Where are you going? Composing novel Oceanic art histories

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Inaugural Lecture by

Prof. dr. Fanny Wonu Veys

on the acceptance of her position as professor

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Mevrouw de rector magnificus, leden van het bestuur van de Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen en leden van het curatorium van deze bijzondere leerstoel 'Kunst en materiële cultuur van Oceanië', geacht faculteitsbestuur, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders in de zaal en online.

In 2003, having already visited numerous museum collections, looking at barkcloth, a fabric made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, I travelled to Tonga, the last independent Polynesian kingdom that has never been colonized. This fact is a great source of pride for Tongans today. As part of my PhD research that investigated the changes in manufacture, design and use of this textile, my fieldwork aimed at understanding how this millennial art tradition lived on in the early 21st century. In fact, I was writing an art history of Tongan barkcloth considering how events, continuity and changes are encapsulated into the story of this product mostly made by women and of significance to everyone. It features as a pathway for high-ranking people to walk on, as clothing for the bridal couple or as a gift during funerals, sports or dance occasions.

A World in Relation

So, there I was, on the main island of Tongatapu often following the faint sound of a mallet hitting a wooden anvil, so characteristic of barkcloth beating. People I crossed on my way to town, the bus stop or one of the village churches would smile at me and say *Mālō e lelei*, meaning 'hello' in Tongan and then inevitably ask me *'Alu ki fē?,* 'Where are you going?'. This simple query, even though asked routinely, somehow took me off guard. It seemed superficial but at the same time almost felt like a philosophical question. Where was I going? To answer that, I had to know where I was at that moment and where I had come from. In short, it forced me to locate myself in time and space. For me the question 'Where are you going?' – the first part of this inaugural lecture's title – has come to stand for the relational thinking that is typical for Oceanic ways of being.

Relationality refers to a view of the world where no one and nothing exists in isolation. Living means 'being in relationship'. This view is of course not unique to Oceania, as testifies the work of the Caribbean thinker Edouard Glissant (1928-2011) who eloquently argues for a construction of identity in relation (Glissant 1990, 1997). Relationality allows one to encompass a multiplicity of meanings that are closer to Indigenous ideas and expressive forms and is also essential for Oceanic cultural expressions that are always situated in time and space. The act of *Composing Novel Oceanic Art Histories* – the second part of the title – will hence always be linked to a particular time and space. But what is that space called 'Oceania' and which timeframes are used?

Time and Space

Oceania is a vast expanse of ocean, with many islands, some very large like Australia, the North and South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand and New Guinea, most small and many tiny. The people inhabiting these islands came in various waves. The first crossings were made from Sunda (roughly today's continental and Island Southeast Asia) to Sahul (currently New Guinea and Australia), during the last Ice Age (2.6 million – 11,700 years ago) when the world's landmasses were aligned differently. Archaeological evidence suggests that Australia was settled at least 60,000, perhaps even 65,000 years ago while New Guinea shows settlement sites of some 45,000 to 50,000 years old. For the deeper water crossings, these first voyagers might have used rafts or simple dugout canoes stopping on the islands of Bali, Lombok and Timor or taking a northern route via Sulawesi and Ceram to the current Bird's Head Peninsula on western New Guinea (Rowlands 2018; Thomas 2021: 83-86).

Then, many millennia later, another movement of people happened, this time rather rapidly. From the area of current Taiwan, some 5000 years ago, people ventured to the Bismarck Archipelago bringing with them the skills of making pottery, which has been termed Lapita after one of its excavation sites on Santa Cruz. Their sites date between 1410 and 1290 BCE, and their people spoke a language that would evolve into the Austronesian language family. These Lapita people took with

