Situated practices

Lisa Reihana and Nandita Kumar in Cosmopolis #2

by Kathryn Weir, Zhang Hanlu

Published on 07.03.2020



Nandita Kumar, *The Unwanted Ecology*, 2017, *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Lisa Reihana, *Papatuanuku*, 2019, and *Tane*, 2019. Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.

Founder and Chief Curator of the ongoing project Cosmopolis*, Kathryn Weir, and associated curator Zhang Hanlu share their reflections on the most recent iteration held at Centre Pompidou in Paris, introducing the works of Nandita Kumar and Lisa Reihana.*

Entering *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human* at Paris' Centre Pompidou in late 2019, viewers were immediately welcomed by Tāne and Papatūanuku. In multimedia artist Lisa Reihana's Māori culture, the story of creation describes how Tāne used his powerful legs to separate his mother, Papatūānuku, from his father, Ranginui, the Earth mother and Sky father respectively. Tāne's parents were separated both from each other as well as from darkness and chaos. Their children, previously held captive between them, were set free and the mythological family became the source of all life on earth. These figures form part of Reihana's new digital work *Ihi* (2019), which gives flesh to immaterial cultural heritage, and also, through expressive performances enacted by contemporary dancers in a digitally composed landscape, re-imagines humans' relationships with each other and

with our cosmological surroundings. The full moving image iteration of the work was recently unveiled on two 65 square metre screens at the Aotea Centre, Auckland.



Lisa Reihana, *Tane*, 2019, color photograph, 122 cm x 122 cm, from the project *Ihi*, courtesy of the artist and Artprojects, Auckland.



Lisa Reihana, *Papatuanuku*, 2019, color photograph, 122 cm x 122 cm, from the project *Ihi*, courtesy of the artist and Artprojects, Auckland.

Cosmopolis focuses on research-based and collaborative art practices, constructing bridges between new forms of creative experimentation and critical thinking. Through residencies, exhibitions, discursive programs and publications, it engages with artists whose work is concerned with the production of relationships and the exchange of knowledge. *Cosmopolis #1: Collective Intelligence* (2017, Paris) focused on new forms of artistic collaboration, while *Cosmopolis #1.5: Enlarged Intelligence* (2018, Chengdu) saw artists envisioning how to draw on artificial and ecological intelligence towards collectively defined ends. *Cosmopolis #2* brought together 40 artists from a spectrum of geographies and presented eight weeks of programming, spanning from critical thinking and music, to workshops and reading groups.

Reihana's practice has long considered diverse forms of technological intelligence, tools that might otherwise be obscured by pervasive forms of cultural hegemony. This preoccupation also runs through the curatorial orientations of *Cosmopolis*. In the exhibition space, Reihana's two large-scale prints freeze Tāne and Papatūanuku in dramatic narrative moments, although the two

portraits were also animated in augmented reality, activated by staff members with iPads.

Reihana was born in Auckland, New Zealand / Aotearoa to a British mother and a Māori father. Her interest in the dialogue between history and visual story-telling fantastically challenges Eurocentric worldviews. Reihana represented New Zealand at the 2017 Venice Biennale with her video epic in *Pursuit of Venus* [*infected*] (2015-2017), which became the first joint acquisition by Fine Arts Museum San Francisco and Los Angeles County Museum of Art earlier this year. This extraordinary 64-minute digital scroll rewrites the history of British explorer James Cook's voyages in the Pacific Ocean in the late 18th century with a sensitivity ascribed to gender and colonial complexities that are usually effaced from mainstream historical narratives.



