

PRESSING SINGULARITIES

John Mutambu & Robyn Pickens

Tendai John Mutambu is the current Artspace curatorial assistant. He is presently working on the exhibition *Potentially Yours, The Coming Community* (10 November – 22 December 2016) that will mark the end of his time in this role. Robyn Maree Pickens is a former Artspace curatorial intern. During her internship in 2010, she curated *post-Office*, a group exhibition reflecting on the contemporary art institution and its relationship to the knowledge economy and immaterial labour.¹ Below is a dialogue between the two on several topics including the curatorial assistant (formerly curatorial intern) position, the politics of labour in the art world, the relationship between curating, writing and theory, as well as their respective Artspace exhibitions.

Tendai John Mutambu (TJM): It's been six or so years since your time at Artspace as the curatorial intern (now known as the curatorial assistant role). I'm interested in hearing what about the position interested you and inspired you to apply?

Robyn Maree Pickens (RMP): I applied for two intersecting reasons. The public space offered by contemporary art spaces to interrogate political issues, and the chance to work with Emma Bugden, whose curatorial projects—particularly the *Land Wars* project at Te Tuhi in 2008 (with Pita Turei)—opened up for me the possibilities of what project spaces could tackle. An ongoing responsibility in such projects—one that flows from the stage of germination to the actual exhibition and beyond—is ensuring space for all involved to actively participate and *produce* meaning, and to resist institutional closure. Such politically invested projects must find ways to reach beyond core insider demographics; to be relevant and accessible to different audiences, particularly if 'non-traditional' audiences have been the subject or inspiration for the project. It is necessary to not just speak to and for 'ourselves', in a tight, self-aggrandising feedback loop, but to make what we do 'matter' for other audiences.

TJM: I'm inclined to agree with your statement regarding the potential these contemporary art spaces offer and, in fact, that was a major part of my own interest in this role.

Thinking back to a question I've been asked several times while working here, around how my time at Artspace has squared up with the expectations I had entering into the role, I'd like to pose a similar question: What was your actual experience with regards to reaching these other audiences and stepping outside of this 'self-aggrandising feedback loop' that had given impetus to your application?

RMP: I toyed with different ideas relating to the theme of immaterial labour, such as turning the space into an actual (temporary) production factory (of useful or useless products). But from a conceptual perspective, a temporary reversal of precarious immaterial labour for precarious material labour seemed an oversimplification. Furthermore, the ethics of short-term production and employment are themselves problematic, and additionally the venture may have conflicted with funding parameters.



Warren Olds, exhibition poster for *post-Office*, curated by Robyn Maree Pickens, Artspace Auckland, 2010.

Although I cannot account for broader audience responses to *post-Office* (15 May – 26 June 2010), in hindsight I probably would have done things differently. I would have spent more time with artists and other communities, focusing equally on process and outcome. In the literary world I am noticing a trend of low or zero expectations around tangible outcomes, where the recipient can read or write, but not necessarily WRITE. Removing some of the overarching expectations around what an exhibition is or looks like, or allowing the scope for something to not work, may engender some unexpected and fruitful experiences.

TJM: I think it's safe to say, without being too unctuous, that *post-Office* has stood the test of time as an exhibition in Artspace's history that people continue to refer to and think about. Several hours after my own interview for the curatorial assistant position, I received a call to say I'd made it to another round of interviews that would be taking place that same day. I was instructed to pick an exhibition in Artspace's archive that had particular significance to me, which I would have to give a brief presentation on. After half an hour or so of scrambling through *Artspace 25: every cloud has a silver lining* for inspiration, I recalled a conversation with a mutual friend of ours, who had introduced me to *post-Office*.² I suspect my choice of an exhibition by a former intern came as a slight surprise to the panel, initially, but in the end it was met with unanimous approval. One of the elements of your show that continues to strike a chord with me is your decision to turn a critical eye towards your own practice, as a curator, a short-term employee and a producer of value and (immaterial) labour. At one point you write in the accompanying text:

