Reading Artists' Books with Interjections from a Daphne on Pete's Front Step

by Hamish Petersen

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Tim Veling, *Dad, Pete, Opa* Limited Edition with mahogany cover and print (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022). Image: XYZ Books.



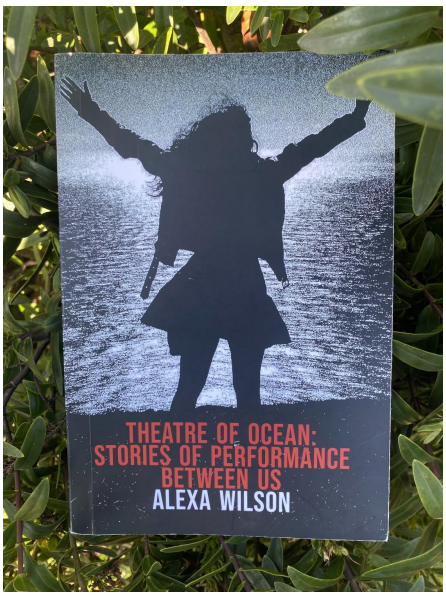
Tim Veling, *Dad, Pete, Opa* (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022). Image: XYZ Books.



Kate Newby, Pocket Works (Portland: lumber room, 2019); Alexa Wilson, *Theatre of Ocean: Stories of Performance Between Us* (Te Whanganui-a-Tara: 5ever books, 2022); and Tim Veling, *Dad, Pete, Opa* (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022). Image: Hamish Petersen.



Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019). Image: Hamish Petersen.



Alexa Wilson, *Theatre of Ocean: Stories of Performance Between Us* (Te Whanganui-a-Tara: 5ever books, 2022). Image: Hamish Petersen.

Taking a poetic and reparative approach in this response to three recent book projects, HUM's new Senior Editor Hamish Petersen asks: what are the unique needs of books as an artistic form, and what might they enable? They share learning gleaned from time with books by Tim Veling, Kate Newby, and Alexa Wilson to suggest that, although constrained by materials and economic pressures, books can become

sovereign creatures in our homes, capable of extending an artistic practice in ways not possible in theatres or galleries.

Books have long been an alternative route for artists to make, document, and extend their work and practices. They can interrogate social politics and communication itself, as in Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–5).[01] They can also provide rarefied, multi-sensory encounters, as in Vivian Lynn's human scale exploration of the "epidermal self" in *Threshold* (1983/1996).[02] In the post-pandemic era, where in-person opportunities are less certain, books are a fertile territory for artistic practice and a potentially important stream of income for artists working internationally. With the ongoing pressure on publishers to serve the needs of capital, artists' books reveal both what the book can do for the telling of stories, and what books require in order to tell stories with intimacy, sovereignty, and safety.

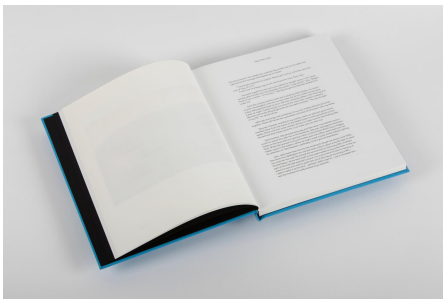
Tim Veling's *Dad, Pete, Opa* (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022), Kate Newby's *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019), and Alexa Wilson's *Theatre of Ocean* (Te Whanganui-a-Tara: 5ever books, 2022) are all books conceived by artists to carry their stories into the world. One thing that ties these books together is that publishing is none of the artists' primary mode of production. Though they have all made books before, they are each better known, respectively, as documentary photographer (Veling), installation sculptor (Newby), and performer (Wilson). Each has made a choice to channel their work into a book, either as the artwork itself, to collect a community of responses to artworks, or to reflect on artistic practice. As I considered Veling's book while writing this text, the different ways in which language, images, and structure were employed led to comparisons with the other books.

I'm curious about the unique capacities of artists' books. While this can refer to their mediums (paper, glue, and other materials they might bind together), the recent books by Aotearoa New Zealand artists that caught my attention also reveal other capacities. Sometimes, books can demonstrate sovereignty over a narrative in a manner that allows us as readers to relate to them less as objects, perhaps, and more as fellow creatures with their own agency,

faults, fears, and power. Perhaps, then, books can remind us of these qualities in ourselves as well. To pursue this idea of books as feral, sovereign creatures in this text—to acknowledge their vitality and force upon us—I take up the voice of a character found within Veling's photographs: a young daphne seedling seen repeatedly in the book.[03] It is an attempt to provide a multi-sensory dimension to my writing, as well as a poetic or pseudo-fictional register in which many potential readings of the book's content might resonate alongside my other, more rational, commentary.



Tim Veling, *Dad, Pete, Opa* (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022). Image: XYZ Books.



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Dad, Pete, Opa begins with three photographs and three full pages of monologue by the artist. In understated language, photographer and educator Tim Veling outlines the events that marked his father's final months with a terminal lung cancer diagnosis, events that form the book's timeline. "The text arrived in the middle of a meeting. … 'I have been admitted to hospital. Please don't worry, call when you can. Lots of love, D, P, O.' It was how he always signed off; shorthand for Dad, Pete, Opa."[04] It begins like a film treatment; bluntly heartbreaking, honest, just short of procedural.

Still, I can hear the pain and vulnerability coded into this language; a subtler shade to the wry, guarded stoicism of typical male communication in Aotearoa New Zealand. “My mouth was dry and I struggled to find the right words, a way to tell him how much he meant to me.”[05] Veling also writes of the rougher textures of his father; divorce and alcoholism among them. There are very few photographs that depict unguarded pain, though it sits, waiting, throughout. Just before Veling’s monologue, readers are given a landscape image of Pete lying on his navy velveteen couch, appearing somewhat deflated. The image bears the caption “After bronchoscopy.” The same scene is presented to us again after Veling tells his story, yet this time Pete’s body is convulsing; coughing up phlegm to clear blocked airways. His face and legs blur as his diaphragm clenches his body in a momentary exorcism. The image gives me a sense of the extraordinary intensity of this time. While this image is alone in its depiction of obvious illness within the book, the other images of Pete—facing the camera, sharing a glance with a friend, or in a moment of rest—each carry a similarly vulnerable sensation; there’s trust and teeth-gritting acceptance only Veling can document. The book’s 144 pages catalogue about four months at Pete’s house and collect his habits and passions as much if not more than his diagnosis. He is in the shed surrounded by woodworking tools. He has sunk into the blue sofa. He is beside his ex-wife, his brother, he is on the porch, under the washing line, sitting, pacing, smoking, outside, in the sun.

I don’t mind the shaded mornings. I spend most of my time on the steps at Pete’s porch. The neighbour’s hedge slows the rise of the sun. He bought me as the winter was lifting, just as the desperation for some kind of stimulation—my scent, a new energy apart from bone-clench cold—reached its peak. I was just finishing my first flowering and was quite proud. Sadly, many of my siblings had already been whisked off by shoppers to new homes, but this is what our family has always done. Immigrants. People flocked to our islands of daphne and the rows of camellia in those shorter days at the garden centre. They’d say our scent in the winter sun was, get this, “divine.” Pete deposited me, still in my plastic jacket, inside a tall, blue ceramic pot. The days were getting noticeably longer and the nights properly warm again when people suddenly started visiting more, often twice a day.

