

Olfactory Memories - *Kelekele mo'ui (Giving Life)*

Khye Hitchcock

It started with the smell—a pungent, slightly sweet, dead-thing smell—as you entered the lift up to The Physics Room. At street level it was subtle, perhaps something spilt on the carpet a few days ago and not yet cleaned. Then you noticed that the scent permeated the stairwell and grew, with the heat, as you ascended to the third floor. As the lift doors opened up the top, a waft of hot air assaulted the senses. Ripe. Not enough to put you off a drink though.

Moving past those gathered by the bar and through into the main space, the source of the scent became apparent: compost—the kind you buy in ten-kilo bags from the hardware store. It was spread across several blue tarps along the centre of the gallery, the dark earth a dusty archipelago on a plastic ocean.

At the southern end of the gallery, the tarp met the wall and was pierced by a steel eyebolt, embedded in the concrete below. Through this a rope was looped and clamped, its length laid out down the centre of the dirt. The audience was allowed to consider this formal arrangement of materials for some time whilst the space remained inactive. It was long enough for most to become accustomed to the smell, although it was enough to make some leave. The installation divided the gallery and seemed to hold anticipation and memory of motion simultaneously. The slight unraveling at the end of the rope and the topography of the dirt created slight rhythms against which to speculate.

Kalisolaite 'Uhila (or 'Ite) entered the space without ceremony, and those watching hurriedly spread out along the three gallery walls available to lean on. In the silence, details came into focus. 'Ite was barefoot, clad in a simple black singlet and shorts covered in rough burlap tied with black cord after the style of Tongan ta'ovala¹. The artist's geometric tattoos were visible, encircling his calves and one shoulder. His body held tension, anticipating deliberate movement. He stepped onto the dirt and stooped, picking up the rope close to the eyebolt. Holding it in both hands he turned to face the opposite end of the gallery and tested the metal, pulling his weight against the bolt, then sent a shock wave along the length of the rope, flicking it like

¹ A ta'ovala is a Tongan dress, a mat wrapped around the waist often at formal occasions, which signifies respect and authority.

a whip. Moving to a crouch, testing again, flicking the rope, pulling against its fastening. Tension, flicking, moving in deliberate rhythms, the choreography unfolded.

It wasn't long before the performance further invaded the senses. Each ripple sent along the rope flicked up dust from the compost, making the air more pungent. 'Ite's skin glistened in the heat, collecting a fine layer of dirt wherever it made contact with his compost islands. The tarps rustled underfoot. As 'Ite travelled the length of the plastic ocean, he became closer to the land and the performance became more laboured. At the rope's end, on all fours he pressed his forearms and forehead to the ground and the dark earth transferred its topographies across his body. Turning, seated cross legged, facing the direction in which he had come, 'Ite flicked the length of the rope again, sending loops running along its length. Slowly, he journeyed, shuffling—sometimes kneeling, sometimes seated, sometimes prone in the dirt—gradually moving back to the bolt. He rippled the rope and tested the connection all the while. The action ended as quietly as it began: after a final flick of the rope which left it snaking down the centre of the dirt, 'Ite stood up straight and left the room.

Writing on performance is always complicated; caught between the responsibility to record an ephemeral event and the impossibility of capturing the experience; navigating opening up the readings of a work without shutting other possibilities down. A few days later I sat with 'Ite downstairs from The Physics Room in C1 Espresso, discussing this and the issue of documentation (which he generally doesn't like). We spoke of subjectivity, and of creating art with generosity. He asked my readings of the work before offering his intentions. I have sat with the experience of both the work and the encounter with the artist in the weeks since, waiting for thoughts to crystalise and the scent of compost to gradually fade from the old High Street Post Office building where The Physics Room is located.

In an online biography, 'Ite's silence during performance is described as a strategy that “forces a projection of your own thoughts and feelings,”² and this was certainly my experience of *Kelekele mo'ui (Giving Life)*. He brings a quiet presence to the space which is unassuming yet powerful, holding an audience without direct engagement, prompting introspection.

With fists full of dirt and his face down on it, 'Ite's movements recalled his previous work, *Pigs in the Yard*, (2011), where he co-inhabited with a piglet called Colonist, and perhaps knowledge of this influenced my first impression. In the moment, the work spoke to me of colonialism. The piercing of the eyebolt through tarp—an unyielding steel anchored firmly in the landscape—seemed to reference the assertion of hegemonic structures; once embedded, difficult to remove. The rough

² <http://www.tautai.org/artist/kalisolaite-uhila/>

cord reminded me of the old adage 'give a man enough rope, he'll hang himself', and this, combined with the futility of 'Ite's gestures, felt like a powerful reminder that the system is set up to fail many and that the odds are skewed, particularly against non-Europeans. As a first generation European, standing on not-my-land, the work felt poignant and uncomfortable; a physical reminder of tensions present in the city and in Aotearoa at large. Admittedly, this is quite a different feeling to the one described in The Physics Room roomsheet, which stated that in *Kelekele mo'ui (Giving Life)*, "the rope alludes to the legend of Māui fishing up Aotearoa's North Island and the umbilical cord of new birth".

Since the performance, though, Ōtautahi experienced another significant aftershock, a 5.7 jolt which has stirred fresh the memories of February 22, 2011. This was my first large magnitude quake, and the experience has amplified the work's site specificity and underlined the sensitivity of the artist to the complexity of the post-quake context. 'Ite's struggles—pulling against the rope, shifting, trying different positions, and inability to move the bolt—also felt redolent of the quake experiences being relived and recounted in daily conversation. In this city, structural bureaucracy is unmoveable in the face of human experience. The rope's rippling loops, seismic waves stirring the pungent earth—ripe with potential for new growth—but the experience still stinks. Further, leaving the compost in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition mirrored communication patterns post-quake. The first time I went back to the space, I mentioned the smell again, but after a few weeks it felt like a faux pas to talk about it anymore, despite its pervasiveness. The other tenants in the Post Office building weren't too happy, but they learned to live with it.

Kelekele mo'ui (Giving Life) was created during 'Ite's residency at The Physics Room. The affect on the artist of travelling the length of the country and being relocated in central Ōtautahi during this period of the rebuild is evident within the piece. However, I believe this work could be performed in other locations and it would still speak to audiences. 'Ite seems to have a knack for creating works which hold site specificity as well as connecting to a general human experience. His are bodily works created through the lens of personal and cultural experiences, which nevertheless speak to a wide audience and political discourses. There's generosity in this practice, and provocation. *Kelekele mo'ui (Giving Life)* held true to both; empathising with the audience's struggles and forcing them to engage.