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Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours)

Exegesis Summary

Slimy Margins;

*An Ontological Study of 'Wilderness' Through
Contemporary Art and Critical Dialogue*

17/11/2020

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The term 'slimy' refers to the kind of 'wilderness' that is deemed undesired, 'ugly,' and abject: weeds, pests, smells, disease, deformities, death, and wastelands.¹ Formulated by professor and ecologist Timothy Morton, the term 'slimy' describes the opposite side of a desirable, 'pretty wilderness,' that often prevails, overlooked, on the verges of society.² In nature documentaries and commercial media, the 'slimy' becomes side-stepped to exclusively create products that display wilderness as exotic, far-away landscapes to appeal to a mainly western demographic. Hi-tech camera gadgets become significant contributors to displaying the aesthetic and photogenic qualities of 'wilderness.' Thus, the camera gadget becomes an important tool to influence how the landscape is perceived. In opposition to this idea, Morton observes that the unwelcome, other side of 'wilderness' needs to be addressed as relevant, as the division of the 'ugly' and the 'pretty' renders nature as one-sided, incomplete and subsequently defective.³ The idea of this in-between, marginal space implies a hazy middle ground between what is accepted and rejected as 'wilderness' in a social landscape. In relation to these ideologies, my practice attempts to analyse and deconstruct the role of the camera apparatus and its effect on the representation of 'wilderness.'

My practice is primarily influenced by the environment around where I live: a rented colonial house on a rural farm, in Kaukapakapa, north Auckland. Many social and developmental intersections are prominent here, causing marginal zones between farmland and roadside, rural and the suburb, and reflecting the colonial histories of the landscape through the ideas of the marginal space my surroundings constantly reflect. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, my research inquired into the connections between the virus and the 'slimy's' description. As the national lockdown commenced, my research became interested in the 'slimy' spreading into the public space in forms of the virus, as well as spaces becoming untended and overgrown through the absence of humans. I began collecting discarded materials such as fence posts and bicycle wheels lying around the property, and constructing makeshift camera contraptions out of those materials. If the notion of a desirable 'wilderness' is countered by the 'slimy,' then the idealised, romanticised perspectives through industrial hi-tech camera gadgetry becomes responded to by utilising ill-functioning and impractically built contraptions. These alternate filming contraptions, such as *Uncycled*, are employed to document the surrounding terrains of roadside ditches and paddocks, expressing a relationship to the site through being components obtained from the landscape.

A recent exhibition by New Zealand-Balinese artist Sriwhana Spong, *Now Animal, Now Spectral*, discusses topics of marginality and 'otherness' within oneself.⁴ Through the installation, themes of female mysticism, language, life, death, nature and cultural identity relates to the notion of the 'other' and exoticism, particularly in relation to the artist, referencing her Indonesian heritage.⁵ A scene within a film installation depicts Spong in the act of peeling soft, tropical fruit consisting of a firmed outer skin, and seeds and ovule within. This references birth, foreignness and destruction, and the transformation of a brown, female entity amid a colonial society. The experience of an entity's change and development views into how the emergence from their heredity reclaims a new position within a culturally altered space. I am interested in the histories and encounters Spong brings to her work, implied through tactile performances of marginality between the spiritual and material state of oneself. Although my practice looks into what externally surrounds me within the land, the idea of a threshold that reflects the world through new perspectives makes a key reference to my research.

¹ Timothy Morton, *Radical Ecological Kitsch*, in Ch. 3, 'Imagining ecology without Nature' in *Ecology without nature, Rethinking environmental Aesthetics*. England, Harvard University Press, 2009. P 158

² Ibid. P 160

³ Ibid

⁴ Spong, Sriwhana. *Now animal, Now Spectral* Exhibition, in 'Honestly Speaking: the word, the body and the internet.' Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 22 Feb - 7th June 2020

⁵ Spong, Sriwhana. Lecture, Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, 26/02/2020, 1:30pm.

Wild Objects Operation is a work based on local beaches in Rodney. I looked into transitional spaces between land and sea, and how these discarded or washed up objects could view the site's topography through their perspectives, via recording videos by placing my iPhone on the articles. Instructional documentation notes were written on any left-over materials found in my car, as a record of the actions performed at the location. An archival booklet, *Lists*, compiled the instructions, referencing the process-based intervention at the sites. Ideas of the 'slimy' and 'wilderness' thereby retain the underpinning factors in my practice, through the wider discussions of socio-political ideologies referencing the aestheticisation of the landscape. Capital markets fulfil the desire for entertainment, but consequently trample indigenous customs such as Tangata Whenua, as the fetishisation of land overhauls cultural influence and observance.⁶

Concerning text, and their positions as 'instructions' in my making, Fluxus artist Yoko Ono's 1960s publication, *Grapefruit*, consists of instructional poems Ono has composed, that offer literary interactions between the artist and the readers.⁷ The writings become interpreted by the reader, extending the bygone performance of the artist. Through time and space, these performances alter, offering a new meaning each time the instruction becomes encountered. Thus, the viewer participates in simple, often arbitrary dialogues with the artist through instructions, participating in a poetic system to encounter and observe daily, mundane elements within society.

'Wilderness' is often interpreted as being humankind's attested opposite. Referring to this ideology, Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys created a work in 1974: *I Like America and America Likes Me*, which consisted of himself spending three consecutive days, locked in a New York gallery with a coyote, tentatively observing and interacting with the creature.⁸ The idea of reforming relationships with an ambivalent, perhaps seen as an opposing body within the room becomes re-investigated, posing an environment built on hostility, as well a certain interdependency between the artist and a feral coyote. I believe this touches on the different levels of relationships that humanity could have with its other, 'wild' counterpart, in this case, the coyote: a motif of 'wilderness.' While Beuys's interactions remained exclusively within the gallery space as to communicate solely with the coyote, my practice actively seeks out correlations of the outside terrain, in conversation with the surrounding marginal spaces. Acknowledging the nonsensicality in Beuys's works, my performances mimic pseudoscientific actions through such absurd intervention. Unlike environmentalists, this interaction between performance and site is not to rescue nature or become its envoy. Rather, I seek a more meaningless process, that simultaneously references and lies independent of colonial ideologies of invention and discovery. It remains purposely frugal in this age of technology, in response to the industrial market and waste production that contributes to the exacerbation of the other side of 'wilderness.'

The Conceptual Land Art of the 1960s addressed environmental issues of humanity's relationships to nature through ambitious interventions within the landscape.⁹ Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* famously imprinted the relationships of art and nature in 1970, alongside artists such as Nancy Holt, and Christo and Jeanne Claude.¹⁰ Although my work references this era, it is less enamoured with large, heroic mediations in the landscape, but rather seeks to intervene into the margins of terrains in casual counteraction. My interventions pose a tendency, rather, to spend time in the

⁶ Barber, Simon. *Māori Mārx: Some Provisional Materials*, P43, [internet]. <https://counterfutures.nz/8/Barber%20article.pdf> [Accessed 16/11/2020]

⁷ *Why Yoko Ono's strange art book Grapefruit is a welcome remedy for crisis*, 1st March 2020, by Ashleigh Kane, [internet]. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/48550/1/yoko-ono-john-lennon-conceptual-art-book-grapefruit-art-remedy-coronavirus> [Accessed 24/8/20]

⁸ *Stories of Iconic Artworks: Joseph Beuys' I Like America and America Likes Me*, [internet]. Artland (Online Journal) <https://magazine.artland.com/stories-of-iconic-artworks-joseph-beuys-i-like-america-and-america-likes-me/> [Accessed 24/8/20]

⁹ Artland (Online Journal), *Top 10 Land Art and Earthwork Pioneers*, [internet] <https://magazine.artland.com/top-10-land-art-and-earthwork-pioneers/> [Accessed 16/11/2020]

¹⁰ Ibid

landscape in ephemeral observation and interaction, driven through a nonsensical, arbitrary activity similar to the 60s art period of Fluxus and conceptualism.¹¹

Following the dissolved wave of Covid-19, *Interventions in Rodney (where nothing happens)* is a journey-based work, conducted through weekly inquiries into the estuarial sites of the wider Rodney region: from Orewa to Omaha. The sites are presented as abstracted recordings of video and sound, accompanied by a digital work consisting of text and satellite map images, documenting my travels to the sites. Over the transitory stages of the lockdown, I collected scrap car parts from my house, interested in the notion of how these disintegrated mechanical limbs, almost like dead bodies lying around my garden could become re-invented as novel machines to prospect into the landscape. Each estuarial site is reflected through an individual filming apparatus, created on-site from a selection of the collected car parts, in response to the terrain's geography. The apparatuses perform idiosyncratically, as I become the primary receiver of the experience that the contraptions document. The re-created, alternative machines serve as carriers for my iPhone, cello-taped onto the apparatus, and in such a pragmatic method they become manoeuvred through the terrain, being carried, dragged, pulled, pushed etc. These shambolic tidal regions host biological life and industrial waste in partnership, that forms wastelands akin to the 'slimy.'

Translating the video performances and contraptions into an indoor space creates a new location to discuss the 'slimy's' position. Momentarily inhabiting the gallery as artefacts of significance, the idea of a stereotypical view of the New Zealand landscape is subverted and re-pitched through a unique viewpoint. The work bypasses conventional standards of documentary, and instead focusses on details that are gained through this operation: an unstable, somewhat violent, sometimes motionless, gritty, weird, obtrusive recording; in some sense, in tune with the 'slimy's' notion. Concepts of sporadic hybridisation within the landscape are discussed, as referenced in *Uncycled*, through the hybrid terrain and 'slimy' qualities of the apparatus. Transposing the 'slimy' to the indoors, it becomes received through a recalibrated, renewed encounter.

Like the paradoxes between Beuys and his animal interventions,¹² or Spong's binaries of corporal bodies and the mystical,¹³ *Interventions in Rodney (where nothing happens)* generates an interruption in everyday mundanity, enquiring into ideas of marginality through 'wilderness's slimy' buried at society's edges. The found materials are released from their foremost purpose as components of an industrial machine, allowing their structures to become viewed as multi-faceted forms of materiality. Exhibited outside their hierarchies, the estuary sites become encountered as new entities. Underlying, forgotten elements within society's conventional binaries emerge from these margins, and push past the enduring notion of 'humanity versus wilderness.' Freed from this conflict, these transitional sites begin to reform through the agency of the contraptions, enabling a particular view into the fragile, unknown, ever-changing realms of the 'slimy.'

¹¹ *Fluxus Movement Overview and Analysis*, [Internet]. [TheArtStory.org](https://www.theartstory.org/movement/fluxus/) Content compiled and written by Tracy DiTolla. Edited and published by The Art Story Contributors. First published on 21 Jan 2012. <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/fluxus/> [Accessed 17/11/2020]

¹² *Stories of Iconic Artworks: Joseph Beuys' I Like America and America Likes Me*. (Online Journal)

¹³ Spong, Sriwhana. *Now animal, Now Spectral* Exhibition, in 'Honestly Speaking: the word, the body and the internet'

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