Forever Fresh

In*ter*is*land Collective and MOKU Pacific HQ, London

by Jessica Palalagi

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*Contemporary HUM has followed the activity of the In*ter*is*land Collective and of their Pacific HQ in London, MOKU, since it was inaugurated in 2018. We've been lucky to work with several members of the collective over the years, as European neighbours within the artistic diaspora community from the Pacific. In 2018, we commissioned a conversation between Jo Walsh and Ahilapalapa Rands, discussing Mana Moana in the UK's year of Captain Cook. Here, we invite another co-founder of the collective, Jessica Palalagi, to reflect on the evolution of the project, the growth of the collective and the challenges and opportunities that 2020 brought along.*

This essay is a companion piece and somewhat a prequel-sequel for a blog I wrote on the 31st July as a way to cope, respond and process the *gift* that 2020 had been so far.

Since that rough midpoint of the year, there have been a number of changes, developments and evolutions in the world and in my life but also in the focus of this essay—the In*ter*is*land Collective.

Tā (to mark time, tap, to form, to beat) and vā (the relational space between all things) are bound together in Moana (Pacific) philosophies—meaning that time is not viewed in the linear of past, present, future, but exists all at once. This may seem confusing at first, but it means that time now and time before are

one and the same—so in telling you about where we are in October 2020, we have to place this beside March 2020 and also the genesis of the Collective in 2018. I promise it will all make sense soon enough. This is the ebb and flow of Time.



18 March 2020 // Re: Coronavirus update

Hi everyone,

hope you are all well - just another update on the building and the Coronavirus situation. We have decided to close until further notice but will be in touch to keep you updated. At current we are estimating a month but this could be extended.

If you have an event booked during this time I'm afraid it will need to be cancelled - if you have anything booked in April and May there's no guarantee that this will be able to go ahead either - any questions just get in touch.

If anyone has left anything in the building, Alex will be opening up this Friday (20th March) from 2pm - 6pm, so things can be collected. Please could you pass this on tohe anyone who needs to know.

Hope to see you all soon and any questions feel free to send them over - I'm still on email Wednesday, Thursday, Friday,

Best Wishes
Raven Row

COVID-19 notice from MOKU Pacific HQ, London, 27 October 2020.



MOKU Pacific HQ, London.



MOKU Pacific HQ, London, currently located at Raven Row, London.



In*ter*is*land Collective.

What came first, MOKU or the In*ter*is*land Collective?

The space or the community?

If anything, they were birthed simultaneously in 2018—well I guess that's my version of events. I was invited in by Ahilapalapa Rands, Jo Walsh and Lyall Hakaraia, three creatives from Aotearoa New Zealand living in London, to join this little roopu (group) who had recently been successful in obtaining a space at Raven Row (a place I never knew existed but quickly found out was really old and really famous). I thought it was very cool but did not really understand the gravitas of having a physical space at the time, a MOKU (island) for tagata Moana (Māori and Pacific Islanders) residing in

or visiting the UK as a place to congregate, create, co-conspire and cook.

MOKU quickly became our island, our beacon, our place of refuge.

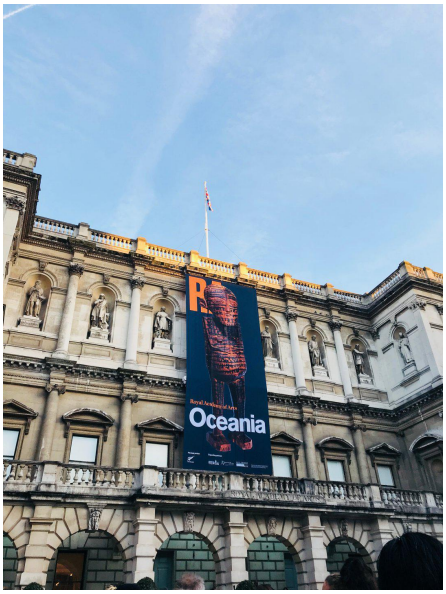
It was busy most days, with a constant stream of visitors—peeking their heads in the door, taking their shoes off and then settling down comfortably inside. As someone who was new to this dynamic, organic way of working my need for structure often pricked me as I wondered how deadlines were going to be met if we were always eating, chatting and napping. I now realise that this is a way of working too, a meandering, pondering, marinating that is required to create. Sometimes the spaces in between conversations are just as important as the words exchanged. On reflection, MOKU bought us people, and the collective expanded quickly from a group of four to embrace and include as many of our tagata Moana community in the UK, Europe and the US as possible. We centred our efforts on knowledge sharing, whether that be learning how to weave, make lei (garlands) or how to make panipopo (coconut buns), spending time together to foster relationships of authenticity and care.

