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'Ae Kai Rising: Trans-Oceanic Communities of Cultural Imagination¹

Abstract

'Ae Kai: A Culture Lab on Convergence, a three-day pop-up exhibition and performance venue organized by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i (July 7–9, 2017), was a daring social and intercultural experiment. Bringing attention to Hawai'i as a locus of trans-oceanic circulation, contact, and contestation, the project convened more than fifty visual artists, filmmakers, poets, scholars, performers, musicians, artisans, and traditional cultural practitioners from across the Asia-Pacific region and the Americas. Beyond fostering person-to-person contact via curated spaces of conviviality involving the participants and visitors to the site, the Culture Lab was foundationally oriented to the transactional production and sharing of knowledge across diverse communities by encouraging collaboration and dialogue in informal, face-to-face exchanges. In considering what type of model for contemporary, socially-engaged curatorial and museum practice the Culture Lab was advancing by devising transitory, culture-centered spaces and identifying themes around which people could find common cause, this piece draws on my firsthand observation of 'Ae Kai and the insights of visual artists I interviewed about their projects. It equally raises the question of what kinds of communities and support systems are being called forth through public convenings in which artists/cultural producers and spectators alike can claim places as active, expressive stakeholders in coextensive civic discourse.

Keywords: *art, Hawai'i, trans-oceanic, relational, dialogic, communities of cultural imagination*

Directly off a twelve-hour flight from Connecticut, I had an immediate, visceral rush upon walking into 'Ae Kai: A Culture Lab on Convergence in Honolulu on its opening day. Housed on the lower level of the vast Ala Moana Shopping Center, the bare, disused, cavernous space of a former Foodland supermarket had been transformed by organizers from the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center (APAC) into a pop-up venue for a sprawling exhibition, performance, and cultural event running from July 7–9, 2017.² I was invited to the event by its organizers and

asked to write my firsthand impressions of *'Ae Kai* from my perspective as a cultural critic and scholar of contemporary Asian American art.³

Although I am originally from Hilo, Hawai'i, and have periodically traveled to O'ahu for my research on artists, I have not lived in the Islands for over forty years. Thus, my encounters with many of the works that specifically referenced present-day, local conditions and events made it apparent to me that close dialogues with the participating artists would be required for a stronger understanding of the issues and contexts that gave rise to their projects. Indeed, the experience of participating in my first Culture Lab—just months after attending the inaugural 2017 Honolulu Biennial (March 8–May 8)—made me acutely aware of how significantly the Islands' art and cultural scene had changed since the late 1960s when I moved to the East Coast. By drawing attention to Hawai'i as a locus of trans-Pacific circulation, contact, and contestation, the Honolulu Biennial and this Culture Lab both represent innovative moves by US-based curators to foreground cultural production in which islands, archipelagos, and oceanic passages are thought of both as metaphors for the human experience, and as real sites with pressing social, political, economic, and ecological concerns to be interrogated.

Over the ensuing three days, hundreds of visitors passed through the space, where they were immersed in a continuous stream of live performances, video screenings, and interactive installations. Suffused with a raffish, DIY spirit, this setting—with its improvised overhead lighting, jumble of displays intermixing art and visual and material culture, and the animate chatter of participants still scrambling to set up their areas—brought to mind New York's downtown artist co-ops and storefront community art galleries of the 1970s and 1980s. *'Ae Kai* also shared traits with a spectrum of public events, gatherings, and presentations similarly intended to be temporary, including art happenings, street fairs, block parties, and flash mobs.

Aspiring to promulgate a “culture of intersectionality,” *'Ae Kai's* experimental, open-ended format was oriented toward encouraging direct engagement, concurrent conversations, and free-ranging byplay between a markedly diverse range of participants and their audiences.⁴ In the course of grappling with the sheer density of offerings, standpoints, and issues being presented in the space, my attention ultimately centered on the nature of the Culture Lab itself, as an extended project that built on previous convenings in Washington, DC, and New York. Since my own research on contemporary Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and US Pacific Islander art is anchored in live interviews with artists about the ideas undergirding their work, I was intrigued by the project's emphasis on generating a dynamic space for sociality, and especially on its use of informal face-to-

face exchange as an integral part of forming communities and networks to collectively produce knowledge about the world.