It's only been in the last couple of months (the Aotearoa summer of 2022–3) that Veling has been able to sort through the boxes his father left behind. He's thrown a bunch out, remembered a lot, and put things on the walls of the house he rents with wife Lizzie and young child Frankie in Ōtautahi Christchurch. He admits to me, when discussing the book at a café, that he feels more at home now than at any time since he was 13, clearly having turned this thought over in his mind for some time now.[06]

In 2018 Veling used a sabbatical from his role as the only full-time Lecturer in Photography at Ilam School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury to return to Amsterdam, where his father lived after leaving Indonesia and before moving to Aotearoa. Veling had put together a dummy version of *Dad, Pete, Opa* but didn't expect to share it with anyone he met there. In the café, he told me about how deeply Tiago Casanova and Pedro Guimarães—behind the XYZ Books table at Unseen photography fair—cared about the books they were sharing. XYZ Books is a small bookshop, publishing house, and research centre in Lisbon, Portugal, who often support artists to produce their first major solo book project. Veling gave them the dummy and shortly they were emailing back and forth about funding, printing, and distribution. This care, combined with their proximity to the markets and skilled book industry of Europe were key to Veling's decision to publish with them, rather than in Aotearoa. In the café, he tells me he's doing it for his daughter, and himself of course. Clearly, he wants it to be a gift for others as much as a balm for his loss.

Veling tells me books give audiences a haptic experience that is different from a gallery. Keeping this book on my own shelf, seeing it in different lights, going to it when I can't sleep at night, or having it remind me of something as it sits on the kitchen table at breakfast makes it unpredictable. It can become an actor in my own life over the course of months and years, unlike an exhibition, where our interactions with those works are limited to fixed times and places.[07] Sometimes this is preferable: the gallery is a shared and social space in which to feel things we visitors can't feel by ourselves. A book, however, is something I have to touch, carry, and investigate. I could open a spread out with a friend, but our eyes will follow different paths, and the impulse to turn back or flick ahead, rub pages to separate them or discover their heft, quickly

turns the book into a tactile, one-to-one relationship. This thing might offer me something if I give it the attention of my thinking, feeling body.

Another project that utilises this intimate, nomadic aspect of books is Kate Newby's *Pocket Works*. Published towards the end of a year-long exhibition, *A puzzling light and moving* (6 October 2018 – 6 October 2019) at lumber room, a publisher and gallery in Portland, Oregon, it feels at home in the US given the show's occupation, and Newby's wide network of relationships there. This includes the six writers whose texts in the book respond to the gift of a collection of small cast-metal, glass, or fired-clay objects from Newby. Each text reveals connections with the artist that have to do with their shared occupation, as thinkers, residents, and fellow artists. Subtitled, "a project for writing," the book is structured around six artworks gifted by Newby to the writers and the texts the writers made in return, plus a reflective essay by Kyle Dancewicz. In this way, authorship is delegated and distributed by Newby and lumber room founder Sarah Miller Meigs, who together issue instructions for the writers at the book's outset. Each text is then preceded by a handwritten title page and portrait of Newby's gifted work, printed on waxy tracing paper as if to water it down or turn it to vapour. The objects range from silver-cast matchsticks, and bronze-cast walnuts or flowers, to fired-glass orbs, and little lozenges of glazed porcelain. Brittle coins and weighty fruits. One was won at a charity auction, others appear to have been handed over in backyards or posted out. Most of the writers express their fear of losing the works gifted to them and a kind of failure this would prove in them. The writers serve the talismans. The artworks also seem to enjoy a kind of sovereignty in this treatment by resisting fixedness, even though they are quite literally claimed by individuals.