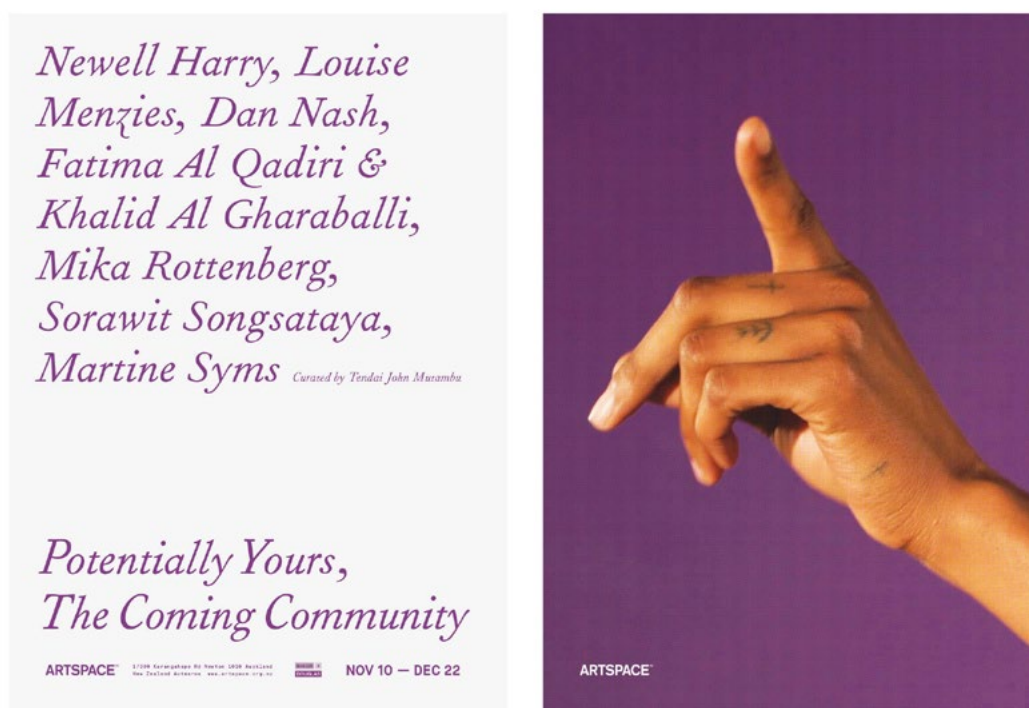
And on accompanying bald facts: an exhibition to curate, (with) a duration of six weeks, and the pressing singularity of that event within the confines of a short-term employment contract. Cultural capital, precarity as investment, self-management and branding existing alongside research, and an enjoyable engagement in the bounce back and forth between ideas and artists' practices.³

As I work towards my own exhibition, I'm reminded of the 'pressing singularity' that you mention. To me, it's this very notion that runs counter to focusing on process or 'allowing the scope for something to not work' as you say. Would you agree with this assessment?

RMP: Yes absolutely, and I can very readily empathise with you at this time. Before I ask you about your exhibition, I would just like to draw out a couple of ideas from your comment about my turning a 'critical eye' on my (humble) practice. Without undercutting this self-reflexive approach, to me it was not merely a *theoretical* exercise, but a real *experiential* event, or rather a succession of years and short-term contracts that created the lens. Of course I was also aware at the time, and what I will make clear here, is that

we as cultural workers in the immaterial production complex have the distinct luxury of making our precarity visible. We have an audience for our precarity. I often think about people who clean buildings at night, people working split shifts, not to mention the absolute precarity of being an undocumented alien labourer, or a refugee seeking any kind of labour, shelter or sustenance. So what can you tell me about the exhibition you are working on?

TJM: The exhibition is titled *Potentially Yours, The Coming Community* and will be a group show comprising a variety of works that provoke an upending or a disrupting of familiar and popular understandings of 'potential'. If, as Sven Lütticken writes, contemporary capitalism encourages us to 'realise our potential', my interest is in how we can wrest the word from this rhetoric of self-optimisation and productivity, and how it can be approached more critically and more imaginatively. I'd been looking at most of the artists in the show for a while before the chosen work started to slowly coalesce around the current premise. A lot of my thinking was inspired by Giorgio Agamben's writing on potentiality, part of which examines the utterance 'I'd prefer not to' by the central character in Herman Melville's *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853). It's a potent statement located somewhere between refusal and acquiescence. Some of the works in the show speak to these ideas quite directly, while some approach them more obliquely.



DDMMYY, exhibition poster for *Potentially Yours, The Coming Community*, curated by Tendai John Mutambu, Artspace Auckland, 2016.

RMP: It will be interesting to see how these direct and oblique conversations interact in response to the shifting grounds of, or between, refusal and acquiescence. No doubt you would have considered the extreme of 'I'd prefer not to', which is abdication or disappearance. To speak personally, this is what I felt I needed to do: to locate myself in actual sites of precarity, as I had run out of theory. This is perhaps not the place to elaborate, but I learnt a lot. I think the shifting ground you evoke is interesting, and this orientation in turn perhaps generates another balancing act: which is to most certainly acknowledge the breadth of 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' (bell hooks), yet to work towards identifying a potentiality of self-as-community that can find a way to resist defining 'itself' in relation to capitalism et al. That is, to not forego possible permutations of potentiality that are located in self/self-as-community/community-as-self, where expression and enactment of potential are grounded neither positively nor negatively in relation to capitalism et al. It is a potential that listens and includes all the voices that have been subsumed, rendered invisible and othered. A potential that is alert to relative moments of its own privilege, adjusts itself and steps to the side.

TJM: When you speak of running out of theory, does that signal a crisis of faith in theory, or something more akin to resigning yourself to its limitations and choosing to pursue other avenues? Perhaps this is a fitting moment to establish how you came to curating and writing. Is your academic training in either of these fields?

RMP: Yes I did have a crisis of faith in theory. I observed curatorial practices locally and internationally that seemed to merely graze the surface of a theoretical body of work, and that often it was the same small piece of ground being grazed. I found this particularly problematic if the subject/s were being instrumentalised to follow a thematic that was 'trending'. But we also need to consider again here the pressures of time and the regular cycling of programme schedules, which can impact on the ability of curators to really limn their theoretical field of choice. There were and are, of course, many exceptions, and this is not to discount the generative, dialogic interaction and conversations between similarly themed exhibitions or projects. In relation to this I feel I also need to clarify a couple of statements I made above: when I said actual sites of precarity, I meant not just that of my own, but that of a 'non-(art)institutionally framed' precarity; and secondly, that my evocation of theory (bell hooks), which appears contradictory in the above context, indicates a renewal or reconnecting with people whose ideas I value. Theory can be and often is invaluable, but it can't do, hold or explain everything, nor has it enabled us as a global community to think our way out of oppression towards othered human and other-than-human beings.

Following my Masters in Art History I intended to make myself employable in a human rights or social justice type organisation, but found myself without the desired skill sets (to engineer wells, water supply etc.). So I came to curating with the intention of wanting to bring together ideas, art practices and audiences that were inclusive of othered communities. I also love writing (non-fiction and fiction/poetry) and wanted to focus more on this as my core practice. Now I imagine moving fluidly between different communities with the ability to write, curate or co-facilitate projects but without being entrenched in the machinations of one particular world or community. It is quite unusual to have this opportunity to reflect in such a (potentially!) public forum, and it has been therapeutic to look back over the past few years, so thank you for your generosity John. What about yourself, what is your background and how did you come to curating?

TJM: I can certainly empathise with feeling disgruntled about grazing the surface of the same well-worn theories until a new focus comes along the next month. We've all witnessed sustained and protracted philosophical bodies of work be de rigueur one moment and out the next. But as you suggest, it's the affliction of the time-poor; certain exigencies within art's institutional models force this hand. And funny you should mention bell hooks, because she is, for me, the model of a humane and generous criticality—one grounded in listening, reading and thinking closely as a lifelong pursuit. I remember an esteemed local art writer and critic sharing with my Honours class the story of how he came to art writing. He mentioned witnessing the weaponising of theory by certain privileged parties who wielded it against those less acquainted.

This a good point to segue into your question about my academic background. I studied towards a conjoint degree in Law and Art History. I am a couple of papers away from completing the former but somewhere along the line, I lost the ambition of becoming an art lawyer that I once had. So you could say I came to my current position with the hope of being an advocate for art and artists in a sense, particularly those least represented and often marginalised. Beyond this I'm not sure I can say, with any modicum of certainty, how I came to curating (or if I have at all). I guess I am what most would term an 'emerging' curator; someone in the nascent stages of their career in this field. Yet, in spite of the great difference in experience between us—me being on the less seasoned end of the spectrum and you being further towards the other end—I think we share a commitment to facilitating projects around art (and doing so critically and self-reflexively) without undue constraint from what a particular discipline prescribes as its defining approach. Which brings me to a rather thorny question, one that relates to curating and its relationship to both inter- and intra-disciplinary boundaries. From your point of view, what is the relationship between curating and once-peripheral structures such as public programming, education and publishing (sometimes referred to as 'the paracuratorial')?⁴ What role do you see these distinctions playing?

RMP: Labels are interesting little entities. An interrelated question, particularly with regard to some of the themes we have discussed here (labour, capitalism, community, precarity, privilege), might be to develop an awareness of how and when labels are deployed for leverage, and the degree to which this involves co-optation by another structure (i.e. funding body). It is perhaps the role of each institution to establish their own relationship to the paracuratorial activities you mention, and to pursue them as self-defined, meaningful structures that enact the kaupapa of their institution. It may be that certain paracuratorial structures correspond and align to specific projects or exhibitions, or that not all of the activities you mention are necessarily relevant. Or, perhaps more importantly, the institution can focus on the activities that *extend* the ideas, themes and intentions of a specific exhibition or project.

We are all complicit with ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’; otherwise it would cease to exist. However, rather than the defeatism of irony and cynicism, it is who we are in ourselves and in our communities: communities that are always in flux and mouldable, that we can learn and build new reference structures (other than capitalism et al.) in which we come to not only identify our complicity, but to find ways—with the support of our communities—to divest from it.

Tendai John Mutambu is an emerging curator and writer of Zimbabwean ancestry with a background in Art History and Law. He is presently living and working in Tāmaki Makaurau, where he is the 2016 Artspace curatorial assistant. In the coming year, Tendai looks forward to pursuing further study, locating his research around curating’s relationship to critical theory, writing and the politics of the postcolony.

Robyn Maree Pickens holds a Masters in Art History and has worked in galleries and project spaces including Artspace, Auckland (2009–2010). Her writing has appeared in *Art New Zealand*, *Art News*, *The Physics Room Annual*, *Enjoy Gallery’s Occasional Journal*, *North Projects*, *The Press* and in exhibition catalogues. Currently she is an art reviewer for the *Otago Daily Times* and the 2015–16 Blue Oyster summer writer-in-residence on Quarantine Island Kamau Taurua. Robyn will commence a practice-based PhD in the field of eco-poetics in the English Department at the University of Otago in 2017.

- 1 For further information see *post-Office* on the Artspace website.
- 2 *Artspace 25: every cloud has a silver lining* (Auckland: Artspace, 2012).
- 3 Robyn Maree Pickens, *post-Office* exhibition text (Auckland: Artspace, 2010).
- 4 Jens Hoffmann and Tara McDowell, 'Reflection', *The Exhibitionist 4* (June 2011).