The Culture Lab's approach in Honolulu—signaled by its invocation of *'ae kai* (the Hawaiian word for the shoreline where sea and land meet) as its earthly metaphor for local cultural convergence and dialogue—is reminiscent of what I term “communities of cultural imagination.” In my book *Unsettled Visions*, I posit that works of art and expressive culture enable us to recognize and articulate experiences that we hold in common and, thereby, contribute to constituting a larger communicative field between individual and collective imaginations that continually flows back and forth in mutually generative ways.⁵ This capacious conception of community can be readily extended to the notion of *'ae kai* as an imaginative schema through which individuals and groups can form empathic connections and as a tangible space of interconnectivity. Such formulations offer robust vehicles for groups to envision engaged, real-world responses to the everyday conditions they encounter, as they continually test and reconstitute their various standpoints and mutual attachments to one another despite potential tensions and contradictions. Throughout this visit, I found myself considering what type of model for contemporary, socially-engaged curatorial and museum practice the Culture Lab was advancing by devising transitory, culture-centered spaces and shared identifiers around which people may come together around common causes. Equally, it raised the question of what kinds of expressive communities and support systems are called forth through public convenings in which the visions and voices of artists/cultural producers and spectators alike can claim corresponding places as mutual stakeholders in active, civic discourse.

Despite receiving due recognition as a self-professed mix of artistic and social experimentation in which no single ideological, aesthetic, or didactic approach predominated, *'Ae Kai* also engendered critique, in part because of its decidedly ephemeral character.⁶ Some attendees questioned whether projects in a one-time, “pop-up” event could meaningfully address the gravity of complex and difficult issues being touched upon, among them the US military presence in the Pacific, climate change, Indigenous sovereignty, and food insecurity. Such considerations echo longstanding critiques of international residency and exhibition programs in which artists are “parachuted” into different locales to engage with local audiences for circumscribed periods. Likewise, the nature of the venue itself came under scrutiny for presenting the event in a former supermarket, thereby potentially lessening the social and political impact of *'Ae Kai* by associating the exhibited work with commercial products and everyday activities made to be readily

consumed. There were also tensions and contradictions characteristic of presenting an arts-related project to the general public under the auspices of a nationally visible government-funded entity—in this case, the Smithsonian—with requirements and constraints that had to be negotiated by organizers and participants alike. For instance, some performances involving partial nudity required strategic efforts to ensure the artistic and cultural integrity of the performers while addressing institutional issues about maintaining appropriate standards of dress.

Although such concerns point out the challenges of this venturesome and inherently complicated undertaking, ultimately the determination of APAC's trio of curators—Kālewa Correa, Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, and Adriel Luis—to extend the Culture Lab's geographic and conceptual reach far beyond the East Coast by staging the third Culture Lab of the series in Hawai'i did, in fact, provide a fertile conduit for bringing Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders together. In order to begin to redress the continental bias found in past models of Asian American studies, and to acknowledge the extent of longstanding historic involvement of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, a substantial number of individuals of Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Asian, and mixed heritage were among the more than fifty visual artists, filmmakers, poets, scholars, performers, musicians, artisans, and traditional cultural practitioners participating in 'Ae Kai.⁷ Moreover, this Culture Lab involved the participation of people from other backgrounds who espouse links to Hawai'i, including a cohort from Cuba whose sense of personal connection proceeded from a passionate advocacy for surfing, a practice that has long been a central part of Polynesian culture. Through its selection of participants and orchestration of works, this iteration of the Culture Lab alluded to the extensive, overlapping spheres of circulation and cross-cultural encounter that today conjoin Hawai'i and its peoples to Oceania, Asia, New Zealand, Australia, North America, the Caribbean, and realms far beyond.