2018 was a flurry of activity as the spotlight of *Oceania*, a large-scale exhibition at the nearby Royal Academy of Arts, cast large shadows under which we were torn between wanting to support our artists featured in the show and being furious and disappointed by the problematic nature of this institution, affiliated to Captain Cook and the history of colonial expeditions to the Pacific. On the upside, having the first exhibition that showed taonga (treasures) from museums alongside 'contemporary' tagata Moana artists in the UK meant that there was a constant stream of amazing Moana creatives travelling to this side of the world to whom we could offer the manaakitanga (hospitality) that was so central to our kaupapa (principles). We were also able to activate a love letter to our taonga in the *Oceania* show by asking our community if they would participate in "Aroha/love in action". We made offerings of lush green monstera leaves and flowers of birds of paradise, then moved through the show like waves in the moana (ocean)—in a rhythm encompassing the complexity that she is—we were at once wild and deep, playful and full of joy, loud and boisterous and at times sad and full of grief. The activation process was moving for us, complicated and probably puzzling for the throngs of people who

had come to enjoy the last weekend of the show. We were (thankfully) protected by allies and the gallery ushers who informed visitors that this was not a show or a performance but a calling out, a deep bone cry against the artificial lights and temperature controlled rooms, a desire to break the perspex caging in which our ancestors were trapped. We were able to work through the push/pull we had felt since *Oceania* opened. The friction was laid to rest, for now.



Oceania, Royal Academy of Arts, London. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.



Oceania, Royal Academy of Arts, London. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.



Oceania, Royal Academy of Arts, London. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.

May 2019 saw our first (and maybe our only) in-person exhibition at Raven Row. We named her *Mana Moana, Mana Wahine* and the invitation to contribute was extended to every person/group that had come through and spent time in MOKU since 2018. Again, the space bought the people together. The result was a show of 26 artists and their works, centred on the mana (prestige, authority, spiritual power, charisma) of the feminine and how she connects, reflects and embraces the Moana. The show was on for one week, and every day bought more love, care and sharing of knowledge. These themes are on repeat within the collective and do not deviate but continue to evolve as we do.

That summer brought the high of *Mana Moana* but the undercurrents of change were present for the four founding members. Lyall became consumed with a myriad of other projects

and resolved to step back to more of a support role in the collective, Ahilapalapa returned home to Aotearoa, and Jo also left for home later in October. We were successful in our reapplication to stay at Raven Row until November 2020, which seemed a long way into the distance at that point. So we had the space, yet the collective was evolving and I somehow was left cradling MOKU—a very reluctant new mum—I preferred being the cool Aunty. I wasn't on my own though (thank Tagaloa) as we decided as a roopu that Momoe Tasker, Jaq Brown and Ariana Davis could now step in to fill the vā. Soon enough we became MOKU 2.0.

In*ter*is*land Collective was omnipresent and existing in all of us, but now the space of MOKU was being filled with different humans.

Towards the end of 2019, our Creative New Zealand (CNZ) arts grant funding application for the next year's programmes was declined, winter began and I started to wonder what 2020 would look like.

2020 started with the excitement of potential with another CNZ funding round, a banging list of programming, a new lease on collective life with 2.0 people (our roopu of four had the addition of two more tagata Moana in AJ Fata and Shakaiah Perez), a potency of creating, collaborating and being in community. All great c-words! Then another one came along that was not as great—COVID-19 aka Coronavirus aka The Germs (to our kids) aka Aunty Rona; prolific and pronounced in its ability to Change Everything.



Mana Moana, Mana Wāhine, at Raven Row, London, May 2019. Image: ©2018 Crystal Te Moananui Squares.



Jessica Palalagi, Ahilapalapa Rands and Jo Walsh, co-founders of the In*ter*is*land Collective at *Mana Moana, Mana Wāhine,* at Raven Row, London, May 2019. Image: ©2018 Crystal Te Moananui Squares.



Melanesian Marks, Revival through Practice, at MOKU (London HQ), November 2018. Image: Joshua Virusami.

So in March 2020 our beloved MOKU had to shut as lockdowns began across the UK (and the world) and we were afforded a time slot on the 20th to pick up ‘things’. What a strange experience, trying to pick and choose what taonga to take and leave, with a sense of foreboding and precarity around the next time we would be ‘back to normal’. Back to sitting together, creating, conspiring to music and punctuating the air with loud hyena laughs.

We gathered artworks, deities, adornments, books, plants, and then, in an apocalyptic turn; flour, honey, canned goods, toilet paper. Not knowing at that point that items we had disregarded as pantry staples also would become precious commodities later, as fear set in and panic-buying became the new normal.

I remember feeling... weird. Just weird. Scared in one way, silly for feeling scared, dissociative, annoyed at the inconvenience that was a global pandemic. I think we were all processing this series of events in our own way and my experience on a personal level was about to become more challenging. However, as a collective, we took the new normal head on and pivoted to the digital. Joining a new app we had never heard of before—Zoom—we started to fall in step with the rest of the world, which now only existed on a screen. MOKU lay dormant and forbidden to us, so we had no choice but to carry on existing in a new space—the virtual.

Creatively, this was a challenging time. We pressed on with some of our programming (not at all as fun in a digital form) and we agreed weekly check-ins were helpful and needed to stave off boredom, and to decompress from new roles as homeschool teachers, banana bread makers and part time pandemic experts. The months lolled by at a strange pace that seemed to be somehow both glacial and avalanche-like. Summer arrived and in July we got the precious communication from the gallery manager at Raven Row saying that MOKU would be reopening on restricted hours with the now familiar protocols of masks, hand sanitiser and social distancing.

