Mataaho Collective at the Dhaka Art Summit

by Pauline Autet

Published on 21.04.2020



Dhaka Art Summit 2020: Seismic Movements, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Mataaho Collective at *Dhaka Art Summit 2020: Seismic Movements*, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit 2020: Seismic Movements, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Photojournalist Rashid Talukder's photo of the arms drill by women members of the Chatro student union in 1971 greets visitors arriving at *DAS 2020: Seismic Movements*, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

Continuing to expand its geographical coverage, Contemporary HUM *is pleased to bring you the third publication covering New Zealand's art activity in Asia. This first series of new publications engages with projects in Singapore, Hong Kong and Bangladesh.*

In February this year, Contemporary HUM *Editor Pauline Autet travelled to the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh and interviewed the Mataaho Collective, recently nominated for the 2020 Walters Prize, about their participation in the week-long Summit. Only two months later, as we prepare to publish this conversation, the world has changed, as we battle against the Covid-19 virus and its implications on our way of life.*

Foreword

We've had the immense privilege to travel nationally and internationally over the past three years. With each trip we know how fortunate we are to follow the examples set by our tīpuna who as Ngahuia Te Awekotuku said "...stretching out on either side of

you like a vast glittering fan of light are women of courage, initiative, healing, imagination, terror, and deep deep knowledge. Whose adventure crossed mountain ranges and spanned the huge ocean; whose vision knew no bounds."[01] Our travel is a responsibility not taken lightly, we are acutely aware of who we take with us each and every time. We're cognisant that as this interview is published, Aotearoa is on lockdown and our borders closed for the first time. Travel is out of the question for the near future and this recent trip to Dhaka will no doubt be our last international trip during this time of adaptation and change. With this in mind, we are grateful to call Aotearoa home and while we try to keep our communities healthy, we hope yours are too. — Mataaho Collective



PAULINE AUTET When you came to Paris last year during the *Oceania* exhibition, you met Kathryn Weir, curator at the Centre

Pompidou at the time, as well as Diana Campbell Betancourt, director of Dhaka Art Summit (DAS) who was travelling through. What did they invite you to do here in Bangladesh? Were you given freedom to propose a project?

MATAAHO COLLECTIVE Initially we did say that we couldn't make a new work because there wasn't enough time. So they proposed a workshop-based, community engagement idea. But that was very different to what our normal practice is, so we proposed this singing practice instead. Because this is something we need.

PA Titled *Woven Songs*, your project for DAS is not an exhibited work, it's not performed or even necessarily experienced by each visitor. It is quite private and operates on a timeline that extends beyond the 9-day long Summit because you are using this time to practice a song that will serve you in the future. Can you outline your project and why you're doing it?

MAC When we were invited to the Dhaka Art Summit, we asked ourselves how coming here would benefit us. We thought of how, when we're travelling overseas, we increasingly feel the necessity to practice our Māori culture with integrity.

In the past we often did that by singing a song of support to the newly installed work, and to represent ourselves, and where we're from. For a while now, we've thought about the need for us to have our own song. From there came the idea to work with a composer to develop a song that we could then sing at different events, exhibitions or places.

We spoke with musician Te Kahureremoa Taumata who was very excited to compose a pātere for us to learn while we're here in Dhaka. And so we go into the Summit every day and learn this new song. It's an intangible practice that is not object-based, which is quite different for us within the exhibition site.

Fortunately for us, we're able to sit within Taloi Havini's work called *Reclamation*. Taloi is one of the other very few Pacific artists

in the exhibition and to be able to sit in this space, made in Bougainville in collaboration with her community, is very special.

Some people visiting the Summit get to see it. Most people don't. But for us, being able to own our time and use it wisely, when we're together, is incredibly valuable because it's what makes us a collective. As we live in different cities of Aotearoa, having ten days together is quite rare. It's in the time together and shared that the collectivity happens.

PA The pātere you are practicing is called *Taku Aho E*, can you tell us what the song is about?

MAC When we decided that we needed a song, and started doing some research, we found the pātere, which is a type of Mōteatea (chanted song-poetry). One of the things that is significant to us about pātere is that it was often sung by a group of women, often composed by women, and one of the characteristics of a pātere is that it's gestural, there's a lot of strength behind the chant.

It's a way for women asserting an idea, or being really clear about issues that they want to portray. And it's used to tell of a journey, or important landmarks. And so our song tells our journey as Mataaho Collective, through the works that we've made together.

We all have waiata from different areas that we come from whereas this one really brings us together. We've been working together for eight years, we want to be able to stand strong in all situations, as a unit, so this is like the icing on the cake!

PA Do you want to go through the pātere in more detail? It would be nice to know what the words say.