The deliberate use of a non-traditional yet well-known public venue like Foodland, instead of an institutional cultural space like a museum or art gallery, underscores the commitment of 'Ae Kai's organizers to bring this event directly to the attention of local communities. Foodland—a chain of family-run supermarkets co-founded in the 1940s by the Lau family and Maurice J. Sullivan that became a fixture for generations of Honolulu residents—provided an animate civic bridge via its historical ties to the sustenance of those communities.⁸ Concomitantly, due to its unrestricted location in a major shopping mall, the event also regularly attracted curious walk-in visitors. While much has been made of conceptual frames like “creative placemaking” as economic vehicles for urban revitalization, to my

mind 'Ae Kai's utilization of vernacular locational contingencies had more in common with precedents like the 1980 *Times Square Show* in New York City, in which empty storefronts along high-traffic streets were temporarily converted by artists to house and display transient projects.⁹

Guided by 'Ae Kai's overarching framework of convergence and interactivity, visitors circulated freely throughout the former supermarket, its raw space loosely divided into discrete zones that featured individual and collective endeavors, often taking the form of installations. Since no hierarchical distinctions were made between visual art, crafts, and vernacular culture, some participants foregrounded techniques for urban organic farming or the fabrication of traditional Hawaiian cultural forms including surfboards, *hōlua* (land sleds), and musical instruments. Because audience involvement was integral to many of these projects, a number of areas were configured as common spaces for communal engagement and transaction, some figuratively referencing the social and cultural realities of people's lives via places of commerce like clothing and grocery stores, outdoor food markets and stalls, and trading posts and commissaries. Some sections were likewise set up to host "barter" tables where the genial sharing of stories and information was the currency of exchange rather than money. Adjacent zones were arranged as informal classrooms, arts and crafts areas, miniature community gardens, and semi-private enclosures for retreat, meditation, or conversation. In other spots, signage invited visitors to sit at worktables to make their own drawings and prints or to write messages, which were subsequently used as components for nearby installations.

Spaces of Sociality and Dialogic Exchange

Ultimately, what stood out as the distinguishing feature of this event was the immediate, onsite presence of artists and cultural practitioners who made themselves available to visitors—interacting, socializing, and discussing the motivations behind their work. By design, then, the Culture Lab advanced a very different mode of engagement from that of the typical museum or art exhibition—for artists and audiences alike. Hospitable, non-didactic, and relatively unstructured encounters unfolded fluidly, ranging from casual conversations to more intensive engagements in which visitors asked detailed questions about the exhibitors' projects. As a situation explicitly constructed to foster sociality and dialogue, the Culture Lab bears affinities with concepts like "relational aesthetics," as well as with

artistic projects that seek ways to foster and share interaction with different publics, and bridge gaps between art and life.¹⁰ An often-cited example of this tendency toward affability and social immediacy in art is Rirkrit Tiravanija's 1990s creation of makeshift kitchens in art museums in which he cooked for visitors, thereby enabling the Thai artist's preparation and sharing of Thai food to act as a means to initiate informal conversation.

Having both witnessed and taken part in a number of open interactions during the event, I was struck by the artists' intellectual and emotional generosity in committing themselves to this endeavor. These often-extended exchanges, as one visiting arts-writer cogently noted, enabled 'Ae Kai's "audience to enter [into] the process of the artist . . . not just the result."¹¹ Through direct and congenial engagement with the audience, as one of the artists asserted, the very act of having Asian Pacific and Indigenous participants share "their stories in their own voice[s] subverts this whole idea of exoticization of the other and just makes people relatable."¹²

Beyond fostering person-to-person contact via curated spaces of conviviality, the Culture Lab was foundationally oriented to the transactional production and sharing of knowledge across diverse communities by encouraging collaboration and loose partnerships between artist-participants. Some of the symmetries between the experiences and histories of different peoples that surfaced through such dialogues suggest the potential for settings like 'Ae Kai to open new channels for creative investigation and cross-identification among members of diverse groups that might otherwise not be aligned.

Indeed, one memorable interview involved a three-way discussion between Charles Philippe Jean-Pierre, a Washington, DC-based Haitian American artist; David Keanu Sai, a Native Hawaiian activist scholar; and myself about their multi-media project entitled *The Commissary / Ua Mau Ke Ea* (Fig. 1).¹³ The two artists met at the 2016 Culture Lab in New York, and their joint project evolved through an ongoing dialogue in which Sai's 2013 book, *Ua Mau Ke Ea: Sovereignty Endures*, became the pivot point for Jean-Pierre's engagement with Hawai'i's history.¹⁴ For Jean-Pierre the term "commissary" provided a symbolic point of convergence, as both men associated the word with American military bases and prisons, institutions that disproportionately incarcerate and employ people of color—in particular African Americans and Native Hawaiians, along with other Pacific Islanders. To provide the visual counterpart and backdrop complementing Sai's provocative onsite lectures on events in Hawaiian history, including the overthrow of the monarchy in 1893, Jean-Pierre crafted a minimal installation meant to schematically represent a US military commissary, identified by prominent signage and

reinforced by distinctive American-flag-inspired bunting. Using metal shelves, clothes racks, a shopping cart, and a telephone cable spool serving as a table, the installation displayed popular local and imported foodstuffs and Hawai'i-themed merchandise to reference the continuing commodification of local Polynesian culture. To signal the foregrounding of an Indigenous perspective, among the wares being purveyed were tropical-flower-print aloha shirts imprinted with a stenciled English text—"MAKE HAWAII HAWAI'I AGAIN"—that contrasts the non-Indigenous and Hawaiian language spellings of this place name. Their rhetorical aim was to assert the Indigenous standpoint through the use of the 'okina, a diacritical mark indicating a glottal stop in the spoken Hawaiian language.



Figure 1. Charles Philippe Jean-Pierre in collaboration with David Keanu Sai, *The Commissary / Ua Mau Ke Ea*, 2017. Mixed-media installation. Photograph by Margo Machida. Courtesy of the artist

To entice visitors to enter their area, Jean-Pierre intentionally sought to create attractive displays of mass-market "cultural commodities" reminiscent of

those in contemporary gift shops or grocery stores. However, instead of actually selling such familiar merchandise, the installation was a performative environment ultimately designed to disseminate Sai's "knowledge and understanding of the history of the Hawaiian Kingdom."¹⁵ *The Commissary* follows the aspirations of the organizers of 'Ae Kai to engage the artists in a collaborative process that "not only allowed for but demanded [that they] be able to shape the kinds of spaces and the kinds of encounters" that took place.¹⁶ Similarly the visual components in a number of other projects were not intended to be standalone artworks so much as continuously evolving sites of interchange between the artists and visitors to this Culture Lab. Given the curatorial emphasis on fostering interpersonal exchange, I would argue that rather than evaluating the exhibited works on traditional factors like aesthetics, it is more salient and instructive to consider how well they functioned within the parameters put forward by 'Ae Kai.

Links to the Local



Figure 2. Carl Franklin Ka'a'ilā'au Pao, *He 'Āhole Ka I'a Hole Ke Aloha ('Āhole is the Fish, Love is Restless)*, 2017. Mixed media (woodblock print, ink, butcher paper), 96 x 120 in. Photograph by Kimberly Luis. Courtesy of the artist

By mounting this Culture Lab in Hawai'i, matters of indigeneity and pan-Pacific Indigenous affinities and connections necessarily took on a prominent role in the

proceedings. As such, the assembled projects contended with urgent regional and global issues, including climate change and rising sea levels, land use, toxic waste, environmental sustainability, food insecurity, Indigenous rights, militarization, sovereignty, and governance.

