



Figures 1, 2. Yuki Kihara, *Siva in Motion* (still), 2012, single-channel HD Blu-ray, 16:9, color, silent, ed. 4/4, 8:14 minutes (looped). Commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Aotearoa New Zealand / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, and Milford Galleries Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand

Archipelagic Poetics in the Art of Kalisolaite ‘Uhila and Yuki Kihara

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In 1994 it finally dawned on me how profoundly the worldview of islands and archipelagos differs from that of continents. This revelation came about thanks to an invitation to represent Amerika Samoa at the first UN Global Conference on Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States held in Barbados. Thirty-five years later, thanks to another invitation—to comment here on the acclaimed work of two contemporary Indigenous artists—I now find myself contemplating archipelagic epistemologies and cultures in a broader context of aesthetics and social history. Given the complex, multilayered artistic practices of Kalisolaite ‘Uhila and Yuki Kihara, my response to the call of their work is a polyphonous one. How could it be otherwise? In the following reflections, then, I explore how their performance art featured in this volume engages the crucial work of cultural production as they transmute frameworks of relationality, multiplicity, and resistance in ways that can amplify our understanding of oceanic and archipelagic worldviews.

Kihara’s *Siva in Motion*, like much of her best-known work, flows across multiple dimensions of Samoa’s colonial history and neocolonial present. In this regard it illustrates the kind of “activist historiography” attributed to Claude Lévi-Strauss by Rose Réjouis’s reframing of his concept of bricolage, that is, as a poetics of the underdog or “dark horse,” one that advocates for “cultures of the weak.”¹ Drawn as it is from a plethora of wellsprings, Kihara’s “interdisciplinary” art resonates with a similar kind of creolization as it “enacts the logic of bricolage,” that is, by

drawing freely upon what is available, *recreating with new content and in new forms a distinctive culture*, a creation in a

situation of domination and conflict ... *not about retentions but about reinterpretations ... not about roots but about loss ... at heart, it is a practice and ethic of borrowing and accepting to be transformed, affected by the other.* In the current era of globalization, processes of creolization appear in zones of conflict and contact. They are the harbingers of *an ongoing ethics of sharing the world.*² (emphasis added)

In a recent interview, Kihara muses, “Sometimes I wonder if I am an artist or an historian. I really like the investigative nature and putting together the puzzle.”³ Such intellectual/creative labor of reconstituting histories suppressed or distorted by the ruptures of colonialism is surely one of the paramount functions of artistic production. Moreover, *Siva in Motion*’s synthesis of two ancestral performance genres—the highly ritualized Samoan *taualuga* (last dance) with the *tagiauē* (lament)—expressed through the media of twenty-first-century videography, in the nineteenth-century European aesthetic of chronophotography enacts “not only the type of bricolage practiced in the Caribbean—*supersyncretisms*—but the alternative logic ... that rules the *antiviolent social space this bricolage creates.*”⁴



Figures 3, 4. Kalisolaite ‘Uhila, *Ongo Mei Moana*, 2015, performance at The Performance Arcade 2015, Wellington Waterfront, New Zealand. Courtesy of the artist

In ‘Uhila’s work we shift from Kihara’s mimetic reinscriptions of history to shamanic conversations with the unseen. For example, in his mystical performance *Ongo Mei Moana* (2015), ‘Uhila spent six hours a day, from low to high tides, for one week, vocalizing and executing spontaneous dance moves in concert with the tides in Wellington, New Zealand’s Oriental Bay. Such direct, articulate engagement with nature—specifically embodied here by face time with and direct address to the

ocean—conjures the Samoan practice of medicinal incantation. There the healer faces the specific direction associated with her family gods, respectfully invoking their “human and spiritual kinship ... with the ocean and wind at the service of healing.”⁵ Another of Uhila’s many-layered enactments in this performance was the homage to his seafaring ancestors, echoing Epeli Hau’ofa’s iconic dicta about maritime “flows”⁶ of the sea as “connective tissue”—here between the seen and unseen—rather than barrier.⁷

Such a synergistic field of perception evokes the Samoan concept of relationship, or *vā*—the space between any two discrete entities.⁸ Echoing Hau’ofa and others, Albert Wendt holds the *vā* to be more than simply “betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together.”⁹ In his oracular choreography with tidal currents and breakers, ‘Uhila performs an intimate discourse with the ocean (seen) and his ancestors (unseen) that personifies and proclaims the particular type of *vā* relationship—*vā tapua’i* (sacred space)—governing human kinship with the spiritual world. In an earlier set of immersive performances, *Pigs in the Yard* (2011), ‘Uhila lived for over nine days with a piglet in a pen, first at the Mangere Arts Center and later in a container in Auckland’s central square.¹⁰ When noted critic John Hurrell observes that “‘Uhila has a great empathy for other people and other sentient beings ...—that seems to be a characteristic of his practice—but he is not sentimental,” he is spot on.¹¹ The seemingly contradictory position of both honoring and consuming the sacred—here embodied by pigs in much of Polynesia, but elsewhere perhaps by wafers of unleavened bread—is not about sentimentality, but about worldview. Which brings us back to the Polynesian notion of relationship between human and sacred worlds evinced here in ‘Uhila’s ritualized engagement with dual expressions of divine immanence in both the natural world and animal realms.¹²

A second expression of *vā* relationship—*vā feloaloa’i* (social space)—that governs social interaction significantly informs the work of both ‘Uhila and Kihara.¹³ A striking similarity in their respective expressions of engagement with social issues is practice that centers on those most disadvantaged by circumstances, whether socioeconomic in ‘Uhila’s work or by natural disasters in Kihara’s. Uhila, for example, is praised by one influential critic as “one of New Zealand’s most intriguing and gifted artists,” whose work is “a series of disappearing acts which include living as a homeless person for three months—and making Auckland’s inequality starkly visible in the process [He] clearly identifies with the people many of us choose not to see.”¹⁴ In such a thoroughgoing commitment to the plight of others, ‘Uhila models the spirit of “rhizomatic thought” which Edouard Glissant considers “the principle behind ... the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.”¹⁵

In contrast to ‘Uhila’s more primal embodiments of empathy, Kihara’s *Siva in Motion* presents a more constructed, formalist expression of compassion in multiple, interwoven layers of history, gender, relations of power, and loss. Wearing the

costume of Victorian mourning, in a somber, constricting dress, she choreographs cultural lament and historical loss of self-determination. Recasting the traditional moves of ceremonial *tauluga* of formal Samoan gatherings, she appropriates narrative power by telling the story of the deadly 2009 tsunami with hand gestures and highly restrained body movement. In a related work, this one a series of photographs featuring the same alter ego, Salome, she tells a pictorial story of the devastation of the natural and built landscapes of Samoa caused by escalating tropical storms resulting from catastrophic climate chaos. The cumulative effect of Kihara's compositions presents a searing critique of colonial mayhem in Samoa as the genesis of such complex devastations.

The crucial work of both 'Uhila and Kihara articulates the considerable power of art to transform loss into agency. This is the kind of art most necessary in our vexing historical moment. It reinterprets Oceanic ways of knowing and being in the body as performance of community. Or as Glissant reminds us, "[s]ometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself That is very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in [the] Relation."¹⁶

Notes

1. Rose Réjouis, "Dark Horse Poetics: Lèvi-Strauss, Benitez-Rojo, and Caribbean Epistemology," *Small Axe* 18, no. 1 / no. 43 (2014): 108.
2. Françoise Vergès, "Kiltir Kreol" Processes and Practices of Créolité and Creolization," in *Créolité and Creolization: Documenta 11_Platform 3*, ed. Okwui Enwezor et al., (Ostifildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 184 (quoted in Réjouis, "Dark Horse Poetics," 103).
3. Nina Seja, "The Past Is a Foreign Climate: Shigeyuki Kihara Meets the Anthropocene," *Art Monthly Australia* 285 (November 2015), <https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=558210683368887;res=IELLCC>.
4. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd ed., trans. James Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996; quoted in Réjouis, "Dark Horse Poetics," 105 [emphasis added]).
5. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Tupuola Tufuga Efi, "Whispers and Vanities in Samoan Indigenous Religious Culture," in *Whispers and Vanities: Samoan Indigenous Knowledge and Religion*, ed. Tamasailau M. Suaalii-Sauni et al. (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2014), 22–26.
6. Epeli Hau'ofa, *Our Sea of Islands: We are the Ocean* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 33.

7. Marco Cuevas-Hewitt, "Sketching Towards an Archipelagic Poetics of Postcolonial Belonging," *Budhi* 1 (2007): 244.
8. For the definitive discussion of the *vā*, see I'uogafa Tuagalu, "Heuristics of the *Vā*," *Alternative: An International Journal of Indigenous Scholarship* 4, no. 1 (2008): 107–26. See also Bradd Shore on the *vā* as "space/time relationship" (Bradd Shore, "A Samoan Theory of Action: Social Control and Social Order in a Polynesian Paradox," PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1977). Also enlightening is Rajiv Malhota on "Indra's Net," the parallel concept of interdependence in Hindu cosmology ("The Vedic Metaphor of Indra's Net," *Pragyata*, <http://www.pragyata.com/mag/the-vedic-metaphor-of-indras-net-234>).
9. Albert Wendt, "Afterword: Tatauing the Postcolonial Body," in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, eds. Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 399–412 (quoted in Tuagalu, "Heuristics of the *Vā*," 109).
10. Linda Herrick, "The Invisible Man: Kalisolaite 'Uhila," *New Zealand Herald*, 25 October 2014, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/canvas-magazine/news/article.cfm?c_id=532&objectid=1134.
11. John Hurrell, "Revered Porcine Cuisine," *EyeContact*, 20 January 2017, <http://eyecontactsite.com/2017/01/porcine-cuisine>.
12. Caroline Sinavaiana Gabbard, "Samoan Literature and the Wheel of Time: Cartographies of the *Vā*," in "Oceania in Theory," special issue, *symplokē* 26, nos. 1–2 (2018): 38.
13. Tuagalu, "Heuristics of the *Vā*," 108.
14. Anthony Byrt, "How Artist Kalisolaite 'Uhila Made a Statement by Vanishing into the Streets," *Noted*, 10 April 2017, <https://www.noted.co.nz/culture/arts/how-artist-kalisolaite-uhila-made-a-statement-by-vanishing-into-the-streets/>.
15. Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (1990, reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 10.
16. Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, 18.

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