

Promises, madness and idiocy – reflections on some art practices during and outside the Covid-19 pandemic in Aotearoa

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Resumo

Este artigo reflecte sobre a noção de loucura através do conceito de idiotice produtiva em relação a algumas práticas artísticas recentes em Aotearoa / Nova Zelândia. A nossa abordagem opera com base no conceito nietzschiano de experimentalismo (Ronell, 2005), combinada com a perspectiva de Michel Foucault sobre poder. O autor propõe um sentido de idiotice produtiva enquanto modo de possibilitar um envolvimento da arte com o mundo, com particular referência à presente situação de pandemia pela Covid-19. As obras consideradas em relação a este tema incluem peças de vídeo que envolvem performances da artista Campbell Patterson, Natasha Matila-Smith, Jeremy Leitino'u e Mark Harvey. Através delas vai-se ao encontro das promessas conceptuais que podem ser exploradas mediante reflexões sobre a solidão e as suas possibilidades associadas à performance e à loucura, neste contexto "de capitalismo selvagem" em confinamento.

Palavras chave

Loucura, Idiotice, Covid-19, Performance, Vídeo-Arte.

Abstract

This article reflects on the notion of madness through the concept of productive idiocy in relation to some recent art practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It works with a perspective based on Friederich Nietzsche's notion of experimentalism (Ronell, 2005), combined with Michel Foucault's perspectives on power. Harvey proposes a sense of productive idiocy as a way in which art can engage with being in the world, with particular reference to the current Covid-19 pandemic. The artworks reflected on in relation to this theme include video pieces that involve performance by Campbell Patterson, Natasha Matila-Smith, Jeremy Leitino'u and Mark Harvey. Encountered through this are the potentials and conceptual promises that can be explored through considerations of solitude and its associated possibilities in performance and madness in this 'mad capitalist' lockdown context.

Keywords

Madness, Idiocy, Covid-19, Performance, Video Art.

*There is always some madness in love.
But there is also always some reason in madness.*
(Nietzsche, 2020)

I wish I could do whatever I liked behind the curtain of 'madness'. Then: I'd arrange flowers, all day long, I'd paint; pain, love and tenderness, I would laugh as much as I feel like at the stupidity of others, and they would all say: 'Poor thing, she's crazy!' (Above all I would laugh at my own stupidity.) I would build my world which while I lived, would be in agreement with all the worlds. The day, or the hour, or the minute that I lived would be mine and everyone else's - my madness would not be an escape from 'reality'.
(Kahlo, 2020)

As I write this, my city Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland (in Aotearoa/New Zealand) is under yet another Covid-19 lockdown. Many of us feel paralyzed, but now used to the routines of staying at home and living in the simulated world of the internet and social media – Jean Baudrillard (1983) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) might be excited by the theoretical ramifications of all of this, considering their journeys into simulations and simulacra. We live in a 'mad world' we tell ourselves here in our home as we snuggle up in front of 'Aunty Netflix' in our comfortable hiding place with our reassuring pet Labrador. I even hum the Tears for Fears 80's pop-song of the same name to myself while I write this I confess. But 'everything will be ok', so they say. For an artist like me that works usually with live performance and participants in public contexts, I just might not ever be able to make this kind of work again due to this pandemic. In this article, from my standpoint as a Pākehā¹ (generally of white of British European origin) male artist of profoundly deaf parents and Portuguese and Māori descent (Matawaka iwi/Ngāt Toa iwi) I aim to reflect on some of the political contexts surrounding the 'madness of this pandemic' in relation to the performance-based art of Campbell Patterson (Pākehā, male), Natasha Matila-Smith (Māori/Ngāti Kahungunu/Ngāti Hine iwi, Samoan, Pākehā, female), Jeremy Leatinu'u (Māori/Ngāti Maniapoto iwi, Samoan, male) and of myself. I also intend to reflect on the conceptual promises that playing with madness in art can uncover through a perspective of idiocy. Reflections on some public performance-based art outside of this pandemic will also be considered as an offer of optimistic promise towards working beyond this time of change.

Madness:

*Madness, madness, they call it madness
Madness, madness, they call it madness*

*I'm about to explain
 A-That someone is losing their brain
 Hey, madness, madness, I call it gladness, yee-ha-ha-ha
 (Madness, 1979)*

All living things contain a measure of madness that moves them in strange, sometimes inexplicable ways. (Martel, 2020)

When we consider 'madness' we may immediately associate it with the myriad of disorders described in the American Psychiatric Association's *DSM-5* (2020) like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychosis, personality disorder, psychopathy and so forth. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines it as "the state of having a serious mental illness" (2020). However, in clinical terms the term is not used - it doesn't even feature in the *DSM-5*. Nor is the term 'insanity'. So, one can position this term more as a form of social construct, dependent on normativities. Cyrus Lewis locates the all-pervasive processes and structures of capitalism itself in current times as a form of madness (2012). For Lewis it is not just psychopaths who control and manipulate market processes but the very *system* of capitalism itself that allows for this to happen, like a structural psychopath that displays a lack of empathy and remorse, that displays bold, disinhibited, and egotistical traits. Capitalism as madness can be seen to have gone a step further for us in our current pandemic and resultant international financial recession. For Andrej Markovčič (2020) it has itself caused 'the Covid' crisis' through state monetarist Chicago School of Economics influenced neo-liberalism, which through austerity has prevented governments like the USA and the UK from investing in preventable measures for this pandemic. This perspective is widely shared amongst thinkers worldwide. In this sense here lies an application of *The Oxford Dictionary* noting that madness can be dangerous (2020). The dictionary also reminds us that madness can be associated with stupid behaviour and that "there may be a link between madness and creativity" (ibid). There is here a play and some slippages between notions of madness, including the mentally unwell, psychotic economic structures, the stupid individual, with the role of the state ideological power apparatuses via actions like lockdowns and government policies, and how we might navigate all of this as artists - which is something that I am interested in here.

A promise of madness as idiocy:

*I'm with stupid. (The text on My Uncle's t-shirt)
 You made me promises promises
 Knowing I'd believe
 Promises promises
 You knew you'd never keep
 (Naked Eyes - Promises Promises, [song] 1983)*

I move here specifically to reflecting on an often more harmless and se-date notion of madness - stupidity, or what can be known as idiocy. Through a lens influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (2001) idiocy or in his words 'playing the fool' offers something productive that can generate insights and reflections, rather than be destructive like other notions of madness. The notion of idiocy is often used to mark behaviours that cannot be accounted for through normalised and fantasised frameworks of 'acceptable' behaviour, as lacking so called 'good judgement'. It is generally used to 'call up', interpolate or police the identity of someone with disdain as a societal reject, to use Judith Butler's words that she has used in relation to gender identity (1993).

Idiocy is for Nietzsche to enact the spirit of experimentality in science- as-art and art-as-science or 'gay science' which allows us to discover conditions of possibility (Ronell: 2002, 19-20). Avital Ronell considers this to be *testing* and *test-writing* (2005). Idiocy's generation of conditions of possibilities manifests through how it tugs at and teethes open the conceptual boundaries and limits of normativities, rules, regulations and 'acceptable' codes of behaviour in objects and projects, for experimenters and spectators to interpret and analyse (2005: 153, 224). This is not out of line with a number of other perspectives on idiocy, such as Elif Batuman's novel *The Idiot* (2017), artists including Fluxus, the Dada movement, William Pope.L, Paul McCarthy, and comedians like Billy T. James (in Aotearoa), Monty Python and so forth. Often cited is Fyodor Dostoevsky who implies that idiots hold a mirror up to the rest of the world and can teach us about ourselves (Ronell, 2002). (Even stupidity for the clinically mentally unwell, like in Nietzsche's personal case can be seen to generate insights and reflections back on to our society through what we might call their stupidity, such as how in his later years when he was considered to be 'going mad' he produced insights around the 'will to power' and the 'will to nothingness' as interconnected and not a binary; Walker Reader, 2020.) Nietzsche here takes this further by inviting the experimenter to embrace failure and the potentials of new understanding and discoveries that can bring. This can if one reads this through a Foucauldian- influenced Butlerian lens conjure up breaking away from dominant normativities to the point of proposing a sense of transgression. If seeing this perspective of idiocy in relation to power dynamics informed by Michel Foucault (1980) where power is productive as it can be seen to generate possibilities whether positive, negative or neither, and with the Nietzschean notion of the 'will to power' as what can be viewed as a protagonist way of being in the world (Nietzsche, 1969), I propose 'productive idiocy'. Another key aspect to Nietzsche's notion of idiocy how experimenters or test-writers should to him make promises (Ronell, (2005: 153, 224). Promises here don't guarantee that the test project will deliver on what such promises themselves pledge, or anything at all. As Ronell notes, promises are only ever promises of promises.

As an artist, I have the pleasure in adding that artists can therefore be excused for promising just about anything about their art (apart from things like ethics, or my Portuguese grandmother might not approve). Another aspect to promise with from this framework of productive idiocy is the call from the *Gay Science* for continual negation and affirmation and endless questioning (Ronell, 2005). These can be considered central tenets of Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance* (1978: 314-115), or the simultaneous and continual play in seeing a concept for what it is named as, what it is not, both and neither. Productive idiocy in this light may be useful, or useless, or both and neither simultaneously - which may help us to view our sense of being-in-the-world with possibilities of discovery.

Madness as isolation:

We live in a risk economy that has created a risk society. Because for the first time nation-states have decided that their citizens *can't take risks*. In the name of Covid-19 our lives have been taken away. We are all locked in our homes, with whatever and whoever is in them [...] Epidemics have a narrative structure, they generate legends and stories with signs and symptoms to decipher. The effects they have on each person are *history*" of stories with happy endings, or the end of everything. We have a "some condition or vulnerability. (Claire Fontaine, 2020, Letters against separation -, E-Flux, March 27th)

We know three solitudes in society. We know a solitude imposed by power. This is the solitude of isolation, the solitude of *anomie*. We know a solitude which arouses fear on the part of those who are powerful. This is the solitude of the dreamer, of the *homme révolté*, the solitude of rebellion. And finally, there is a solitude which transcends the terms of power. It is a solitude based on the idea of Epictetus that there is a difference between being lonely and being alone. This third solitude is the sense of being one among many, of having an inner life which is more than a reflection of the lives of others. It is the solitude of difference. (Sennett, 1981)

To be in isolation, lockdown and keeping social and physical distance in the present Covid context can mean many things for us. On the one hand it can be considered a safety net from the madness of the pandemic getting 'out of control, which I and most fellow citizens in Aotearoa support and consent to 'for our own good health' as most of our scientists tell us. On the other hand it can be seen as an act of idiocy, as something that for many of us reaches beyond our reference points of acceptability, that already has displayed failure with heightened stresses on mental health (Barber et al, 2020), accidental outbreaks, losses of life and conspiracy theory-based protests, that all promises its own promises - for instance in relation to the risks of economic ruination. For some it is a time of gathering with whanau (family), for others a time of enforced productivity or loss of employment and value under the circumstances of disaster capitalism (Lowenstein, 2015) where our capitalist neoliberal system

can be seen to exploit workers and spit out many of us, especially women and those with less power and status and capital, and for many of us a time of increased personal risk.

Being alone and carrying out life in isolated individual units is something not new for the individualist, competitive capitalist modern colonial Pākehā project. It is something many Anglo colonials have long been proud of, take for example the widely considered white New Zealand toxic masculinity stereotype of John Mulgan's *Man Alone* (1939); of the Pākehā bloke who goes forth and conquers the bush, metaphorically rubbing butter over his power and privilege. This connotes our dominant white British cultural norms of individual productivity, 'the colonial spirit', combined with conventional Western gender binaries and machismo heroics, heavily influenced by the various brands of protestant Christianity, like Calvinism (that I personally attempted to rebelled from as a child), and yet, correlated with Pākehā male alienation and high national suicide rates (Phillips, 1996)². For others, including Tangata Whenua (Māori; people of the land) and Pasifika (mainly Polynesians from the Pacific Islands) isolation can at times be profoundly destabilising to the very fabric of cultural identity, belonging and sense of *Va* (collective belonging and positioning on social, political and spiritual levels, including notions of ancestry). For some it can be *mana motuhake* or a time and place for empowerment that promises realities and futures that can overcome the confines of ideological state apparatuses, inequality and disempowerment. It *can be* and *is* many things for us. From a perspective that Foucault takes as mentioned above, solitude can be a productive experience that transcends being with or without others, as an internal perspective of difference. However, from a kaupapa Māori perspective (or Māori world view and ways of doing things), even a sense of one being internalised in their solitude is always *in relation to* and *belonging with* others, *iwi/hapu/whanau* (tribe/subtribe/family) and *whakapapa* (genealogies). In this way, we are never alone.

For me all of these perspectives on isolation, madness and productive idiocy influence how I approach my art and the art of others in what can be seen as a time of 'great world stupidity'. What stands out for me personally in this time is the productively idiotic institutional expectation that we are 'successful' if we are productive, in our jobs and even in our recreation. We are surrounded it feels by adds on TV and online about activities we can do while in lockdown. Our tertiary education institutions have us lecturers doing twice the amount of work to ensure student-as-customer satisfaction in this time of 'inconvenience', as well as to come up with ideas on how we can generate more income due to our loss in international student revenue - and potentially we face major 'burnout' from it. This is all in line with the psychotherapist Paul Verhaeghe (2012) who draws attention to the neoliberal status quo in the West and how due to our obsession with financial gain and market growth we are more worried about our accountable performance as agents of the market,

rather than other issues like ethics, including in academic contexts (which he names specifically). A lot of our students are facing higher rates of mental health challenges, while many are forced to skip online classes and lectures due to the poverty related issues of having to work to provide for their families (as children themselves, with many of their family members have lost their jobs with retail and hospitality closing down), and many students simply are not able to afford the resources to do online learning with us in lockdown. While we are yet to see statistics around this it appears to be dramatically increasing ongoing local trends where Māori and Pasifika face much higher rates of poverty and mental and physical health risks than the rest of our population (Durie, 2011). Meanwhile most Pākehā as privileged subjects appear to be quite content in lockdown and the most wealthy are even saving money and accumulating wealth through it, particularly the very wealthy (as is well-known in the USA at present). This can all be seen as examples of disaster capitalism (Lowenstein, 2015) where neoliberal processes like policies based on the myths of meritocracy are being implemented by many of our governments, which can be viewed to be showing symptoms of capitalism-as-madness - as traits of psychopathic Chicago neoliberalism.

This pandemic appears to be generating a kind of self-generated madness as well. It has changed my personal lifestyle and the lives of many artists I know locally - we are doing everything from home, to the point of potentially becoming agoraphobics. I'm personally working at home all the time and want to avoid being in public as much as possible, even in between our lockdowns when we have free movement out of fear of the virus, despite Aotearoa's extremely low rate of Covid infections (and the lowest of all Western nations).

Madness alone:

So what might it mean to explore productive idiocy as a form of madness as an artist in lockdown? What might it mean to promise resisting the neoliberal status quo of being productive and fail at producing something 'that sells'? What follows is a reflection on some practices of three local artists' video works presented during our lockdown earlier this year: Campbell Patterson, Natasha Matila-Smith and myself. Each of us have attempted what can be considered idiotic promises of resistance to normatively sane behaviour that the institutions and public media around us attempt to police us with.

Patterson's video *Untitled* (2019/2020)³ begins with a focus on some white underpants being rammed into a white plastic bottle of orange juice, again and again so that it absorbs the juice. We next see Patterson putting on the underpants and then his denim jeans over the top. Then we see him stomp on a sponge. It's a cloudy day and he's inside his studio. He begins to stomp on the sponge, again and again. The focus moves to his foot on the sponge. Squish-squitch, squish-squitch... The repetitive work goes on for what might appear an endless duration. It's not unlike as though one of our children when



Figure 1: Patterson, C. (2020).
Video still of *Untitled*. (Video).

they were toddlers found a sensation they like repeating, obsessively again and again. It's ritualistic not unlike in Patterson's many other video works. After a while we witness his jeans gradually darken with the juice, growing with each stamp on the sponge. 'Now, just what *has* he done?!!!' As his group exhibition catalogue states,

The video seeps with squishy, sticky textures and absurd, seemingly futile movements. There is something slightly uncomfortable about witnessing what happens behind Patterson's closed doors. His gestures reflect deeper concerns. (Ramp Gallery, 2020)

Through his repetition we witness promises of being a 'useful worker', in terms of conventional contemporary Western capitalist modes of productivity. But it might be seen to fail at that as to the non-art audience it can appear pointless and even a 'bloody waste of tax-payer's money'. Yet at the same time his perceived failure of being 'useful' serves as a mirror on what the norms of pointless productivity for the sake of so widely promoted during this lockdown in our country - on the absurdity of our collective call to be useful and busy so as to maintain our sense of fitness of body and mind as 'good labourers' within the capitalist machine. One might associate this with Ivan Illich's writings on how we workers are part of the 'out-of-control system of modernity' where we are worn down like 'mechanical parts' while being dependent on it for our survival (1973) in what David Graeber calls 'bullshit jobs' or pointless and even potentially harmful jobs according

to (2018), and Campbell is preparing to go back to work in this 'bullshit job machine'. On the other hand of course, his work can be seen to conform to capitalist madness, if one finds this entertaining, as cultural relief for us workers, 'so we may feel happy to continue on in our service to the good of the economy'.

Matila-Smith's video series *Self-isolating in your heart* (2019/2020⁴) in the same exhibition as Patterson's (*Personal Space*, Ramp Gallery, 2020), consists of three videos focussing around loneliness in this time of mad capitalism, in relation to what can be considered the insular social media influenced world of contemporary existence for many of us and our romantic fantasies. In one video, *Transmission* she is sitting on her own on a couch below a large fantasy-like photo of Waitemata harbour and Rangitoto island in the gallery space, behind a dividing rope. She is playing perhaps on how we must all keep our social distance from each other. And all she does is sit down on a couch and use her smart phone for what can feel like quite a long time. She eventually gets up and walks away. In another video, *Self-isolating in your heart* we see her reading a romance novel on the edge of a bath tub under blue light, while text in pink block letting appears at times with various romantic yet seemingly tragic 'truisms', like "You can't be hurt if you don't go outside", "Mutual rejection is how to connect with others" and "What would I even do if I were lucky enough to be a chosen one?". The next video, *If I die, please delete my Soundcloud* has her lying in her bed, hidden under white bed covers, almost asleep while sporadically pressing a button or two on her laptop, that in turn appears to cause the light of the room to be pink. We see text about romance appearing in different colours every so on, such as "Men on dating apps... I don't care if they ski or mountain climb or go to the gym or partake in adventure sports. I just wish they had personality" and "I leave my laptop on because it makes me feel less alone". All the while on each

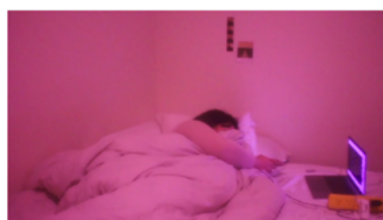
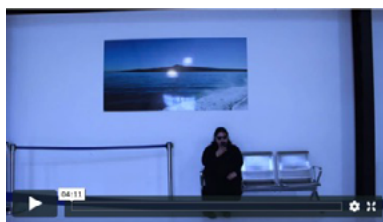


Figure 2: Matila-Smith, N. (2020) Video stills of *Self-isolating in your heart*. (Video).

video we hear drone-like minimal-expressionist electronic and stringed instrument sounds tracks in mostly minor chords, like the soundtrack of a contemporary post-apocalyptic movie.

Each of Matila-Smith's videos can be read as inviting us viewers locked into our holding patterns of romantic loss and non-productivity to swim in our reflection of our situations. We are witnesses to the fruitlessness of online simulation culture in that we never get to experience the resolution of what her personae appears to long for in these videos - romantic love, completion, satisfaction, the success we see in mainstream commodifiable romantic movies. Just like in the lockdown itself, we are kept hanging, with our desires deferred, waiting for something to be resolved. And this is a resolution of the work - a promise of failure over romantic resolution, a promise to conform with the mad capitalist status quo of being productive. There is here a promise of productive idiocy and in the sense of pleasure one may get in watching supposed 'nothingness' that is perhaps very familiar with many of us who have resisted the lockdown-rush of being 'busy for the sake of it'. We are offered, like with Patterson's work an idiotic promise of productive futility and uselessness and perhaps an escape from our 'bull-shit jobs'. Matila-Smith provides us with an object of catharsis for our own mad desires of doing nothing and being melancholic in this time of great international and local pandemic-induced trauma. She invites us to empathise with her and see ourselves as also being caught up in this entanglement of capitalist madness and mass-trauma -perhaps even to 'own it' as she promises here. We do not know if these are her words cited in her videos or those of others from social media -perhaps they're even some of our own words. Perhaps it matters not. Something that's also at play here is a reflection on the stereotypes of who is not considered to be useful in mainstream Aotearoa media and Pākehā circles -public contexts that are often considered to be normatively racist (Jackson, 2018; 2019) and sexist and bigoted (Strongman, 2018). We witness Matila-Smith as a Polynesian woman (Māori and Samoan), and in revealing this she invites us to reflect on these racist and sexist stereotypes many of us maintain on a daily basis in regards to people from her demographic as the 'least productive'. And yet, it is well known that they make up the majority of essential workers, like cleaners, who arguably work harder than others for much less pay and in times like 'the Covid' at much more health risks to themselves, more over the majority of social welfare beneficiaries are Pākehā (*Stats New Zealand: Tātuaranga Aotearoa*, 2020). I note too that like with Patterson, her works were made prior to the pandemic lockdowns, but they can be seen to anticipate this pandemic through how they resonate with them in the ways mentioned above.

And then there was the dad in his back yard with the family Labrador. In *Let's share the ground together* (2020), a video presented on Facebook and Instagram for the Danish online art festival Performance Kækkenet (2020) by me is also a very simple set of actions, with me following our Labrador ('Lara

the Labrador') and her following me and us swapping roles from time to time. I have done here perhaps what every art academy instructor tells us not to do - made a performance involving pets and children. My teenage daughters helped in the production of this, with my daughter Tui filming us, because we could not get a camera person in 'level 4 lockdown', and my daughter Sanne directing us with doggie treats out of the camera lens to entice us into lying down, rolling, sitting up, walking, and searching for more treats on the ground in our semi-suburban and forested backyard. At times there is very little occurring with long pauses with subtle movements by Lara that I try to follow and at times it's like she explodes into a 'more-than-animal' hunger for food on the ground as I follow. In jest of the current mainstream and social media hype at the time of making this, with people in Australian supermarkets on TV panic-buying toilet rolls and leaving supermarket shelves empty Lara and I wear collars of toilet rolls -our 'sensible collars of hygiene' perhaps. After our scrounging around, Lara and I lay content in the sun, we fall asleep, side by side, cheek to cheek.

As can be interpreted of Patterson's and Matila-Smith's works *Let's share the ground together* is intended to promise idiotic failures on our call to be 'useful' and normatively productive in this time of isolation -with our 'call to be animal'. I (and perhaps Lara) wonder what human-non human theorists Karen Barad and Donna Haraway might say? There is a productive pointlessness in some ways to what Lara and I do together, besides bonding and providing cultural relief for our family and our viewers. With my sense of inherent privilege I have I aim to play on the normative stereotypes of how a middle age, middle class white man in Aotearoa (by my 'white passing') is widely expected to behave as sensible, instrumental, useful and not time-wasting. Perhaps highlighting the absurdities in our pandemic and strategies to deal with it, for Lara, there is no pandemic, just



Figure 3: Harvey, M. (2020). Video still of *Let's share the ground together*. (Video). Camera work by Tui Harvey-Jansen.

our collective sharing and the joys of our games with Pavlovian Classical behavioural conditioning, with all the extra food rewards it brings. It's a serious business for her. I have never seen her so happy. For my children behind the scenes, 'who cares about all of these worldly ills when you can make dad do something stupid with our dog', and get the last laugh at him. Besides such inter-species, inter-generational and inter-gender promises of failing at being sensible and useful capitalist subjects is the temporariness of the social media platforms in which this work is presented -here now, gone tomorrow, with no profits shared for the artist, but for Mark Zuckerberg and his associates and some of their sponsors. There is a sense of failure in this way despite my attempt to allude and resist capitalism by my 'goofing around', an inherent issue with many social media posts. It's just as Slavoj Žižek notes of the cynic, 'we know, but all the same we do it' (1989). It's after all only a promise of a promise of resistance. Perhaps more resistant of capitalism here is how these online platforms are not seen to count for research requirements in my academic job, so perhaps I have madly wasted time by making this video after all -is this a good thing or a bad one? I will let my employers tell me when they make me 'walk the tightrope' of my academic performance review at the end of this year, in true neoliberal accountable form. (As Verhaeghe (2012) states, all universities and academies in our country are subject to similar neoliberal norms, and this does not mean that I do not value my employers and where I teach - quite the contrary, because in part they allow me to question such norms of market-fundamentalist madness.)

Nostalgic or optimistic?: Pre and post Covid-19 stupid strategies:

What do you call that? That's no art? (My neighbour)
Go and get a real job!(A public by-passer yelling at us in
We can shift the world together, by M Harvey)

I return to pre-Covid-19, perhaps as a moment of mad/idiotic nostalgia, but maybe out of hope and optimism for where we might just go in the future... Some argue that we can change the world out of this pandemic and associated economic crisis for the betterment of us all. On the other hand, some say it's impossible considering how most Anglo countries turning to neoliberal strategies for solutions that benefit the '1%', just as they have with every economic downturn in the last 40 years or so (Markovčič, 2020; Lowenstein, 2015; Klein, 2007; 2014). Whichever the case, productive idiotic art practices have the potential to help us to reflect on how we are and can become. Through it we may just be able to think more about 'all the ills of the world' and deal with them, like inequality, bigotry, greed, climate change - maybe, just maybe... The following approaches to performance by Jeremy Leatinu'u (2020) I propose attempt to activate notions of collectivity towards considering other possible

futures of being in the world. Whether they really do or not can be seen not to be the point of them, but that they can stimulate reflection on it. As Verhaeghe argues, it's not only approaching things in relation to ethics and wellbeing but also through collectivity and solidarity that we can begin to address the inequalities and environmental destruction of neoliberalism (2012). There is also something we can potentially learn here from kaupapa Māori and Pasifika ways of being in the world, whereby the individual is always a part of a collective, with for instance whaka-whanaungatanga (family based relations) being fundamental, and we have to consider and 'have a care' with our families and relationships with others through all of our behaviours.

Perhaps not unlike the above works in lockdown isolation, each of these works also attempts a sense of situatedness in their locations by productively idiotically promising to move past the 'pass/fail' notions of right and wrong of how to engage in sites, in line with Miwon Kwon's writing (Kwon, 30-39, 2004). Kwon calls engagements with sites beyond approaches of 'right' or 'wrong', whereby sites are structured intertextually generating a range of possible strategies that respond to contexts of that site, whether political, psychological or otherwise.

Jeremy Leatinu'u's (2020) three videos *The Welcome Project* (2010), *Tight Rope* (2011), *Public Observations* (2010) can be read to form part of a series of videos that test out ideas around the individual in relation to collectivity in terms of a productive idiocy. In these videos he may be viewed to idiotically promise to test what it can mean to belong and not belong to a sense of collectiveness and how his own cultural identity that is itself of course part of its own cultural collective identities as 'acceptable' or 'not'. In each video we see him doing something we might just consider to be mad and stupid and pointless, while the world goes on around him - as though he is waiting for us to change for the better perhaps.



Figure 4: Leatinu'u, J. Video stills from *The Welcome Project* (2010), *Tight Rope* (2011), *Public Observations* (2010). (2020).

In *The Welcome Project* we see Leatinu'u standing at the busy arrival gate of what appears to be Auckland International Airport beside other 'welcomers' to arrivals off different aeroplanes from Polynesia. We see new arrivals stream past him with their baggage trollies, while he just stands there for a long time with a sign saying 'welcome' as though he really is welcoming someone in particular, yet he knows nobody arriving and nobody knows him -or perhaps they are ever yet to arrive? There is a madness in all this, and in doing so it reminds us of the current Aotearoa and international political tensions around immigration and the value of migrants, even before Covid. As Shannon Te Ao notes, on the one hand his sign invites people, on the other hand the word 'welcome' tells them they *are* visitors (Leatinu'u, 2020). The work activates reflections on a range of readings that non-migrants, Pākehā and Māori might not realise, such as what might it mean to not feel one belongs, what might it feel to belong elsewhere, and perhaps what might it feel to be marked as foreign and 'other'? Like with all of these videos this work for some generates reflections on the wealth of racist and xenophobic stereotypes mainly held by Pākehā towards non-white migrants in Aotearoa, that (falsely) they might 'take jobs' off locals and even overstay their travel visa. (This is a long well-known racist narrative in Aotearoa with the government carrying out 'dawn raids' on many Pasikifa for 'overstaying' here in the 1970's - often with no evidence; New Zealand Herald, 2015.)

In *Tight Rope* Leatinu'u walks down the medium white lines on a suburban street as though he is balancing on a tightrope, while cars go zooming past him. The work can be seen to explore the fragility of the body in relation to cars and trucks, with an elderly man being struck by a vehicle as a 'hit and run' in that spot some weeks before hand. I imagine drivers thinking to themselves... 'What's that stupid bloody idiot doing? He could get himself killed'. Again, with him as 'the odd one out' in this context the video can be considered to be another play through modes of productive idiocy on racist cultural stereotypes with him walking the 'tightrope of racism' within this dangerous suburban site, as a play on the well-known wider colonial power and aggression towards Pasifika and Māori (such as carrying out an armed police trial last year only in Pasifika and Māori neighbourhoods). It could also be seen as a play on the 'tightrope of fossil fuel burning' as 'we go about on our daily chores' in our vehicles, oblivious to our complicit-ness in climate change.

Leatinu'u's *Public Observations* on the other hand can be seen to productively idiotically test out what might it mean to re-approach the public colonial space with Fa'a Samoa (Samoan) ways of being in the world. We see him sitting cross-legged in a very busy sunny tar sealed outdoor public market place where mostly Polynesians cross in front of him. With the focus on him, all we see is their mid to lower bodies with their bags of shopping. He appears as though he may be in a fale (Samoan house) either in a ritual or just waiting his turn to eat/drink/speak as Samoan protocols can define it -or, he's just being



Figure 5: Harvey, M. (2020).
Photo of live performance, *We can shift the world together*, *The Performance Arcade*, Wellington.

within himself, with indifference to others, yet in consciousness of those around him. He activates reflections on the Samoan concept of *Vā*, of the complex space between people, that's charged by often unsaid relationships, ancestral spiritual, political and otherwise. Leatinu'u also offers up a place of stillness, to rest up from the Pākehā colonial pace of business and productivity for the sake of itself. He does not appear bothered that someone might trip over him. The promise of this failure adds fragility and vulnerability to this -that perhaps in order to achieve a sense of rest from the 'rat-race' one has to be very focussed and 'let's hope no one nobody knocks you over'.

It's a sunny windy afternoon. I'm standing beside a large 3-5 tonne light blue shipping container amongst a village of others like it with a towrope in my hand. I feel like a used-car salesman. I approach many people as they pass by, asking them if they would like to help me move this shipping container, in everyday 'Kiwi', like "How are-ya'? D'ya wanna' give me a hand? I'm try-na' move this shipping container?" Many folks just laugh and keep walking. Many stop and appear to take it seriously and agree to help. They often ask me what am I moving it for, so I tell them honestly -that it is an artwork called *We can shift the world together* and that I'm just trying to get people to help me to shift this extremely heavy shipping container, and that it's part of the surrounding art and performance festival in shipping containers, *The Performance Arcade*. Thousands

of people help me over the period of five days. I get up to 60 people helping me at times, and sometimes only one or two. I take it serious like it's the Olympics and means 'everything in the world' for us. When folks ask me why I am doing this I say because *We can* shift the world together. They usually laugh, a lot. Many respond with comments like, 'yes, we can!' Usually we agree to try and pull the container with the towrope and I always drill them and count them in to create a rhythm, not unlike how sailors have teamed together on boats for thousands of years, with "1, 2, 3, pull!" Again and again, and again. When we pause or stop we check a mark on the concrete pathway to see if it has moved - I believe it has and I always tell the participants it has. We usually cheer with satisfaction. 'A job well-done' and the participants walk off for me to start all over again, only to hawk for new participants. Whether or not it really moves this does not matter for me, but the sense of group motivation and physical effort and associated euphoria in this 'tug of life'. And, as one may expect, there is the odd passer-by or two who dismisses it - 'haters just gotta hate', as they say. Perhaps this is a bit like life when we try to get people mobilized to change things for the better? 'There are always some who just can't be bothered', and of course some who simply can't for a range of reasons not to do with any of this.

We can shift the world together might just appear to be a fun but rather mad game we might find at a public fair, but it's intended to promise a sense of togetherness, through coming together and being mad and idiotic together. In a time when there appears to be growing division in the Anglo world, with for instance the likes of Trump-sympathizing with white supremacists, it has the potential to uplift the general public into working together no matter the demographic. We have had what appears to be the full range of Aotearoa demographics participating too. It could be considered to be particularly poignant and needed considering our nation has been so traumatised by the Christchurch Terror Attacks -most Pākeha never believed such an act of white racist hate could happen here, or that there is white racism here, despite as is generally known, all the evidence to the contrary. Perhaps, just perhaps madness in art-as-productive idiocy can help us to heal some of that division and bigotry?

Closing remarks:

*Summer and smoke, diamonds and dust
Go where you will, do what you must
The promise was made, your word was enough
We had dreams, visions and plans
Into the night, out of our hands...*
(Survivor, Broken Promises, [song] 1984)

In what many of us call ‘these mad times’, ‘the time of the pandemic’, all-embracing- neoliberalism, inequality, division, environmental destruction and other things, perhaps madness in art as productive idiocy can help us to reflect on our lives, sometimes as catharsis and maybe even help us begin to think about how we can cope and address it all? I’ve presented a series of works here, by others and myself here in Aotearoa that offer some tactics towards this. On another train of thought, these tactics can be seen to propose a slant on Guy Debord’s notion of ‘tactics of the everyday’ (1994) by attempting to activate what we might do in our daily lives in these times with a sense of political purpose, and yet in the spirit of *The Gay Science*’s call for experimentation, playing the fool, questioning and affirming, in addition to embracing the personality of the artists, to potentially activate what Amelia Jones implies is beyond the everyday, where there is no such thing as performing in the everyday (2010). From tactics of being alone, following, sitting still, lying in bed, balancing acts, mess-making and obsessiveness, to the rabble-rousing of crowds, these methods of productive idiocy might offer us new possibilities towards being-in-the-world and maybe even well-being and healing in the world. While we tinker on the side-lines of capitalism, these are after all only promises of promises, but without out it where else would we be?

Notes

¹ The term Pākehā is a Māori one that means British and New Zealand European. Using this word emphasises the relationship NZ Europeans have with Māori, as a form of empowerment for Māori and partnership with them. Further reading can be found on it by Jodie Ranford (2020) for instance.

² I note here that suicide rates in Aotearoa are often noted to be the highest in the world, for men, young men and Māori and Pasifika, despite my emphasis here just referring to toxic white masculinity (Ministry of Health, 2020) – with the contingent causes being widely considered to be more complexed, such as higher poverty rates for Māori and Pasifika.

³ I note that this work was made in 2019, but I credit it at the time of this exhibition, as I read it in the time of our national pandemic lockdown.

⁴ These videos like Patterson’s were created in 2019 and I read them here in relation to the lockdown context because of the timing of this exhibition. The Two of the works *Transmission* and *Self-isolating in your heart* were commissioned for *Runway Journal* (2020) and the other, *If I die, please delete my Soundcloud for Circuit* (2020).

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