site inside the camera obscura… then go back to *doing* and *being* in the place. Dismantling the tent. Roving on. Reweti's whanaunga reclaim not just doing but wandering, and the roving disposition, from the adventures of imperialism. Equiano clearly does this too, but Reweti restores roving specifically to te ao Māori. Yes, we are deeply connected to our tūrangawaewae (and colonial land thefts have called upon us to shout it loud). But we too are migrants. We too are rovers. As are, sometimes, maunga and taniwha and rocks (I'll come back to that).

Reweti's video works in *Tirohanga* are all pairs: an antiquated, slow, almost still, upside-down camera obscura image; and alongside, a clearly contemporary external shot of the same scene (tent included), showing the making of these images by her whānau – who are simultaneously mucking around, playing with dogs, enjoying their leisurely mahi. Thus we can flit back and forth between the views, noticing how with the peopled scenes the mood shifts: a turn away from the distancing grandeur of the twice-mediated, quoted image, towards a more immanent, direct engagement.

Bridget Reweti, Tirohanga, Installation view CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016

Tirohanga is not epic. The audience is not offered much uplift. Nor much downpull. No grief. No trauma. No sorrow or guilt. No momentousness. No memorialising. It's lackadaisicle. Slapdash. Compared with *Vertigo Sea*, it might feel thin. Not much guts to sink your teeth

into. Not much of a feast for the thirsty eyes and hungry senses. Not much to gnash your teeth about either. The de-sublimating mission is for real now. These people are quietly busy. You might get a sense that you are being held back, held away at arm's length, of there being *something* here that *you* can't quite see. The only drama is in this note of resistance pervading it all. Resistance to the curious, hungry, conquering gaze. An intentional resistance that knows we are looking and *will not* be consumed, objectified, decontextualised, not this time. Or is this affect of resistance merely a projection from those who are used to getting and seeing what they want? Not here the sensual, sumptuous, pornographic glut. Not here eviscerated souls who have been taken, forced to give everything over. Just a quiet suggestion to the viewer to grasp that you're not being offered objects to look at (images) so much as performances. Performances of easy self-sovereignty, tino rangatiratanga, agency, in lands these people have connections with. Performances? Or just the *fact* (documented) of people inhabiting their whenua in the plainest of ways, enjoying being alive? Could these be the kinds of decolonised images bell hooks was asking for? The camera obscura scenes deflate, lose their punch, and everyday doings win the day.

It is not that Reweti and whānau do not see or feel anything special here. But it might be that they don't feel the need to tell us much about that. It might be that Reweti considers this 'not feeling the need to tell' worthy of art-making in itself. She's practising her right to opacity, Glissant would say, her right to 'remain within herself'. For Glissant optimistically states that, 'we've understood that we can't understand everything and that there are things that remain within themselves' (2009, p. 63). Though again I wonder which 'we' he means. Like Equiano (and the whales and the bears), but more directly, Reweti reminds us viewers that not everything is ours to know. I would even say she exhorts us to practise being satisfied with less, or with different kinds of seeing and knowing.

If Reweti is protective (visually speaking) of knowings that don't belong to everyone, she is generous too. She plants clues. The gallery handout (in sharp contrast with a century of decontextualised Primitivisms) tells us some of the stories by which she and her whānau know the lands (Mauao, Tauranga Moana, Te Tai Poutini) depicted in her works, the stories that she belongs to, and that help define who she is as, not human but tangata whenua, uri; not master, but kaitiaki. Writes Reweti:

> *Poutini, a taniwha, crept out from the deep green waters surrounding the island [Tuhua(Obsidian)/Mayor Island] and was captivated by Waitaiki, the wife of Tamaahua. Poutini captured and fled with Waitaiki. Upon realising Waitaiki was gone, Tamaahua followed in hot pursuit using his special tekateka to direct his way. Poutini tried to keep Waitaiki warm by lighting fires and these ashes signified to Tamaahua that he was on the right trail. The chase went across Te Ika a Maui and continued down to South Westland, ending at the Arahura River. It was here, with Tamaahua close behind, that Poutini realised he could not keep Waitaiki and so he transformed her into pounamu [greenstone], forever bound to the river, while he moved along the West Coast, known as Te Tai Poutini.*
> *The Tuhua and Poutini narrative is a map of geological deposits throughout the country...* (Gallery handout, quoting Reweti, 2013, pp. 3-4)

Right here, in the story of Poutini, we discover the land as human: Waitaiki was woman first, then stone. Thus we know to value it. Not resources to be extracted, consumed. But tupuna who must be honoured, thanked, conserved, *remembered* through protocols of kaitiakitanga. Animal, human, mineral become indiscernible here. Once you start blurring the boundaries of identity – through whakapapa acknowledging that we evolve through and shapeshift between these forms as surely as our cells return to the earth – it becomes much harder to care for our*selves* separately from our whenua, and vice versa.[11] It becomes much harder to project a world in which agency and power exist only on the untouchable, near side of the camera or the eye.