them unique cultural elements such as tattooing and barkcloth making, but they also interacted with the local population on New Guinea and in Island Melanesia, adopting for example the earlier inhabitants' methods of cooking food in earth ovens**.** The newcomers mixed and ultimately moved beyond the limits of where humans had ever settled. They travelled to the Santa Cruz Islands, Vanuatu, the Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia and Fiji, crossing great stretches of ocean with their seafaring canoes. To reach Fiji between 1100 and 1000 BCE, these voyagers traversed a sea stretch of some 850 km. They settled Tonga and Sāmoa between 900 and 850 BCE – becoming the first Polynesians – and stopped long distance voyaging for almost 2000 years. Then restlessness grew – the exact reasons for this new burst of colonising movements will probably never be known – driving the voyagers to move further east and settle the Cook Islands, the Society Islands, Mangareva and the Marquesas by 900 CE. The most eastern parts of Oceania including the Austral Islands, Hawai'i and Rapa Nui were settled around 1100 CE, and the last place on earth to be permanently populated, Aotearoa New Zealand, was inhabited by the 1200s or even as late as the 1300s (Thomas 2021: 100-137). Other areas that are traditionally called Micronesia show a variety of settlement patterns: from parts of southeast Asia in the Marianas and Palau to settlers from the Austronesian family such as Yap and the Caroline Islands (West et al. 2017; Gosling and Matisoo-Smith 2018; Thomas 2021: 119).

Vasco Núñez de Balboa (c. 1475-1519), a Portuguese navigator, was the first European to enter Oceania in 1513. A few years later the Spanish arrived and felt so much ownership over the Pacific Ocean that they termed it 'el lago español' (the Spanish lake) from the 16th to well into the 19th century (Buschmann, Slack Jr., and Tueller 2014). Then came the Dutch in the 17th century followed by the British and French in the 18th century. Colonisation in earnest started in the 19th century often preceded by Protestant and Catholic missionaries. These mostly European newcomers consisting of settlers, traders, government officials, missionaries and travellers upset the social fabric of Oceanian societies. Movement of peoples, religious practices and economies changed. It is often overlooked that Westerners brought diseases such as dysentery, flu, sexually transmitted illnesses, measles, tuberculosis, and smallpox into a population that was not yet immunised. In some places 95 percent of the population was decimated, leaving the archaeologist Christophe Sand (2023) to describe the period of Western incursions as the 'era of depopulation'. Of course, all these changes had a severe impact on knowledge transmission and as a result on art traditions. Today, the influence on cultural expressions of the Chinese involvement as the largest donor in the Pacific still needs to be evaluated (Wesley-Smith 2007). One thing is already clear: the same way that Western colonisation changed the architectural landscape of the Pacific, so has China.

Oceania or 'Our Sea of Islands', so-termed by the Tongan philosopher and anthropologist 'Epeli Hau'ofa (1939-2009), is populated by myriads of peoples who – speaking about a quarter of the world's languages – use a multiplicity of names to refer to the place they inhabit, ranging from Oceania to Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia, *Te moana nui a Kiwa*, *Te moana nui a Hiva*, or *Moana* (Salesa 2012; Saura 2022). This last name was used – some would say appropriated – in popular culture by the Disney film *Moana* that came out in 2016 with a more recent sequel in 2024 (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018). As a place in time, Oceania is as diverse as its peoples, languages and cultures. Some traditions for example in northern Australia stretch back 60,000 years, others such as Māori groups in Aotearoa New Zealand have almost 900 years to look back upon.

Art

It is often argued that there are no societies in Oceania that have an equivalent for art in the Western sense. What art is, has occupied the minds of archaeologists, ethnologists and artists alike. This search is – in a Parisian context between 1918 and 1939 – explored in *Objets en question – Archéologie, ethnologie,*

avant-garde at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (Objects – Ways of Seeing, 11 February – 22 June 2025). Beyond the discussion of what art is or whether one should rather talk about artefacts, I would like to stress that I consider this chair an opportunity to have a wide ranging approach to a multitude of cultural creations from rock art, basketry, weaving, plaiting, sculpture, pottery, masks, paintings, and personal adornment to performing arts that can encompass dances, theatre as well as food presentations.

Popular representations of Oceanic art often show it as spectacular and unique or mysterious and spiritual. Think of the impressive bis poles from the Asmat region in southwest New Guinea, the *hula* dances from Hawai'i or the New Guinea Highland performances of men clad in the most extraordinary paints and feathers. And who is not familiar with tattoos? The word 'tattoo' in itself is of Polynesian origin derived from the Sāmoan and Tahitian 'tatau'.