Although space does not permit a full account of the spectrum of presentations and issues in 'Ae Kai, I found it notable that in many projects the venue itself, as a former supermarket, prompted references to food that addressed broader issues impacting Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and other local communities. For instance, Carl Franklin Ka'ailā'au Pao's installation, 'He 'Āhole Ka I'a Hole Ke Aloha (*'Āhole is the Fish, Love is Restless*) (Fig. 2), referenced the municipal character of Foodland—which had primarily served a working-class clientele—by surveying members of the public about their economic status. Pao—concerned about growing economic disparities between the affluent Honolulu residents who now frequent the mall's increasingly upscale businesses and the swelling ranks of the city's poor and homeless—devised a participatory project in which woodblock printing techniques registered, compared, and visibly displayed visitors' social standings based on their differing income levels.¹⁷ He invited visitors to select from one of three colors of ink corresponding to their income level, then use an engraved stamp with an image of the 'āhole, a local species of fish, to stamp a fish in that color on a large sheet of butcher paper affixed to an adjacent wall.¹⁸ The images this process created illustrated the stark polarities between wealth and poverty in present-day island society, signified by the contrasting arrays of black, aqua, and red fish. Yet, the project was also meant to summon a unifying spirit rooted in mutual connections to the Hawaiian Islands as one's home. The 'āhole carries notable cultural significance in Hawai'i, as it was traditionally used in ceremonies to conjure the spirit of aloha and love.¹⁹ Each individual's act of hand-stamping an 'āhole on the wall, therefore, became a symbolic contribution toward collectively "bringing aloha to that place."²⁰

Native Hawaiian artist Maile Andrade's mixed-media floor installation 'Āina Mea'ai (*Food Land*) (Fig. 3) offered a trenchant commentary on local people's dependence on imported canned and processed goods—and the concomitant importance of growing their own food—via a three-dimensional rendering of the island of O'ahu. The island's landscape and population centers were assembled entirely from comestibles—including SPAM, canned sardines, and bottled water—that are currently omnipresent in Islanders' diets. (Fig. 4). The pork product SPAM, in particular, retains a deep resonance across the Pacific region,



Figure 3. Maile Andrade, 'Āina Mea'ai (Food Land), 2017. Mixed-media installation with canned goods and bottled water. Photograph by Margo Machida. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Maile Andrade, 'Āina Mea'ai (Food Land) (detail), 2017. Mixed-media installation with canned goods and bottled water. Photograph by Margo Machida. Courtesy of the artist

as it was introduced and popularized by American troops during World War II. The artist's deployment of packaged foodstuffs purchased in bulk from Costco (and later donated to a local homeless encampment) provided a concrete manifestation of the impact of mass consumerism on the environment, including distress over "how we dispose of the waste that fills our island."²¹ Such themes, and attendant concerns for the profound damage to the planetary ecosystem brought about through humankind's actions, resonated throughout a number of projects in 'Ae Kai, some of which incorporated empty plastic bottles and other detritus gathered from area shorelines.



Figure 5. Craig Santos Perez and Brandy Nālani McDougall, *(de)fence*, 2017. Mixed-media installation with steel mesh fence (8 x 10 ft.). Photograph by Craig Santos Perez. Courtesy of the artists

Linkages formed through trans-Pacific warfare and colonialism inspired the installation *(de)fence* by Chamoru (Chamorro) poet Craig Santos Perez and Native Hawaiian poet Brandy Nālani McDougall. The work explored historic connections between the artists' respective island homelands, Guåhan (Guam) and Hawai'i, both of which came under US control during its late-nineteenth-century territorial expansion in the Pacific. The Cold War led to further expansion of the American military presence and the deeming of Hawai'i, Guam, Okinawa, and other Pacific islands as vital to America's national defense. As a result, fenced-off US military bases, supply and storage centers, training grounds, firing ranges, and test sites became ubiquitous postwar features in these island landscapes. To underscore lived experiences in these militarized environments, the central component of *(de)fence*—alluded to in its punning title—was a freestanding section of galva-



Figure 6. Craig Santos Perez and Brandy Nālani McDougall, *(de)fence* (detail–Hawai’i), 2017. Mixed-media installation with steel mesh fence. Photograph by Craig Santos Perez. Courtesy of the artists



Figure 7. Craig Santos Perez and Brandy Nālani McDougall, *(de)fence* (detail–Guam), 2017. Mixed media installation with steel mesh fence. Photograph by Margo Machida. Courtesy of the artists

nized chain-link fence (Fig. 5). Densely festooned with texts and archival images, detailing the islands' respective histories and printed on plastic sheets, the fence also included clusters of red ribbons and white fabric bearing handwritten messages of hope for peace, liberation, and demilitarization of the islands. Visitors were encouraged to add their own inscriptions on blank ribbons and strips of cloth that the artists provided (Figs. 6–7).