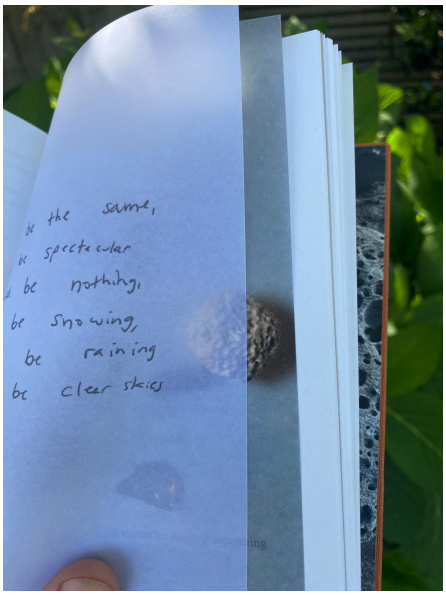
Alexa Wilson, *Theatre of Ocean: Stories of Performance Between Us* (Te Whanganui-a-Tara: 5ever books, 2022); Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019); and Tim Veling, *Dad, Pete, Opa* (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022). Image: Hamish Petersen.



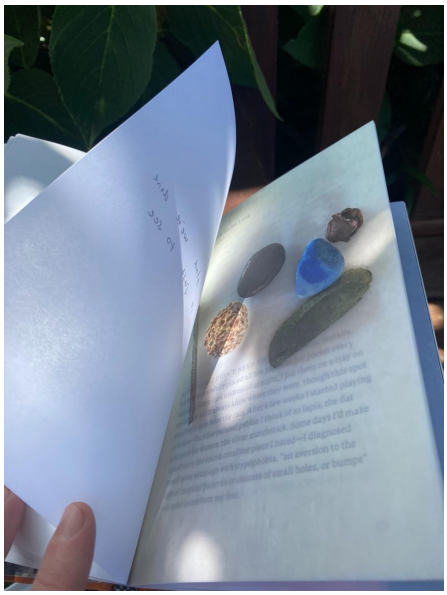
Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019). Image: Hamish Petersen.



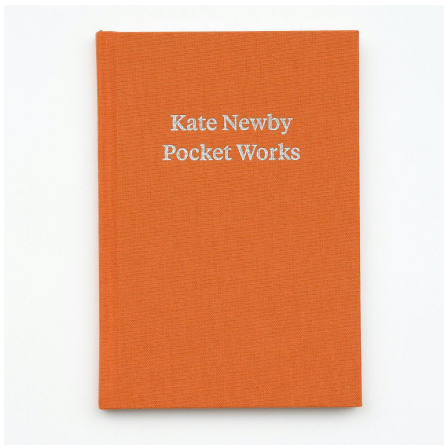
Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019). Image: Hamish Petersen.



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Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019). Image: Sam Hartnett

The book is lighter than I imagined. The picture on the website gives it a sense of chunky weight. Instead, the hardcover cloth binding acts more like a thin shell. Its embossed, silvery-gilt title clashes with the humble butterscotch of the cloth. Signified value, preciousness, ephemerality, and banality are constant themes in the book as they are in Newby's practice: "The matchsticks were valuable. They were made of silver but were meant to be lost as part of the process."[08] With these kinds of observations, the texts collage a story of the little lumps and sticks refusing to be separated from the world as an exhibition might implicitly enforce; a separation Newby often corrupts. "I could hear them, name them," writes Stephanie Snyder in her text, yet the silence of these objects is remarkable.[09] They sit for their portrait and are each

feared, loved, idolised, forgotten, or personified in turns. I'm interested in the ambiguity that the book and the works assign to authenticity and its role in authority; key tools in the connoisseur's toolbox. Instead, the artworks—these imperfect copies passed over the back fence—find in the book a chance for their impact to be felt rather than assessed. Elsewhere, I'm told, "The title of the work is *I'll be here in the morning*, which are the same words I say to our foster daughter when I put her to sleep at night."[10] In contributions like these, and in its structure and form, the book becomes part of the artwork—like Veling's monograph—and is perhaps the most successful way to extend and enrich the life of work like Newby's. The writing and the little pocket works track changing relationships between the lives and spaces they inhabit.

