

**File 5
Critical Text**

**Written by:
Victoria Wynne-Jones**

**In response to the exhibition:
to and fro organised by
Amelia Hitchcock at Artspace
July–August 2014**

A certain type of panel heater could be found in hardware stores this winter. Held upright by a stand, or mounted to the wall, it appears as a white rectangle of various sizes and dimensions, completely without detail or ornamentation. A blank oblong, strangely sculptural and simple. During the course of the exhibition 'to and fro' curated by curatorial assistant Amelia Hitchcock, two of these heaters were installed within the main gallery of Artspace in order to help keep the artists warm. To make sure they were well looked after. The three main rooms of Artspace were re-purposed, becoming artists' studios, meeting rooms, laboratories, galleries, rehearsal spaces, lunch rooms, retreats, performance areas, study halls, little theatres, as well as exhibition spaces. Aiding in these transformations were pieces of furniture by Christchurch-based spatial designer Tessa Peach. Accenting the white cube walls with notes of vivid turquoise, Peach constructed and introduced a partition, wheeled tables, tall stools, a bookshelf and long, low platforms covered with removable mattresses. All were monochromatic, white with hints of raw wood-grain and the pink of treated timber.

The point is that a flexible space of presentation, enquiry and generosity was created, recalling a scenario frequently depicted by painters throughout the Italian Renaissance and described by the art historian Jan Verwoert.¹ Verwoert recounts that one day, a lion

walked into the study of Saint Jerome with a thorn in his paw and although the saint was unprepared, being a translator rather than a cat-doctor, he could pluck the thorn out by ‘initiating a social mode of conviviality with the wild cat.’ According to Verwoert the reason why Saint Jerome could extract the thorn is because, in leaving his door ajar he was already operating in a semi-public space, one that was open to the occurrence of such an event. This openness to the unexpected, melded with a desire to create a secure and convivial environment for artists, is of crucial importance to Hitchcock’s ‘to and fro.’

Above all, as a curator Hitchcock acted as *enabler*, devoting all of her ‘time and energies to get other energies to emerge.’ⁱⁱ The exhibition itself was almost completely without predetermined outcomes, simply providing a framework of space that was the gallery and time between July 11 and August 23 2014. In bringing together eleven main artists Hitchcock sought to provoke a collision of ideas and practices so that the exhibition might fluidly unfurl over time via negotiations, a back and forth of shared knowledge, discussion, strife, experimentation and playfulness. Most importantly, aside from the physical bricks and mortar space that is Artspace and the time period over two winter months, Hitchcock also co-opted the whole entity that is the institution of Artspace for the service of the

artists involved. This included its staff both full-time and part-time, friends, volunteers, frequent visitors and casual droppers-in.ⁱⁱⁱ ‘to and fro’ began as a precarious plan, a schedule, a calendar. Three days of artists’ workshops were followed by six weeks of rolling residencies and public programming. An email list was set up so that each week a newsletter could be sent out to interested parties listing the events that would take place that week.

And what exactly did take place? More than can ever be recounted in writing or in excited anecdotes. Visiting Artspace when it was open to the public in the afternoons during the course of ‘to and fro’ was like dropping into a quaint and vibrant community centre; one was frequently plied with cups of tea, cakes and fruit. Artspace always acts as a kind of eccentric hub in some sense but this was certainly heightened during the course of the exhibition. One day you might be invited to join a discussion on thinking about thinking, there might be children riding BMX bicycles through the main gallery, an artist might be merely reading a book, you might be given the opportunity to participate in a faux graduation ceremony, you might see a young woman holding up a poster of Miley Cyrus for as long as she possibly can, you may be offered a meal of fish and chips or you could be co-opted into propping up a mattress for no reason at all.

The allusion to Saint Jerome's study could be extended to a discussion of Robert Carter's *The University of Who?* Taking place within the mezzanine space, Carter transformed this normally brutal and unforgiving space into a cosy and inhabited one. Another heater, this time an outmoded, single-bar electric one was switched on beside a comfortable looking couch. There were lamps, books, audio equipment and slides. It felt as though someone had abandoned their somewhat esoteric and impenetrable research and wandered off mid-thought. Carter himself frequently hosted visitors, earnestly telling them about a missing professor Hubert Raptor, weaving a confusing narrative for anyone who cared to listen. The quasi-fictional location felt surreptitious, due to its absent occupier. *The University of Who?* realised a Raymond Chandler-esque situation that was comical yet impressive, equivocal and unsettling.

The hushed, steady and earnest manner in which Carter addressed his visitors recalls aspects of Dunedin-based artist Hana Aoake's performances. During one of the opening events someone pointed to Aoake and whispered 'is she part of the exhibition?' There was something different about her behaviour that was difficult to pin down, she seemed determined yet also slightly removed from what was happening around her. As part of her work *Intended Consequences* Aoake was following little instructions she had pencilled on

the wall, they were almost invisible at the opening, yet they were found one by one throughout the exhibition... "Introduce yourself to a stranger, talk about the weather"... "Tell three strangers a fantastic story about yourself which could be true"... "Take off your shoes and remove the stones inside, tie them up very tightly and notice how it makes you walk differently"... "Don't get out of the way for anyone"... "Make eye contact with a stranger and when they notice look away." The slightness of this work was echoed in a short performance given by Aoake with Robyn Jordaan. *Exploration* involved Aoake and Jordaan moving on the floor almost naked in a mound of soil. Shifting the matter around with their bodies, rolling and extending, they swept and aggregated the dark material around, creating small troughs and crests, absences and gaps with their limbs, torsos and heads. Creating rhythms, speeds and slowness, they smoothed along the cement gallery floor so that the soil made traces of their movements. Swishing the soil like finger painting, Aoake and Jordaan made modest and transitory sculptures, drawing material beneath themselves to make unexpected forms.

These quiet and graceful actions recall *Lift*, another performance that took place at one of the opening events of this exhibition. As part of this work Auckland and Tauranga-based Darcell Apelu enacted a simple act of swaying from side to side. Barefoot and

dressed entirely in black, Apelu had tied around her waist a sort of skirt constructed on the day from woven fibres from which hung at intervals incredibly heavy weights normally used for fishing. This appendage weighed approximately fifteen kilograms so that Apelu's swaying motion required a tremendous amount of exertion. The weights also lent an aural aspect to the work, as Apelu rotated her torso from side to side and the weights made contact with each other they made a metallic sound like cascading bells. This delicate sound coincided with the flirtatious nature of swishing a skirt, black curls flying, and it was easy to get lost in the rhythm of Apelu's movements back and forth, as the weights caught in the momentum of her movement flew through the air then collided, jangling. The fluidity of Apelu's hair and movements belied the weightiness of her attire as well as the endurance and brute strength required to wear it let alone manipulate it through movement for forty-five minutes. At the end of this time Apelu untied the skirt, let it drop with a loud thud and left it behind on the gallery floor. After this moment of release all that was left was a jumble of neutral coloured fibres and silver weights lying spent like a dead fish. Apelu's performances throughout the exhibition tended to combine tremendous strength with conceptual simplicity and a surprising sense of lightness. For example, in *Stranger* she slowly walked around the perimeter of the gallery, negotiating it and its visitors whilst holding the razor-

sharp edges of a vicious-looking training saw on her fingertips for an entire hour.^{iv}

A sparkling duet, Christchurch-based artists Audrey Baldwin and Julia Croucher performed their work *Lashes* the same night as Apelu's *Lift*. Wearing simple white shifts Baldwin and Croucher were attached to each other by multitudes of very long eyelashes that went from one to the others' eyelids. When extended the lashes seemed to measure about three quarters of a metre. At the start of the evening Baldwin and Croucher sat opposite each other on Peach's white stools, their heads bent, mirroring and blinking like contemplative twins. Eventually extending the complicity and co-operation required whilst being attached to one another by the eyelashes they began to move around the room, at one point kneeling in a doorway so that gallery visitors were forced to gingerly step over the lashes attaching the two artists like a skipping rope. The simple device of attachment via accoutrements of vanity and beautification was extended in the second part of their trilogy, *Hangnail*, in which Baldwin and Croucher had impossibly long curlicues of fake nails appended from one woman's nails to the other. Pushing and pulling they played with this intersubjective connection until through intense cooperation they managed to separate themselves with scissors, which was no mean feat. Being-together was made literal as Baldwin and Croucher used simple

means taken from popular culture to playfully probe co-dependency, friendship and trust.

The ferocity and resolve of Baldwin's solo performances recalled that of Apelu yet were taken to a more visceral and extreme level. *Tether/Reel* took place within the main gallery space, still haunted by the first performance Alicia Frankovich gave as part of her 2009 exhibition *A Plane for Behavers* with the director of Artspace at that time, Emma Bugden. Whereas Frankovich's performances involved the curator utilising all of her strength to hoist the harnessed artist aloft on a block and tackle so that she could reach back and open the gallery door to visitors, then slowly lower the artist back down to safety, Baldwin's more masochistic iteration was more oriented towards audience members. Baldwin stood naked, close to the heater on one side of the gallery. In preparation for the performance Baldwin's back had been pierced with large hooks and attached to these hooks were cords that extended horizontally across the room to a far wall. These were attached to a block and tackle system with a hand-crank that allowed audience members to operate the crank. Doing so would shorten or extend the fibres, forcing Baldwin to either walk backwards or forwards in order to maintain the tension. Audience members could choose whether they were content to merely observe Baldwin's action or whether they participated, occupying the position of

puppeteer, communicating with the artist on a very intimate level. Any pulling or releasing of the cords was transmitted along the fibres, across the gallery space to the raw wounds in Baldwin's back. Acts of reeling and releasing could be compared to catching a fish, a slight echo of Apelu's fishing weights. Via acts of piercing, hooking, tying and rigging, artist and institution were literally bound together, with audience members essential to an activation of the performance's mechanics.

Whereas *Tether/Reel* engaged with the sub-culture of piercing and suspension, Croucher's *Bloodline*, performed the same evening, involved tattooing. The high-pitched buzzing of Croucher's tattoo gun could be heard echoing throughout the space. A tattoo artist by trade, Croucher sat in front of a full-length mirror, slowly and patiently giving herself an inkless tattoo, dipping her needle in a glass of water to clean it as the blood flowed from her shin. As Croucher performed this solitary act of blood-letting in the gallery she evoked a rich history of body art and performance that has engaged with self-inflicted pain. Inscribing herself with a wandering line, drawing with flesh and gesture, Croucher demonstrated how performance can be a process enacted upon the artist's body, leaving a temporary trace which is subsequently transformed by the body's ability to heal itself.

Wellington-based artist Virginia Kennard utilised the same mirror as a prop in her performances, frequently involving reflection and self-inspection, looking and listening. During her residency Kennard made very public acts of diarising, self-examination and narration. Sometimes this involved writing confessional phrases in lipstick on large plastic sheets attached to the walls, and often Kennard used costume that oscillated between come-hither vamp and respectable office attire. The mirror was also used in conjunction with Peach's mattresses stacked one on top of the other upon which Kennard would perform acrobatic mattress dancing. Her self-reflection and analysis was also extended to her audience members in discussions such as *Team Management Workplace Personality Profiling*. This exercise used a personality profiling kit Kennard had been forced to use during her day job in an office. Kennard encouraged her audience to use the same jargon and contemplate whether they were 'creative facilitators,' 'thruster organisers' or 'assessor developers.' Continuing this thread of looking and listening to others, was *How do I look?* A work that has spanned much of Kennard's practice, a quiet intervention saw the artist sitting on the floor and staring at herself intently in the mirror in a performance that lasted one whole hour. Kennard's combination of self-conscious body-imaging, instruction and lecturing culminated with *Jazzycise*, a class on a Friday evening which was attended by a small but energetic band of lycra-clad devotees.

Choreographer Zahra Killeen-Chance gave a class of her own during her time at 'to and fro,' her session *Body Beautifying Fitness Class* combined yoga, Pilates and ballet so that participants might discover their alignment, improve their posture and start on their way towards a toned ballet dancer's body. Similar to Baldwin, Killeen-Chance parodied the ways in which popular culture encourages self-improvement and like Kennard, Killeen-Chance utilised instruction and demonstration within her performances. *Hearing the Body* was a series of soundtracks Killeen-Chance developed that visitors could listen to via headphones and small audio devices according to how much time they were willing to devote to the exercise; from four to fifteen minutes. The soundtracks involved Killeen-Chance's soothing voice slowly giving instructions to the listener so that they might be made more aware of their bodies in both a holistic sense as well as in the ways in which they might physically engage with the gallery space.

