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September 27 to October 29, 2016

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WAIRUA

Rona Ngahuia Osborne & Dan Mace

Whetūrangi. Detail of *"Tupu-a-Nuku"*. 2015. **Rona Ngahuia Osborne** and **Dan Mace**. Image used with permission by artists.

Reception: Friday, October 21, 5:00-8:00pm
Artists Talk: Friday, October 21, 5:30pm, as part of Art Crawl

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Image 4: *Whetūrangi*. Detail of "Matariki". 2015. **Rona Ngahuia Osborne** and **Dan Mace**. Image used with permission by artists.

Critical Cosmologies and Digital Encounters

By Fiona P. McDonald, PhD.

Our lives are comprised of interconnecting cosmologies—complex realities layered and interwoven with concepts, beliefs, and practices. These dimensions and truths can bind together elemental worlds with the human, animal, and celestial encounters from past to future. In the space between art and anthropology today, there exists the rich conversation about shared corporeal experiences that are increasingly being mediated through digital encounters. Situated in this nexus, *Wairua* grounds us in a poetic and timely conversation about land, language, and culture in relation to digitally re-mediated material and sensorial cultural encounters. Created by the collaborative work of Rona Ngahuia Osborne (Clan Fyfe, Clan Caduggan, and Kai Tahu) and Dan Mace (Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Tamaterā, Clan O'Boyle and Ngāi Te Rangi), *Wairua* transcends geo-political and inter-cultural borders by creating a dynamic web of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge experiences that lay at the heart of cosmological frames that acts as portals for shared experiences within gallery settings. Looking at *Wairua* as a snapshot of a Māori cosmological framework is a way to unpack the pathways of understanding the role digital technologies play in re-mediating cultural encounters about the complex "practices of a society or culture related to explanations about the [...] evolution of the universe as well as the role and meaning of humans, life, and the world, within the universe or cosmos."[1] To navigate this terrain, three concepts become central to guide a reading of *Wairua*: raranga (weaving), wānanga (traditional Māori learning forum and philosophy), and tūrangawaewae (a place to stand).

When collaborative, creative endeavours seamlessly tie together material, visual, and sensory encounters across time and space, and across cultures and landscapes, they inevitably are layered with meanings and significations. In *Wairua*, what is created through Rona Ngahuia Osborne and Dan Mace's collaborative digital works is an interwoven suite of cultural, celestial, and elemental landscapes that are comprised of the infinite threads that bind together cultures, technologies, narratives, time, genealogies, environments, personhoods, and politics to create a wānanga —a traditional Māori learning space within the gallery. While raranga (weaving) is the most relational metaphor to use as it captures the thick tapestry of knowledge connecting the three works that comprise *Wairua*, *Te Taki* (2016), *Whetūrangi* (2015), and *Elemental* (2016), it is in fact the digital re-mediation of cultural knowledge by Osborne and Mace where the nuances of Māori cosmological frameworks within contemporary art become profound.

Wairua is a Māori concept encapsulating the spirit, or soul. As Osborne and Mace note, "it also refers to a universal energy and is a thread which connects the three works in the exhibition, each of which utilises abstract personifications and sounds to explore the earth, the stars, and human ritual. On a conceptual level, *Wairua* has deep meaning."[2] It is this idea of *Wairua* that allows the complexity of the three works that comprise this exhibition to be understood within the larger cosmological framework of Māori culture, identity, land, rights, and future as they relate to the environment.

Te Taki

Te Taki (2015) is situated at the entrance to the gallery space. This digital installation foregrounds the traditional Māori ritual of welcoming. As Mace and Osborne note, "The taki, or challenge, is a fundamental aspect of formal pōwhiri, the ancient Māori ritual of welcome. Rich in symbolic meaning and visual spectacle, the underlying purpose of pōwhiri is for a tribe to determine the intention of a visitor or group of visitors: are you coming in peace or to make war? The feather represents an offering placed before our manuwhiri (our visitors [or welcomed guests]) as a gesture of goodwill."[3] The taki is both a challenge and an invitation to communicate. To enter this gallery space is to pick up this challenge and accept the invitation to learn. (See Images 1 and 2)

In *Te Taki*, a male character offers the taki or challenge. In this moment, viewers of the work occupy a tapu or sacred space. Once the taki (challenge) has been accepted, a female character emerges in the film sequence and calls the visitors in to the exhibition space, to learn, experience, and to be present. This digital re-mediation of a customary welcome transports and transforms manuwhiri (visitors or welcomed guests) through a liminal space between not knowing and knowing, between street and gallery, and between cultures. *Te Taki* stands in the waharoa (the entrance or gateway) and transitions the viewer from the outside (both physically and culturally), to the inside, a space of belonging. From here, all are accepted, connected, and welcome to return.