Most will know of the moai statues erected on raised stone terraces called *ahu*. Carved between 1000 CE and 1500 CE the moai are inscribed in a long line of *marae* or sacred space constructions in central and eastern Polynesia, in places such as the Cook Islands and Hawai'i. The Rapa Nui statues were associated with particular groups sharing common descent lines. The refinement of the carvings reached its apogee in the 14th century with the fifteen moai on the *Ahu Tongariki* on Rapa Nui's eastern coast (Van Tilburg 2001). These carvings have instigated the most fantastical ideas about their arrival. Did aliens drop them? Or did Rapa Nui people deplete the island's resources in order to move and erect the statues, leaving the island barren and subject to erosion in the winds of the Pacific Ocean? It is now clear that none of the suggestions above are true, but that the environmental changes on Rapa Nui are the result of an interplay between the introduction of rats and El Niño phenomena (Boersema 2015). One can conclude that dynamic art historical developments did not lead to the collapse of land and culture. However, today many Rapa Nui people argue that the return of moai held in collections worldwide might contribute to strengthening the *mana*, the power, of the land and its inhabitants as is visualised in the film *Te Kuhane o te Tupuna*, *El espíritu de los ancestros* (2016) by Leonardo Pakarati.

Another popular angle to the approach of Oceanic art is through its reception by Westerners who have created tropes of exoticism while also admiring the freedom of expression of Oceanic creations. For many modernist surrealist artists, art from the Pacific was a major source of inspiration, adequately captured in the 'Surrealist Map of the World', published in 1929 in the Belgian journal *Variétés*. New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, and Rapa Nui appear enlarged as well as Russia, Alaska, Mexico, and Greenland (Kjellgren 2007, 18; Dixon 2007, 555). One of the exponents of surrealism, Joan Miró (1893-1983) was influenced by New Guinean Lake Sentani decorated *maro* (barkcloth) that arrived in Europe from the early 1920s onwards, originally made and worn by or hung near the graves of women (Hermkens 2011). Another modernist artist Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) got inspired during the encounter with a sculpture from the small atoll of Nukuoro (the Caroline archipelago) at the Musée de l'Homme leading him to create *Hands Holding the Void* (Kaufmann and Wick 2013). Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) is generally known to have drawn inspiration from both Pacific and African art for the development of the cubist art movement and Henri Matisse's (1869-1954) cut out works are reflective of Tahitian textile patterns that he saw on his visit in the 1930s (Thomas 2024: 378). Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) is the artist that people most readily associate with Oceania. His works produced during his stay in Tahiti and the Marquesas (1891-1893 and 1895-1903), show mystical images of French Polynesia, often with people that have been interpreted as young underaged girls. His works reference Polynesian art and his personal experience of the area. Both his paintings as his sexual behaviour are looked upon ambivalently. His most iconic work *D'où venons-nous ? Qui sommes-nous ? Où allons-nous ?* (1897)

(Where Do We Come From? Who are we? Where are we going?) which Gauguin thought might be his last as his mental health issues made him toy with the idea of suicide, was meant to summarise his existential search in what is humans' natural and rational destiny (Thomas 2024: 331).

Oscillating Between Anthropology and Art History

The study of Oceanic art and material culture does not only live in popular imagination but has been at the beginnings of anthropological theory. Ethnographic museums – the showcase of anthropology since their founding in the 19th century – including the Wereldmuseum, where I work, have large collections of Oceanic art and objects (Ames 1992; Bennett 1995; Shelton 2011; Kuper 2023). These museums have been preoccupied not only by showing what art and material culture are but often also with what they can do. In other words, how do objects work as an intrinsic aspect of social organisation alongside religion, kinship, politics, economy and so forth (Bell and Geismar 2009: 3; Nuku 2023: 127). Early 20th-century anthropologists were key in developing ideas around the function of Oceanic art. Think of Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942) with the study during the first World War of the armbands and necklaces that are transported in extensively decorated canoes as part of the ritual exchange circle, called *kula* on the Trobriand Islands off the southeast coast of New Guinea (Malinowski 1932). Every scholar of Pacific art knows the work of Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) centring on the gift of valuable objects such as Sāmoan fine mats or Māori *taonga*, treasures (Mauss 1990). Margaret Mead (1901-1978), best known for her book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead 1928), affirms her interest in material culture and art of Pacific peoples with her work at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (1926-1978). The Oceanic wing is still named *The Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples*. Let's fast forward to the end of the 20th century, when Pacific art and material culture seemed to have lost their central position in the development of anthropological theory. Nevertheless, the Cambridge anthropologist Alfred Gell (1945-1997) called attention to the aesthetics of Oceanic art, that has the capacity to enchant, to fascinate, to entrap and to delight the spectator (Gell 1992). These anthropological insights were taught to me by Steven Hooper, my Cambridge educated PhD supervisor.

