

PASSIONATE INSTINCTS

Andrea Bell

These days we do everything in groups. Recent years have seen an excess of exhibitions conceived by curatorial panels, curatorial consortiums, curatoriums or curatorial attachés. This pluralist approach has become *de rigueur* in contemporary practice—based on an assumption that the more curators are involved, the more intellectually rigorous the exhibition outcome.

UK-based artist and writer Liam Gillick has described this trend towards group-based practice:

A discursive model of praxis has developed within the critical art context over the last twenty years. It is the offspring of critical theory and improvised, self-organized structures. It is the basis of art that involves the dissemination of information. It plays with social models and presents speculative constructs both within and beyond traditional gallery spaces. It is indebted to conceptual art's reframing of relationships, and it requires decentered and revised histories in order to evolve.¹

Curatorial voices are everywhere—at conferences, symposia, hui, workshops, intensives and retreats. But talk is cheap, which is why curators favour more academic words such as *Discourse. Discursive. Dialogue*. In the realm of art, inanimate objects are often described as being *in conversation* or *in dialogue* with each other. Since the relational turn, *conversation* has become a valid form of artistic production, in and of itself. As Berlin and Rotterdam-based writer and editor Monika Szewczyk explains: 'In an information economy, the power of discourse to shape the world gives conversation ever more complex and concrete potential. And the question becomes how to employ conversation as a medium.'² At best, conversation offers multiple and diverse perspectives. At worst, a single privileged perspective dominates the discussion. But group dynamics are key to measuring the success or failure of conversation as a relational art form.

In 1965 American Behavioural Psychologist Bruce Tuckman identified four stages of group development relating to 'patterns of interpersonal relationships'.³ These stages became known as 'forming, storming, norming and performing'⁴—a model that (at a stretch) could be applied to the process of group curating, and in this instance, applied to the collective curation of *Passionate Instincts*.

According to Tuckman, the 'forming' stage is 'a time of orientation, testing and dependence'. This likely took place during the five-day Curatorial Intensive at Aoraki Mt Cook in November 2015, when the curators of *Passionate Instincts* were first introduced to each other—and to the idea of a group curatorial project as an outcome of the programme.

'Storming' manifests through: 'intragroup conflicts' and presents as an 'emotional response to task demands'. The phrase 'Battle Royale' was frequently used during the exhibition's opening weekend when recounting the method for artist selection and an overarching theme. As I sat in the audience at the *Passionate Instincts* Artists and Curators in Discussion public programme event, I couldn't help but wonder... who threw the biggest punches? Who got knocked out?

Tuckman suggests that 'norming' (a term that feels slightly out of place here) is when the group begins to be effective: 'ingroup feeling and cohesiveness develop; new standards evolve and new roles are adopted'. This was the stage for finalising artist lists and connecting threads between the works.

'Performing' is when 'roles become flexible and functional; structural issues have been resolved and the group structure can support task performance'. This is the actual *doing* bit: organising freight, finalising the exhibition design, writing text and installing the show.

Tuckman later added a fifth stage, sometimes referred to as 'adjourning' or 'mourning', which brings feelings of 'anxiety about separation and termination', 'sadness' and 'self-evaluation'. It is a stage that may not be publicly witnessed, but is a familiar end to any curatorial project nonetheless.

Somehow, despite this set of (hypothetical) conditions, *Passionate Instincts* successfully delivered a series of self- and site-responsive works that shared a common vision irrespective of individual differences—to be discussed below.



Passionate Instincts (exhibition view), The Physics Room, Christchurch, 8 October – 12 November 2016.
Courtesy of The Physics Room. Photo: Daegan Wells.

Alexis Hunter's *Passionate Instincts XIII* (1984–85), loaned from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, served as a catalyst and the exhibition's namesake. Hunter's work was framed as a 'provocation' for the exhibition—a point to begin the conversation.⁵ The feral cat depicted in the painting appeared as a metaphorical self-portrait, keeping at a safe distance whilst flashing its teeth. The artist's biography informed the exhibition too. Born in New Zealand, Hunter (1948–2014) was best known for her photography, film and text-based works; although mid-career she returned to painting to experiment with the political constraints associated with the medium, using it to address psychology and fantasy from a feminist viewpoint.⁶ Not long after moving to London in the early 1970s, Hunter joined the Women's Workshop of the Artists Union, finding that it was 'too hard' to be a feminist artist working alone.⁷ In the decades that followed, Hunter produced works that highlighted issues of inequality and identity politics—a legacy that was acknowledged in *Passionate Instincts*.

