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THE RISE OF TE PĀTI MĀORI + ART IS BORING + 30 ARTISTS WHO AREN'T



SPIRALLING TRANSLATIONS

Artist and Berlin-
based expat
RUTH BUCHANAN
is returning to
Auckland to take
up the role of
kaitohu director at
Artspace Aotearoa.

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On 5 November 1881, 1500 armed Crown troops and volunteers stormed Parihaka to break up the peaceful Taranaki community. The people of Parihaka had been removing surveyors' pegs and ploughing land designated for settlers, in resistance to the theft of their whenua. Rather than meet violence with violence, the villagers greeted their invaders with singing tamariki offering kai. Among those peaceful protesters were the tūpuna of artist and incoming Artspace Aotearoa director Ruth Buchanan (Taranaki, Te Ātiawa, Pākehā) — and mine, too. One hundred and forty-one years later, when I took a trip from Berlin to see Buchanan's soft, giant lavender koru taking up a whole room of the Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart in Switzerland, I thought of the passive resistance of our ancestors, the artwork continuing our whakapapa of stealth.

The koru in question, titled *Spiral Time* (2022), is the culmination of Buchanan's latest exhibition, *Heute Nacht geträumt* (*Dreamt last night*). Yet it's entirely possible that I was the only visitor in the exhibition's five-month run who saw it as a koru. The 64-page reader accompanying the exhibition omits the koru's significance in te ao Māori. For Buchanan, the omission is a question of "what's helpful for us in this moment?" She continues, "In the Basel moment, I think that would have been confusing. Not because it's not interesting and important, but [the museum is] just not there yet."

The show, which may be the 2018 Walters Prize winner's last for a while, scrutinised the gallery's collecting methods, the same approach she utilised in her 2019 exhibition *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth. In *Heute Nacht geträumt* (*Dreamt last night*), Buchanan applies different organising systems to both the public collection and that of the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, which provided significant funding towards the building of the contemporary museum that opened in 1982. One system is that of the spiral.

"Spiral time is my answer or provocation to a standardised, Western, chronological time," says Buchanan, particularly in the context of art history. Rather than looking at time as a linear construction, as the collection (and many other collections) has done up until now, the spiral asks us to consider what multiple art histories might look like, layered on top of each other, cycling back and forth on simultaneous planes.

Buchanan tells me she felt like she had "cracked it" with spiral time, but soon discovered that she'd actually tapped into a well-established Māori concept of time without realising it. Former Māori Language Commissioner Sir Patu Hohepa has described Māori time as being multidimensional, criticising the oft-wheeled-out idea of Māori walking backwards into the future as being too linear. Art historians Deidre Brown, Ngarino Ellis and Jonathan Mane-Wheoki continue this thought: "The past, or future for that matter, can be above, below, close, distant, or facing towards or away from us or you, depending on the situation or subject."

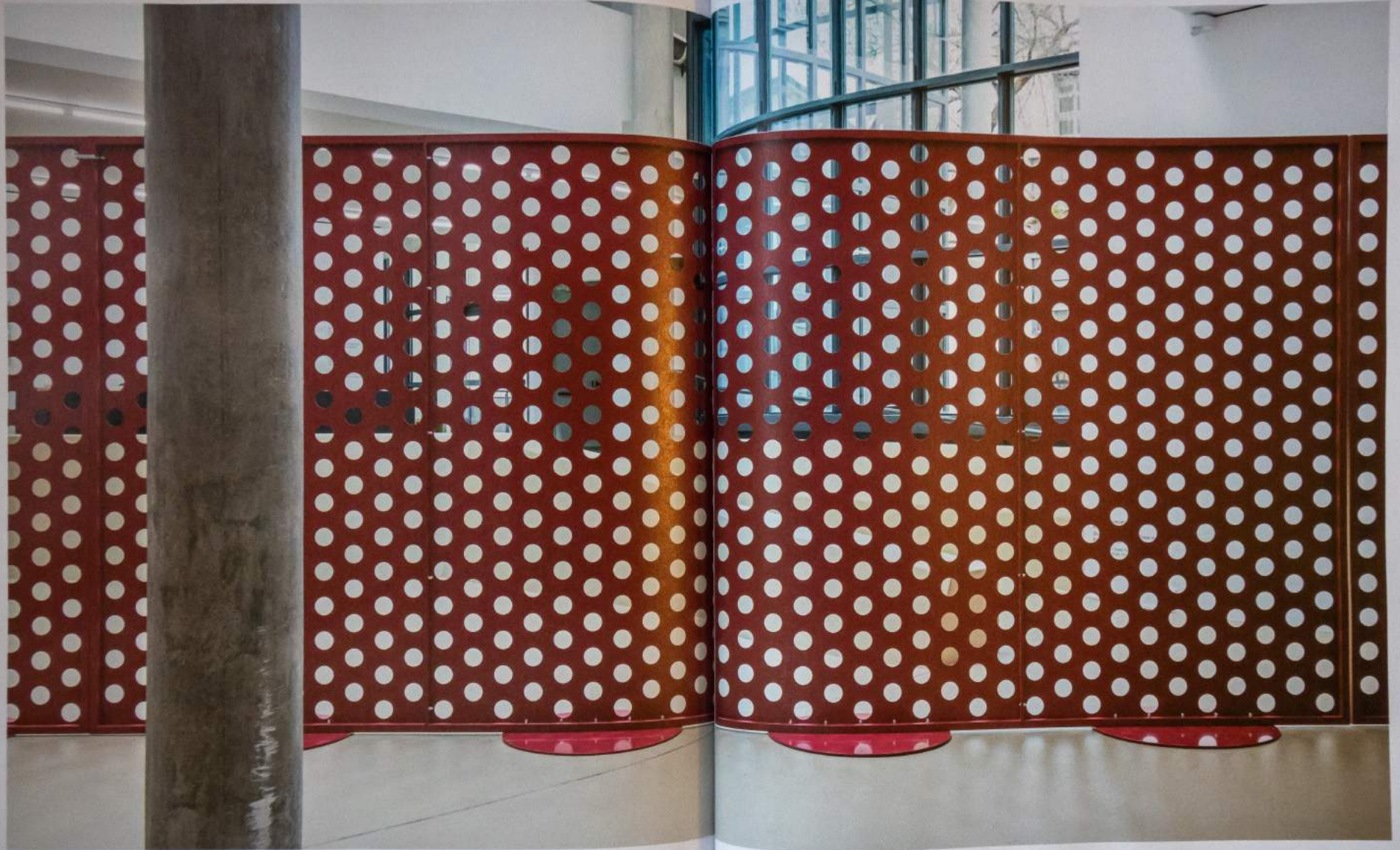
For Buchanan, spiral time also stems from her close reading of pioneering Māori poet JC Sturm, a whanaunga of hers. Like Buchanan, Sturm was interested in institutions like museums and libraries and what they tell us about ourselves. "Sturm's work offers so much in terms of thinking about institutional critique, because it moves from critique to transformation," Buchanan says. "Moving on the spiral was how I could understand the process of doing and undoing that Sturm performs in her poems."

Crowning *Heute Nacht geträumt* on the third floor, *Spiral Time* was a room-sized lilac curtain furling in on itself. The piece was hand-dyed by Buchanan along with members of the curatorial team and museum hosts — an opportunity for staff to engage bodily with the space in a new way. Many of the walls were handpainted in the same soft tone to about halfway up, resembling a rising tide with the works floating on top. This added a tenderness to the white cube experience, but also served as a reminder that even Buchanan's survey of the collection had been performed by human minds and hands.

This emphasis on the handmade reminds us that it is the artist's hand which works between the collection and the audience — a kind of translation, something which Buchanan recently discovered is a familial legacy. Her sister, the writer and historian Rachel Buchanan, in researching her 2018 book *Ko Taranaki Te Maunga*, discovered that their tūpuna Tāre Warahi, or Charles Wallace, was a translator for Parihaka ploughmen put on trial. He also served as an interpreter for Parihaka leader Te Whiti o Rongomai. Rachel Buchanan describes finding a drawer of her recently deceased father's filing cabinet dedicated to Taranaki land disputes. It contains three generations of news clippings, research papers and reports. "Here was eighty years of nonviolent protest against colonisation," she writes. "This was our whānau's passive resistance." The idea of descending from a translator rang true for the artist and her whānau. When you translate, Ruth Buchanan believes, "you're putting things in relation through systems. That's infrastructure, but it's content and it's politics, too. I think that's something that our family has been alive to."

Like her art practice, Buchanan's new role at Artspace Aotearoa is also an act of translation. In fact, her new job at the Karangahape Rd gallery is an excellent opportunity to continue examining the questions that have run through her recent work around who art spaces are for, whom they reflect, and how this is experienced by the visitor. "I feel very excited about the questions that are asked of me in stepping into this role," Buchanan says. There are meaty and challenging questions, for sure, for a gallery director today to be answering. But Buchanan is also one of the people asking them.