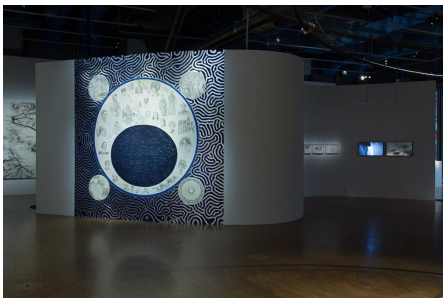
Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, featuring Lisa Reihana, *Ihi*, 2019 (background); Benvenuto Chavajay Ixtetelá, *4'33'' (John Cage)*, Mixed media, 2014 (middle); and Sandra Monterrosa, *Columna Vertebral Roja* [*Red Spinal Cord*], 2017 (foreground), Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human,* Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



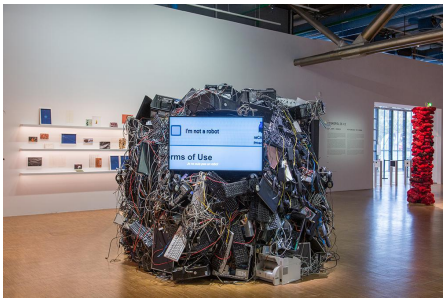
Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.

At the Pompidou Centre, Reihana's work was exhibited in proximity with the installation and sound works *4'33'' (John Cage)* (2014) by Benvenuto Chavajay Ixtetelá and *Columna Vertebral Roja* [*Red Spinal Cord*] (2017) and *Rokeb' iq' / Viento / Wind* (2014-2015) by Sandra Monterrosa, two artists from Mayan communities in Guatemala. This invites dialogue between the Māori narrative of creation that opens the exhibition and Chavajay Ixtetelá and Monterrosa's poetic and powerful work on the silenced histories of indigenous communities in South America. Together, these three works draw on diverse indigenous worldviews and set the tone for the second edition of *Cosmopolis*, with its concerns of scale, technology and alternative ontologies.

Today there is widespread discussion of the post-human, yet many artists and path-breaking interdisciplinary thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter and Silvia Federici remind us that most humans have long been excluded from 'universal' formulations of the human and the idea of humanity. The European Renaissance fashioned 'man' to the exclusion of women and non-Christians, the latter increasingly defined through the invented paradigm of 'lesser races'. By the time of the industrial revolution in the 18th century, these philosophical formulations of humanity went hand in hand with a 'civilising' ideology that advocated for scientific rationality and technology's ability to improve living conditions. European Enlightenment conceptions of the human were promoted within regimes of expropriation of resources, labour and reproductive capability. The technological, industrial and ecological transformations linked to the development of global capital in the modern era are inseparable from the racist and misogynist degradation of the horizon of humanity. This particular project of modernisation, widely presented with the force of teleological inevitability, is today brought into question as one history among many other possible paths not taken of the evolution of technology and society. Artistic propositions such as those of Reihana, Chavajay and Monterosso, among others in the exhibition, allowed audiences to consider the plurality of history and to challenge established ideas of social progress.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human* including Munem Wasif's *Seeds Shall Set Us Free II*, 2019 (in background), Centre Pompidou. Photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.

Cosmopolis #2 aimed to explore how other cosmologies, economic systems and geographic articulations form the bases of different social and technical configurations. It brought to the fore the possibilities of technological diversity, as well as the question of how small-scale and differently configured social formations can generate other models and value systems—networking smaller units, de-industrialising and cultivating a fine attention to process and social rhythm. In his project *Seeds Shall Set Us Free II* (2019), artist Munem Wasif worked with the grain bank UBINIG, founded in 1984 by a group of activists in Bangladesh to support rice biodiversity and local agricultural knowledge, in a context where these were curtailed by Indigo and Jute cultivation imposed for the world market by the British colonial system. French artist Tabita Rezaire conducted research into celestial technologies—notably the stone circles of Senegambia that date back to between the 7th and 15th centuries—drawing on astronomy, divination techniques, archeology and oral history to consider the implications today of effaced cosmological frameworks.

Nandita Kumar resides between India and New Zealand, and is dedicated to creating sensory experiences through a wide spectrum of methods: images, installations, researches, technologies and community events. Her presentation for *Cosmopo lis #2*, titled *The Unwanted Ecology* (2017) exemplifies the artist's long-term interest in the crossroads of industrial and natural worlds. Placed on a plinth near the wall of windows that are the interface between the gallery space and the street, Kumar's glass biosphere of plants emitted sounds of buzzing and humming with changing rhythms, emitted from each individual plant. One only

realised when getting closer to it that the biosphere is in fact made of small metal panels in various plant shapes and numerous electronic components.

The 'unwanted' ecology the work refers to are weeds, often deemed useless and unwelcome by their human neighbours. The word 'weed' itself denotes a problem: it is a designation given carelessly to innumerable botanical species based on their unwanted status in a modern and cultivated garden space. Weeds, nevertheless, reveal a whole neglected realm for Kumar. The plants seen in the terrarium are representations of wild weeds collected within a 20-minute radius walking from Kumar’s studio in Goa. They not only comprise a formal ecology, but also create a poetic analogy to the larger relationship between human and ecological environment as a sound frequency has been created from each plant and is emitted in the glass sphere. Designed to self-sustain with solar panels, the technologically reincarnated organisms respond to air humidity and the presence of humans around them, replicating living plants both in appearance and life-force. This interactive sculpture re-enacts missed encounters between plants and people.



Nandita Kumar, *The Unwanted Ecology*, 2017, *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Nandita Kumar, *The Unwanted Ecology*, 2017, *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, with Sam Keogh's installation *Untitled*, 2019, in middle, Centre Pompidou. Photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.

Transferring between data, media and viewer interaction has been a recurring methodology in Kumar's practice. Her ongoing project *OsmoScape* comes out of three years of research into water, particularly, its usage, scarcity and pollution in human society. After collecting relevant water data from government and NGO websites, she designed a notation system to turn this data into

visual forms and sound compositions to be read, heard and interacted with through an app. In this way, knowledge is not only shared, but also experienced and felt. Such quests for alternative models of learning are also seen in the ongoing programs presented within the Cosmopolis exhibition. For example, *Music as Knowledge* was a curated program of concerts enjoyed and 'learned' by the audience in all three editions of Cosmopolis. *The Right to Research*, a two-day forum in collaboration with École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy, borrowed its subject from scholar Arjun Appadurai's celebrated text with the same title pointing to the acquisition of strategic knowledge as a basic human right.[01] Appa durai was also present in the Parisian forum and joined one of the five sessions of *Collective Thinking*, a reading group program discussing some of the key theoretical ideas in *Cosmopolis #2*.

Kumar is among many artists in the exhibition who explore 'other ways' of gaining knowledge, especially ecological knowledge. Adjacent to Kumar's work and hung from the ceiling was Irish artist Sam Keogh's installation *Untitled* (2019). An ever-morphing 'root system', as termed by the artist, consisting of a melange of objects—both organic and inorganic, collected near his studio—was unfurled in two lecture performances as props and items of reference. Elsewhere, Chen Jianjun and Cao Minghao, an artist duo from Chengdu, China, documented a farmer self-managing a reforestation project and a post-earthquake Qiang community creating a school of cultural traditions and sustainable living. The two videos stem from their long term project *Water System Project*, which examines environmental and historical complexities near the Dujiangyan River in Sichuan Province and which interweaves questions of landscape, livelihood, climate change and the creation of alternative futures through small-scale actions with their collaborators.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, featuring Simón Vega's, *Archipiélago de Intercambio*, mixed media, 2019, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, featuring Simón Vega's, *Archipiélago de Intercambio*, mixed media, 2019, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, featuring Simón Vega's, *Archipiélago de Intercambio*, mixed media, 2019, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.



Installation view of *Cosmopolis #2: rethinking the human*, featuring Simón Vega's, *Archipiélago de Intercambio*, mixed media, 2019, Centre Pompidou, photo by Hervé Veronese.