Beyond this tribute to Hunter, a set of historic events and concerns set the stage for the artists and curators of *Passionate Instincts* to represent themselves and their politics. In 1986 the *Homosexual Law Reform Act* removed what was previously regarded as a form of criminal behaviour (consensual sex between men aged over sixteen) from the *1961 Crimes Act*. This change in legislation was a landmark decision in New Zealand's human rights' history. The Dorian Society was a driving force behind the Reform, campaigning since the early 1960s.⁸ However, some members of the public were slow to accept the change, with several suspected arson attacks targeting gay rights clubs and organisations around the country the year of the Reform.⁹ One casualty of the arson attacks was a popular gay bar on Cashel Street in Christchurch, similarly named The Dorian, and

which had on at least one occasion been promoted in the bi-monthly gay and lesbian magazine *Out!* as ‘a place to go’.¹⁰

Thirty years after this act of vandalism, The Dorian was remembered through a combination of architectural interventions and selected image reproductions in Jaimee Stockman-Young’s *Spectres of Violence (4)* (2016), presented as part of the *Passionate Instincts* exhibition. Using salvaged materials such as plasterboard, melamine, galvanised chain and timber off-cuts the artist divided the body of the gallery into segregated parts. In the context of post-quake Christchurch, Stockman-Young’s roughly crafted homage brought to mind the loss of other gay spaces such as Colombo Sauna, Menfriends, Ministry/Cruz/G-spot on Lichfield Street and the Manchester Street Car Park building’s men’s toilets. The acceleration of social media has also led to an infiltration of hook-up apps such as grindr that have also impacted on the cultural landscape of gay spaces around the city.¹¹ Stockman-Young’s interest in queer spaces ventured beyond the re-creation of a site, addressing the importance of spaces that have been ‘occupied, desecrated or subjected to trauma’.¹² Her use of archival material has given voice to queer histories and the collaborative community ideology connected with the multiplicity of LGBTQI+ identities.



val smith, ‘formations for reciprocal justice and further sad attempts to punish you or make some kind of a difference i. Making the club gay again ii. Ensuring no pride is a positive outcome of the protest’ (detail), *Passionate Instincts*, The Physics Room, Christchurch, 8 October – 12 November 2016. Courtesy of The Physics Room. Photo: Daegan Wells.

Artist val smith similarly sought to ‘queer’ the gallery space in *Passionate Instincts*, though using different methods to Stockman-Young. Neoliberalism has led to an increased number of public/private partnerships in control of public space. This politics goes hand-in-hand with the reinforcement of heteronormative, capitalist power

structures. For this exhibition, the gallery space was viewed as an exception—described by one of the *Passionate Instincts* curators during the artists and curators discussion as ‘a place of civic commons, a place of refuge’.¹³ As a dance educator and choreographic artist interested in queer politics, smith offered a somatic and improvisational approach to interacting with objects, people and the gallery space. The work was titled:

formations for reciprocal justice and further sad attempts to punish you or make some kind of a difference

i. *Making the club gay again*

ii. *Ensuring no pride is a positive outcome of the protest* (2016)

Performance and installation was used as an invitational gesture, symbolically creating a ‘safe space’ for *The Dorian* to return. Handmade cardboard cuffs included in the exhibition were designed to be worn by at least two people, holding hands: a private/public display simultaneously hiding and drawing attention to an otherwise everyday behaviour. During the exhibition opening a large group wore the cuffs and held hands in the gallery—creating a chain as if standing together in solidarity. This performance introduced a protective element to the exhibition whilst also encouraging new ways of experiencing the gallery and the artworks that it contained. *Formations* also tested the boundaries between spectatorship and participation—seeing and being seen—via a series of peepholes punched through the rear wall. This apparent act of violence was softened by the welcoming space awash with mirror balls and refracted coloured lights that lay in wait behind the wall.

Reflecting on our relationship with the past similarly provided inspiration for Ana Iti (Ngāpuhi), whose work *Treasures Left by Our Ancestors* (2016) was filmed at the Canterbury Museum. In her fifteen-minute video, Iti actively engaged with a number of exhibits in the ‘First Settlers of Aotearoa, tangata whenua’ display. With an awareness of her heritage and the politics of the gaze, she turned away from the camera, facing the life-sized ethnographic kitsch dioramas. Crouching, out of respect, Iti lowered herself to the height of the seated Māori figures. Through this action Iti rejected the museological construction of the ‘other’ while visitors (presumably tourists), unaware of her cause, passed by. Unlike German artist Thomas Struth’s static photographs of people viewing art, the museum visitors in *Treasures Left by Our Ancestors* were secondary. Iti’s use of the moving image added a durational layer to the work, transforming it into a performance of endurance (so too, for the viewer) and a peaceful protest via the interruption of space.

Darcell Apelu’s *Brown Girl in the ring (Tra la la la la)* (2016) video and live performance also engaged with the perceptions of the ‘Other’. Apelu’s experience as an afakasi



Ana Iri, 'Treasures Left by Our Ancestors' (detail), *Passionate Instincts*, The Physics Room, Christchurch, 8 October – 12 November 2016. Courtesy of The Physics Room. Photo: Daegan Wells.

female informs her practice as an artist of Niuean and New Zealand European descent. Through her work she challenges cultural and gender stereotypes relating specifically to views regarding the female Pacific body—refusing conventional beauty ideals and the western male gaze. In the 'safe space' of the gallery, Apelu made her debut fully naked performance—in a sense, 'coming out' in her own words as 'brown, hairy and fat'¹⁴—with only a white towel left behind as a trace of a residual performance.

Shahriar Asdollah-Zadeh's *Fear Performance: The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Fear* (both 2013) coupled performance documentation with sculpture as a remnant or artefact. The works recalled the story of Sisyphus, who was burdened with the futile task of rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, only for it to roll back down again. In Asdollah-Zadeh's nine-minute video the artist labours over the task of literally pulling the weight of 'fear' (a sculpture made with wood and polystyrene also displayed in the exhibition) up the black sand dunes near Te Henga in the Waitakere Ranges. Whether or not it made for compelling viewing was beside the point. The work drew on Albert Camus' reading of Sisyphus' struggle to symbolise the hopelessness of the human condition. Asdollah-Zadeh situated this view as a metaphor for the issues in our political climate such as the economic crisis, rise in unemployment and displacement.¹⁵

A personal sense of narrative continued in the work of Joanna Neumegen, whose paintings offered a diaristic approach to matters such as mental illness, femininity and self-help. Using biro pen, paint, graphite and resin, her works *Thanks mather 4 my life*, *im getting really tired of these broken promithes promithes* and *of becoming* (all 2016) divulged a series of uncomfortable sentiments and symptoms of psychological distress.

Body, image and eating disorders have featured as subjects in Neumegen's previous works, whereby fictional personas engage with (and via) social media as a form of self-expression/self-destruction, performing for a broad, unknown audience, or perhaps more importantly, for themselves.

For an exhibition with such a high curatorial headcount *Passionate Instincts* had the potential to turn into a cacophonous racket of *me, me, me!* Instead, the curators presented a unified approach and provided a generous amount of thought and space to each artwork, enabling room to breathe. For all the talk of collective practice and community, the gallery context limited the potential for *Passionate Instincts* to reach a broader demographic. In spite of this, the exhibition's strength was its engagement with politics outside the gallery. The concept of conversation extended to the artworks themselves, which interacted with each other and put forward a non-linear set of dialogues relating to art as a catalyst for social change. Similarly, Tuckman's stages of group development paralleled the artworks as autonomous subjects—speaking to their own politics the artworks collectively formed, stormed, normed and performed. As a 'fragmented self-portrait',¹⁶ *Passionate Instincts* provided a platform for the artists and curators to put forward a selection of perspectives and revised histories representative of a generation of changing demographics, which advanced the conversation beyond curatorial rhetoric.

Passionate Instincts

8 October – 12 November 2016

The Physics Room, Christchurch

Alexis Hunter, Shahriar Asdollah-Zadeh, Darcell Apelu, Ana Iiti,
Joanna Neumegen, val smith and Jaimee Stockman-Young.

Curated by Henry Davidson, Amelia Hitchcock, Emma Ng, and Ted Whitaker.

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- 1 Liam Gillick, 'Maybe it Would be Better if we Worked in Groups of Three? Part 1 of 2: The Discursive', *e-flux Journal 2* (January 2009).
- 2 Monika Szewczyk, 'Art of Conversation, Part 2', *e-flux Journal 7* (June 2009).
- 3 Bruce Tuckman, 'Developmental Sequence in Small Groups', *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal 3* (Spring 2001). Also see, M. K. Smith, 'Bruce W. Tuckman – forming, storming norming and performing in groups', *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education* (2005).
- 4 The following discussion of those terms—forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning or mourning—is based on Tuckman's analysis.
- 5 *Passionate Instincts*, curatorial statement/room sheet, The Physics Room, Christchurch (8 October – 12 November 2016).
- 6 Lisa Sabbage and Alexis Hunter, 'Fears, dreams, desires', *Broadsheet 172* (Oct 1989): 20.
- 7 Lynda Morris, 'Alexis Hunter Obituary', *The Guardian* (12 March 2014).
- 8 Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 'Homosexual Law Reform: Setting the Scene' (updated 1 July 2014).
- 9 Such as the Lesbian and Gay Rights Resource Centre (LGRRC) in Wellington and The Dorian in Christchurch. See Phil Parkinson and Chris Parkin, 'Out of the Ashes', *Friends of LAGANZ Newsletter 13* (December 1996).
- 10 Jay Bennie, 'My Life before Law Reform', *Gay NZ* (3 April 2016).
- 11 Jay Bennie, 'The Gaping Holes in Gay Christchurch History', *Gay NZ* (11 May 2013).
- 12 Jaimee Stockman-Young, stated during *Passionate Instincts Artists and Curators in Discussion*, The Physics Room, Christchurch (8 October 2016).
- 13 Ted Whitaker, *Passionate Instincts Artists and Curators in Discussion*
- 14 Darcell Apelu, quoted in *Passionate Instincts* curatorial statement/room sheet, The Physics Room, Christchurch (8 October – 12 November 2016).
- 15 See Zara Sigglekow, 'Fear Performance: The Myth of Sisyphus', excerpt published by *CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand* (October 2013).
- 16 Emma Ng, curatorial statement read by Amelia Hitchcock, *Passionate Instincts Artists and Curators in Discussion*.