At the same time, Pacific creative expressions caught the attention of art historians. Leiden University – this university – occupies a unique position with the thinking of Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme who have really put 'World Art Studies' on the map. The term itself was coined by John Onians in 1996 at the University of East Anglia where I studied in the School of Art History and World Art Studies (Onians 2004; Zijlmans and Van Damme 2008; Zijlmans 2021). It refers to a paradigm shift challenging 'knowledge systems, models and assumptions' which Zijlmans defines as 'a dynamic whole of theoretical, philosophical, and scholarly models and assumptions, as a conceptual framework for analysing, understanding, and interpreting reality' (Zijlmans 2021: 21).

Having been shaped by both art historical and anthropological narratives of Oceanic art, I am acutely aware of the fact that the study of art in Oceania is often confined by Western preoccupations. With *Composing Novel Oceanic Art Histories*, I argue for a more fluid and dynamic art history, less rigidly constrained by Western frameworks and relating to lived experiences of Oceanic peoples. My goal is therefore not to remove the Pacific from Western imagination, but to foreground the rich and complicated histories, while also signalling the multisensorial experience that makes the encounter with Oceanic art complete. This is an exercise in balancing stories by decentring the West while at the same time recentring Oceania. My teaching and research assignment offers me the opportunity to try and do just that. As the historian Damon Ieremia Salesa (2012: 392) says: '…the histories of Oceania offer important challenges to many of the central tropes and narratives of world history'.

Composing Art Histories

I would now like to expand on some of the Oceanic art histories that are being composed, a number of which I am contributing to actively, others where I am more of an interested bystander. These art histories ask different questions. Should one reconsider who is an artist? How does the inclusion of Oceanic art shape the art market and its relationship to deep time? How can Pacific art help rethink modernist art? How can art histories, acknowledging Indigenous aesthetics, be written? What is the captivating power of Oceanic art? What is the contemporary relationship between Indigenous stories and western modernism?

The Gendered Artist

I will start by staying close to home, the Wereldmuseum, with the work of anthropologist and museum curator Adriaan Gerbrands (1917-1997). In his masterpiece *Wow-ipits. Art in its context. Studies in Ethno-Aesthetics* he sketched lively portraits of eight Asmat carvers (Gerbrands 1967). The book was supplemented with photographs and a film where the woodcarver Matjemos was shown carving a drum and commenting on his activities. Gerbrands thus broke with the tradition of not naming the Indigenous artist, while also showing the creative process underlying his work. In so doing, he demonstrated that the carver was not involved in an eternal cycle of copying what his ancestors had done before him but was a full artist and not 'a devoted servant of his people submerged in their totality' (Gerbrands 1967: 13). Gerbrands effectively answered the question: What makes an artist? To the question 'Who is an artist?', the answer is typical of the 1960s: a man. While Gerbrands acknowledges that men or women made, forged, cast, carved or wove objects, he does suggest that *a man* made 'the object come to life' determining 'its meaning and significance' (Gerbrands 1967: 14). This is analogous to art historical writing of that time. Janson's *History of Art*, a survey art history textbook first published in 1962, only included women artists from 1987 onwards. And, as I used the third edition of 1986 on which the Dutch language version was based, I did not read about the art of for example Camille Claudel or Frida Kahlo (Janson 1995).