MAC We'd prefer not to write down the words, but for people to experience it because it's an oral thing. However we can talk through the verses and the structure. The verses have a

procession starting with the inception of an idea, then through the process of making, and finally to hanging the work.

When we initially met with Te Kahureremoa, we shared with her the ideas behind work we've made, which she wove into the words of the song. It talks about different Atua wahine (female Māori gods) that we've included in our works, or our works have acknowledged. And it ends with a really beautiful statement about hanging our work in the space, asserting that that's the main goal for us, as Māori women, to have our work on display in a range of institutions and for people to hear our story. So it's really clever and beautiful. She's done a really amazing job.

PA Can you talk about the intangibility of the project, and the difficulty of conveying it beyond the stage of practising the pātere and also in an international context like this?

MAC It's been a bit of a juggle when people have asked us when we're performing, and having to explain that we were doing this as a more intangible project, rather than a performance. It's really for us, rather than an audience. It goes back to the uncomfortable feelings about being indigenous and performing for people. It raises the issues of always being on show, or for example the history of tourism in our country.

It looks more like a rehearsal. We've got our phones, and we're going over certain lines, and we sing, and talk, and then talk to other people, and get selfies. It seems as though people are comfortable to come up and almost interrupt us, which you wouldn't do in a performance.

We've had people stand around, talk to us and listen, or read the words over our shoulders. So there has been interaction with the public.

We're also sitting facing each other, not facing outward as if we're performing. There are people who have a beautiful performance practice, and that's exactly what they do, but for us, first and foremost, we're installation artists, or artists who make tangible works. This is different but it definitely isn't a performance.

Because when we do waiata and practice customary things, that's not a performance either, it has a real practicality and plays a role. Either to support those who have spoken, or it's like a gift. When we travel, we've been able to stand and acknowledge people who've hosted us without giving physical gifts, but by singing to them. It's never a performance for us, in the Western ideology sense, and we're uncomfortable with the idea of being performative of our culture.



Mataaho Collective speaking at Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Design in the Era of Climate Catastrophe panel at Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Courtesy Mataaho Collective.



Mataaho Collective at Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Mataaho Collective practising under the work of Taloi Havini, Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit Director Diana Campbell Betancourt welcoming everyone to the Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

PA The particularity of DAS is that the core program is made of talks, discussions and other moments of intervention. You participated in two panel discussions this week, particularly focused on indigenous collectives, and resistance. Other speakers on your first panel were from very different cultural contexts and everyday realities. Even the very strong military presence on the grounds of the event and the fact that an attendee raised the importance of creating safe spaces for everyone to be able to speak freely, was a reminder of how context can affect these types of international events.

How did you feel participating in these panels? And how do you go about sharing and presenting your work in a context that is so different from home?

MAC In the last year we've presented work in Honolulu, Paris, Ottawa, and now here. All are really different places. So we're getting used to explaining and grounding our practice in different contexts. We're still learning and developing ways to talk about our practice to lots of different people, to give some sense of where we're coming from. And we just always hope that our work can hold its own in whatever context it's in, and that people can get something from it, whether they know the full concept or not. As with any visual art, the audience brings their own experience to reading a work.

In the panel, there were artists coming from very different places, and we could have just talked to compare our differences. But what was interesting to us, as artists, was that we were able to discuss our artworks and the materiality of them, the concepts behind them. Those are the things that we can share and connect across differences. For us, coming from Aotearoa with government funding, speaking to the fellow artist group who aren't even recognised as indigenous people in Bangladesh, we can still connect across our practices, which is amazing.

PA Artist collectives were a central focus of DAS this year and collective processes were addressed in different ways throughout the week. For example Taloi Havini made the work you

sit under collaboratively with people from her village in Bougainville but they don't form an ongoing collective. And Merv Espina from Green Papaya in the Philippines said that they're not a collective either, because they don't work collectively to produce artwork. They are an artist-run-initiative.

MAC This came up in the workshop we did the very first day. It was like a collective of collectives' workshop facilitated by Gudskul from Jakarta. The format worked well because it was really intimate and well-facilitated. There were keywords put forward like process, economy, sustainability, members. They asked us to share how that works for our collective. There was a smaller group of people so you can really have a conversation. There are so many collectives here at the Summit so it was amazing to sit at the table and have discussions with other collectives, meet them on the very first day.

One person said we sounded like a "real collective". It seems that they were talking about the way in which we make a single work, without distinguishing who does what. It's been great to see the difference between collectives as a strength, to see how people can take the concept of working together and do it in their own way.



Mataaho Collective speaking at Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Courtesy Mataaho Collective



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

PA Is there anything else that you want to say about the panel discussions? It's at once so valuable to be able to bring all these different experiences together, and at the same time quite complex for each speaker to share enough knowledge with other panellists and the public so that everyone is on some common ground before delving into the topics of the shared discussion.