Bridget Reweti, Tirohanga
Installation view during Opening event
CoCA Toi Moroki, 2016

We also learn how Poutini and Waitaiki *traveled* (I said that rocks could roam; Mauao the mountain roams too, but that's another story). Through their movements they mark Reweti's Ngāti Ranginui/Ngāi te Rangi iwi connections to land. Suggests Reweti, her iwi read meanings and histories in the land by its tuhua/obsidian and pounamu/greenstone deposits. They interpret those deposits as signs, marks, tohu; as their writing and, if you like, as an image history. The land *is* the image. And the stories are the key. We don't tell the land so much as it tells us. And it tells us all differently – you can't have Reweti's stories; you will need to find your own. Or, if you're from any of the West Coast places in Reweti's story, you will have stories of your own already. Our stories tell our place in this land differently. But the stories interconnect too.

As Māori historian and storyteller Pita Turei (2015) says,

> *Our stories didn't just happen in one place. We were mobile. And our stories moved. And unless you walk the land you don't really understand where the anchors to the stories are, how they work. That's why it's really important to walk the land. It helps you make sense of it. … We walked all over the motu. We weren't just visiting. We had relationships. We created whakapapa. Links. So the next generation would be walking back again.*[12]

This is a roving that privileges connections over conquest, links over cuts.

And like that roving, Reweti's exhibition in some ways privileges telling over imaging, the unseen over the seen. These artworks are part of her people's stories' telling. Perhaps they're not artworks at all. Perhaps they're *taonga*, or tohu, enabling the *kōrero* to be told anew, when they fall into the right hands, on the right occasions.[13] They've already done some of that work by facilitating Reweti and whānau to occupy Tauranga Moana in their own way. To remember their past and not freeze it but make it relevant to contemporary challenges. Using video,

acknowledging colonial history – but also wriggling from its grip.

I have argued that, when watching *Vertigo Sea*, the spectator (especially the 'mainstream' spectator) is gradually introduced to the devastation wreaked by sublime, sublimating technologies of looking… Once they see it, they might for a while feel helpless with guilt and grief… Then, from the cracks, they *might* salvage a way forward that involves steadfastly holding all these wrongdoings and wrongseeings in their consciousness as a spur to do differently whatever they do next. But Akomfrah also leaves open, in the Equiano figure, a small space for disavowal, for a complex disidentification with (or de-coupling from) imperial conquest – a space to say, '*Not I*, I don't see like that, and though, like Equiano, I've been forced to look through those eyes, I find it a strange gaze indeed'. Equiano could be a Benjaminian angel of history, gazing on the wreckage – but I'm guessing his gaze travels differently, and further than that.

Bridget Reweti, Can I be in your video? (still), 2012

I have also speculated that Reweti's *Tirohanga* works go further in 'distancing themselves' from the imperialist gaze – by *de*-distancing themselves from land and story. Reweti and her protagonists 'know' because they are more immanently, entangledly, invisibly *part* of the world.[14] *Tirohanga* offers less for easy consumption, but more for those who can bring some story to these localised, singular sites.[15] If Reweti shares Akomfrah's urge to remember,[16] it is a different history she wishes to recall (and one that makes fewer distinctions between fiction and nonfiction).

I will finish by offering some speculative propositions, gleaned from viewing these two exhibitions side by side:

1. That de-seeing, de-sublimating our gazes, might be connected to a re-orienting of the 'roving disposition'. The antidote to conquest is not to just stay home, but (for instance, through story) to forge bonds of relationship and accountability between home and wherever else we go.

2. That we stop pretending 'we' can all see and hear the same things in these works. That we refuse the global 'we' subject position[17] and *thus* begin to forge connections with each other. That we pause before declaring that 'our era of dominion has been a disaster' – not to deny the devastation that has been wreaked in the name of *some, human* ideologies, but to remember, and identify with, and bring into the present, *other*, non-disastrous ways of relating to whenua.

3. That the locatedness and singularity of whenua- and iwi-specific approaches (substitute your own singularities here) can be a ballast in the face of the universalising archive. That the challenge

is to find commensurable ways of being in and with *both* landscapes. That such located, singular views can include meaningful multiplicities. Thus, benumbing blur and spectacle are not the only response to globalisation.

4. That critique (of the archive, globalisation, imperialism, the sorry history and all) is also not the only response. However suspicious we may be of utopian thinking, we need to believe in real, productive difference, and in invention, fiction, transformation, storytelling. Assert our differences, draw from our own centres! Tell our own ocean stories.

5. Close our eyes sometimes. Remember what is ours and what is for others. Be guided by our relationships and our own knowings-in-place. Hold some things in.

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Vertigo Sea
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Bridget Reweti
Excuse me, you're in my shot
(still), 2012

GLOSSARY

Aotearoa: New Zealand

Iwi: tribe

Kaitiaki: guardian, custodian

Kaitiakitanga: guardianship, caretaking

Kōrero: talk, story/storytelling

Mahi: work

Maunga: mountain

Mihi: greeting, acknowledgement

Motu: island, country

Pounamu: greenstone, jade, nephrite

Tangaroa: 'god' of the sea; father of all sea creatures and of reptiles

Tangata whenua: local people, indigenous people born of their ancestral land

Taniwha: water spirit/creature

Taonga: treasure

Te ao Māori: the Māori world(view)

Tino rangatiratanga: self-sovereignty, self-determination

Tohu: sign, mark, symbol, landmark

Tuhua: obsidian

Tūrangawaewae: home, place one has the right to stand (through kinship)

Tupuna: ancestor/s
Uri: descendent/s

Whakapapa: lineage, genealogy

Whānau: family

Whanaunga: family member/s

Whenua: land; placenta

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NOTES

1 This paper is a (still polemical at this stage) work in progress. Offered here is the edited transcript of my talk delivered for COCA's public programme on 25 July 2016; references and glossary have been added subsequently for print purposes. However, my wider theoretical position is still evolving. I beg tolerance of inconsistencies, and reserve the right to change my mind on some things!

2 My mihi to the local whenua (including Mt Cook, the Southern Alps, Banks Peninsula, the Canterbury Plains and the Avon River), to the iwi of these lands, and to the organisers of the exhibition and of my talk.

3 My use of the term 'formless' references Georges Bataille, but not the polarised, static Bataille of Rosalind Krauss. Hegarty's paraphrasing comes closer: 'In …Bataille's *oeuvre*, the formless holds a space similar to that held by abjection. It is both an 'outside', and something permeating the 'inside' (of form, of identity, of solidity). In terms of aesthetic philosophy we could liken it to Kant's sublime: totally outside of the categories of beauty, but somehow informing them, as that which beauty cannot simply be. But **Bataille's 'sublime' is one of the movement of crossing, of transgression rather than an observation** of something fearful 'outside'.' (Hegarty, 2000, p. 143, my emphasis).

4 See Sontag's essay 'In Plato's Cave,' in *On Photography* (1977), for a critique of the parallels in the West between technologies of seeing (the camera) and technologies of killing (the gun).

5 The film theorist Paul Willeman has suggested (2005) that an indexical reading of film 'opens the possibility of tracking how the material world is present within [the film's] formation'. Focusing on a film's forms of expression (rather than content), that is, on the technologies used, indexing in turn the finance available, we discover how 'the processes of industrialisation imprint themselves on [film] production' (n.p.). Willeman highlights how discrepancies can be found to exist between these forms of expression and the forms of content (e.g. *Metropolis* and *Bladerunner* both promote an anti-authoritarian rhetoric, yet simultaneously (by featuring giant architectures as their 'stars') condone the capitalist conditions of their making).

6 In her Masters thesis, Bridget Reweti quotes Francis Pound on the empathic protagonist offered by Casper David Friedrich's 'sublime' paintings: 'A spectator figure, a stock figure type in European art from the Renaissance on. He stands for us. He gazes; we gaze… he is our painted deputy. Through him it is the act of our seeing that we see' (1983, p. 12). Does Equiano fit this description? Whose deputy is he? A similar – yet distinctly different – orientation is seen, and will be discussed later, in Reweti's *Tirohanga* works.

7 It feels impossible not to quote Audre Lorde here: the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. I would hazard that the auto-critique offered by Akomfrah's archival montage is (however brilliant) largely a use of the master's tools (cinematic archive and montage). And that the larger work becomes more brilliant because broken up by the fictive appearance of Equiano.

8 Aotearoa: the Māori name for New Zealand. Tauranga Moana: a group of Māori tribes based around the Tauranga Harbour and the Bay of Plenty in New Zealand's North Island. Te Wai Pounamu: the South island of New Zealand.

9 Geoff Park analyses this capture in detail in his book *Theatre Country* (2006). 'When the New Zealand government got serious about protecting nature from culture, in the early 1900s, the process by which it witheld unproductive land from its settlers – and took it from Māori – was called 'scenery preservation'. The prospect of revenue from tourism, in the main, was leading the policy. […] the true picturesque New Zealand scene was where the wild forest could still grow and native birds still fly: the lands emptied of Māori custom and 'returned to their primaeval grandeur', as one Crown land administrator put it at the time. […] Gilpin's rules for appreciating picturesque scenes were conceived at almost the same moment in imperial time as the bourgeous sensibility for which the rules were invented first became aware of the Pacific. The great ocean and the myriad strange 'other' things within it had a huge impact on European notions of the picturesque and the sublime' (pp. 148-9).

10 See notes **7** and **9** above.

11 Thus, Reweti's restrained views might have answers of their own to the questions posed by Akomfrah's work.

12 Turei appears in Episode 3 of Scottie Productions (for Māori Television), *Te Araroa: Tales from the Trail*. Te Araroa is a walking trail that travels the length of Aotearoa New Zealand.

13 Paul Tapsell discusses this understanding of taonga at length in 'The Flight of Pareraututu': 'as taonga travel from one generation to the next, so too do their complex, genealogically ordered histories, or kōrero, which are individually attached to each item' (328). 'Without kōrero, the item ceases to communicate, loses context, and fails to link a kin group's identity to specific ancestral landscapes' (332).

14 In contemporary Western philosophical terms, such knowing finds articulation in the thought of philosopher of science Karen Barad, who insists that: 'knowing is a direct material engagement', not a 'knowing from a distance. Instead of there being a separation between subject and object there is an entanglement of subject and object… Objectivity… is about… responsibility to the entanglements of which we are a part.' (2009, Q.1)

15 This is by no means an isolated understanding, but one shared (with differences!) by many indigenous peoples. For instance the writer Vine Deloria, a Standing Rock Sioux, writes, 'Indians do not talk about nature as some kind of concept or something "out there." They talk about the immediate environment in which they live. They do not embrace all trees or love all rivers and mountains. What is important is the relationship you have with a particular tree or a particular mountain.' Further, 'people live so intimately with the environment that they are in relationship to the spirits that live in particular places. It is not an article of faith; it is part of human experience' (pp. 224).

16 In an interview conducted by TateShots, referring to anti-immigration sentiments in the UK, Akomfrah comments, 'you're sitting there listening to someone referring to… migrants as "cockroaches". And you're thinking, Ok, what's going on here? How do people migrate from being human beings to cockroaches? What do you have to forget, what's the process of amnesia, that allows the kinds of forgetting that builds into hierarchies in which there are beings and non-beings? So those things, the aversion to fiction, is what keeps me interested in the non-fictive, is what keeps me interested in questions of the historical. Because they act as a… powerful counter-ballast against the… turbulence of amnesia. And amnesia is a constant sea. We swim in it all the time. So one does need the ballast of memory and the historical just to counterbalance.' (TateShots, 6'03"–7'20").

17 That is, stop pretending that we are just one humanity – a 'panhumanism'– and admit that we are many humanities, or posthumanities, or animals, or iwi and mana whenua, indeed other kinds of assemblages, overlaid and mingling and mixing. Rosi Braidotti (2006) is firm on this point: '…'we' are indeed in *this* together. But this pan-human factor need not result in new universalizing master-narratives… The polylingual voices of the multi-located subjects of the global nomadic, diasporic, hybrid diversity and producing concretely grounded micro-narratives that call for a joyful kind of dissonance…' (pp. 93). And artist/writer Rania Khalil (2016) paraphrases the connection here to questions of race and culture: 'Braidotti… cautions her readers against a universalising process by which humans become one race, or raceless. …For Braidotti, the idea of 'one race'… is simply a means of erasing and ignoring power dynamics' (n.p.).