We went back to her. Well, some of us anyway. Ariana and AJ were now in Aotearoa until further notice, Jaq had to shield at home—so it was Momoe, Shaka and I who were able to travel in and see her, reacquaint with her and maybe, just maybe, start the comeback of the decade. For the first time ever though, MOKU wasn't able to

bring people together and that was a new feeling—what would MOKU become without people? Without a community there to fill her with ideas, sink into her cushions as refuge, gaze on her beauty laden with taonga?



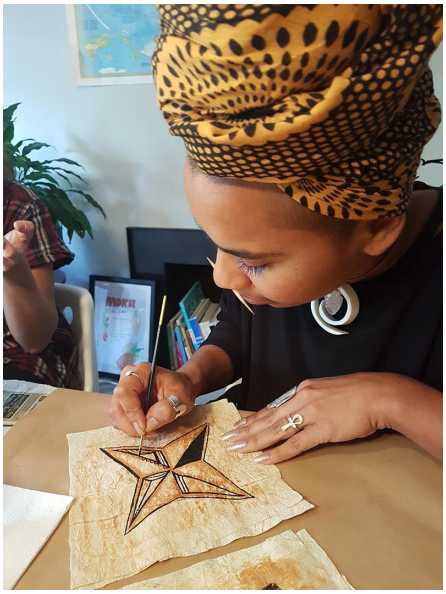
20:20, a digital exhibition by the In*ter*is*land Collective, 2020. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.



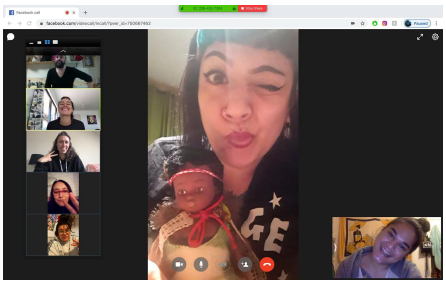
Kai Klub, 01 May 2020. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.



Kai Klub via Zoom, 01 May 2020. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.



Ngatu Heneba painting. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.



Zoom meeting featuring members of In*ter*is*land Collective, 2020. Image courtesy MOKU Pacific HQ, London.

It's now October. In July, to celebrate Matariki (Māori New Year), we sent words to each other and to the universe, words to manifest a future that looked different to our present. What I can attest to now is that our words are powerful enough to create worlds, we hold magic within us as we have been able to cultivate a second half of 2020 explosive with creativity, challenge, collaboration and content. We are on the precipice of launching our first digital exhibition, 20:20, a response to a year that has brought about great change, heartache and sadness, but conversely also opportunity, development and new narratives. We have been on this journey to curate an exhibition since August 2020 and are privileged to include 20 artists residing in different parts of the world, all providing a view of life in this challenging year. The provocation was sent out on social media to ask artists to respond to notions of tā and vā and connection—how are we connecting now that our freedom of movement has been limited? How do we connect over large distances (both physical and emotional) - how do we connect in grief and loss? The responses were varied; from poems, to video works, wearable art to photography. All hosted in a digital space, a new type of MOKU in the form of a purpose built website that we wanted to make as accessible as possible to ensure our version of 2020 could be shared with many.

From October onwards to Summer 2021, we are also set to do a series of talanoa (dialogue/conversations) in collaboration with *Co ntemporary HUM*, ranging from indigneous queer love to connections to home in the diaspora. Visually, we are looking at producing photographic explorations and portraits of hair, and a series of learning resources created in different Moana languages created for our children. Finally, when we are hopefully allowed to be physically together again—we will be curating healing spaces for tagata moana within our workshop space as we continue to prioritise each other, learn, grow and transform together in MOKU.

We are strengthening our skills online and testing new ones—forging collaborations we haven't had before and, in the vastness that is the internet, somehow connecting more than ever. Pandemic life has moved on in some ways, lockdowns and a limited freedom of movement a mercurial element that we now take in our stride. But. We have remained. And I guess this is version 3 now, a

truly global arts collective of tagata Moana creatives, a home we have created in many spaces, and in many ways. So, to answer my initial question, I now realise that people—the community—came first, always. As long as there are people, there will always be In*ter*is*land Collective.

Biographies



Jessica Palalagi was born in Aotearoa/New Zealand and traces her ancestry to Niue/Nukututaha in Te Moananui a Kiwa and Aberdeen, Scotland. She has an MA in Art History from Auckland University and is a founding member of In*ter*is*land Collective; a misfit collection of queer, moana artists and activists based around the world. Her artistic focus is born out of the duality of existing in the interstice, the vā, the space between and she constantly seeks meaningful reciprocity in all forms of expression. She is made of the saltiness of all moanas spanning hemispheres, the journeys that her ancestors navigated, the movements of dark to light made by the mahina, the languages that have been lost, the strength of the matriarchs before her and the music of Barry White.

HUM

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