Cosmopolis #2 connected questions of scale and technological divergence to artistic explorations of the entanglement of the human and the non-human and alternatives to neoliberal individualism, taking as points of reference the critical propositions of key contemporary artist theorists Denise Ferreira da Silva and Elizabeth Povinelli, who bring into resonance ideas stemming from quantum thinking and diverse cosmological systems. Povinelli, a member of the Karrabing Film Collective, participated in the program to discuss their recent cinematographic exploration of toxicity and indigenous agency in *The Mermaids*, or *Aiden in Wonderland* (2018), included in the exhibition. The centrepiece of the show, Ferreira de Silva and filmmaker artist Arjuna Newman's *4 Waters: Deep Implicancy* (2019), was a video essay threading together issues of migratory displacements, colonial violence and resource extraction with images of flow and changes of state. The artists and critical

thinkers involved in *Cosmopolis #2* speak to specific locations and geographies, but their concerns exceed national borders; together they formed constellations of discourses and critical practices across the exhibition space and its unfolding programs, generating future questions and collaborations.

Footnotes

01. Arjun Appadurai "The Right to Research" *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 42(2) (1 July 2006): 167-177.

Biographies



Lisa Reihana (b. 1964) is a multi-disciplinary artist from Aotearoa New Zealand (of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine and Ngāi Tū tribal descent) whose practice explores how identity and history are represented, and how these intersect with concepts of place and community. The subjects of Reihana's portraiture inhabit a world in which the boundaries of past, present, and future are mutable; their identities are likewise unfixed and transgress everyday expectations of cultural and social norms.

She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland University, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1987, and recently completed her Master of Design through the Unitec Institute of Technology. Reihana has an extensive exhibition history in New Zealand and abroad and in 2014 she was awarded an Arts Laureate Award by the Arts Foundation of New Zealand. Her works are held in private and public collections including Te Papa Tongarewa; Auckland Art Gallery; Australia National Gallery; Staatliche Museum, Berlin; Susan O'Connor Foundation, Texas and Brooklyn Museum, New York.



Nandita Kumar (b.1981 Pamplemousse, Mauritius) is a new-media artist who creates immersive environmental spaces. She explores the elemental process through which human beings construct meaning from their experiences, by creating sensory narratives through the usage of sound, video/ animation and performance, or through smartphone apps, customized motherboards and solar/microwave sensors. In her research, she attempts to locate inherent patterns, modes of sustainability, cultural hybridity, technology and the synergy between nature and our current urban environment. Nandita has shown in varied festivals and exhibitions throughout the world including ZKM, LACMA, REDCAT, ISEA, Je de Paume, The New Zealand International Film Festival, Film Anthology Archive NY, Indian Art Fair, Rome International Film festival, and the Stuttgart Animation Festival. Nandita lives and works in Bombay, India and Auckland.



Kathryn Weir founded *Cosmopolis* at the Centre Pompidou in 2015 as a platform for research-based and collaborative multidisciplinary art practices. The platform constructs bridges between new forms of creative experimentation and critical vocabularies from contemporary theory, and between reconceived geographies and histories. From 2006 until 2014, she led the international art and cinémathèque curatorial areas at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Brisbane and was one of the curators of the 5th, 6th and 7th Asia Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art. From 2020 she has been appointed Director of the MADRE museum in Napes.



Zhang Hanlu is a writer and curator based in Shanghai. She is also editor at artforum.com.cn. Hanlu received her MA in Art History, Theory and Criticism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2013. She received second place in the "International Award for Art Criticism" in 2014 and her writing can be found on LEAP, Art Review Asia, Flash Art, and art-agenda. In 2015 she co-curated *Nightmare of Exhibition Part II: the Two-Way Theatre* at the Power Station of Art, Shanghai. She has also curated exhibitions at No Longer Empty and 49B Studios in New York, Yang Art Museum and 798 Photo Gallery in Beijing, among other spaces. Zhang is interested in art as public sphere, and she has participated in multiple collaborative projects/platforms such as OnPractice and Theatre44.

HUM

creativenz
Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa