AMELIA JONES

Reframing: Michael Parekōwhai’s Indigenous Détournement of the Museum

Exploding into the newly renovated “art” spaces of the hybrid art history, natural history Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, Michael Parekōwhai’s *Détour* is lauded on the museum’s website as a redo: his installation “mines the museum’ and reframes art you perhaps already know” (fig. 1).¹ While “mines the museum” is evoked without proper attribution (despite the telltale quotation marks), the museum literature echoes African American artist Fred Wilson’s exhibition project *Mining the Museum*, staged at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992–93. In that project, Wilson “mined” objects from the museum’s collection, restaging them in new ways to comment on the legacies of slavery that the objects expressed. Echoing Wilson’s gesture and its sharp tone of conceptualist institutional critique, Parekōwhai, one of New Zealand’s best-known artists abroad,melds an ostentatious representation of artworks from the museum’s collection—original works by New Zealand “greats” such as Colin McCahon and Frances Hodgkins; and Euro-Americans, including Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Natalia Goncharova; as well as multiples by Claes Oldenburg and Christo—with a display of historical and practical objects relating to Māori life and history, such as a pair of stilts carved by Te Arawa (1964). Haunting the complex reframing are a number of drawings by pākehā (white New Zealander) artist Theo Schoon from the sixties, depicting the shrunked heads of Māori that were disseminated around the world in the nineteenth century (many of which were recently returned to Te Papa and now reside as horrifically deracinated body parts in the bowels of the museum) (fig. 2).

Through a *détour*, a turning aside of objects from their expected contexts in order to reframe them, a move in line with the premise of the Situationists’ *détournement*, Parekōwhai places these objects and images on a massive metal scaffold, which is wrapped with plastic “tree bark” or encased in clear boxes such that all of the works can be examined from multiple sides. In this display, as with Wilson’s work, the artist serves the crucial purpose of reminding gallerygoers of alternative histories, including those of the indigenous peoples of New Zealand or, as the Māori call it, Aotearoa, placing their ritual objects alongside “art” objects by Europeans.

Parekōwhai’s most notable détournement is his inclusion of Duchamp’s 1934 *Boîte-en-Valise*, a museum-in-a-box that Duchamp constructed, which includes miniature remakes of his classic works. Here, the inclusion of his extraordinary commentary on the impossibility of originals turns *Détour* itself into an echo chamber of reverberating repetitions. Parekōwhai furthers the effects of this reframing by channeling Duchamp’s cheeky attitude toward “originals,” producing replicas of some of the artworks, placing both originals and copies on the scaffold, such as Molly Macalister’s *Maquette for Maori Warrior* (1964–66), a model for a key monument to Māori military prowess that was moved away from its central spot on Auckland’s waterfront and relegated to an unseen spot along a major thoroughfare. In the face of these replications, one is forced to read the gallery guide to find out which is the “original” object. In this way, Parekōwhai both mirrors and critiques the nature of Te Papa as an exhibition space and a radical example of a national museum that—controversially among contemporary artists from Aotearoa—puts objects defined as historical, ethnographic, and artistic in the same institution. Parekōwhai

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While “mines the museum” is evoked without proper attribution (despite the telltale quotation marks), the museum literature echoes African American artist Fred Wilson’s exhibition project Mining the Museum, staged at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992–93. In that project, Wilson “mined” objects from the museum’s collection, restaging them in new ways to comment on the legacies of slavery that the objects expressed. Echoing Wilson’s gesture and its sharp tone of conceptualist institutional critique, Parekōwhai, one of New Zealand’s best-known artists abroad, melds an ostentatious representation of artworks from the museum’s collection—original works by New Zealand “greats” such as Colin McCahon and Frances Hodgkins; and Euro-Americans, including Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Natalia Goncharova; as well as multiples by Claes Oldenburg and Christo—with a display of historical and practical objects relating to Māori life and history, such as a pair of stilts carved by Te Arawa (1964). Haunting the complex reframing are a number of drawings by pākehā (white New Zealander) artist Theo Schoon from the sixties, depicting the shrunk heads of Māori that were disseminated around the world in the nineteenth century (many of which were recently returned to Te Papa and now reside as horrifically deracinated body parts in the bowels of the museum) (fig. 2).

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indeed mines the museum to navigate its hybrid spaces in a way that makes us think twice about this strategy.

Parekōwhai’s reworking also points to the hybrid nature of being Māori in contemporary Aotearoa, a hybridity paralleled in the complex logic of Te Papa. As Parekōwhai noted to me, expressing a particular version of Māori politics, Aotearoa is a bicultural place, not multicultural. The Māori are the founding human culture, having arrived in around 1250 on giant waka (double-hulled canoes) on Polynesian forays. Everyone else came later, most notably the pākehā and subsequent waves of Pacific peoples (who are called Pasifika once they arrive in Aotearoa). Te Papa both celebrates and mitigates this hybridity, as it includes a range of objects but segregates contemporary art into newly refurbished galleries on the second floor, physically differentiated from the more “ethnographic” displays elsewhere in the museum. Parekōwhai, in turn, both honors and critiques Te Papa’s asymmetrical exhibition of art and historical objects, as, to some degree, the museum still distinguishes between contemporary art, whether Māori or Euro-American, and traditional Māori “artifacts.” If “art” has been defined by Europeans as fundamentally “originary” (singular things made by those we call artists), “artifacts” occupy the European imaginary as things that have use value and exist in repeated multiplicity (usually made by those who are “others” to European “high” culture, including, for centuries, women). Through his remounting and remaking of various objects, Parekōwhai cleverly frames this as a false division, placing elements of Te Papa’s collection together with his own redos and new works in a dizzying array. The cacophonous effect is summed up by his own creations: the deliberately confusing replicas are displayed alongside a series of gargantuan fiberglass monkeys and human figures cavorting on a bench topped by a life-size fiberglass elephant lodged high up in the scaffolding (which, he noted to me, is literally “the elephant in the room”) (fig. 3).

Overall, the work is welcoming. Yet it is also a nose-thumbing spectacle that points to the openness of Te Papa, as well as the lingering binary logic in the museum’s clumsy attempt to separate “art” from the historical “artifacts” of the Māori people. Parekōwhai merges cultures and a range of objects into a carnivalesque experience that irreverently points to Te Papa’s fantastic collections of stuff: everything from contemporary art to a giant squid in a vat to extensive historical materials highlighting Māori culture, among them a fifteen-foot-high replica of the moth-eaten Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of Māori/pākehā relations, which sutured Māori interests to those of the British crown in 1840.

Finally, it is fitting that Détour fills the massive atrium leading into the new art galleries in which Pacific Sisters: Fashion Activists, a fabulous art/artifact show curated by Nina Tonga, presents a range of costumes, photographs, and videos of the ground-breaking feminist activist art group that was active in Auckland in the nineties. Crowned by life-size color photographs taken closer to the present day and depicting Māori and Pasifika “sisters” posing in riotous, self-fashioned costumes that recall the reuse and bricolage strategies they deployed in the heyday of their earlier fashion performances, the show continues the humorous yet cuttingly critical tone set by Parekōwhai. While Parekōwhai gestures to the deeply interconnected histories of Māori and pākehā art and culture, as well as the yearning for connections to European modernism on the part of white New Zealand and its marketing of Māori body parts abroad, Tonga’s exhibition presents the Pacific Sisters as examples of borrowing and redoing across Māori, Pasifika, and pākehā cultures, which activate the potential of the hybrid to shatter strictures between art and performance, “native” and “colonizer,” and between living and making.

fig. 2 Installation view of Michael Parekōwhai, Détour, at the Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongawera, 2018. Photograph by Sam Harnett. Courtesy of the artist. Detail of installation showing Theo Schoon, Studies of Moko Mokai (South Kensington Museum), and a black-and-white photograph of the Māori Chief Anekana, (ca. 1960s); Man Ray, Self Portrait (1947/1968), and Theo Schoon/Michael Parekōwhai, Cracked Mud with added decoration by Theo Schoon (1950–66, printed 2018).
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CAROLINE A. JONES

Pendleton’s Rainer

Adam Pendleton’s decision to shoot his 2016 portrait of Yvonne Rainer in black and white opens up the possibility of a formally seamless appropriation and reframing of the 1978 black-and-white film of Trio A, Rainer’s most famous choreographic work, first presented in 1966. The 2016 film presents, in its vérité segments, Pendleton and Rainer facing each other across a table, sharing a meal in a New York diner. At times they are shown standing, to improvise simple dance moves. At one point, Pendleton gives Rainer a script to read that includes her own words and those of others, a reading that is extensively intercut with segments of the Trio A film. In terms of the montage operations to which the 1978 film is subjected, however, the redo here is heavily seamed. The movements of a much younger Rainer dancing Trio A are never allowed to flow uninterrupted. Indeed, I would argue that Pendleton’s appropriation, nesting, and recoding of Rainer’s film footage—using most of Trio A—functions through a systematic signification of seaming that is communicated by the heavy sampling of this recorded dance. Just Back from Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer premiered at Anthology Film Archives on January 9, 2017 as part of the commissioning biennial Performa, and it now exists in a gallery-distributed edition. Featuring the legendary theorist-performer of Minimalism’s heyday (and thus invoking her stature as the legendary theorist-performer of Minimalism’s heyday) and Pendleton’s radical conscience of that mostly male and predominantly white movement), Pendleton’s film both honors Rainer’s brainy, unabashed feminism and stands for a new generation confronting Minimalism’s seventies episteme.


2. Pendleton’s other film portraits include a Black Panther documentary from the seventies, and My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard (2011–14, documenting a Black Panther documentary from the seventies), and My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard (2011–14, documenting My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard (2011–14, documenting David Hilliard, a founder of the Black Panther movement, as he walks around Oakland). Rainer’s insistence that Pendleton appear in his portrait of her was a canny negotiation. It both distinguishes Just Back from Los Angeles from Pendleton’s other portrait films and allows for a sometimes tense balance of power to play out between the portraitist and the portrayed. Pendleton’s inclusion, of course, also makes his body subject to the camera’s gaze, presenting the film as a collaboration between its ostensible subject and putative author. Given this, the “quotations” from Trio A assert themselves as both authorized and authored by Rainer, even as Pendleton dramatically recasts them, thereby bringing Rainer’s history forcefully into the present. At several points in the film, we see Rainer teaching Pendleton moves from Steve Paxton’s Arm Drop, as the younger artist tentatively engages in this game of trust with the more experienced dancer/videomaker theorist. Since Pendleton is black and Rainer white, these choreographed sequences also stage a racial interplay, with Pendleton’s dark, young arms moving gently against Rainer’s pale, aging ones. This interaction produces the imagery of trust and cautious engagement—across generations, between artists, among art forms—that lies at the film’s core.

The structure of the film is simple, nesting its cuts and discursive claims in a mise en scène of realist documentary: the setting is Rainer’s favorite Chelsea diner, where the two hold a measured conversation. Sometimes we see Rainer and Pendleton from outside the diner, with noise from the Manhattan street drowning out anything they might be saying. Sometimes we are inside with them, the soundtrack dominated by the script that Pendleton has given Rainer to read. The diegesis unfolds over sandwich (Rainer) and salad (Pendleton), accompanied by the tinny jangle of silverware, cutaways to wall clocks, and brigades of ketchup and napkin