Inspired by Gerbrands's questioning of received notions of the anonymity of Indigenous art, I want to remedy the male bias by looking at the art made by women. In the case of the Asmat, women produce ritual mats. With symbols related to those shown on shields, the mats were traditionally associated with the Pir-Jimi (Jimi Pir) festival described as the festival of friendship. Today, the mats are still essential but then in Catholic rituals marking and honouring the birth of Jesus (Powell Davies 2020). We have a unique opportunity to share this questioning with a large audience in the exhibition *Time for Papua* (working title) that is due to open in February 2026 at the Wereldmuseum Leiden. One section of the exhibition will consider the connection between what makes an artist and who is an artist. How does this relate to conceptualisations of Pacific art? I hope it encourages audiences, including students and researchers to contribute to thinking more nuanced stories of Pacific art where both Western and Indigenous concerns are appreciated.

Deep Time

Still staying close to home. In 2017 the Wereldmuseum welcomed a collection of nearly 800 works of contemporary Aboriginal art from the AAMU, the museum for contemporary Aboriginal Art in Utrecht which had been established in 2001 and was the only museum of its kind in Europe. A discussion could be had about the categorisation of contemporary art, as the collection was transferred to the Wereldmuseum, an ethnographic museum and not to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, a museum for modern and contemporary art (Petitjean 2020). But what I want to stress here, is that the art works testify to the presence of Indigenous Australian contemporary art on the world scene, 'moving it out of the category of primitive art and freeing contemporary Aboriginal artists from the constraints that this definition imposed' (Morphy 1995: 212).

It is generally accepted that the journey of contemporary Aboriginal art started in the remote Northern Territory settlement of Papunya that united since 1959 several desert peoples forced to settle there under Australia's policy of assimilation. In 1971, men with different tribal backgrounds represented the Honey Ant Dreaming on the walls of the settlement school encouraged by the art teacher Geoffrey Bardon (1940-2003). Soon men and women started painting with the material provided by Bardon (Scholes 2017). Their creations related to the Dreaming, a world view that forms the basis of religion, law and social structures in Aboriginal cultures. In the Dreaming, powerful ancestors sang everything into existence on their creation journeys (Morphy 1998).

The AAMU collection allows tracing developments in Aboriginal contemporary art and its position on the global art market in which huge amounts of money circulate. But these art works also very directly relate to art that is presented at international biennials and triennials today. I am taking you to the Australian pavilion on the Giardini grounds of the Venice Biennale in 2024. Small groups of visitors were let into a space, a black box with in its centre white typed up papers, and on its black walls names written in white chalk. The work was called *kith and kin*, meaning 'friends and family' by the Kamilaroi and Bigambul, and Goldon Lion's award-winning artist Archie Moore. You were entering a memorial space, a memorial to all the people who had gone before him as the four walls of the space were covered with his genealogy stretching back 65,000 years. The holes in the family tree signal colonial invasions, massacres, diseases and displacement that sever family ties. This kinship knowledge, an extremely complex system, is part of the Dreaming. It is simultaneously a cenotaph for Indigenous Australians deceased in state custody, represented by the piled-up coroner's reports floating above the pool of black ink. Colonial laws and government policies have contributed to the fact that today Aboriginal people form three percent of Australia's population and more than thirty percent of the incarcerated people. While Archie Moore drew attention to injustices of the present and the past, he also placed the viewer in this history. Making visible the connections, namely the relationships between people, places and things, is important for understanding this work, Aboriginal contemporary painting and Oceanic art in general.

Modernisms

Mathias Kauage (c. 1944-2003), a Chimbu man from the Highlands of New Guinea, is heralded as the exponent of modernism in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The couple Uli (1922-2011) and Georgina Beier (1938-2021) played an instrumental role in this art movement. When they arrived in Papua New Guinea in 1967, they had already mentored writers and artists in Nigeria leading to a vibrant art scene with literary magazines such as *Black Orpheus* and leading African modernists including Ibrahim El Salahi and Malangatana Ngwenya (1936-2011). In 1968 Georgina Beier organized a first show with prints by artists who had participated in her workshops at the Laloki psychiatric hospital. Shortly after, she was introduced to Timothy Akis (1944-1984) from Tsembaga, the Simbai Valley. He had worked on a copra plantation and was an assistant and an informant to linguists and anthropologists including Ann and Roy Rappaport (1926–1997) and Georgeda Buchbinder. He was a real artistic talent. Upon seeing Akis's exhibition, Kauage wanted to have Georgina Beier take an interest in what he as well could do as an artist. This resulted in his first screenprints in 1969.