The history of engaging with a traditional Māori welcoming within exhibitions has a complex history in North America since the 1984 touring of the *Te Māori* exhibition that first took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, N.Y. (and later toured to other sites). With the inclusion of *Te Taki* in *Wairua*, Osborne and Mace push beyond the complex, reductive debates that *Te Māori* sparked by incorporating a re-mediated experience of a cultural tradition that is central to the installation, and is therefore not used as spectacle for an opening event. As with *Te Māori*, however, *Te Taki* demands "continuing regard to protocol, and recognition that the gallery [becomes] a [metaphorical] marae, a secular ceremonial meeting ground for the duration of the exhibition."[4]

By transforming the gallery into a wānanga (a learning forum), Osborne and Mace invite each person who enters to participate in kaupapa Māori (Māori principles and philosophy). This "literally means the Māori way […], a term used to describe traditional Māori ways of doing, being[,] and thinking […] encapsulated in a Māori world view or cosmology."[5] By placing this work at the entrance, Osborne and Mace are honouring the tikanga (protocols), the correct and safe way of encountering their culture, their people, their histories, and their art.

Te Taki is a significant work, commissioned for permanent display at the entrance to the Waitangi Museum in Aotearoa New Zealand. The museum stands on the grounds where the singular 1840 Treaty of Waitangi was signed between Māori and the British Crown.[6] The Treaty of Waitangi is a fraught document that has resulted in a loss of land rights, language, and traditions for Māori due to aggressive colonial actions by the British Empire. "The Treaty, which affected an ambiguous cession of sovereignty on the part of Māori in return for rights and guarantees that were subsequently violated."[7] Osborne and Mace strategically do not foreground the narrative of struggle caused by the Treaty, but rather capture the "survivance" of Indigenous traditions by ensuring everyone becomes a participant in knowing cultural values today and in to the future.[8] *Te Taki* provides a profound learning experience that sets the stage for an exhibition to be a wānanga (a learning forum).

From this point, *Wairua* opens up to create a web of micro-encounters allowing everyone on their own terms to experience the nuances and power of Māori culture and identity. By tapping in to the natural environment of their home in Aotearoa New Zealand as the entry point, Mace and Osborne allow each of us

Image 1: *Te Taki*. Film Still. 2016. **Rona Ngahuia Osborne** and **Dan Mace**. Image used with permission from the Museum of Waitangi, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Image 2: *Te Taki*. Film Still. 2016. **Rona Ngahuia Osborne** and **Dan Mace**. Image used with permission from the *Museum of Waitangi*, Aotearoa New Zealand.

as manuwhiri (visitors or invited guests) to the A Space Gallery to encounter Māori culture through relational logic that strategically taps in to our globally shared, sensory experiences with our weather world. They gently invite us into this space beyond *Te Taki* by presenting personifications of celestial bodies and natural world elements to help narrate the oral traditions of Māori life. As each moment passes during one's stay within this exhibition the tapestry of layers thicken and the complexity of Māori cosmology is told through this digital world.

Whetūrangi

This work is a technically sophisticated piece, centred on the constellation of Matariki (Pleiades), which appears on the horizon in Aotearoa New Zealand in June each year. This powerful moment marks the beginning of the Māori New Year. In *Whetūrangi*, Osborne and Mace dig deeper into the oral traditions of Matariki as a way to decolonize further their own knowledge of the celestial body comprised of seven stars. This is actualized in the personified characters and the materiality of their costuming.

Whetūrangi sits across seven monitors and plays as seven separate video loops, one monitor for each star of the Matariki celestial body (known in other cultures and parts of the world as Makali'i, Subaru, The Seven Sisters, Thurayya, and Pleiades, among others). One monitor is dedicated to each star, presented in "humanoid form", with each character performing anthropomorphized actions that the star represents (see Image 3 for an installation guide to each star in the constellation).

What is striking is that one can never experience this work twice, given the infinite permutations and combinations of the sound and video loops. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus commented, "No man ever steps in the *same river twice*, for it's not the *same river* and he's not the same man" (man in this sense being genderless). The rarity of re-encounter never happens in *Whetūrangi* in the gallery, in the same way that no two days are the same when the sunrise appears on the horizon. The algorithmic settings of the sonic and visual aspects mean unpredictable moments can create the potential for infinite encounters. As such, this work weaves in a layer of time into the tapestry of *Wairua*.

The character for each star is an amalgamation of influences for atua (gods or demi-gods), historical narratives from Māori oral traditions, and Osborne's own creative imagining of material histories. *Matariki* is believed to be in the centre of the celestial cluster and is the star that shines the brightest (See Image 4 on inside cover). As such Osborne and Mace use a larger monitor and brightness to capture the vitality of this ancestral star. The personification of *Matariki* is dressed in white Irish linen passed down through Osborne's Irish family as an heirloom that she has refashioned as Victorian wedding garb, embellished with hand stitched outlines of muskets and the now extinct huia bird as artefacts of colonial encounters. The gown, detailed with mother of pearl buttons, is decorated with hand carved hei tiki pendants of Perspex (plastic) and the other of bone (carved respectively by Maika Nuku and George Nuku), and both inlaid with paua shell eyes. The flowering native vine Tecomanthe adorns *Matariki*'s hair and her feather shawl is a quotation to the value of traditional woven cloaks, known as korowai (meaning finely woven with flax fibre). *Matariki* is the only one of the seven characters that speaks—she recites a proverb "Kua whetūrangitia i te korowai o Ranginui", likening the spirits of loved ones who have passed away to the light that emanates from the stars.[9]

Situated above *Matariki* (and moving counter-clockwise), *Waipuna-a-Rangi* represents the ancestral star associated with rain and is wrapped in a woollen blanket made from off-cuts of materials saved by Osborne's family. The hand stitched marks gesture as visual and material quotations to decorative woven 'taniko' (patterned) panels on traditional Māori cloaks. She also wears a heitiki pendant carved by George Nuku and she holds the healing kawakawa plant in her hand and hair. Below and to the left sits *Ururangi* – the smallest, youngest, and most petulant of the ancestral stars. This personified form is adorned with kahu (hawk) feathers in her hair, and dressed in a dyed woollen blanket. Wearing a bone puriri (moth) pendant, she plays a tumutumu, a child's wind instrument that creates a rhythmic pulse in this work that compliments the soundscape for the proverb repeated by *Matariki*. Below *Ururangi* is *Waitā*, representing large bodies of water. Her mother-of-pearl armour by Sofia Tekela Smith rests over a silk kimono as she grinds rocks in her hands, adding

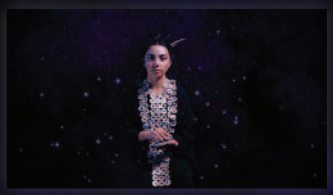

Image 3. *Whetūrangi* Installation Guide. 2015. Prepared by **Rona Ngahuia Osborne** and **Dan Mace** for A Space Gallery.

whetū*rangi*

additional information about the work

WAIPUNARANGI
Springs from the sky, waterfalls from the heavens, tears from the gods, Rain.
Waipunarangi wears kawakawa in her hair as in tangihanga (funeral rites).
From the stars we have descended and to the stars we will return.
We mourn for our dead at the rising of Matariki.

URURANGI
The baby of the constellation.
She is wild and impetuous.
Her name refers to the wind and air currents.
The sound of wind through the trees supports the sound of her instrument - she plays a tumutumu, traditionally a child's wind instrument.

MATARIKI
The tuakana (elder sibling) of the group.
Matariki is the brightest star of the constellation, a beacon in the sky. She lights her sisters.
From time to time Matariki speaks:
"Kua whetūrangitia i te Korowai o Ranginui"
which refers to the light of the stars shining from the cloak of Ranginui, the sky father. This phrase is used in traditional Māori oratory to refer to the spirits of ancestors and loved ones who have passed away.

