

This is also a call
by Abby Cunnane

In early 2020 Ana Iti purchased a number of back-issues of Te Pipiwharaura: he kupu whakamarama, a reo Māori newspaper in print between 1899 and 1913.^[1] Over the winter and during Tāmaki Makaurau's two Covid-19 lockdown periods, the artist spent a long time with these texts, piecing together each kupu (word) line by line, mainly using Google Translate. Kimihia te āhua, Iti's billboard series' title, refers to the reader's search (kimihia) for meaning, for a specific 'shape' (āhua), form or tone in order to navigate a text which is new to them, and more generally, to processes of translation.

Te Pipiwharaura was one of around 40 Māori language newspapers in distribution in Aotearoa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first, Ko te Karere o Nui Tireni, was published by the government in 1842. These newspapers were circulated regionally and nationally, up until the 1930s, by which time there was a significant decrease in the number of speakers of Māori.^[2] It has been argued that these were initiated by the Pākehā government with an agenda of assimilation, however niupepa Māori remain a vivid record of cultural history in Aotearoa, the character of te reo at the time, interactions between Māori and Pākehā, iwi life, education, government and local politics, religion, farming and social life. These are records of division and conflict also, spanning the period of wars on the East Coast, Taranaki and the Waikato; they reference Māori representation in parliament, and decisions of the Native Land Court.

As Iti's work suggests, the newspapers also continue to initiate relationships in the present: with contemporary researchers, descendants and language learners among others. In one of the newspapers in Iti's keeping (dated Maehe/March 1910) there is an article about the arrival of a comet, Te Whetūrere, in the night sky; in that text a prediction is made that the comet will return in 1985. Many of the articles hold a similar sense of immediacy, of being at once an everyday commentary on matters of interest, an historical record, and a distinct voice with resonance for readers of future generations.

In her series of billboard images, Iti uses a piece of white paper with a slit in it to isolate specific phrases from the original columns of densely printed text, incrementally building a slower, reduced narrative within that of the newspaper. This new work is developed from *Howling out at a safe distance* (2020, Circuit commission), a video in which we see Iti's hands turning through the newspaper pages, occasionally coming to rest on specific lines or words. Both works emphasise the physical contact involved in the interaction with text, and gestures of reaching and finding. They also evoke the sense of distance that a contemporary reader of these newspapers may experience, as a result of the passing of time, of language loss and change, and the shift from everyday to archival materials.

The phrases zeroed in on include 'He kupu rurua aku': I have few words; 'whakamāori': to interpret, elucidate, clarify, translate; to translate into Māori. Framed in this way, they focus the reader, holding us a space of intimacy with the words. At the same time, the project recognises the distance

and difference between a contemporary reader, driving past on Reeves Road in a car perhaps, and one from the period of Te Pipiwharauoa's circulation. Speaking of her prolonged work of reading these pages, and acknowledging the likelihood of interpretative errors—in spite of paying such close attention—Iti says, “I was trying to work out what it was that I held.” Kimihia te āhua doesn't make a final pronouncement on what this is. Rather, it is the gesture of holding, the artist's hands in each of the frames, and perhaps also the wish to research the context of these pages further in your own time, that remains with you after seeing this work.

I visited Ana during her residency at McCahon House in late winter, around the time the pīpīwharauoa is typically heard singing in Aotearoa. In te ao Māori the bird's call is a sign for the arrival of spring, as acknowledged in the words, Ka tangi te wharauoa, ko ngā karere a Mahuru. We spoke a little about the bird—which neither of us have seen, only heard the short, high, keening cry—and about connections between birds and the idea of a newspaper: something that carries a message, that has a voice or voices, the physical association with 'wings', pages that would or could fly if the air is stirring or the wind is strong. Later, at home that night, I read:

Māori newspapers were often named after birds, including the hokioi (a giant bird), pīhoihoi (pipit), korimako or kōpara (bellbird), huia, pīpīwharauoa (shining cuckoo) and mātuhi (fernbird)...letters to the newspapers [often began] with 'O bird, greetings to you'. Editors, always in need of funds, urged potential subscribers to send in 'seeds for our bird'.^[3]

Letterpress technology has been the focus of earlier works by Iti. In her 2019 work for Strands at The Dowse in Wellington she reproduced the custom metal letter-forms used for the reo Māori consonants ‘ng’ and ‘wh’, as used in early printing presses. In Kimihia te āhua Iti returns to the newspaper format, this time bringing it into relationship with contemporary digital technology in Te Tuhi’s new digital billboard site.

The series of images shown on this site are drawn from design marks used in Te Pipiwharauoa to mark page breaks, or differentiate between forms of written content. As the artist observes, these designs reference both Māori and Celtic cultural histories. Iti has repeated each image, and reinterpreted their configurations in reference to patterns in the handbook Te Rautaki Reo o Te Rarawa, the language strategy of Te Rarawa, Iti’s iwi. Abstracted from the newspaper and their supporting role in relation to the printed text, these images—including clover or trefoil, thistle flower—take on a stronger presence; they too undergo acts of translation.

Kimihia te āhua is spread across three sites, all external to the gallery itself. As such the work brings the act of reading, usually solitary and private, into the public domain, outside into the weather and the traffic noise, so that it becomes something we participate in as a collective. The work brings historical archival material, and te reo o mua, into the present, into the hands of the artist, into viewers’ mouths as we read the words aloud, and the work’s title. This connection between written and spoken text reasserts the significance and continuity of the relationship with oral language, including

song. As the final billboard reads, ‘He karanga tēnei hoki’: this is also a call.

[1] From 1899 the newly-founded newspaper was taken over by Te Kotahitanga Hou. This group included Apirana Ngata, Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck) and Maui Pomare. Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney and Aroha Harris (eds.), *Tāngata Whenua* (Auckland: Bridget Williams Books and Auckland Museum, 2014).

[2] Up until the Second World War most Māori spoke te reo as a first language. Political meetings, such as the Kotahitanga parliament in the 1890s, were held in Māori; there were many Māori newspapers; and books such as Apirana Ngata’s waitata collection, *Ngā mōteatea*, were published in Māori with English translations. See Angela Ballara, ‘History of the Māori language’, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/maori-language-week/history-of-the-maori-language> (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 31 July 2020.

[3] Jane McRae, ‘Māori newspapers and magazines—ngā niupepa me ngā moheni—Role of Māori newspapers’, *Te Ara: the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/maori-newspapers-and-magazines-nga-niupepa-me-nga-moheni/page-1> (accessed 19 November 2020).