They keep saying "diagnosis" but I don't know what it means. Rhododendrons: loud, red, and sticky. I could smell them from my blue pot. Something uncontainable. Difference a day makes. In the sun his small, goldfish-glinting cross necklace echoes the ash flying off his cigarette. How he changes with other people in frame. They set up the tripod and I watch Tim reach around his father's shoulders like a boy posing with his mates from rugby, all a bit taller than him. Framed up in the workshop. A single-car garage. "Why is he wearing ski pants in November?" I asked the rose on the fence in front of me. The pelargoniums reach out and call to squirming baby Frankie in his arms while a curling iron bannister frames the limbs of echium singing harmonies with the child, stage right. December has been hot and dry this year.

Unlike audiences in the concrete of museums, readers have more choice about how to address a book; pore over it, hide it on a shelf until we're ready, or give it away. Similarly, Veling can choose the frame through which I encounter these images and learn this story. *Dad, Pete, Opa* became a book in order to retain control over this narrative, to not let this character so close to his heart be twisted by the motives of sensational curators, or public-wary institutions. As a reader, I am given the responsibility of holding this linen-rough cloth that wraps the book in a pale sky; to keep it safe. Veling told me the designer found the cover's colour in his father's eyes. I got to know his face. I came to expect things from it, and was surprised. I'm careful not to leave the book open in a public place. I

also found myself holding its spine in my right hand and using my left to flick through the book backwards. I couldn't help being reminded of the way I replay intense sequences of my own time backwards and forwards again, considering the what-ifs, and accepting the decisions made. Maybe this is part of the gift of this book—recognition. Veling's use of the photographic book to retain sovereignty over narrative and family—the intimacy and trust with which the images were made and are shared—compels me to recognise my own experiences of intimate filial connection.

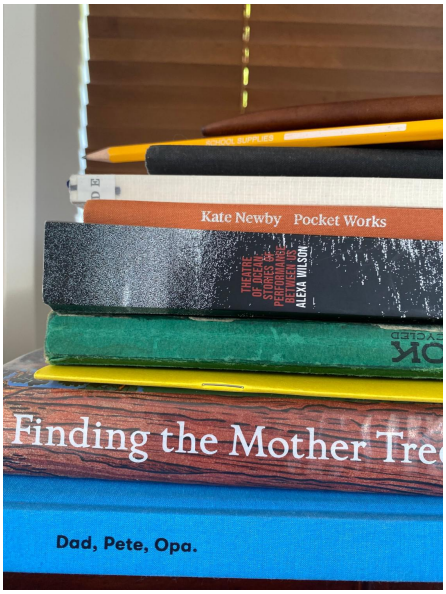
Books can be expensive to make. They benefit from skilled technicians, experienced organisers, and expensive machinery. Economics become pivotal and inescapable. While Veling collaborated with a European publisher to navigate this challenge, Berlin- and Aotearoa-based performer and filmmaker Alexa Wilson has collaborated with the 'underground' publisher 5ever Books.[11] Based in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, 5ever Books is an independent publishing house, with post-capitalist aspirations. In 2022 they worked with Wilson on her collage-like memoir edited by Lauren Oyler. Titled *Theatre of Ocean: Stories of Performance Between Us*, the book demonstrates the value of recording one's own story in one's own voice. Publishing is itself an act of sovereignty that 5ever Books seems intent on practising by sharing skills and community-scale production. Books, as the growing zine community is testament to, can also be accessible acts of self-determination and community building. As a celebrated performer, Wilson is practised at making her voice public on her own terms. Unlike performance, however, publishing asserts one's voice on the public record in a fixed, enduring document.

Wilson's use of language is a pivotal aspect of this book. I could lose myself scrolling through the cascades of prose here, or let it tumble over me like a film. She summarises my reading experience in her final chapter, writing, "Everything happens with lightning pace, with the force of the ocean taking my body, with the sudden surprise of water all around me."[12] There are a handful of photographs documenting Wilson's practice at the beginning, otherwise the author and publishers have left the storytelling to written language. The prose changes frequently in style and tone, from casual, stream-of-consciousness monologue to loosely poetic riffs, and the next chapter might be wholly objective and academic

in tone. This jump in mode would not hamper the telling of the story if both the casual and formal modes felt tightly edited, direct, or compelling to read. This is where it becomes clear that Wilson has taken the cadences and liberties of a performer's practice and fitted them into the almost 500 pages of this book. I wonder if using language in this almost psychedelic mode would be more resonant if encountered emerging from a specific body, their multi-sensory presence shaking through mine.