TUPU-A-RANGI
Her name literally refers to the fruits of the sky - being birds and treefruit.
She is adorned with wings of Kereru (Wood Pigeon) and Kotare (Kingfisher), and wears Kahu (Hawk) feathers in her hair.
She makes birdlike movements, and her song is supported with recordings of Ruru (Morepork) and North Island Kiwi, piercing the night.

TUPU-A-NUKU
Contrasting her sister above, Tupu-A-Nuku is concerned with what grows from the ground, the fruits of Papatuanuku - fern fronds, root vegetables and the like.
Her face and body are embellished with earth.
She clutches a kete filled with kumara.
Her sounds are low pitched harmonic hums, grounded vibrations from below.

WAITĀ
Salt water, oceans, currents, fish, kaimoana.
She wears gull feathers in her hair and mother of pearl armor. She is grinding rocks as do the waves and ocean currents. She is accompanied by the sound of whale song.

WAITĪ
Fresh water, rivers and streams
She is depicted wearing pounamu (a precious stone which was once a fresh water fish).
She wears silk representing water and taps a pounamu toki (adze blade). The sound references water running over river stones.
She is supported by the sound of bubbling fresh water streams.

in presenting this work the artists acknowledge the writing and research of ***Dr Rangi Mataamua*** *of Waikato University into the history, science and ancient practises of Māori Astronomy.*

texture to the sonic fabric of *Whetūrangi*. To her right, Waitī emerges in the constellation to represent the rivers and fresh water systems. She wears pounamu (greenstone) heitiki, beads, and matau (a stylized fish hook). Her hair is adorned with feathers and a wooden heru (comb) passed down through Mace's matrilineal line. The constellation is completed by Tupu-a-nuku and Tupu-a-rangi, a balanced pair of stars that relate to earth and sky. Tupu-a-nuku grounds the constellation and carries a kete (basket) filled with kumara, a staple root vegetable, while Tupu-a-rangi bears the bounty from the sky as she embraces the wingspan of the kereru (wood pigeon). Both wear pendants carved by Gareth McGhie. Collectively these vignettes personify key concepts of Māori cosmology and stress the interrelations between animal, human, and environmental worlds.

Elemental

Elemental is comprised of four independently looped projections— *Hau* (Air), *Wai* (Water), *Ahi* (Fire), and *Whenua* (Earth). Each projection occupies one wall of the gallery. These projections are rich 'motion portraits', combining seamless loops of environmental textures with carefully constructed tableaux characterizing the element being portrayed. Each character sits silently in the frame, dressed (or immersed) in costume that personifies the agency of the element according to the perceptions of Osborne and Mace. Each personification is informed by their personal experience of the elements in the wild terrain of the Northland Region of Aotearoa New Zealand, where this work is based. As with *Whetūrangi*, each character is costumed by Osborne using a complex array of natural and found materials, again, the cultural significance of which requires a deeper reading. These large-scale projections attempt to achieve an intimate encounter with the personified elemental characters and textures. This aesthetic choice offers a re-mediated digital experience of the agency of nature. The subtle aural-scape emitted from each projection creates a sensitive symphony from the weather world. When entering the space, one first visually encounters *Whenua* (Earth) as the grounding element (See Image 5). As Osborne and Mace note, "[*Whenua*] is a place in which you stand. It usually references your tribe, the area where your tribe is based. The direct translation is tūrangawaewae (a place to stand). This is where you are standing in place. That's all tied up conceptually within *Whenua* (Earth), and the *Elemental* work as a whole." *Hau* (Air) and *Ahi* (Fire) are situated to the left and right of *Whenua* (Earth), and *Wai* (Water) is on the east wall. *Wai* (Water) is the last elemental encounter in the gallery and its strategic placement functions to whakanoa (to cleanse) in keeping with Māori traditions when one is leaving a space that is tapu (sacred).[10] This is the sacred space in this

wānanga (learning forum) that is defined by the waharoa (gateway), this liminal space which one first encountered when they entered in through *Te Taki* to experience *Wairua*.

Conclusion

In their premiere exhibition in Canada, Rona Ngahuia Osborne and Dan Mace collaborate not only in the studio but also in life. Mace's film and sound work and Osborne's costuming of characters and material connections are married together in their creative co-direction of aesthetic outputs. As artists, Osborne and Mace note "we are the sum total of everyone who has gone before us and after--our tipuna (ancestors) as they are part of our whakapapa, our genealogical history" (personal communication, 2016). Osborne and Mace share similar experiences with having dynamic intercultural whakapapa (genealogies) as both of their families have matrilineal and patrilineal ancestors who were either Māori or European (mostly Scottish and Irish). Their work acknowledges these genealogical connections and complexities through the materials in their work and in the way they costume characters in everything from woollen textiles to hand carved Māori taonga (treasured customary items). But the intercultural sensitivity in each work that comprises *Wairua* brings us closer to learning about Māori cosmology by focusing upon shared experience as humans with our weather world.

Approaching *Wairua* by using an anthropological lens to understand the concepts and the cosmological frameworks that Osborne and Mace address in the context of contemporary digital art, it is the metaphors of weaving and learning spaces that allows the many threads that tie together not only the exhibition, but the connections we all have through shared sensory experiences in a global context to emerge. Osborne and Mace allow everyone to encounter Māori culture while presenting opportunities of decolonizing the traditional gallery experience through *Wairua*.[11] By placing a customary welcome at the forefront, the poetic curation of *Te Taki*, *Whetūrangi*, and *Elemental* together create a powerful tripartite installation that invites a re-experience of the exhibition anew each time. After a first visit, when the taki, or challenge, has been met, a visitor to this gallery/wānanga is welcome to return in perpetuity. To this end, Osborne and Mace strategically create a metaphorical audio-visual marae (tribal forum for social life) where all who enter transition through the customary welcome into a wānanga, where they become part of a community of experience. In this sense, each gallery goer can have their own tūrangawaewae (place to stand, learn, and share) and be part of the intercultural conversation about our weather world.

As we move in to the autumnal shift in the Northern Hemisphere, and the anticipation of Pleiades' arrival in November is glimpsed on the horizon, the interconnectedness that Rona Ngahuia Osborne and Dan Mace make in *Wairua* is not only between their Māori and European heritages, but they also create an open opportunity for us as sensory beings to be reminded of the power of the elemental forces – wind, fire, water, and earth – and that we can all draw connections to celestial bodies through our own cosmological frames. Add the layer in which this exhibition is taking place just as our current geological epoch has been declared as the Anthropocene – a man-made geological age caused by human activity on the environment causing climate change – *Wairua* as a wānanga about life, culture, and our environment is riddled with infinite unique encounters and subtle lessons for us to contemplate within the gallery, no matter where in the contemporary art world Osborne and Mace exhibit. A sense of being present in our present moment is at the heart of Osborne and Mace's work. *Wairua* allows us to *know* the essence of tūrangawaewae – "Tūrangawaewae are places where we feel especially empowered and connected. They are our foundation, our place in the world, our home."[12] In the context of *Wairua*, Osborne and Mace create a place where we stand together, and our standing place within, between, and across landscapes, cultures, and time as it plays out in the contemporary digital art world.

[1] Cosmology and Anthropology: Towards a Definition". 2008. http://timeo-habla.blogspot.com/2008/09/cosmology-and-anthropologytowards.html [Last Accessed September 4, 2016]; Abramson and Holbraad, 2014.

[2] Rona Ngahuia Osborne and Dan Mace, Personal Communication, August 31, 2016.

[3] Cf. "Wairua" exhibition text. Used with permission from A Space Gallery. 2016.

[4] Nicholas Thomas, "Possessions: Indigenous Art / Colonial Culture" (1999: 191-192).

[5] Ella Henry, and Hone Pene. Kaupapa Māori: Locating Indigenous Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology in the Academy" *Organization* 8(2) (2001): 235.

[6] Claudia Orange. The Story of a Treaty. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books.

[7] Thomas (1999): 192.

[8] Gerald Robert Vizenor. *Survivance: narratives of Native presence*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

[9] Osborne and Mace, Personal Communication, 2016.