MAC When we're speaking on panels, we like to think about where we're speaking, and to be good guests. We try to place ourselves as visitors in that space, and not to speak over anyone that's from there.

Often Māori get pulled up as being an example of success. Because of the way in which we have risen in some aspects of our culture or the way we are revitalising our language. And so for some people there's an impression that Māori are leaders in this indigenous world.

And so it's nice to go somewhere and not get caught up in comparing who has it better or worse, and acknowledge that we do

come with privileges. It's good to just go and talk about what we do, and what we make without trying to solve these problems through the panel discussion. Because although we can draw similarities in indigenous peoples having gone through colonisation, loss and militarisation, it's important not to always come from a place of deficit.

One of the first questions in our first panel for instance was, what are your struggles? Which is an impossible question to answer when you're placed in a direct relationship with somebody on the panel who is having a very different experience, where this is their land, and politically they're not recognised as indigenous people here. In contrast, we can talk about what was experienced by our people historically, and how we continue to see the effects of that, but this is a present experience for them.

And so how do you reconcile that? On reflection, if we have a situation like this again, we'll probably spend more time with the moderator and with the people involved to be able to talk through how we can find solidarity through those differences.

PA This leads me to asking you why it's important for you as artists based in New Zealand to participate in events like DAS. What do you get out of it? How important is it for your collective practice, for your individual practices?

MAC Meeting people and being on this world stage is invaluable. To be able to discuss events, art and everything that comes with it. All these incredible people that you're sitting next to on the bus, or at dinner, or at some party, or in a panel discussion.

It's hard to find words to explain how valuable those conversations and those discussions are outside of a museum context. The beauty of distance, maybe being able to see where we're at in our country, but also internationally. And then from these events come opportunities for us to do things in the future too. You start thinking about how we could bring people home, and what kind of exciting projects we could organise, maybe by circumnavigating those people and places that have usually held power in New

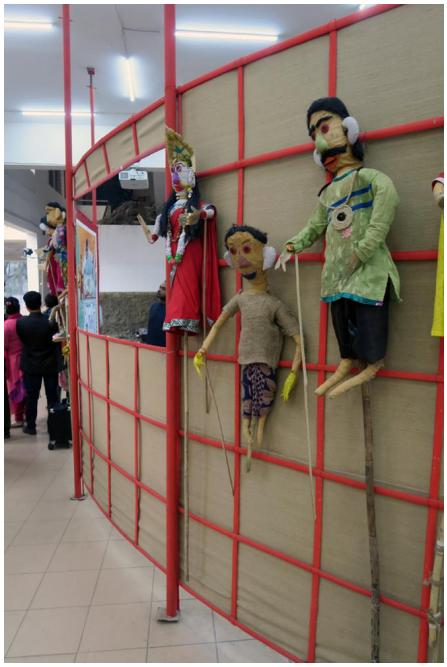
Zealand. It's also been really affirming to be around so many collectives from all around the world.



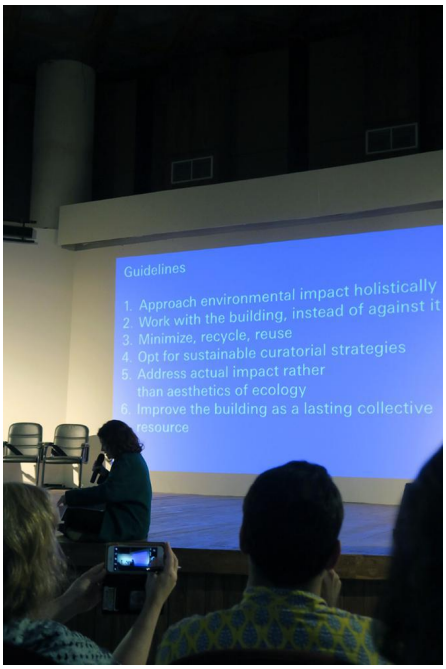
Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Design in the Era of Climate Catastrophe panel at Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

PA At the first talk I attended, titled *Design in the Era of Climate Catastrophe*, I learnt that past Dhaka Art Summits were completely air-conditioned and white-cube like. This year, with a

concern for the event's ecological impact, they've done it differently, working with the building rather than against it by utilising the existing structure, thinking about what areas could stay open to the outdoors and not be climate-controlled. It's actually much better, for example, the balcony on the first floor being open to the outside courtyard, but this is also invisible work, you wouldn't have a clue unless you came to previous editions.

A growing concern I share with many, in my job and in general, is the viability of the idea itself of the international art stage and of us flying places to participate in different events. It's an issue that is becoming increasingly urgent to consider. At the same time, I find such incredible value in these international moments of sharing and cross-influences, and that's also why I'm here today and why I work in this role promoting international exchange. Learning from different experiences, from how people might approach a similar issue differently, and building relationships are all so valuable in our field, especially in smartly curated events like this one.

I wondered if that's an issue we'd want to discuss. In parallel to these international exchanges and collaborations, how we can also stay aware and responsible.

MAC This is something that we've started talking about because it is now looking like travelling internationally might continue in some capacity for the next couple of years, at least. So it's a really tricky question without any solid answer.

One of the things that we try to do is make the most of that time. We might stay longer, or if we travel to Europe we make sure we've hit every museum, tried to get into the collection if they have Māori taonga, to make it not just one trip for one thing.

When you get cross-pollination of people from different countries coming together, the outcomes can be big and even life-changing for people, and could actually help solve some of the problems that we face. So it's such a complex thing. How do you weigh up the carbon emissions of one air ticket with these other possible benefits that come from spending time together? Does it need to be literally face-to-face meetings? We have these technologies that

allow us to be able to communicate electronically, but you really can't beat the value of personal interactions and the bounty that comes from that. There are these beautiful Pacific connections that just continue to get stronger and stronger for us.

Also, New Zealand is quite far away from a lot of the world, and so we have to travel anyway. People can either come to us or we go there, and fifty-times more people attend these international events.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Art Summit, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka Book Fair, Bangladesh, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Louis Kahn's National Parliament of Bangladesh in Dhaka, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.



Dhaka, Bangladesh, February 2020. Photo: Contemporary HUM.

PA What does it take for your collective to be here in Dhaka and participate in an event like this?

I'm thinking of public and personal support from your communities before you leave Aotearoa but also support abroad. Last time we had this conversation was in our panel discussion in London in 2017, have things changed since? Do you find there's a need to do it differently, as a small nation, and as a small art community, are there things that we can do to support each other better?

MAC It takes guts and support from our families. We still need that. Things haven't changed. We still start with personal connections, and then that becomes a collective relationship.

The work you do with Contemporary HUM is very important, for this story to be documented and shared because otherwise, no one knows what we're doing here. And we're also thankful for the funding received from Creative New Zealand. Last year, we received support from Massey University as well in order to produce our work in their spaces and for documentation but otherwise, there is very little institutional support.

Not to compare, but the Australian contingent in Dhaka is made of 33 artists and curators, not many of them exhibiting, just being here and being part of it. For us, it would be really beneficial to have someone sitting at those upper levels, as collectors or press, making those relationships, or being part of those conversations.

It's hard to make the work, install and also have the capacity to put out a press release, organise meetings etc. However one of the beauties of travelling as a collective is that we can manage most situations because we've got our people, we're not alone.

Footnotes

01. *Mana Wahine Māori: Selected Writings on Māori Women's Art, Culture and Politics.* Ngahuia Te Awekotuku. Auckland, N.Z.: New Women's Press, 1991

Biographies



Mataaho Collective is a collaboration between four Māori women who produce large-scale textile-based work, commenting on the complexity of Māori lives. Their conceptual framework is founded within the contemporary realities of mātauranga Māori and together they produce works with single collective authorship that are bigger than their individual capabilities. Members are Erena Baker (Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Toa Rangātira), Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe), Bridget Reweti (Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāi Te Rangi) and Terri Te Tau (Rangitāne ki Wairarapa).

Recent exhibitions include *Océanie*, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France (2019); *Oceania*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK (2018); *Signature Art Prize* Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, (2018); *documenta 14*, Kassel, Germany (2017); *Making Space*, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, NZ (2017); *Noho 16*, Whau Art Centre, Auckland NZ (2016); *Disrupting the Narrative*, Thistle Hall, Wellington NZ (2015); and *International Artist Initiated*, David Dale Gallery, Glasgow UK (2014).



Pauline Autet is an independent editor, curator and project manager. Based in Paris since 2016, Pauline founded Contemporary HUM in collaboration with other art professionals from Aotearoa New Zealand based in Europe and beyond. She previously worked at City Gallery Wellington, 30upstairs Gallery and co-founded the nomadic gallery Elbowroom. Following her experience as attendant of the New Zealand pavilion at the Venice Biennale for Simon Denny's *Secret Power* exhibition in 2015, she thought something could be done to bridge the gap between Aotearoa and the wider art world and developed HUM. Since 2016 she has worked with the Aotearoa and French art scenes concurrently. She is in charge of the editorial platform *TextWork*, initiated by the Fondation Pernod Ricard and in collaboration with the French Ministry of Culture. She is also Executive Director of Trampoline, a non-profit initiative created by a group of private organisations in France to support and raise the international profile of artists from the French art scene.

HUM

creativenz
ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA