

ARTICLE 27

We know that even those societies that lay claim to the utmost liberality when it comes to political expression find themselves tested when it comes to artistic expression. There is always a lag, if you will, between the general and the particular, between convention and advanced art. Many have said that this is the character of Modernity. New Zealand's history of art, no less than that of any other society, has seen its fair share of refusals in the form of censorship, exhibition closure and public expressions of outrage. Under the given historical conditions and social organisation these tensions are inevitable and possibly a sign of a healthy and socially-relevant art history.

The exhibition, **Article 27**, arose from an intention on the part of the Human Rights Commission of New Zealand to acknowledge the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [known as the UDHR] in 2008. The exhibition is one celebration of the anniversary, a small show of seven artists that presents a range of recent art practice.

Six of the artists are local to Auckland, one lives in Coromandel. They were selected because their work is intelligent and formally challenging, combining a mixture of accessibility and thinking. Ideas are an equal ingredient in the mix of art-making. Art with content—with their own take on what it means to be political—will mark the exhibition.

The curator chose artists whom he thought would reflect the spirit of the Declaration rather than those whose work might illustrate an aspect of the document in some literal or obvious way.

The contributions by Daniel Webby and Kah Bee Chow, to discuss only two of the works in the show, were never intended to be about human rights as such and any readings along these lines would limit the works' possibilities. Yet their art works nonetheless intersect with the concept. Inasmuch as human rights underpin all aspects of society, then a reading of universal rights is there.

Kah Bee Chow's video installation, *Golden Slumbers*, adds the weight of history and the real to the exhibition. It both celebrates the history of Wellington's so-called Chinatown around Haining Street as well as exposing its other side, giving voice on the one hand, to the experiences of Chinese New Zealanders [one interviewee talks of the Joe Kum Yung race murder of 1905] and others who have a long history with the street. One interview shows how the Suzanne Aubert Compassion Centre and Soup Kitchen in Haining Street has been a safety net for some of the city's dispossessed for whom aspects of universal rights have been sorely absent.

Webby's *Parabola*—two blindfolded people playing a game of 'throw and catch the egg'—could readily demonstrate the place that human rights should have in society. The starting point for achieving human rights in any society must surely be a basis in trust and equality between two

people, which this performance enacts. One could construe this as the same starting point for German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas. In his *The Theory of Communicative Action* he explores how language [and discourse] has the "ability to coordinate action in a consensual or cooperative way as opposed to a forced or manipulative one", with all attendant social and political considerations.

It is in Habermas's writing that the term 'subjective liberties' appears, an aspect of his analysis of universal rights. He maintains that 'subjective liberties' are those freedoms we have as individuals within the overall structure of public rights. They are rights that are associated with freedom of speech and conscience, the right to association and rights to legal protection, etc, essential to properly functioning societies. Rights guaranteeing autonomy mean that it is up to us how we exercise our liberty, a freedom assumed for artistic practice, of course.

Habermas says, "Subjective liberties enable us to step out of communicative action ... they ground a private realm freed from the burden of a reciprocally acknowledged and expected communicative liberty." In other words, they allow us to act independently within the framework that rights provide or, if you like, guarantee. The art gallery, in this sense, can be seen as an idealised space in which a range of possibilities for communicative action are explored.

The art works in this exhibition have been chosen because they demonstrate independence, an expression of the freedom, if you will, intended by the Declaration in the first instance. Article 19 of the Declaration provides the necessary legitimation:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

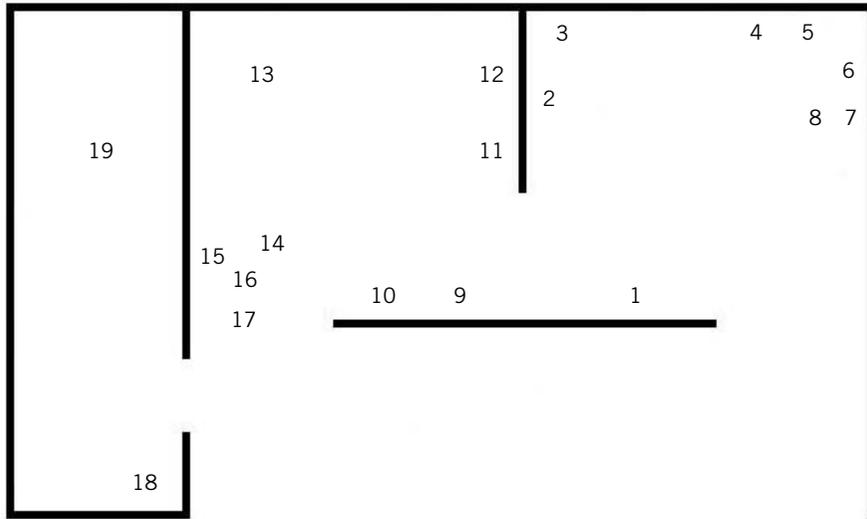
And it is Article 27 that the exhibition speaks to most directly. Article 27 reads:

"1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific achievement and its benefits.

"2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he [sic] is the author."

Ignoring the gender bias of mid-century officialese, it is to the Human Rights Commission's credit and in the spirit of the Declaration that there has been no prescription in organising the exhibition. In this regard both the curator and the artists are grateful for the opportunity to mount **Article 27**.

—Richard Dale



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Xin Cheng, Kah Bee Chow, Majlinda Hoxha, Tui Kerehoma,
Jasmine Lockhart, Christina Read, Daniel Webby

Curated by Richard Dale

Commissioned by the Human Rights Commission

- 1 Christina Read, *Banned Books*
- 2 Daniel Webby, *Parabola*
- 3 Daniel Webby, *The Patriot Revisited*
- 4 Tui Kerehoma, *Huia Dart*
- 5 Tui Kerehoma, *Mirror Target*
- 6 Tui Kerehoma, *Hard Hats*
- 7 Tui Kerehoma, *Soap Dish*
- 8 Tui Kerehoma, *The Gambler*
- 9 Majlinda Hoxha, *Untitled*
- 10 Majlinda Hoxha, *Family Portrait*
- 11 Majlinda Hoxha, *Fifteen*
- 12 Majlinda Hoxha, *Untitled*
- 13 Xin Cheng presents: *being resourceful in various situations*. Featuring works and publications by Wolfgang Röhlke (Netherlands), Sue Soo (NZ), Temporary Services and Angelo (US), Tony Harward (UK), Vevang Produksjon (Norway), Vladimir Arkhipov (Russia), Architecture for Humanity (US), Oily Rag Books (NZ), Victor Papanek (US) and others.
- 14 Jasmine Lockhart, *Peace Makes the World Turn Round*
- 15 Jasmine Lockhart, *Untitled [After Gavin Hipkins]*
- 16 Jasmine Lockhart, *Grey Lynn Shrub*
- 17 Jasmine Lockhart, *My Little Pony*
- 18 Jasmine Lockhart, *It's in the Bag*
- 19 Kah Bee Chow, *Golden Slumbers*