As part of her *party.gif*, attendees were encouraged to wear single-coloured outfits and gather *en masse* to mimic projected and looped images of Killeen-Chance and other professional dancers enacting transitional movements played to a pumping soundtrack. These isolations were repetitive movements usually involving one body part such as a leg, lips or elbow. The resulting

party involved a host of visitors including children joyously talking and dancing, using Killeen-Chance's movements as provocations for social movement and interaction. Killeen-Chance took as her point of departure the GIF, that is '256-color bitmap picture files that can composite a series of stills into an infinitely loopable, silent moving image.'^v The popularity of this format is partially due to the speed with which it loads, the fact that it is supported by every web browser as well as the way it combines a decisive moment with the 'irresistible affectivity of moving image.' However the GIF can also operate as a demonic loop with paralytic power, reducing the complexity of contemporary life to a few seconds, 'recalibrating our emotional and empathic responses' as 'vortices of pure spectacle... like strips of intellectual fly-paper.' During Killeen-Chance's party audience members revelled in these loops, before laughing and moving on to something else.

This use of instruction ties into certain theories that posit choreography as a kind of manipulative strategy and this was often alluded to in works by another Auckland-based artist Sean Curham, who offered works under the pseudonym 'Group Show'. Throughout his time in 'to and fro' Group Show was frequently giving out instructions, whether directly or indirectly, and like Kennard often engaged his audience members in friendly discussion. The first work he presented,

How to be: Relay Choreography involved performer Margaret Blay asking audience members to fetch chairs from a storage space and then set them up in a long line in the gallery. Blay then appealed to more audience members to assemble a wooden structure that ended up resembling small sized bleachers. Blay promptly sat herself down and began to recite a text delivered to her via headphones and a media player, the text began with the words 'The point is, don't become an asshole.'^{vi} Repeating the text differently each time, Blay spoke slowly and softly so that one had to sit very close to her in order to hear what she was saying. Gallery visitors found themselves sitting almost on top of her, cocking their heads, concentrating and listening intently in order to follow what she was saying. Others stood behind her, leaning very close, some kneeled at her feet, peering upwards. Above all Group Show orchestrated and created a space for listening, a moment to pause and reflect. A rather touching scene was created as young men and women could be seen intently listening to an older woman, a far from common scenario. The construction of the seat was also the realisation of a space to sit and rest for a spell. Group Show also had a row of cinema-style seats attached to the front handrail outside Artspace so that passers-by could pause, rest for a moment and enjoy the sunshine. There is something radical about the ways in which Group Show utilised apparatus and instruction in order to gift a time and space for resting to his participants.

Group Show's physical offer of a place and time for repose evokes some of the performances created by choreographer val smith. smith's offerings alternate between ambiguous signalling gestures and bizarrely spoken commands as the artist plays with ways in which they can control their participants.^{vii} *Inside Knowledge* involved a circle of cushions on the gallery floor that visitors were invited to sit on. smith then proceeded to remove the empty cushions and pushed everyone together into a tighter circle so that there was no gap and they were quite close, their feet stretched out before them touching in a star pattern. smith then removed people from the circle, pulling them on their cushions, and though some people resisted, smith manipulated them within the gallery like a wilful Busby Berkeley.

Within the final *Duotones* performance smith erected a quasi-lecture set up, a simple power point presentation giving the titles of their performances thus far as well as smith's collaborators and brief bullet points. Initially positioned behind the station, a trestle table loaded with a computer and audio equipment hooked up to rather large speakers, smith played a seductive song by the velvet-tongued Barry White and in a distorted and deep voice repeatedly intoned "Forward... Forward... Forward" into a microphone whilst making a gesture which seemed to say "come forward, towards me." Audience members got up and

slowly moved towards the artist paying attention to the ways in which smith altered their hand movements like a police officer on point duty. smith manipulated audience members around the room, herding them like sheep, dividing them into groups, beckoning them to crouch, kneel, sit, jump. At one point smith had coerced the audience out of the gallery into the foyer while remaining inside the central space, only their arm visible from the doorframe, still signalling, as if to say "move back." At that point we were all huddled together by a wall as far back as we could possibly go. Appealing through strange verbal cues, confusing hand gestures and sometimes more direct bodily intervention, smith moved participants, appealing, commanding, separating, dividing, controlling, directing... using one body, one that enjoyed a certain amount of authority, in order to manipulate the bodies of others.

Whereas smith's performances involved a slightly bewildering manipulation of audience members, opening up the entire space of the building, and beyond, to their peripatetic encounters, Berlin-based artist Alexa Wilson's *Star/Oracle* initially took place in a more familiar set up with a lit stage and formal seating arrangements for her audience members. Moon-bathing in theatre lights with sunglasses, then seated lotus-like before a Macbook, Wilson's *Oracle* involved an appeal to audience members to interrogate her female wisdom

by asking her questions which she would then answer with a vague yet beautiful combination of gestures, actions, additional questions and a popular music soundtrack. Before this more Delphic encounter was Wilson's *Star*, an embodied exploration of the star Tarot card—mutating its original intent to inspire and guide into a range of schizophrenic identities. Utilising a notion of the schizoid (defined by French theorist Félix Guattari as that which dramatically denudes the everyday) Wilson used a range of banal props such as a bathrobe, sun-screen, spray paint and a water bottle to enact a host of ambiguous actions.^{viii} Manically posing, writhing and grinning, Wilson undressed, poured natural spring water onto the ground, smiling like a promo girl, clumsily smeared herself with sunscreen while reclining like a swimsuit model. Self-consciously striking poses, shape, shape shape, Wilson appropriated and repeated them knowingly, with a difference, co-opting positions commonly used to display femininity as available and making them constantly changing, haunting, manic and wrong.

In a similar manner, Kelly McDowell's *Sunset Strip* repeated actions readily associated with the strip-clubs surrounding Artspace and its location on Karangahape Road, the red-light district of Auckland. *Sunset Strip* took place at the close of day, during what is sometimes called the magic hour, in the mezzanine which McDowell occupied for the second half of the

exhibition. The occurrence involved McDowell peeling off her clothes layer by layer until, only wearing her underwear, she stood, upon a ledge at the front of the room. Inching back and forth in bare feet on a narrow ledge between two walls McDowell appeared at one thin window, then another. Semi-secret, this shivery and slight performance tentatively addressed particularities of time of day, light and place. From outside the gallery, down on the street, if one looked up to the first floor of the Artspace building one could see McDowell's small, partially naked figure appearing occasionally in the windows as she moved back and forth, to and fro.

As part of her exhibition-making process Hitchcock highlighted the ways in which Artspace can be likened to Saint Jerome's study, a semi-public and convivial space where almost anything can happen. In response, the invited artists extended the institution to its limits so that it accommodated bodily modification, nudity, bicycles, sensory deprivation boxes, theatrical-style presentations, a missing professor's study, the filleting of fish, even a barbecue. Artspace fully mobilised its capacities and resources so that each artist could realise their projects and performances and the gallery emerged with newly acquired wisdom and potentiality. The exhibition 'to and fro' enabled networks between artists to be formed, ones that now criss-cross the country from south to north. Unlikely combinations

were made and alliances were formed, there was a sense of teaming up as well as a conspiring for future works.

What ‘to and fro’ seems to have demonstrated above all is the gentleness and fragility of gesture as well as the ferocity, strength and resolve required to be truly open.

i

Jan Verwoert. “Jan Verwoert: Last Lecture.” *E-flux*. 20 June. 2009. Web. 30 Sept. 2014
 <<http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/jan-verwoert-last-lecture/>>.

ii

Massimiliano Gioni quoted in “10 Curators – A Conversation on the Internet” in Sergio Edelsztein
Ice Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture (London: Phaidon, 2007), 8.

iii

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Artspace Staff: Caterina Riva—Director, Anna Gardner—Interim Director,
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 Jeff Henderson

iv

Tying into Apelu’s tour de force *New Zealand Axemen’s Association: Women’s Sub Committee—
 President* in which she slowly promenaded around Artspace bedecked in a garment woven from ribbons
 won in wood-chopping competitions and then executed wood-chopping before an astounded audience
 one Saturday afternoon.

v

Morgan Quaintance, “Loop the Loop,” *Frieze*, Issue 155, May 2013, 35-36.

vi

Amita Kirplani, “How to Be” in *Artspace 25: every cloud has a silver lining* ed. Caterina Riva
 (Auckland: Artspace, 2012), 18.

vii At the time of writing, the individual val smith preferred the use of the pronoun ‘they’ and
 the possessive ‘their.’

viii

Félix Guattari *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University
 Press, 1995), 63.

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