"I think that so much of what's missing for audiences is the offer to be confident," she says. Buchanan is interested in what meeting Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations could look like in practice; what it would take for audience members to feel a sense of sovereignty or tūrangawāwae in the



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Ruth Buchanan



gallery. She acknowledges that might look quite different for each visitor — from liking, say, the lilac colour on the walls, to having your mind changed about a certain topic from watching an experimental film. “All of those responses are equally part of what it takes to think the world differently.”

“Another focus of mine is the intergenerational,” she adds. “How can we bring what I would call ‘pou artists’, significant senior artists, into arced conversation with younger practitioners?”

Buchanan is keen to connect Aotearoa artists and audiences with international conversations, using her experience and connections abroad. And it’s precisely having a leg on either side of the fence — the international experience combined with local connections — that made Buchanan a great candidate for her new job.

In the autumn 2022 issue of *Metro*, Emil Scheffmann reported on the unsettling trend of international director hires over local counterparts. He noted that although 50% of Artspace Aotearoa’s directors in its 35-year history came from within Aotearoa, none of the last three appointments was a local hire. Buchanan will replace Remco de Blaaij, from the Netherlands. In that same article, Artspace Aotearoa kaihautū chairperson Desna Whaanga-Schollum said that in its next hire, the gallery would be looking for someone to implement enduring change. Buchanan has negotiated a tenure of up to five years, longer than the previously standard three, so that she and the team will have time to make changes that can outlast her directorship.

As for what she brings to the table, Buchanan says, “I think it’s awesome to have an artist lead an arts organisation.” Buchanan is the first artist to lead Artspace since its founding director, Mary-Louise Browne, in the late 80s. Buchanan continues, “I think it’s awesome to have an artist who’s lived in both places. I think it’s awesome to have an artist who’s fragmented from their Māoriness and able to slowly come to that. I think it’s awesome to have all of those things as part of what happens at the organisation.”

Buchanan will take up her role at the end of October. For now, she’s working from her studio in Berlin, where she has lived since 2010, while gearing up to write the next version of art history, or an art history, at least. Will the institution gobble her up, she wonders, “or will I crack it open? Ask me in a couple of years.”

What Buchanan is sure of is that Aotearoa is the place to be right now. “What we can do in Aotearoa is magic,” she says, adding that the European arts scene is still relatively limited by linearity, whereas in Aotearoa, we have access to more complex paradigms. She encountered this with her exhibition at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, where she found an Indigenous framework ready to engage with her work. In Basel, by contrast, “it was a completely different thing to try to understand where and how you hook on”.

Buchanan has noticed an inward turn in New Zealand during the pandemic, the border closures providing the setting for a more introspective reckoning with our home

identity. “That makes sense,” she says. “But let’s look at what parts of that can also open up, be shared, and offer a precedent, a model or a practice to other spaces that don’t have that paradigm; that don’t have mātauranga Māori; that don’t have a massive diaspora from the whole Moana-nui-a-Kiwa; that don’t have all of these layers of rich textured understandings of how we are as people.”

The European art world Buchanan leaves behind is sitting at an uncomfortable point on the spiral. In 2021, Berlin’s hulking Humboldt Forum opened its doors, putting back on display thousands of contestably collected Indigenous taonga, right as some of the continent’s oldest institutions began to engage in discussions of repatriation. This year, Yuki Kihara was the first Pasifika, Asian and fa’afafine artist to represent Aotearoa at the Venice Biennale, where she convened the Firsts Solidarity Network for the many artists who are the first of their community to show at the fair. And just a month before Kihara’s exhibition opened in Venice, Buchanan installed her lilac koru in Basel, its softness belying its iconoclastic implications.

In her 1997 poem ‘Let go, unlearn, give back’, JC Sturm wrote:

*Let go, relinquish
Charms, talismans, taonga.
Return them, in the turning time
To their source.*

The lines could just as easily have been written this decade, as a poem for an entire continent’s “turning time”, or for us here in Berlin, farewelling Buchanan on her journey home.

1. Ruth Buchanan with Tongue / Plattform (2022) in Heute Nacht geträumt, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart. Photo by Sandra M. Linsin
2. Ruth Buchanan with Spiral Time (2022), in Heute Nacht geträumt, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart. Photo by Xandra M. Linsin
3. Enclosure (when the sick rule the world reverb) (2019/2022), in Heute Nacht geträumt, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart. Photo by Jonas Hänggi, courtesy of the artist
4. Installation view of Heute Nacht geträumt, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart. Photo by Jonas Hänggi, courtesy of the artist