Figure 8. Shizu Saldamando, *Farewell to Honouliuli: Reflections on Manzanar, Rohwer, and the Japanese Incarceration in Hawai'i*, communal workshop in progress, 2017. Mixed-media installation. Photograph by Len Higa. Courtesy of the artist

In the mixed-media installation *Farewell to Honouliuli: Reflections on Manzanar, Rohwer and the Japanese Incarceration in Hawai'i*, Shizu Saldamando, a California-based artist of mixed Japanese and Mexican heritage, referenced Honouliuli, Hawai'i's largest Japanese internment camp, which operated from 1943 to 1946 (Fig. 8). Her piece encouraged visitors to participate in fashioning leis from paper flowers to pay homage to the Japanese Americans—including local residents and the artist's own West Coast relatives—who were incarcerated on O'ahu and on the US mainland during World War II. Notably, the leis were fabricated from shredded paper replicas of US-government documents authorizing

proscriptive policies toward ethno-racial and religious groups perceived as threatening to national interests—specifically, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Executive Order 9066 of 1942, and the more recent 2017 Executive Order 13769, colloquially known as the Muslim Travel Ban (Fig. 9). For Saldamando, cutting up these “politically loaded” documents and repurposing them to create leis, which are typically used on special occasions to welcome people to Hawai‘i, was both a “poetic action and a symbolic gesture of resistance.”²²



Figure 9. Shizu Saldamando, *Farewell to Honouliuli: Reflections on Manzanar, Rohwer, and the Japanese Incarceration in Hawai‘i* (detail), 2017. Mixed media installation. Photograph by Shizu Saldamando. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 10. Shizu Saldamando, *Farewell to Honolulu: Reflections on Manzanar, Rohwer, and the Japanese Incarceration in Hawai'i* (detail), 2017. Mixed-media installation. Photograph by Margo Machida. Courtesy of the artist

'Ae Kai took place during a period of escalating anti-Muslim xenophobia and public fear about Islamist terrorists entering the United States. When newly elected President Donald J. Trump signed Executive Order 13769 in January of 2017, he raised the possibility of establishing a national database of all immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, citing the constitutional precedent that had ordered the wartime internment of Japanese Americans. Condemnation swiftly ensued, with Japanese Americans demonstrating against Trump's action while also expressing support for Muslim Americans and other imperiled immigrants. Accordingly, Saldamando's installation includes her drawing of a young child holding a sign that reads "Japanese Americans against Muslim Registration" (Fig. 10). This stirring image, inspired by a photograph taken during a 2017 protest march, personifies an intersectional ethos of solidarity formed among minoritized groups and people of color through their struggles with discrimination, racism, institutionalized violence, and exclusion.²³



Figure 11. Robin Lasser and Adrienne Pao, *Dashboard Hula Girl Dress Tent*, mixed media installation at Foodland featuring Mareva Minerbi and Sequoia Carr Brown, 2017. Photograph courtesy of the artists

Adrienne Keahi Pao—a California-born photographer and artist of mixed Native Hawaiian and European ancestry who was raised in the Hawai‘i diaspora—simultaneously views herself as an outsider/observer and insider to Hawaiian culture. Negotiations of hybridity, Indigenous identification, and complex implications arising from Pao’s sense of “double consciousness” were given dramatic expression in *Dashboard Hula Girl Dress Tent* (Fig. 11). A collaborative installation and performance with artist Robin Lasser, the work was intended to contrast the hula dancer as a stereotypical Hawaiian female image with that of actual women in Hawai‘i. Playing off the swaying hula girl figurines that commonly appear on car dashboards and are sold as tourist souvenirs, the project was centered around a ten-foot-tall grass hula skirt resembling a thatched hut. The collaborators conceived this “dress tent” as both an iconic costume and a habitable dome-like structure. They enlisted a succession of local female dancers to inhabit and infuse this wearable sculptural object with their own interpretive performances, both at the festival site and on nearby Waikīkī Beach’s postcard-like, touristic setting (Fig. 12). To further underscore the contrast between received images and an intimate knowledge of Hawaiian culture, *Dashboard Hula Girl Dress Tent*’s hollow interior included text panels—recounting familial stories about the artist’s female ances-



Figure 12. Robin Lasser and Adrienne Pao, *Dashboard Hula Girl Dress Tent*, Waikīkī Beach, Honolulu, Hawai'i, chromogenic print, 30 x 36 in., 2017. Photograph courtesy of the artists



Figure 13. Robin Lasser and Adrienne Pao, *Dashboard Hula Girl Dress Tent*, interior design fabricated by Christy Chow, 2017. Photograph courtesy of the artists

tral lineage of traditional hula practitioners—that were accessible to viewers who ventured into this tent-like enclosure (Fig. 13).²⁴

Co-relationality and Reciprocity

Driven by APAC'S staunch commitment to advancing issues of social justice, environmentalism, and human rights, the Culture Lab represents an adventuresome experiment in applying principles drawn from community organizing and outreach to the process of doing curatorial work.²⁵ In seeking to foster equity, interconnectivity, and reciprocity by developing and expanding lines of affinity across different groups, the Culture Lab series is providing vibrant public spaces for cultivating convergence, mixing, and co-relationality. In 'Ae Kai, this direction, by design, allowed for new channels of transmission and communication to organically take shape within a Pacific locale where multiple voices, narratives, and trajectories have historically intersected and converged.



Figure 14. Artists from 'Ae Kai participating in preservation work at the Ho'oulu 'Āina Nature Preserve, Kalihi Valley, O'ahu, Hawai'i, 2017. Left to right: Chad Shomura, Linh Huynh, Kayla Briët; upper right, Rosanna Raymond. Photograph by Nathan Kawanishi. Courtesy of Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center

Kālewa Correa, one of the organizers, proceeding from a Native Hawaiian vantage point, movingly characterized 'Ae Kai's principal objective as sharing in "building the 'ohana (family), building communities of trust and communities of practice . . . knowing [that every participant's] job as family is to raise up each other."²⁶ Or, as Adriel Luis, another curatorial team member, pithily put it, "What we've made is not just an art show. . . . [H]ere we seed tribes."²⁷ This emphasis on "growing" relationships of mutuality and reciprocity proved deeply resonant for many Pacific Islanders taking part in 'Ae Kai and in the preliminary events arranged by APAC that preceded the exhibition. These included the pre-convening of the artists on April 21, 2017 to participate in preservation work at the Ho'oulu 'Āina ("to grow the land") Nature Preserve in Kalihi Valley, providing a tangible means to directly engage with Hawai'i by caring for a portion of its land (Fig. 14).²⁸ For Rosanna Raymond, a New Zealand artist of mixed Sāmoan heritage, the organizers' careful attention to establishing a "relationship-making space" prior to the event was analogous to Indigenous ways of being, as manifested in traditional values associated with hosting—*manaakitanga* in the Māori language—that place great worth on how well the person extending the invitation "brings people together, looks after them, and sustains them."²⁹

For this artist, the Culture Lab's affirmation of the importance of providing a reciprocal, inter-relational forum also resonates with Sāmoan conceptions of the *vā*, a term with variants among other Polynesian cultures. According to Raymond, in Sāmoa the *vā* is broadly perceived as the space in between all things, an expanse for negotiation that is "activated through the living, and the connections they make," as different standpoints, worldviews, and knowledges are brought together in purposeful engagement.³⁰ From this perspective, dialogic encounters also figuratively serve to constitute the ever-shifting scope of the 'ae kai, the shoreline, posited as a dynamic natural metaphor for emergent spaces of interchange and mutual transformation between people and cultures. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to witness, share in, and derive sustenance from such a rich discourse-in-formation.

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the Americas (*Brill*) and a contributor to the retrospective catalog Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision (University of California Press, 2022).

Notes

¹ This article was originally prepared in 2017 for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center (APAC), and is being published in expanded form with their permission. All images are from 'Ae Kai: A Culture Lab on Convergence, organized by Smithsonian APAC, July 7–9, 2017, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

² For more information about 'Ae Kai: A Culture Lab on Convergence, see the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center website: <https://smithsonianapa.org/aekai/>.

³ As I was unable to witness an earlier gathering held solely for the invited artists and cultural practitioners, this commentary is based on attending activities that were open to the public.

⁴ Brandi Martin, dir., 'Ae Kai, A short documentary by 84 and Sunny (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, 2018).

⁵ Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 276–82.

⁶ I thank an anonymous peer reviewer for sharing their observations regarding critical reactions to 'Ae Kai; these are paraphrased here.

⁷ Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, interview by the author, August 3, 2017.

⁸ Jane Char Wai and Tin-Yuke Char, *Chinese Historic Sites and Pioneer Families of Rural Oahu* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Chinese History Center, 1988), 41–4. See also "Soo Shee Pang Lau" in Barbara Bennett Peterson, *Notable Women of Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 231–3.

⁹ Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, *Creative Placemaking* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2010), 3–9. For a discussion of the 1980 *Times Square Show*, see John Reed, "Crossroads of the (Art)World," *The Paris Review*, October 10, 2012, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/10/10/crossroads-of-the-art-world/>.

¹⁰ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Relational Aesthetics," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 160–71. See also Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

¹¹ Sasha Dees, conversation with the author, Honolulu, Hawai'i, July 10, 2017.

¹² Shizu Saldamando, interview by the author, Honolulu, Hawai'i, July 8, 2017.

¹³ Charles Philippe Jean-Pierre and David Keanu Sai, interview by the author, Honolulu, Hawai'i, July 7, 2017.

¹⁴ David Keanu Sai, *Ua Mau Ke Ea Sovereignty Endures: An Overview of the Political and Legal History of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: Pū'ā Foundation, 2013).

- ¹⁵ Charles Philippe Jean-Pierre, interview by the author, Honolulu, Hawai'i, July 7, 2017.
- ¹⁶ Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, interview by the author, August 31, 2021.
- ¹⁷ Carl Franklin Ka'ailā'au Pao, interview by the author, Honolulu, Hawai'i, July 16, 2017.
- ¹⁸ A wall chart posted in the installation denoted Pao's system of color-coding visitors by their annual income level and socioeconomic class, with black representing the "upper class" defined as "greater than or equal to \$154,000"; aqua corresponding to the middle- and blue-collar class, "between \$52,000 and \$153,000"; and red representing the "so-called lower class, less than or equal to \$51,000." Pao, interview.
- ¹⁹ For more about the significance of the 'āhole fish, see Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary: Hawaiian-English, English-Hawaiian* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), 8.
- ²⁰ Pao, interview.
- ²¹ Nina Wu, "CULTURE CONVERGENCE: A pop-up event features local artists, Cuban surfers and creatives from around the world," *Honolulu Star Advertiser*, July 7, 2017, T5.
- ²² Saldamando, interview.
- ²³ Shizu Saldamando, email to the author, September 2, 2021.
- ²⁴ For an in-depth discussion of Adrienne Pao's *Dashboard Hula Girl Dress Tent*, see A. Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira, "From a Native Daughter: Seeking Home and Ancestral Lines through a Dashboard Hula Girl," *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal*, 1 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/R71141463>.
- ²⁵ Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, "Culture Lab Manifesto," *Poetry Magazine*, July 5, 2017, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/142894/culture-lab-manifesto>.
- ²⁶ Kālewa Correa, interview by the author, Honolulu, Hawai'i, July 9, 2017.
- ²⁷ Adriel Luis (@drztl), Instagram, July 13, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BWgCBXXlkXn/>.
- ²⁸ For more information about Ho'oulu 'Āina Nature Preserve, see <https://www.hoouluaina.com/>.
- ²⁹ Rosanna Raymond, interview by the author, New York City, August 12, 2017.
- ³⁰ Raymond, interview. For further discussion of the *vā* and concepts of relational space, see Vilsoni Hereniko, "Tualuga: Decolonising and Globalizing the Pacific," in *Transpacific Americas: Encounters and Engagements Between the Americas and the South Pacific*, eds. Eveline Dürr and Philipp Schorch (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 167–74.