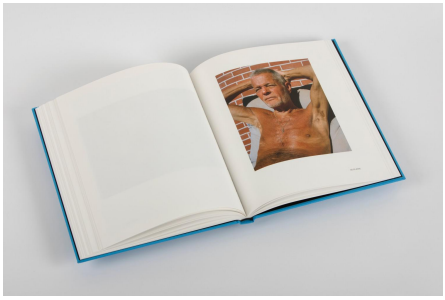
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Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019); *Alexa Wilson, Theatre of Ocean: Stories of Performance Between Us* (Te Whanganui-a-Tara: 5ever books, 2022); and Tim Veling, *Dad, Pete, Opa* (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022). Image: Hamish Petersen.



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The unique needs of the book as a form become apparent here: we encounter stories in a book without many of the sensory aspects of the story that's being told, so its language, form, or contents must somehow account for them. This includes the accountability an

audience provides in its own sensory feedback: laughter, breathless attention, or idle distraction. Similarly, historian Nēpia Mahuika has observed that, unlike oral histories, books might be considered less accountable because of their inability to answer to readers when questioned.[13] While none of the books discussed here can reply to a reader's questions, perhaps Newby's and Veling's works have taken this limitation into consideration by refining their contents (ordered images and careful language) for a connection with readers; a different encounter than on a blog, or in a theatre.[14] This, I think, is the privileged task of publishing: taking readers with us on a journey using an intimate encounter with very limited tools. With no clear scaffolding, guiding string in the dark, or map set out for us in the early chapters, I quickly started circling around in Wilson's book, losing track, and leaving it face-down as I moved on with my day. My inability to connect with this book doesn't mean it wasn't worth making. It may simply be written for a different reader than myself; a reader who will resonate, feel recognised, and find what they need here.

I struggle to keep adequate moisture in my plastic pot. By Christmas Eve Pete is shirtless, smoking, and his tan has become the ancient leather of creased saddle-bags. I see his years worn in shades. There are no photographs here on Christmas Day. Or the day after. I'd lost a few leaves by the new year. Just had to let them go. Life carries on in the background. It is wet today and I notice the pelargoniums need dead-heading. The following afternoon I watched them together in the sun: arms crossed like a baptism, like a rapper. Then, after dinner: how often does a dad have his portrait taken in his bath towel by his son? Bet the neighbours would have a few words to say about that!

The pages of *Dad, Pete, Opa* are dated and titled as simply as someone sorting another batch of prints into a family album after the summer holiday: 21.03.2015. In the final photographs, a subtle shoulder-bag and narrow translucent tube belie Pete's usual hard stare of perseverance. Something has changed despite his efforts. The ruse is revealed by the caption, "Nurse Maude Hospice." On the final pages Veling uses words, not photographs, to give us the inevitable conclusion. It's a deft decision—after all this visual stimulus—to withhold the images of his father's last moments. Instead, he tells his dad it's okay to pass. It's an opportunity to give permission; to act out a need, a conceit, that we might have

some say in the living and dying of the world and its creations. A trick of the light. One we build cities on.

Perhaps many exhibitions of images would be better encountered as books, many sculptures better given than exhibited, and many memoirs better cast as performances. Each work or story will live a different life depending on the form it takes. This is a task for curators, dealers, agents, directors, editors, producers, dramaturges, and friends as much as it is for artists. When sympathetic to a book's formal intimacy, its limited ability to adapt to an audience, or its capacity to safeguard a story, artists can publish books that seep into our lives and help us navigate the rapids. They can become eddies in the current of living.