When the Gallery of Modern Art opened in Glasgow in 1996, Kauage was invited to celebrate the event. There, he met and performed for Queen Elizabeth II. Conscious of the importance of the moment, the artist fixed the meeting in this 1999 painting featuring himself with a headdress and the Queen with a *bilum*, a characteristic Papua New Guinea string bag symbolising femaleness. The Qantas airplane that brought Kauage to Glasgow features prominently. His signature 'Kauage Mathias O.B.E. / Artist of P.N.G. 1999' indicates how aware he was of his representational function as an artist of Papua New Guinea.

Kauage responded to events happening in his nation and contemporary life. Papua New Guinea moved from a colonial nation having been under Australian rule, and before that, part of the British and German colonial empire, to an independent nation with its own symbols and art production. In that sense Kauage's art corresponds to modernist paradigms of progress, of creating radical new art forms, different from what existed before. However, can we really understand his art, if we do not look at the Highland aesthetics of self-decoration? Andrew and Pamela Strathern (1971) have theorized that male body decoration signifies virility and competitiveness of the group all done for special occasions. The Highland festivals have become touristic attractions, but also events that signal important aspects of Highland life. People in Kauage's paintings are not just parading a Papua New Guinea identity but are marking the occasion by being completely decked out as winners. As Nicholas Thomas (2018: 179) says 'Kauage's art was emphatically modern, but his modernism was also distinctively Melanesian'. The works of the modernist art movement in PNG, encourage researchers to relate the art to the political and social happenings of the time, but also to link it with the distinctively Oceanic notion of the performance that connects visual, auditory, tactile and olfactive elements. One should try and look beyond the mere visual aspect when studying these modernist histories.

Indigenous Aesthetics

Many of the examples I have given are 20th-century developments. However, I am equally interested in earlier art historical evolutions as testifies my work on barkcloth. I have now started a research project on tattooing in Tonga. Tattooing was executed by piercing the skin with a sharp implement dipped in ink. In Tonga, a comb-like tool hafted on a handle was tapped with a small stick. Banned in 1839 by King Tupou I of Tonga, tattooing in Tonga became less vibrant as opposed to Sāmoa. My research project started with the academic stance that there was little tattooing (*tātatau*) of both men and women in Tonga. The assertion was perhaps spurred on by the anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler (1935-2022), an important scholar of material and performance culture in Tonga, who wrote in 1978: 'There was not very much tattooing on Tonga, and what there [was] was done by Samoans' (Kaeppler 1978: 212). The anthropologist Alfred Gell in his book on tattooing in Polynesia adheres to the theory, claiming that in Hawai'i and Tonga tattooing was underplayed, certainly when compared to the Marquesas (Gell 1993: 163). In addition, there was until recently the conviction that the only visual source of Tongan 18th or 19th-century tattooing was the image of the *Tatouage de la Cuisse des hommes* (Tattoo of the male thigh), made by Louis-Auguste de Sainson (1800-1874) and published in the *Atlas* to accompany the journal of Jules Sébastien Dumont d'Urville's (1790-1842) voyage in 1827 (Tonga 2018).

I have been able to demonstrate that there is a richer body of written and pictorial sources available to construct an art history of tattooing up until its withering in the 19th century. It goes from indexes to the presence of tattooing such as the tattooing tools excavated in Pea on the island of Tongatapu, to descriptions and drawings made by Europeans. With my research, I am placing tattooing in Tonga in a long history of art of the body, stretching from at least 700 BCE to the 19th century and showing the connections between tattooing traditions in the region, especially in Fiji and Sāmoa. Indigenous histories and western archaeology do suggest that the knowledge of tattooing was transferred from Fiji to Tonga and Sāmoa, following the movement of the peopling of the area. I am further shedding a new light on the significance of this body art and its relation to Tongan arts and aesthetics. Tongan tattooing was applied to both men and women, although for women it was more socially accepted not to be tattooed. The designs were gendered to some degree, but all fit within a Tongan aesthetic of what I term 'interrupted symmetry'. Club designs have very regular geometric carvings only to be interrupted by animal or anthropomorphic designs; barkcloth designs are interrupted by dots; and dances where everyone moves in symmetric ways are interrupted either by

a central figure performing differently or by people carrying gifts. Similarly, the interruption of certain motifs was probably a unique feature of Tongan tattooing patterns. Tracing the relationships with Indigenous social and political movements, the great diversity of art forms, including performing arts allows me to write an art history of tattooing. In this, I certainly also want to consider the multisensorial aspect as it appears that undergoing tattooing, experiencing the pain and pride involved in wearing tattoos was as important as the motifs that referenced historical events and personal experiences (Veys 2023a, b).

Captivating Art

In 2013 multimedia artist Lisa Reihana of Ngāpuhi, Ngati Hine, Ngāi Tu and British descent got in touch with me, saying that she was going to display a video work as part of a collaborative exhibition at Museum van Loon in Amsterdam – the van Loon family was one of the founding members of the Dutch East India company. 'It would be nice', Lisa continued, 'if the Tāhimana *waka*, or the Abel Tasman Māori canoe could be part of the opening ceremony of the exhibition called *Suspended Histories*'. Lisa Reihana 'whakapapas' – a Māori word conjugated as an English verb – or 'has genealogical connections' through her father with both *waka* for which the Wereldmuseum Leiden cares. I first met Lisa Reihana when she created the site-specific work *He Tautoko* in Cambridge. I was coordinating Pacific artists' visits to the stores in preparation of the exhibition *Pasifika Styles* in 2006.

The exhibition *Suspended histories* featured two large screens, the beginnings of *in Pursuit of Venus*. Exhibiting at a place that is so fraught with Dutch trading and colonial history is significant. Therefore, Reihana wanted to recentre Indigenous identities by having the *waka* there. In Amsterdam it worked, but when the same request came for the opening in 2017 of the Venice Biennale *Emissaries* exhibition in the New Zealand Pavilion at the Arsenale, the proposal was declined. There, the display included the full-scale version of *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* projected over twenty metres. Weaving together visual and performance arts drawn from historical and contemporary sources, Reihana revisits and reimagines European narratives of colonisation of the Pacific (Looser 2017). The work is inspired by a twenty-panel panoramic wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la mer du Pacifique* (1804) designed by French artist Jean-Gabriel Charvet (1750-1829) and produced by Joseph Dufour et Cie. Technically and conceptually complex, *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* literally restores agency to Pacific peoples, who through the movements accompanied by sound give a certain dignity but also humour to the installation with a mesmerising effect on visitors. As the work weaves together 'the speculative and the factual; the past and the present; and imagination and reality' (Gare, Buchanan, Burns-Dans, and Church 2020) some scholars have focused on how Reihana's work engages with historiography addressing historical truths and/or untruths. Truth-telling, often provoked by violent colonial histories in relation to displacement of Aboriginal Australian communities or Pacific islander forced-labour practices is an important theme in many Oceanic communities. But how can one apprehend this work, without understanding the sustained European history of depicting exotism, the tradition of the moving panorama – a type of rotating panoramic history painting that was popular in the 1800s – as well as the long histories of Oceanic visual art and multisensorial performing practices? Lisa Reihana's artwork helps exploring the captivating and immersive character of Oceanic art and hence its relation to Pacific lives.

Indigenous Stories, Western Modernism

Yuki Kihara of Sāmoan and Japanese heritage really made it onto the international scene with her work *Paradise Camp*, which was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2022. I first encountered Kihara's work in 2006, while assisting Amiria Salmond and Rosanna Raymond with the curation of *Pasifika Styles*. Years later Yuki Kihara presented *Going Native* (2019) at the Wereldmuseum, a collaborative project in which she researched the museum's rich collections to explore issues of cross-cultural

exchanges and representations, reflecting on cultural identities in the contemporary and Dutch constructions of the Pacific. This resulted in an artwork where in three filmed vignettes, each consisting of an interview and a performance, Dutch people express their connections with Indigenous Māori, Hawai'ian and Yolŋu (Arnhem Land) culture. In doing so, Kihara critically questions the fine line between personal spiritual enrichment and cultural appropriation and between performance and performativity (Veys 2022).

In *Paradise Camp,* curated by Natalie King, Yuki Kihara foregrounds the *fa'afafine* community, to which she relates, with twelve tableau photographs in saturated colour, situated against a vast wallpaper of a landscape decimated by the 2009 tsunami in Sāmoa. The word *fa'afafine* literally translates as 'in the manner of a woman' and is in Western speech often called 'third gender', not to be confused with transgender, because as Yuki Kihara said in a personal conversation in 2019: 'I don't want to be a woman, I am a *fa'afafine*'. Traditionally, the role brings with it responsibilities such as caring for the different members of the extended family (Tcherkézoff 2022). In her Venice Biennale work she interrogates and dismantles gender roles, (mis)representations and colonial legacies in the Pacific. She was the first Pasifika, Asian and Fa'afafine artist to represent Aotearoa New Zealand in Venice.

A lot of Kihara's work is based on careful archival research. The photographs are in fact reinterpreted, or as Kihara phrases it, 'upcycled' and by this she means 'improved' works by the French artist Paul Gauguin during his time in Tahiti and the Marquesas between 1891 and 1903. In doing this 'upcycling' Kihara was inspired by the Māori academic Ngahuia Te Awekotuku who said that many of the people depicted in Gauguin's paintings are in fact non-binary Polynesians (Yu and Steinbock 2023).

Kihara discovered during her archival research, pictures taken by Thomas Andrew (1855-1939), a New Zealand photographer who worked and lived in Sāmoa until his death. These photographs return in Gauguin's paintings, such as the back of a Sāmoan man, who is depicted as a Tahitian man without the Sāmoan traditional male tattoo, the *pe'a*. An important but often overlooked aspect of her presentation was the section that paid attention to her archival research with Sāmoan barkcloth designs. In Kihara's work, barkcloth does more than providing a visually appealing backdrop to her archives. With barkcloth she draws attention to a particular aesthetic, but more importantly she shows the relevance of the archive be it in stories, material things and in people. And ultimately, she claims barkcloth as a *fa'afafine* art form. Again, when visiting a Pacific art exhibition, to really understand what one is seeing and experiencing, one needs to track the relationship with longer art historical currents. These Indigenous art developments also encourage us to turn the question around: would modernist artists have been the great artists they have become, had they not encountered Oceanic art?

Conclusion

With *Where Are You Going? Composing Novel Oceanic Art Histories* I am trying to question how we look at both historic and contemporary Oceanic art. This involves rethinking traditional art histories that have often been framed by Western perspectives and introducing relationality to broaden the possibilities of conceptualising Oceanic art. Taking into account gender in all its expressions, enriches the perception of the art that is created. Different types of Oceanic art make one question relationships to time, be it deep time, western periodisations of art such as modernism or even colonial encounters. Acknowledging the significance of performance creates awareness about the arresting importance of involving all the senses when enjoying Oceanic art. It pushes one to reassess aesthetic principles and the need for placing art within its political, social and cultural Indigenous contexts. In short, this is an appeal for a relational and multisensorial enjoyment and study of the rich, diverse and constantly evolving expressions of Oceanic art.

Words of thanks

In my academic journey, personal and institutional encounters come together. Therefore, I want to acknowledge some of its key players.

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She has held postdoctoral fellowships at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) (2006-2007) and at the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (Paris) (2007-2008). In 2022 she held the Barbro Klein fellowship at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (Uppsala) and was the Fred Alexander Fellow in Perth for 2023. Her fieldwork sites include Aotearoa New Zealand (since 2000), Tonga (since 2003) and Arnhem Land, Australia (since 2014).

Her topics of interest and expertise include Pacific art and material culture, museums and cultures of collecting, Pacific musical instruments, Pacific textiles, gender and material culture, missionary collections, and the significance of historical objects in a contemporary setting. Her most recent single author book is 'Unwrapping Tongan Barkcloth: Encounters, Creativity and Female Agency' (Bloomsbury, 2017). Her recent co-edited book is 'Collecting in the South Sea. The Voyage of Bruni d'Entrecasteaux 1791-1794.' (Sidestone Press, 2018). She is since 2020 the main editor of the Provenance series published by the Wereldmuseum and is the president of the Pacific Arts Association Europe.