

Te heahea me ngā toi, te hikohiko: Productive Idiocy, mātauranga Māori and Art-activism Strategies in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This article explores what it can mean to navigate notions of productive idiocy with aspects of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), through some recent art-as-activism practices of the author, Aotearoa/New Zealand artist Mark Harvey. The works explicated include *Waitākere Drag* and *Auau* in the Te Wao Nui ā Tiriwa forest ranges and *Productive Promises*, which was part of TEZA (*Trans Economic Zone of Aotearoa*) in Ōtautahi/Christchurch. Avital Ronell's Nietzschean-influenced perspectives on idiocy are drawn from in relation to Western and Māori perspectives, along with Roger Sansi's work on idiocy as dissent. From this aggregation of epistemologies, it is proposed that idiocy can be productive through art as activism and that this can align with Indigenous Māori perspectives on playing the fool as a form of resistance and refusal. Examples of Māori concepts engaged with here include perspectives on relationship building, human relationships with forests and the environment, and sovereignty under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi). These art-activism projects promised micro-attempts at making positive changes for the communities in which they were situated through performatively generated actions from a Māori perspective within the shroud of ongoing colonization and capitalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

He pai ake te iti i te kore (*A little is better than none*, Māori proverb)

What difference can performance-based art generate in terms of cultural and political awareness? Specifically, what might it mean to consider art as activism in the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a multicultural society still grappling with its colonial legacy, in relation to notions of productive idiocy (playing the fool) and Indigenous Māori perspectives (that is, mātauranga Māori, or Māori knowledge)? In this article, as an artist and researcher, I attempt to provide conditions of possibility regarding these questions by working through three recent performance-based art-as-activism projects; *Waitākere Drag*, *Auau*, and *Productive Promises*.

The notion of art-as-activism is influenced here by a range of perspectives, where art is intended to performatively call up (Butler 1996) and activate political discourse, reflections, agency, and insights through specific tactics (de Certeau 1984). For instance, by questioning or providing alternatives to dominant hegemonic, colonial, capitalist, and what many see as conservative, norms implicit in the modernist frame of white-cube-gallery-related methods (Felshin 1995), such activism may be situated in parallel to traditional protest actions, while aiming to catalyze political and cultural questioning of normative Western and colonial practices. Such work can be, as Sarah Ann Standing argues of eco-activist performance, effective as a means of political agency despite itself not originating in activism that pushes for social and societal change (2012, 147–9).

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The art projects analyzed here are defined by a performance aesthetic. They work with the live-in-the-flesh, and involve participation, demonstration, and solipsism. They exist outside art galleries, but sometimes in partnership with them. Each is situated in a specific context that calls for a sense of engagement and responsiveness, rather than a sense of doing the right or wrong things that “site specificity” calls for (Kwon 2004, 29–34). They attempt to generate political awareness of social justice and ecological political issues latent to their respective locations through a sense of idiocy. Both the projects and my reflections on them are fundamentally informed by my own mixed cultural standpoint, as Māori (Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Raukawa, Mātāwaka iwi), Pākehā (New Zealander of primarily British descent), and as a son of profoundly deaf parents (a cultural identity often associated with idiocy in my experience). In relation to both my analytical positioning and to the visual representation inherent in the artworks, it is also relevant that I perform as “white passing,” and that I have a Portuguese ancestor who labored in the local kauri extraction industry where some of the works took place. In addition to describing these works I attempt to reflect on them as art-as-activism through an aesthetics of idiocy and mātauranga Māori.

II. AUAU AND WAITĀKERE DRAG

Woof, woof! (A dog barking while I perform *Waitakere Drag*, personal journal 2018)

People before forests! (Oratia residents’ protest motto against the planned water treatment facility in their valley, personal journal 2017)

Before launching into theoretical reflections, I turn here to describe the art works *Auau* and *Waitākere Drag* (Harvey 2018).¹ Both were curated by Ariane Craig-Smith and Chris McBride for The Kauri Project curatorial collective. They formed part of an iterative series of endurance performance projects where, on my own, I dragged things around busy roads for 2 to 3 hours at a time. The name of one of the log-dragging pieces, *Auau*, is te reo Māori (the Māori language) word for “dog bark,” in reference to the many fence-bound local territorial dogs I passed on my travels. The name also serves as a metaphor for the ways in which many rural Pākehā have proclaimed their felt right to do what they like on “their land” and clear forest,² no matter what Indigenous locals and allied ecology campaigners might say. The other title, *Waitākere Drag*, is a play on how Māori values and language are often misunderstood and twisted by Pākehā. The area where the artworks were performed, for example, is replete with misappropriated usage, and has long been incorrectly named the Waitākere Ranges by local and central government. By contrast the Mana Whenua Te Kawerau ā Maki (the Māori iwi/tribe with cultural and symbolic jurisdiction) note that the one correct name for it is Hikurangi (Taa-Gordon 2021).

The artworks were performed during the morning on semi-rural roadsides in the mountainous Te Wao Nui ā Tiriwa forest ranges, West of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland City). For each of the performances, I used a yellow automotive towrope to drag what was, for me, a very heavy roll of corrugated cardboard—two meters by 800 centimeters in size—along the road and footpaths. The cardboard weighed half a ton but felt double this when, during *Auau*, it rained on and off for the duration, not to mention the effort caused by intermittently dragging the “logs” uphill. The drags were physically challenging for me. They had me dripping in sweat and I had to maintain a sense of self-discipline not to give up. These events were filmed, and the videos subsequently presented in various art contexts, including festivals and at local art galleries at Corbans Estate and Manurewa Art Gallery, as well as online (see Harvey 2022). However, the key intention for me was to activate insights and awareness and reflect on the human and colonial-dominated politics to do with ecology in the local contexts.

On the one hand, the cardboard logs were intended to reference the extensive logging of native forest in this region by European colonizers that occurred between the 1840s and 1920s. Historically, colonial forest clearing has often been a point of celebrated nostalgia for local Pākehā—with the leftover rusty machines littering our forests acting as trophies to so-called “colonial progress” in the sometimes-romantic accounts of amateur historians like Jack Diamond (UNESCO 2022). However, these wrecks are also ghosts of the destruction and desecration of sacred natural spaces to many others, especially local Māori. The cardboard logs were the same scale as many of the thousands of

kauri trees that were felled and shipped as far afield as San Francisco and London. The scale of forest destruction was so high that only around 1% of kauri still exist (Hill and Waipara 2017).

The drags were a reminder that Aotearoa is currently at risk of losing much more of its forests, due to limited legal protections. This is due in part to amendments in 2012 to the New Zealand Resource Management Act which favor private landowners and developers who seek to clear their land. (There are on average twenty to thirty approved local government consents to clear native trees or forest monthly, which excludes the many well-known forest clearances that do not require approval [The Tree Council n.d.; Stanley 2021].) This risk is exacerbated by the recent outbreak of the tree-killing disease kauri dieback and by forests weakening in health due to climate change (Hill and Waipara 2017). However, for many of Māori descent (including myself and my family), what is often missing in public discussions around this destruction of forest is how kauri are our tūpuna (ancestors). The ongoing loss of these trees and habitats is believed by our people to cause ill-health on physical and spiritual levels. This sense of integrated ecologies contrasts with, for example, the motto of a campaign by Oratia Valley residents against a proposal to build a new water treatment facility on local farmland, which was “People before forests.” They campaigned to have native forest cleared for the water facility in a neighboring kauri-clad forest valley instead. This was near to where I performed the log-drags; thus, climate change and maintaining species diversity may not have been top of the community agenda in the sites I deliberately chose for the performances.

To some passers-by, these performances may have appeared to be with real kauri logs (if one were to remove the bark for instance). This confusion is productive: while the work might not stop an ongoing threat to local native habitats, it has the potential to keep the political issue of tree-felling in the awareness of locals as they zoom past in their cars. To others, I may have just appeared to be some random idiot, framed by a camera person in a “high-vis” vest. By perhaps appearing foolish and absurd like this I aimed to stimulate reflection in others: to attract attention to our ongoing loss of kauri trees and forest. Many people called out and asked what I was doing (to which I replied that I was doing an artwork and that I was thinking about our kauri). Others chatted with me for a while and some even cheered me on. After 2 hours of *Waitākere Drag*, an Auckland Council Forest Ranger stopped by and insisted he “give me a hand.” He placed the log in the back of his truck and dropped the camera person and I off back where we started on the basis that someone had called his office and suggested I needed some help. This was a failure to some, but it gave me the opportunity to replan the work and start again by dragging in a new direction, through forest-clad semi-suburban streets, downhill, past lots of locals, and to end at a stream, where the log could function as a non-toxic home for spawning fish.

III. PRODUCTIVE IDIOCY

Sometimes I think people are getting more and more clever watching us be more and more stupid.
(Jérôme Bel 2004, 199)

As noted in the introduction, a central contention of this article is that the productive idiocy on display in these artworks can serve as a key performative tactic of activism, building political and cultural awareness. Idiocy has a range of meanings. In the Western canon, the Ancient Greek term *Ideōtēs* refers to one without professional skills (as naïve in one sense), and/or self-involved who keeps out of “public affairs” (Sansi 2020, 266). The idiot in this tradition can be seen to be locked in fantasy (Baker 2007, 508): they are operating in opposition to, while also searching for, a sense of utopia (Sansi, 252). Roger Sansi notes that idiocy was one of the central tenets of Dadaism where artists “renounced their academic knowledge and skill, to become amateurs, who engaged with the world through chance” (266). Drawing on Isabelle Strengers and Bruno Latour, Sansi locates the idiot as avoiding rationalization, which “resists consensus” as a form of dissent (Sansi 2020, 252)

While the above may seem to give idiocy a bad name, I propose that the sense of resistance that can be found in some forms of idiocy helps produce artworks that resist dominant modes of accountability. Artistic idiocy may help us to critically reflect on and cope with situations that feel discursively foreclosed, and even offer solutions to problems at times—in this case when aligned with forms of activism. As Simon Baker notes, idiocy in art can provide a mirror to normative society and thereby

present alternative viewpoints, such as with John Heartfield's anti-Nazi art works, René Magritte's cow paintings, Paul McCarthy's chaotic video work, or Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (Baker 2007). As I develop in more detail below, a similarly productive account of idiocy can be found in the Māori tradition. Heahea, the Māori term for idiocy, occurs in many of the stories of "Māui the trickster." A demi-God (who appears in many Polynesian cultures), Māui-tikitiki-o-Taranga is well known in Māori traditions to have played the fool and often made false promises in order to trick and deceive others such as the renowned stories of origin in which he deceives the fire-God Mahuika in order to obtain fire, and fools his brothers into taking him fishing so he could show up their arrogance and fish up Te Ika-a-Māui (the North Island of Aotearoa) to the surface, bringing it into being.

This notion of idiocy aligns with that advanced by Avital Ronell (2005) in her reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (2001). Ronell specifically suggests a concept of "testing"—following Nietzsche's call for experimentation—as a mode of idiocy whereby conditions of possibility can be uncovered. The test-writer of the idiotic project, or experimenter, for Ronell (2005, 10), operates through endless questioning, simultaneous reaffirming, and failure, so as to determine what can be learned from tests. Failure, here, can include many things, such as breaking expectations and promises, lies, the fall of truth, and deception. The estimated time of arrival of this version of Nietzsche's spirit of experimentality is one that promises its promises *only as promises* (Ronell 2005, 153, 224). Promises here, no matter how much one proclaims the fulfillment of what they promise, can never guarantee to be realized—they can be broken as many can attest. Consequently, the promise of live art (experimental and conceptual arts that engage with performance in the "expanded field" [Harvey 2011]), is such that their idiotic tests refuse to underwrite themselves with any fulfilment, despite their "warrantees of promise" (for didactic completion). Moreover, in Ronell's (2005, 177) model, testing calls for an incorporation of one's own personality and passions: it is inherently linked to the tester's sense of selfhood, including their cultural and political identity.

Such test tactics may appear to be common contemporary conceptual art strategies, including creating material for open-ended interpretations. However what Ronell's concept allows for is the consideration of promises and the inclusion of one's sense of personality as a way to offer further insights about politics and culture. To take the previous example of *Auau*: things may at first appear to be "going wrong," when dogs are barking, and people are yelling out of their car windows. However, the potential of such unintended slippages is that they can reveal insights about performing art activism in public, about *the public* and its contexts that artists are dealing with, including the multitude of perspectives and attitudes we can encounter there, which "our art bubbles" might otherwise exclude.

Framed in this way, the artworks discussed above engage with idiocy towards productive understandings of contingent power dynamics (Foucault 1980, 134–140) in the contexts and sites in which they are performed and presented. This has the potential to empower voices of resistance to what can be seen as oppressive institutional norms. For example, in addition to calling up reflections regarding local settler-politics around deforestation, the "drag-works" also played with stereotypes of toxic masculinity often associated with such ecological destruction (the butch homophobic, racist, and misogynist "blokes who like drag racing" trope and its "blow-out" cultural symptoms). Another example of how these works engage with power can be seen in the dynamics of audienceship and participation and the responses and receptions to each project; for instance, whether participation goes as planned and to what degree bystanders might be stimulated into reflecting on the ecological, cultural, and political issues the art is attempting to invoke.

The productive idiocy that informed the drag works also invoked the idiotic as a way of inviting reflection upon a colonial context. The dragging of the cardboard rolls attempted to invite reflection on how humans shape and influence our natural world in ways that often suit us, but are ridiculously inappropriate to the rest of the ecosystem, in colonial contexts. Within these performance tests I brought my own personal experiences, idiosyncrasies, histories, interests in ecology, and my connections to mātauranga Māori, into conversation: attempting to continually affirm the references to nostalgia and heroism that celebrate our colonial forebears with my physical endurance and aesthetic reference of pulling the logs, yet endlessly question the ethics and point to references to ecological destruction and social exploitation. For many I may have failed to make these logs look like real trees (a nod to the Greek notion of idiocy and amateurism that Sansi [2020] reminds us of perhaps). Moreover, I may

have failed in stopping forest destruction: after all, that outcome was only ever a promise of a promise in the tradition of Nietzsche and perhaps Māui. Nonetheless, the idiotic drag may have prompted passers-by to reflect that in “humanity’s dangerous exploitation of the natural world ‘we make nature’ as we used to ‘make history’” (Randerson 2018, 117).

IV. PRODUCTIVE PROMISES

Jeeze, did you hear about the protest going on in new Brighton today? This bloody crowd was marching up and down the streets saying “thank you New Brighton, and we love New Brighton.” I mean why would anyone want to do that. It’s a bloody hell hole! (Unknown listener, *Newstalk ZB* radio station 2013)

Productive Promises was a 2013 collaborative performance work that occurred each day through *TEZA* (Trans Economic Zone of Aotearoa), curated by Mark Amery, Sophie Jerram, and Helen Kerlow-Smith. *TEZA* was an art series involving wānanga and hui (community workshops and meetings) with the aim of creating economic and social alternatives to the Aotearoa/New Zealand capitalist status quo. The intervention focused on an abandoned demolition site in the suburb of New Brighton, in Ōtautahi/Christchurch: an area that two years prior lost most of its buildings and homes due to earthquakes and was known to be living with significant community trauma and transitory-housing-related issues. The area had been subject to what was characterized as Chicago-school neoliberal government policies where the city’s rebuild became an excuse to build corporate profits at the expense of local people’s needs (Mutch 2017; Letting Space 2013).

In *Productive Promises* I used consensus-based artmaking to work with participants from the local community to create performance actions as a means to test out notions of work, usefulness, and dominant political views within a chosen site. Through guidance and facilitation, we attempted to apply the mātauranga Māori notion of whakawhanaungatanga (developing relationships and personal connections, along with consensus building) while also building a sense of mutual manaakitanga (showing respect, kindness, hospitality, and generosity, uplifting each other’s mana). In this case, we worked with neighbors, locals, and other *TEZA* participants and artists. After a day of performing a range of collective actions, such as moving rubbish out of empty lots so that the council would collect it, we then completely transformed the work due to further discussions with locals at our first evening *TEZA* open community kōrero (talks).

Claire, a neighbour, said to the whole room that she was sick of everyone always being down on New Brighton, and that she was proud to live there. Everyone else in the room agreed. She went on to say, “Why doesn’t someone just go up and down the street thanking us all for the heart and soul we put into our community?”... So I chatted with her and the locals later on and asked her, how would you feel if we were to run “thank you protests” through the main streets of New Brighton? She and the others lit up and said yeah! (Harvey, personal journal 2013)

The decision to run what became known as “thank you protests” in *Productive Bodies* for the remainder of *TEZA* proved popular. The crowds grew and made placards for our marches. We marched daily and chanted around the main streets, for approximately an hour each time at regular intervals. On the first day we had what I consider the best art review I have ever received on national talk-back radio, where (as noted in the epigraph to this section) a grumpy elderly man called up and complained that we were cheering on New Brighton and thanking it.

The chanting is non-stop, “We love New Brighton, We love New Brighton, We love New Brighton..... thank you New Brighton, thank you New Brighton, thank you New Brighton...” The spring sun washes over us while I look around the crowd, with the children all holding signs, the teenagers holding their big signs they made, and right in the front beaming away are the Labour Party and Green Party politicians with their rosettes—it must be government election time. It seems like the crowd is growing as we get closer to the *TEZA* hub. (Harvey, personal journal 2013)

On the second day we had four classes of children join in, from Freeville Primary School and other local schools that were about to be closed as part of government reforms. On the third day we took the protest to Freeville Primary, with the whole school making placards and protesting around their street block. Lots of neighbors waved and we were told that the kids continued chanting and waving their placards around the school for the rest of the day after we finished. A teacher told me later that this was like a catharsis farewell chant for the children; as happy and blustery as they were, there was a deep sadness driving this, she told me (anonymous personal communication).

While *Productive Promises* may have seemed “light,” perhaps even “unprofessional” as an artwork (taking us back to the Greek definition of idiocy as “amateurish” [Sansi 2020]), I propose that idiocy here works as a productive tactic. It can be seen as an example of social-process-based experimentation that involves “lay people” not trained for it (Sansi 2020, 251). The work also played on normative codes of public behavior in an “idiotic way” by thwarting expectations regarding “productive work” and protest: twisting them so that they did not produce capital (in the rubbish clearing) or antagonize and polarize people as might be expected (apart from the talk-back radio caller’s response). Instead, operating via a sense of joy and catharsis, the artwork adopted what we might call a sense of “genuine un-coolness” and humor. Often, a protest is associated with something negative in Aotearoa and the West, with something where people feel aggrieved and want justice. However, this sense of playing the fool, I propose, not only allowed release and celebration—as a way to endlessly reaffirm the integrity of locals as valued citizens—but simultaneously questioned the general lack of civic unity and community connection in Pākehā communities throughout Aotearoa, not just New Brighton. This can be seen to be part of a continuum of artists and arts practitioners who work with playing the fool as forms of resistance, like the collective Beautiful Trouble (Tilley 2017) and Larry Bogad (2016).

Our processes of whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga that guided *Productive Promises* allowed for the collective and consensus-based inclusion of ourselves and other participants within the test-iterations of this work. On the one hand, the work may have failed to deliver its perceived promises in “producing an artwork” in any normative sense (as was noted by some locals, with comments like “that’s not art, but I like it”). Nor did the work produce capital from our collective labor. But, on the other hand, it promised a sense of inclusion, community empowerment, catharsis, and mutually shared affirmations that directly related to locals’ concerns with life in New Brighton under neoliberalism and ongoing collective earthquake trauma. A reference point that for us was brought to the surface here is Naomi Klein’s (2007) notion of disaster capitalism, where disasters like earthquakes and economic downturns are seen by Western governments as an excuse to create neoliberal reforms, resulting in community isolation and growing inequalities. In response, *Productive Promises* promised a sense of communal generosity so as to draw attention to and cope with the damage to the community. To borrow from the artist William Pope.L’s words and that of a local:

We were the nicest art project in Aotearoa. (Harvey, personal journal 2013)

The fight against our greedy governments that don’t care about us isn’t over. (Unnamed passerby, qtd. in Harvey, personal journal 2013)

V. INDIGENEITY FROM MĀORI PERSPECTIVES, ART, AND ACTIVISM IN AOTEAROA

What d’ya call that kind of art? (My uncle, personal memory, circa 1986)

The activism of these works is fundamentally informed by indigenous Māori perspectives. As it is for many non-Western indigenous peoples, “art” is regarded by Māori as a modern disciplinary term brought to Aotearoa through Western colonization: one that is usually subject to colonial power structures and norms. While art projects may be labelled decolonial (Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Thomas

2020, 107–20; Jackson 2020, 133–40), I acknowledge the ongoing debates around whether the notion of decolonization (as with postcolonialism before it) will ever be more than a privileged academic exercise: one that despite its call to undo colonial exploitation might never be completely possible (Dhillon 2021; Muñiz-Reed 2017). Such concerns are ever-present when working with Western notions of “art” that usually emphasize individualism and market processes in ways inverse to mātauranga Māori, in which notions of professionalism are not so clearly demarcated nor required and relationships with each other and with nature are paramount (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). In the Māori world, as with many indigenous cultures around the Pacific and Americas, all things are interconnected ecologically, including cultural practices (Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Waters 2004, 153–60).

The works covered here also, I propose, play with the colonizing nature of attempting to apply frameworks like the Ancient Greek definition of idiocy as amateurism in instances like this. While Patrick McDonagh (2008, 85) notes that the 15th Century English legal definition of an “idiot” that evolved from the Greek notion of a “private man,” was someone who was, among other things, not considered fit to own land and should have it confiscated, the drag works potentially tug at our inheritance of that legal system in the New Zealand government and local councils, which can be seen from a Māori perspective to have taken the forest land without permission from Mana Whenua Māori tribes. By contrast to many of us Māori, we see ourselves serving the land rather than owning it. This can be seen as the colonial state treating local Māori as idiots, and an example of the mass Māori land confiscations of the 19th and 20th centuries (Walker 2004). In offering up these perspectives, I propose that these projects were attempts to *reclaim space* for Māori, who are well-known to often be ignored in public society in Aotearoa (Rameka and Paul-Burke 2015, 261–71).

At the same time, I have attempted with these projects to negotiate what can be seen as the constructive opportunities that some colonial processes and institutions might offer artists of Māori heritage. Government arts funding, local art galleries, and public art institutions, like the Circuit Aotearoa artists’ video platform on which films of the *Auau* and *Waitākere Drag* performances are hosted, can contribute to the empowerment of te ao Māori (the Māori world) through publicity and the sharing of resources and documentation. Some of the dominant colonial structures and processes I was attempting to move away from in these works include market-driven and competitive Western art norms (Beach 2015), that reinforce colonialist, individualist, and exclusive values, and thereby reinforce Western capitalism with its inequities, socio-economic class structures, and limitations on the kinds of arts that are presented in public (Bishop 2012, 2–9). In order to challenge that colonial project, the projects described here placed emphasis on relationship building: a central Māori cultural concept where a sense of collectivity and community (including ecology and ancestry) is key before other things in the arts (such as when working with whakawhanaungatanga in *Productive Promises*). *Productive Promises* with its overt sense of collectivism can be seen to traverse the binary that Rancière (2004, 76) presents when he says art must create dissent, not consensus; because the artwork promised both simultaneously. Following Tate (2022) and Bishop (2012), these projects can even be seen as forms of “social practice” in art: *Auau* and *Waitākere Drag* attempted to generate social connection and relationship-building with passers-by. However, whereas social practice in art has been criticized for continuing to conform with processes of capitalism—not least assigning credit and profits to white middleclass artists over the indigenous, non-white, and less-economically privileged communities they work with (Davis 2013)—I propose instead a Māori-influenced approach (performed by Māori sometimes with others). Such an aesthetic can offer a more diplomatic perspective of social navigation where a sense of listening, exchanging, and uplifting of communities can occur through art practice. This perspective is in conversation with Bishop’s (2012, 2) concept of socially based art practices that hold their sense of political and aesthetic agency outside galleries and out among localized and situated sites of engagement: situations where all participants “come away with something.” In the works discussed here, that might include a sense of catharsis for the school community through the “thank you protest” or locals’ growth in understanding from conversations with me while I dragged the logs.

These works also call-up a sense of whakapapa, or genealogy, that includes the annals of prior activism in Aotearoa, including the long histories of environmentalist and worker’s rights protests, but especially the movement of Māori rights since the 1970s. For many of us with Māori ancestry

(and allied Pākehā) who engage in activism, understanding such issues is integral to our activities, and this is widely accepted and expressed across contemporary art forms. Political disjunction between indigenous peoples and colonial governments and peoples is a common theme throughout colonized lands around the Pacific rim (Waters 2004; Arkeketa 2004, 239–48). In Aotearoa, this is often expressed through calls to honor Māori rights under Te Tiriti o Waitangi of 1840 (Orange 1987; Walker 2004).³ This was the founding document of the nation state of Aotearoa/New Zealand and evokes a power-sharing agreement between the Crown and Māori. In contrast to the English version, the Māori version does not state that Māori ceded governorship of our lands and waters of Aotearoa to the Crown (Orange 1987; Mutu 2019; Walker 2004). I draw here from Te Tiriti because it is the one legal document in Aotearoa that is widely acknowledged as a tool towards gaining restitution and reparations for Māori, against the intergenerational and ongoing colonial trauma inflicted by Crown law and settlers since 1840, that continues to be central to the Māori rights movement (Orange 1987; Walker 2004). This includes how my log-drag works can be seen to question notions of ownership while they attempted to “poke fun” at the fenced-off “private properties” that symbolize the colonial assumption that people can do whatever they like with forests on “their land”: a position that ignores Māori tribal cultural and political authority over all land in Aotearoa according to the Māori version of Te Tiriti. The log-drags were also intended to generate awareness regarding planned forest destruction for a new water treatment plant by local authorities, that risked the loss of not only four hectares of endangered native trees and plants like kauri, but also the extinction of a flightless wasp species. It is well-known locally that Mana Whenua were not included in the consultation and decision making around this process. I note that in all my art projects discussed here, the consent and blessings of Mana Whenua were sought, and respect was paid to their tikanga (protocols).

Finally, the activist aspects of these projects were defined by a deep sense of mana motuhake: self-determination and self-rule (Paora, Tuiono, and Flavell 2011). The concept is widely understood in accordance with the Māori definitions of Te Tiriti (in contrast to the English version [Jackson 2019]). While its last word (motuhake), refers to separation, standing alone, or self-governance, it also implies the uplifting of the mana (status, respect) of Māori and their iwi/hapū, the preservation of wairua (feeling and spirit), hauora (continued health), and connections through whakapapa to ancestors in the whenua (land) and other aspects of the environment such as awa (waterways). *Productive Promises*, like its umbrella TEZA project, attempted to enact this concept (or “promise” in Nietzsche’s terms of idiocy) on a micro scale as a way of resisting Western demands to be productive and “useful.” It did this by creating a circular micro-economy of manaakitanga: an exchange of ideas and sharing labor (not unlike Boasa-Dean and Shareef’s Māori model of doughnut economics (Shareef 2020)). Furthermore, in the log drags I attempted, or “promised,” a sense of mana motuhake by “taking actions into my own hands” and walking and “playing the fool” in the “grey zone” of the roadside as a way to invite the public to reflect on the damage that many are still doing to our forests: as an act of kaitiakitanga (guardianship or caring for the forest on more than just physical levels).⁴ This was also attempted through a sense of wā (time and space) that from a Māori perspective does not have the finite temporal limits that often emerge in Western contexts, but instead lets “things take the time they need.” This came about (I promise) in the durational aspects of both works, with the log-drags going for hours and the planning of the thank you protests taking days until we had collectively settled on a plan of action.

While the activist aspects of these artworks productively operated through mātauranga Māori concepts, their critiques of constrictive colonial and capitalist norms also work through a sense of endless questioning and affirmations (in league with Nietzsche’s sense of idiocy). They thus remain “slippery” in their messaging as forms of activism. For instance, in not telling us outright that colonial capitalism is “bad” or “good” for us in these contexts, but by conceptually and indirectly sidling up to their respective political concerns with tactics of intentional ridiculousness. In bundling up the absurd with political metaphor I follow the example of fellow indigenous arts practitioner Selina Tusitala Marsh (2018, 68) who describes her poetry as a form where “value is placed on interdependent, contextually nuanced, accretive ideas that momentarily come together”: a space where everything is mixed, cut, interconnected, and “potentially realigned” thereby circumnavigating reductionist perspectives.

VI. CONCLUSION

Tama tu, tama ora, tama noho, tama mate, tamatoa (Stand up and do something, don't sit and do nothing [Eruera 2012])

These art-activism projects promised micro-attempts at making positive changes for the communities in which they were situated through performatively generated actions within the shroud of ongoing colonization and capitalism. In doing so, they promised to make sense of this world where colonization and capitalism have changed being-in-the-world for Māori and the contexts in which we engage in Aotearoa. Each project tested out possible acts of “speaking up” as mana motuhake in response to issues incurred by colonization and dominant neoliberalism. They did so via tactics of productive idiocy, in ways that reveal and engage with contingent power dynamics and offer the means, informed by indigenous Māori perspectives, to reflect on the ecological, cultural, and political issues at hand, including deforestation, community alienation, and colonial law. The productive idiocy of these works called up the question “but is it art?,” from passers-by, local communities, and participants alike. However, the more important question is “but does it matter?” Many reported to me that they did not “get them” as “being art,” but they thanked me for stimulating public reflection and exchange about their respective political issues: school closure in the case of *Productive Promises*, and ongoing local forest destruction in *Waitākere Drag* and *Auau*.

A final reflection here on these projects lies around this question: might they be seen as tokenistic attempts to involve locals in these works? They could, in this way, like many social practice art projects, be accused of endorsing entrenched dominant capitalist ideologies by employing what can be seen as buzz words in corporate contexts; *collaboration* and *creative hub*. However, I propose that by involving locals to reflect on contingent political issues, through consensus-based decision-making and participation in *Productive Promises* and even at the level of “chitter-chatter” with passers-by in *Waitākere Drag*, these works catalyzed levels of critical inquiry with locals and put democracy into practice. The works disarmed participants and passers-by in relation to their usual social barriers and empowered them by involving them in local democracy and enhancing their mana. These tactics could, I propose, amount to a productive idiocy of disarmament and empowerment as art-activism. As Nietzsche might say, these are of course promises of promises, but without making performative promises through art, issues might just cease to be remembered as much.

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END NOTES

- 1 *Auau* was an exhibition performance installation at Corbans Estate Gallery, Auckland, 2019. See also [Harvey \(2022\)](#).
- 2 See for example news stories about the "Groundswell" farmers' movement which opposes regulation of farming including climate regulation (e.g., [Wogan 2022](#)), or other stories about residents felling native trees to enable "ocean views" (e.g., [Hatton 2022](#)).
- 3 The use of te reo Māori (the Māori language) for key concepts including how we name this treaty rather than the English "Treaty of Waitangi," is an attempt to performatively empower Māori perspectives. This could be seen to apply [Butler's \(1996\)](#) perspective that calling something up enacts it politically, including resistance to colonisation. Many Māori authors do this, for example Margaret [Mutu \(2019\)](#) and Moana [Jackson \(2019\)](#).
- 4 In mātauranga Māori, it is widely known that there is no discernible separation between human and non-human in terms of notions of life force, spiritual connection and sacredness, reciprocity and interdependency, relationships, ancestry, and in how the wellbeing of each affects the other. Kaitiakitanga is thus a human, non-human, and post-human concept in how it is performed ([Hutchings et al. 2020](#)). I propose this departs from the binary between humans and nature that many Western thinkers like Nietzsche maintain, as illustrated by Kaitlyn Creasy's analysis of Nietzsche and environmentalism. While as Creasy notes Nietzsche also sees any idealism around conceptualizing nature is predetermined to undermine it ([Creasy 2017](#), 353), the opposite can be the case if one were to approach it through a Māori perspective such as kaitiakitanga, for instance in how it is well-known that rāhui set up by tribes can help to rebuild native habitats and species and foodstocks in ocean areas.