Footnotes

01. See https://www.martharosler.net/the-bowery-in-two-inadequate-descriptive-systems

02. Christina Barton, wall text for Vivian Lynn, *Threshold* (1983/1996), in *Crossings (a group show about intimacies and distances)* at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, 19 June – 22 August 2021. See, for more information, http://www.adamartgallery.org.nz/past-exhibitions/crossings/

03. Specifically *Daphne odora 'Leucanthe'*; a small, perennial evergreen shrub producing fragrant white to pink flowers, late winter–spring, in terminal clusters.

04. Tim Veling, *Dad, Pete Opa* (Lisbon: XYZ Books, 2022), n.p.

05. Ibid.

06. Tim Veling, in conversation with the author, 29 January 2023.

07. Perhaps exhibitions in public spaces are a notable exception here.

08. Jennifer Kabat, "Pledge," in Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019), 48.

09. Stephanie Snyder, "Μάρμαρα," in Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019), 79.

10. Sarah Sentilles, "What Mothers Send," in Kate Newby, *Pocket Works* (Portland: lumber room, 2019), 68.

11. Their website asserts the admirable slogan, "We are serious in our playfulness." See https://5everbooks.com/about

12. Alexa Wilson, *Theatre of Ocean: Stories of Performance Between Us* (Wellington: 5ever Books, 2022), 491.

13. Nēpia Mahuika, *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 42.

14. Eileen Myles' contribution to Newby's *Pocket Works*, "The Nut," is a notable comparison here as their use of unconventional, conversational language is dialled in to communicate precise sensations, memories, and feelings in an accessible narrative. In contrast to Wilson's prose, Myles has tuned their style to work on the page alone.

Biographies



Alexa Wilson is an interdisciplinary NZ artist who has been based in Berlin ten years, and is now living back in Aotearoa. She has presented video and performance work across Europe, Asia, North America and NZ. She has won awards for different works, choreographed for dance companies including Footnote NZ Dance (2014, 2017) and Touch Compass (2006) and curated Morni Hills Performance Residency in India (2017). She is the artistic director and founder of Experimental Dance Week Aotearoa (2019/2020) and is publishing her first book, *Theatre of Ocean*, in 2021.



Kate Newby received her Doctorate of Fine Art in 2015 from the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland; she has shown internationally at galleries and museums. Recent institutional exhibitions include the Palais de Tokyo (2022), Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi (2021), Institute of Contemporary Art Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes (2019), Kunsthalle Wien (2018), 21st Biennale of Sydney (2018) and the SculptureCenter (2017). In 2012 she won the Walters Prize, New Zealand's largest contemporary art prize. In 2019 Kate was awarded a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors grant. She has undertaken residencies at The Chinati Foundation (2017), Artspace (2017), Fogo Island (2013), and the ISCP (2012). Kate currently lives and works in Floresville, Texas.



Tim Veling's practice is primarily focused on issues and people close to home and heart. His work straddles the genres of fine art and documentary photography. He has exhibited nationally and internationally. Tim lectures in photography at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, New Zealand. He is the director and administrator of Place in Time: The Christchurch Documentary Project.



Hamish Petersen is an organiser of words and people. Born in Nêhiyaw, Siksikaitsitapi, Tsuut'ina, and Métis territory on Turtle Island, and growing up in Waikato Tainui and Ngāi Tūāhurriri whenua in Aotearoa New Zealand, Hamish writes, edits, curates, and organises projects with artists, while working on the land in the British Isles. Their editorial practice has focused on the role of relationships in nurturing a reciprocal, respectful, and enlivening critical culture. Working with artists, publications, and their MA thesis over recent years they have come to consider their writing about art, music, performance, and the land as an act of relation itself; producing relations by writing-with and being-with the world. Hamish joins HUM in 2023 and brings these ideas to help bind together the global community of Aotearoa artists.

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