[10] Osborne and Mace, Personal Communication, 2016.

[11] Osborne and Mace, Personal Communication, 2016; Linda Tuhaiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books (2012 reprint).

[12] Tūrangawaewae." *Te Ara, The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land/page-5 [Accessed September 5, 2016].

Image 5: *Elemental: Whenua* (detail). 2016. **Rona Ngahuia Osborne** and **Dan Mace**. Image used with the permission of the artists.

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Sincere whakawhetai (gratitude) to **Rona Ngahuia Osborne** and **Dan Mace** for the opportunity to engage deeply with their collaborative practice throught writing about their work. As Lucy Lippard once noted, "I am the best form of myself when I collaborate" (2013, NYC)—the collaborative conversation from which this essay results in is a testament to Rona and Dan's generous and vibrant mauri (spirit and essence). Thank you to **Jason Ryle** of imagineNATIVE, **Lisa Steele** of Vtape, and **Vicky Moufawad-Paul** of A Space Gallery for editorial finesse, and **Tariq Sami** for layout and design. Tēnā kōrua (thank you).

Te Taki is presented with the kind permission of the Museum of Waitangi, where it is held on permanent display. www.waitangi.org.nz

The artists would like to acknowledge our production team on *Whetūrangi* for their energy and support in creating this work:
Camera and lighting: **Mairi Gunn**
Sound: **Mike McCree**
Performer: **Huia Mārama Osborne**
Assistant: **Ngaio Matariki Osborne-Mace**

The artists would like to acknowledge our production team on *Elemental* for their tautoko and aroha in creating this work:
Camera and lighting: **Mairi Gunn**
Performer: **Ngaio Matariki Osborne-Mace**
Makeup/art department: **Huia Mārama Osborne**

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Rona Ngahuia Osborne
(Clan Fyfe, Clan Caduggan, Kai Tahu)

Rona was born in Auckland in 1974, but spent her formative years in the wild bushy mountains of Hokianga in New Zealand's far north. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts from the Elam School of Fine Arts. Rona's work primarily references cultural and historical themes in Aotearoa, combining strong Māori imagery with colonial symbols. Her work spans a range of mediums, including paint, photography and audio-visual installation. Rona is also well known for her textile work under the moniker Native Agent.

Rona exhibits regularly in both group and solo shows. She has recently returned to the wilds of Northland, where she now lives and works with her husband Dan and two daughters.

Dan Mace
(Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Tamaterā, Ngaiterangi, Clan O'Boyle)

After 16 years, Dan Mace still struggles to describe what he does for a living. In a general context what he does involves crafting ideas, alone or with friends, and then communicating them to an audience. In a more practical context, Dan brings these ideas to life across a range of linear and non-linear formats, including animation, illustration, photography, film & television directing, opening titles design, motion-based museum installations, live event visuals, and experiential art projects.

Dan acknowledges his mixed Māori and Irish heritage when discussing his practice.

Both cultures have rich histories of visual communication through traditional art forms such as carving, weaving, performance, and jewellery. Dan's use of digital media to convey narrative and emotional experience can be described as a contemporary manifestation of indigenous storytelling.

Fiona P. McDonald

Fiona P. McDonald (PhD) is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Arts & Humanities Institute (IAHI). She completed her PhD (2014) in the Department of Anthropology (Material Culture & Visual Anthropology) at University College London. Her current work involves writing a visual and material ethnography monograph that builds upon her graduate studies in Art History (Canada) and Māori Material Culture (Aotearoa New Zealand) to consider the social specificity of the aesthetic transformation(s) of woollen trade blankets in contemporary art, craft, and customary Indigenous regalia. Fiona is co-founder of the curatorial collective, the *Ethnographic Terminalia Collective (ETC)*, an international group of anthropologists and artists who curate exhibitions and experiences at the intersection of art and anthropology. She sits on the Board of Directors for the Society for Visual Anthropology. Fiona's areas of interest are: Indigenous material and visual culture, contemporary Indigenous art, museum studies, sound studies, Māori Taonga, Tlingit At.óowu, material culture theory, ethnographic object analysis, curatorial studies, performance theory and collaboration, environmental anthropology.

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