

**Urban Voodoo: An Ambiguity Document, seeking to record the disruption of
language through imitation.**

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Master of Art and Design

2007

School of Art and Design

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A thesis/dissertation submitted to AUT University in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of a Master of Art and Design

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

Urban Voodoo mimics semiotic phenomena, which constitute language and functions as a system of signs that intra-act ambiguously within their own system.¹ This project explores the link between the ambiguous signs of the worm, what looks like a mimesis of icons/symbols, and the way in which simulations are caught up in semiotic implications.² *Urban Voodoo*, which followed on from my earlier *Project Iroiro*, developed language precursors from the study of the marks of the worm, creating different patterns and styles, and generating language-like effects. Using this system of signs, my project explores the idea that humans are part of a system operated by language, and examines the notion that language itself may be disrupted. To explore this, my project is about layers of competing imprints, about ‘languages’ tagged into spaces occupied by several graffiti artists within a local skate park.³ *Urban Voodoo* acts as a new Graffiti system.

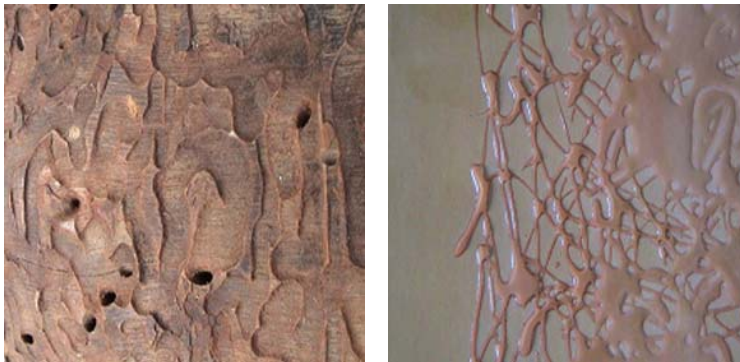
In mimicry, organisms make themselves resemble others or their environment. Icons ‘look like’ what they represent; simulation proposes ‘to be’ what it suggests. These concepts of assimilation and representation will be explored to understand and interrogate the power balance of language systems, starting with a specific local situation, the skate park.



1 Signs of the Worm

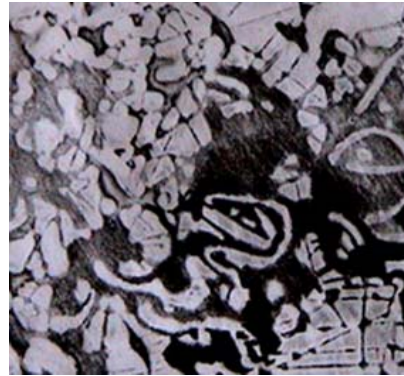
Iroiro is the Maori word for the maggot, or larvae, found in nature.⁴ Maori myth also identifies this worm as *Toke*, master of a layer of the underworld. *Iroiro* worms its way into the unknown and acts as a vehicle that takes our thoughts and perceptions into *Toke's* realm.

1.1 Patterns and Styles: Generating language-like effects.



The initial focus of this project culminated in the link between the ambiguous signs of the worm, the trace it leave in passage, and the similarity of this trace to the icons and symbols used by written 'languages'. This research follows the hunch that it may be possible to disrupt the way in which dominant groups in western society use language. Thus, signs and phenomena were explored not in isolation, but as part of a semiotic sign system. Ambiguous sign-systems were looked at not only in communication, but also in the context of personal reality construction, as a way of representing that reality.

1.2 Imitation



An analysis of photographs of *Iroiro* at an early stage shifted my research to the periphery of a system of marks, which I then described as textural references. Those textural references, which I found etched into the surfaces of wood and seashells, seemed to have a connection to visual languages. Photographing, imitating, reproducing and re-representing *Iroiro* became a means of studying worm signs' relationships to semiotic phenomena. It also resulted in a form of mimesis, a highly ambiguous exercise. Mimesis, in its simplest context and following the Greek, is defined as an imitation or re-representation of nature.⁵ What kinds of activity or actions are connected with mimesis?

In my research I had to constantly avoid the compelling impulse to interpret these ambiguous visual stimuli.



2 Research History: From *Iroiro* to *Urban Voodoo*

2.1 Worm sign stages of project *Urban Voodoo*. Approaching a method.

In researching *Project Iroiro*, I began searching for structures underlying the surface features of the *Iroiro* phenomenon, the mark of a worm found in nature. This mark is the basis for the origin of *Whakarei*, the surface patterning that is found on Maori sculpture.⁶ It is within this frame that I began to analyse this phenomenon. In the examination of *Iroiro*, my research endeavoured to focus on the identification of *Iroiro* as a metaphor and, in practical studies, to observe, record, remix and respond to this mark of the worm. Everything leaves behind some mark of its passage, through, in and upon the world. This idea was the starting point for my research.

2.2 **Ambiguity's Children:** Why Voodoo?

Some time in the past, ethnic survivors of the slave trade groups in the Caribbean began to invoke not only their own Gods, but to practice rites other than their own. In this process, they co-mingled and modified rituals of various ethnic/non-ethnic groups. It is this very co-mingling in the guise of the 'over-dub' that I use in relationship to graffiti and tag art, and I further observe that versions of co-mingling happen to western languages used by graffiti artists as they become 'remixed' or over-dubbed. These are

musical terms, and I find a simile in the work of William Burroughs and particularly in the Cutout techniques he made popular (Gibson, 2005).

Graffiti becomes intra-active within itself: it operates within the iconic and symbolic systems that make up languages appropriated by tagg/graffiti artists. Some of the best graffiti pieces are at this ambiguous stage of degradation. With time, the introduction of new work, and through the ageing process, graffiti pieces become over-layered and a part of each other. This creates unforeseen new forms to be interpreted and re-engaged with. In performing my art as *Urban Voodoo* (this appears as a new form of urban graffiti and tag art) I utilise the term ‘intra act’ to define these layers within my own work.

The word “voodoo” comes from the West African word ”vodun”, meaning spirit.⁷ Within voodoo, there are no accidents; practitioners’ believe that nothing and no event have a life of its own. That is why “voodoo” becomes “you two, you too”. That is, in voodoo you and I would be viewed as one being. To voodoo practitioners, the universe is all one; each thing affects something else. Western societies’ languages seem to operate in similar ways to voodoo, all one, each piece affecting some other piece. To me, voodoo is linked to graffiti in hyper-culture, not only by the secret use of coded languages of a sub-culture, but also by the efforts western hegemonies make to eradicate these forms of reaction to their dominating languages. In most cases a lot of graffiti art is very difficult to read/interpret and so it can represent the unknown to those that do not understand, and so fear of voodoo becomes a fear of the unknown.

Graffiti means little scratchings. Scratching is also another musical term for re-mixing. And so this project is titled *Urban Voodoo*: the re-mix, or scratched over-dub, acting as a new type of voodoo, performed by art that utilises this project’s ambiguous icons and symbols, inside and amidst Graffiti occurring in a local skate park.



Voodoo, 2006

2.3 Introducing the linguistic relativity principle: The central philosophic viewpoint of this research

The linguistic relativity principle is defined by the idea that language influences the manner in which we understand reality and behave with respect to it. Maybe the world we think we see could turn out to be only a representation, a description of a world narrated to us by our internal dialogue (the little voice we hear in our heads), a description that could have been taught to us by others. We might be trapped inside a bubble of perception created by this internal dialogue, and what we witness on its walls merely reflects our worldview, our description. So in an attempt to influence and understand this description of the world, I explored in this project the proposition that it may be possible to disrupt the language used by western society. To that end, I began creating from Iroiro marks a system of signs that ambiguously imitated iconic elements of written languages, thus seeking to observe (but also affect) our ability to operate our interpretive language recognition. If these ambiguous language icons prevent language from operating in the way it usually does, then they could disrupt the way language is used to support our descriptions of the world. New descriptions may form as a result of this process.

2.4 Sub-cultures. New tools for communication.

The proposition of the project was to explore the potential of interrogating the language systems operating within the dominant spheres in capitalist societies. This became an

attempt to reactivate Graffiti, reclaiming its territory and identity, thus facilitating a condition that sought to explore new facets in the engagement with language.



Stencil cutting, 2007



Example, Stencil for graffiti art

One of the primary tools of my art form is a series of stencils (common in graffiti/tag art) to facilitate ease of performance practice. The technique involves casual/painterly stencil spray can or roller painting processes, and is practiced in the spatial context of the skate park. Some of my early graffiti performances in this skate park were perpetrated after daylight. However, this proved to be a very dangerous undertaking, because the park's residents tend to draw powerful territorial demarcation in the so-called Zone. There was a strong possibility that they would violently defend personal spaces. So, daylight tagging became the normal operating practice. This is safer because, generally, the territorial skate park artists are elsewhere during the hours of daylight. Although inter-relations with skate park graffiti Artists improved gradually as, with time, the relationship between skate artists and myself softened, it never improved enough to allow me night access with safety.

It is interesting that the authorities (i.e., the local councils and the police) did not interfere with the daylight performance/paint practice.



2006 in progress: *Voodoo Urbanised*



Voodoo, Chrome over flat Black, 2006

Because I continued daylight tag/graffiti, I have renamed my practice as Neo-Graffiti, (a new graffiti practice). The interesting departures from normal behavior by the authorities in this particular skate park have opened up a whole new terrain of exploration and research possibilities for future projects. As a result, I have designed new forms of graffiti stencil art and processes of delivery which I am about to explore in the future.

2.5 Architectural spatial syntax: Space-ing-out-by-space-ing-in

Dr. Wend's *Cybertextspace: Culture as Program -- Textual Sign Spaces and Textual Signs of Space as Result* made me realise that space can be looked at in terms of text, and text can be spaced as a result. In coming to terms with locating my system of signs within a social spatial context, I designed a series of sculptures, *Semiotic Pou Whenua*, which attempt to relocate my un-interpretable system of signs.

This relocation of graffiti art, ironically, parallels practices by certain groups, within the dominant in society, when they attempt to remove this art form from the canvas of the urban environment. So, while some parts of the dominant take offence and would like to get rid of graffiti and graffiti artists, another part is re-representing graffiti in different social spaces (e.g., public art galleries). These strategies seem to be constantly at work, redefining the practice of graffiti artists away from the subversive.

As a result, the ways in which I engaged with my project were infected to the extent that I started exploring new avenues of counter-hegemonic activity. In that, I am attempting to disturb the dominant's interest in normalising the resistance strategies of sub-cultures idealised by graffiti/tag art. To achieve this goal, I referred to social customs and rituals and to resistance music remixes (including ritualised forms of language contempt, i.e., "well, fuck you, 'Virgil' just does not cut it in here"...)⁸ My art practice/performance seeks to demonstrate and activate a sculptural sign system that is caught up in semiotic implications.

Eight *Semiotic Pou Whenua* are placed into the so-called, *dominantly owned*, social space. They are intended to ambiguously imitate, and attempt to disrupt, western societies' language systems. Alternative ways of using social spaces may construct a different reality.⁹



3D computer model of Poupou *Urban Voodoo*. 6x6 image x *Surface Datum Raga*

2.6 The Surface Datum Raga. The remix and an introduction to 'eye music'.

Israe, do you remember at the mid-year visit (2006) Dieneke and I talked with you about how some of this combination of text/image was indicative of dance party invitations? The reason I am raising this again is this is the response that I get from the above image. I can't quite fully understand how to read what I am looking at ... (Fiona Amundson, secondary project supervisor, my emphasis)¹⁰



Dance Party Invitation?

In the above quote Fiona Amundson refers to an image I posted on ARDEN (the Art and Design Postgraduate Network), to introduce *The Surface Datum Raga*, which is a series of layers within the final end-of-year exhibition. Dance party invitations? Yes, I think Fiona had it completely, and yes, it most certainly did have musical overtones. Like, from the Primal Scream's lyrics, "What do we want? We want to get loaded, we want to get high and we want to do what we want to do ..." (Primal Scream, n.d.)

Also, even though you explained what Raga means via the telephone (also, I've listened to enough jazz to 'hear' raga) I again am unsure what you mean by the use of such a word in the context of this work. So, I guess my question here is how do we (i.e. viewers) see or read 'raga' into the work? ... Perhaps another way for me to put this is what does 'raga' mean in this context? The context you have created for your work? (Fiona Amundsen)¹¹



Invitation to Raga?

In response to these questions, the contextual comparison is between the operation and identity of my form of urban voodoo with some musical terminology. First, the use of the word *Raga* is placed in the exhibition titles layering to create questions, to *invoke* in

the viewer something that connects them to feelings. You/they will either know or not know what *Raga* is; the answer to this question is moot. The contextual connection is to invocation and engagement. As my sought after response is ambiguity, the new voodoo is remixed as a visual reference to the jazz chord.

So raga engages the feelings of the viewer, seeking to by-pass the mind, “ ... *ahhh well, just about, by-passing sort of... and kind of out of key slightly, just enough to annoy you.*” This is because one of my desired results is to create confusion (“*I can't quite fully understand how to read what I am looking at...*” Fiona Amundson) to disrupt routine thinking, not just by the use of an ambiguous sign system, but also by use of ambiguous terminology. The viewers either engage or, like the mass of wallpaper out there (I refer in my own way to the unthinking masses of people in society) finding them-selves some-where they have no pigeonholes for.

However, *Raga* (in Sanskrit “Raga” is “colour” or “mood”) may also answer some of the above questions.¹² *Raga* music refers to melodic modes, which are the method/processes in this genre of music. *Raga*, as a musical term, helps me to compare the visual intra-play of images purloined from graffiti art, just a *Jam* (being two or more musicians playing together in *improvisation*). *Raga*, in this context, is used to label the process of recording the feeling, or the colour of, and the mood of the photographic document. The *Surface Datum Raga* is the name given to the feeling part of what is being presented to view in this layer of my project. Thus, I seek to convey a connection to a certain intra-action within the visual presented. My use of the word *Raga* refers to the mode I seek to uncover within images of graffiti. In my project, I refer to this imagery as *EYE MUSIC*, my term, no context, just improvised to fit.



In Indian music, a *raga* is a series of five or more musical notes upon which a melody is founded (I link this to the five elements in Taoism my project’s reflective methodology). And so it is through the series titled *The Surface Datum Raga* that I present a melody of

photographic data, all these *Raga* images appearing as part of the whole *Surface Datum Raga* experience. They are a photographic document of intra/inter-active, re-constructed *Urban Voodoo*, a system of signs, and recorded ex-tag/graffiti 'pieces', both operating in the skate park Parihaka Whangarei, and also intended for final examination exhibition material.

3 Methodologies: The Cut-Out, Reflective and Performative Methods

3.1 The Cut-out's Functioning as a Methodology. Remix and sampling, enter the scratch

The cut-out technique is an aleatory literary technique or genre in which a text (text is referred to here as any form of trace left as a result of art performance, and is cut up at random and rearranged to create a new text. William Burroughs' cut-out methods, are built into some of the techniques and methods through which my project's visual narratives are composed. Burroughs' cut-out techniques are another form of sampling (a musical term for appropriation and remixing). So in adapting Burroughs' methods the camera/photo-shop became my scissors and paste pot for interrogating language. This "cut-up method," as Burroughs called it, is central to whatever it is that I am doing. In using this method, language started to re-appear inside a '*peripheral aperture*' (an out of the corner of my eye experience) of surface semantics, thus creating perceptions of rhetorical patterns, and surreal linguistic constructs, all this emerged as symbols that invoked a kind of '*subliminal architecture*', within my *urban voodoo* constructs. And so all this imaginative activity had to be cropped down, visualised, put into the practical frame and reviewed through some theoretical aperture. Enter a reflective methodology my projects tool for re-centering.

3.2 Reflective Methodology. Introducing Not Doing and Taoism as an alternative means of apprehending 'reality'

Not doing is a philosophical term from, "Stopping the world" and "Not-doing" in *Journey to Ixtlan* (Gullette, 1975, S7). Not doing is defined as; "to not do what you know how to do," I respond to this as blocking the normative description of the world (ibid.). Not doing in regard to *Urban Voodoo* speaks about shutting down internal dialogues (this is not just how I talk to my-self, but is the inner voice that maintains my

world description). I refer to the *linguistic relativity principle* previously mentioned. I also relate not doing to the Chinese Wu Wei, a central Taoist principle, which I interpret as that which is ‘without action’. Taoism, applied to the art of *Urban Voodoo* as a Reflective Methodology, is seen here as a passive engagement, enabling shifts in points of belief as I begin to see new aspects of the work. I use this methodology to expand my activity to encompass reflective practice and thinking, as in Taoism and the Five-Element Philosophy. According to this philosophy, everything contains a dualistic polarity (Yin-Yang), and this is why we see a spot of white in the black segment of the Yin-Yang symbol, and vice versa, not unlike modern voodoo. As something reaches an extreme, it always becomes its opposite. This is illustrated in nature in many ways. It applies to all things, and so to return to voodoo, “voodoo” becomes “you two, you too”.

3.3 Performative Methodology

Performativity is the key methodological approach to my research and seeks to operate in a diversity of layers. Graffiti is a medium of marking with unmistakable characteristics.

First, it is/can be performative, suspending representation in favor of action: *I mark you, I cancel you, and I dirty you*. Second, it is/can be violent: almost/always an invasion of a space that is not/may not be the marker's own. The marking takes illegitimate advantage of the surface it occupies, violating it, mauling it, scarring it. (Or perhaps, in an alternative view, making an improvement to the order the landscape has been left in.) Third, it converts the present tense of the performative into the past tense of the index: it is the trace of an event, and could be away from the presence of the marker. (Krauss, 1994)

The act of photography became the performative imitation technique that I used to recreate Twombly’s scratching technique throughout my work, both in practice and in theory.¹³ In reproducing this method of working, I remix the original art of the skate park. This is achieved by digital photography in low resolution reflecting Twombly’s scratched/smudged effects. ‘Truth’ is often found in garbage! So this project utilizes the original graffiti as photographic trace (analogue to digital), and then back again to re-represent its art (digital to analogue) as a means of trafficking its Voodoo.

4 Contextuality

4.1 C.Y. Twombly. The little scratchings

Remixed and re-represented as the *Surface Datum Raga*, my art attempts to realise a similarity with the work of C. Y. Twombly. Twombly is best known for blurring the line between drawings and painting, and so I ask myself the question: does my art blur lines? If this is so, the question is: what lines? Paradoxically, a fact may be more purely defined if it is not clean; the ‘truth’ of things may best be read in refuse. Graffiti in any form is viewed by those in power as a form of refuse, one that also disrupts the order of the landscape. The dominant in western society does its best to ‘rub off’ truths that appear as writings on its walls! Twombly’s art makes me see new things, and this finds resonance in my *Urban Voodoo* research as an abstract awareness that eats through surfaces, tasting cultural, spatial, physical, conceptual and metaphorical phenomena; my project research has revealed things about the material seemingly by eating through it. In relation to these issues, the terrain occupied by my work is contextually located alongside Twombly within the context of Modern Graffiti and the spaces this art form inhabits.

Twombly was one of the first American artists to interest himself in graffiti. It wasn’t bound up with the seizure and degradation of public space. It was, so to speak, more muted, harmless scratches, small obscenities, chalk on Roman distemper. (Hughes, 1994)



C Y Twombly

There seems to be a disproportionate effort in the way that the dominant reclaims its ownership of space when cleaning away Graffiti art. Graffiti is typically perceived as vandalism; a public nuisance to be dealt with by measures such as banning the sale of spray paint, and making graffiti writing a criminal act. In New York City, where graffiti first emerged in the late 1960s, officials responded by creating Special Forces to combat

graffiti. Although millions of dollars have been spent on graffiti removal, much of the effort to abate this expression in New York City has failed. Officials in New York City responded because they claimed that the order of the landscape had been disrupted.

On July 19, 2007, police arrested an artist after she had kissed one of Twombly's works, an immaculate canvas, and smudged it with her lipstick. She is to be tried in a court in Avignon on August 16 for "damage to a work of art". The artwork, which is worth an estimated \$2 million, was on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Avignon. (*Painting meets its femme fatale*, 2007)

Perhaps C. Y. Twombly is my project's contextuality figure, as the father of modern graffiti. Twombly, the name kind of tumbles over. Many of his paintings are reminiscent of a school blackboard someone has scribbled on, or hundreds of years of bathroom/bus-stop graffiti on a wall. Although the marks are graffiti-like, it is unclear if this was Twombly's intention.

A layer of my work is about making graffiti pieces in a text/space (i.e. a gallery). It is vital to this part of the work to question how I could escape the dominant's desire to legitimise, to own by legitimisation, and so take my graffiti out of the place of dissent. So I dissent through my art within the dominant's own codices (the context of Gallery), by means of disrupting the order of the place, to change the way that we, the viewer, perceive the built space around us. This is achieved by demarcating a space within a space: a space marked with the same ambiguous sign system – this is *intra-action* at work again.

4.2 Lyotard and the Differend: playing a differend language game with *Urban Voodoo*

Lyotard describes the incommensurability of imagination and reason as a "differend"... The situation is analogous to the collision of two different language games, each absolute in the self-enclosure of its rules. Imagination speaks a language of forms, of measures; reason speaks a language of the without-form, of infinitude. The differend between them is irresolvable: "This conflict is not an ordinary dispute, which a third instance could grasp and put an end to, but a 'differend'." (David, 2000: 9-10)

As artist/author of Project *Urban Voodoo*, I relocate Lyotard's terminology to operate within the cutout methods employed by William S. Burroughs. My project attempts to focus the language game outside of its usual context and by playing with the notion of a neo-questioning, a new form of differend. Consequently, a new type of language game became implicit within this project. Further I ask the following questions, what is our language condition, and what condition is this condition in? I don't pretend any answers. So, has the art that is *Urban Voodoo* and operating as Graffiti, become 'a Neo Language game' and who are the rebellious social identities responding to this art form as experienced within their own territorial spaces? In their own terms, are they re-challenging the dominants ownership of social space? Neither side acknowledging the others form of communication? Or are they exhibiting being stuck in the 'differend'. An interesting postscript to this state of interplay is that to date Graffiti has stopped being eliminated from the skate park that my projects art surfaces in.

5 A Body of Work

5.1 Exhibiting the Physicality of a project. Overall title of exhibition, *Urban Voodoo*.

There are two layers (sub-titles) and two sub-layers to this exhibit.

Layers one to three, a document of work made up of sets of photographic/photo-shopped material. Title: *The Surface Datum Raga*.

5.1.1 Layer one, a set of 24, 122x122mm images framed in slim CD cases. (The plastic cases CD's usually are stored in)

Theme: The Intra-action of the *Urban Voodoo* System of Signs with images taken from the documentation of Graffiti art in a local skate park. Parihaka, Whangarei.



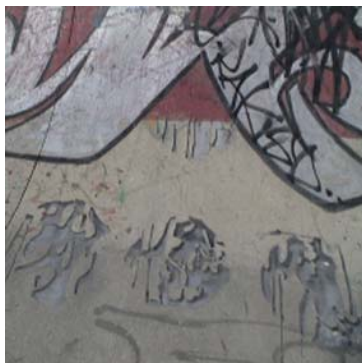
Examples, 2006/7.

5.1.2 Layer two, a set of 24, 122x122mm images framed in slim CD cases.

Theme: Photo-shopped line reductions used to explore/understand graffiti images from the photographic record of skate park art.

5.1.3 Layer three, a set of approx, 100; 122x122mm images framed in slim cd cases. (The performance of a Neo-Graffiti Piece).

Theme: Pictorial views of graffiti as a performance trace, documenting inter and intra-acting systems of signs framed and placed at eye level (approx) throughout the gallery space. These themes relate to each other by recording and documenting the sign systems that are *Urban Voodoo* as they operate ambiguously within their own system also recording an operation with the systems used by languages embedded within the graffiti art that is represented by this third set of images. There are further links to signs that appear on the 'Semiotic Pou Whenua' the second title of this project.



Graffiti as trace, 2006/7.

5.1.4 Layer four, Title: *Semiotic Pou Whenua an Architectural spatial syntax*. A set of 8 wooden (Japanese cedar) sculptural Pou Whenua, approx, 2500mm x 900mm x 65mm.

Theme: These eight Pou pou are presented in a circle, and the material used defined by colour, size, iconic, sign, and polarity reference. The relationship to the site is a centralised position in relation to the walls and so central to the first four titled works, thus allowing for viewing, movement and traffic around the site. This site is also an old library, so there is a secondary context to this site, in regards to language, communication, and interaction with society.

How I am expecting the viewer to see, engage with, and take away from...Looking into and surrounded by ambiguous spatial syntax- confused, but the photography might hold their attention long enough for a deeper engagement, if not...there is always the trace for them to ponder.



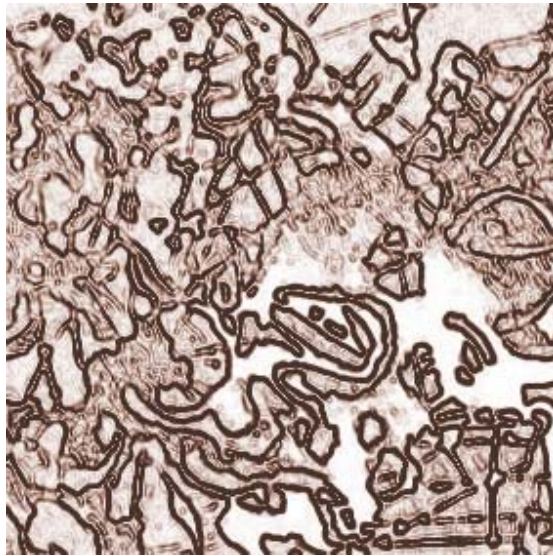
5.2 Relationships to this site. The order of things/scapes.

The first four of the above themes are placed at (approx) eye level on the walls surrounding the Pou Whenua. The intention is to create movement through this exhibit around a slightly off centered sculptural space defined by the sculptural layer of this exhibit. (The Semiotic Pou Whenua). This exhibit seeks to legitimise its art, within the context of the gallery, art that the dominant within our society or dominant influenced, see as a treat to the *order* of the (their) landscape or the shared vision of social spatial syntax.

And so, the viewers are presented with art that disturbs by the way that language and space has been used, questioned, explored and how their so-called hallowed description of text/space/reality has been interfered/disrupted. It's the very softness of this intended engagement that is felt by the artist to be the central strength of this presentation. The work seeks not to '*fuck*' with you, but to attempt to infect the viewer's very powerful need to translate the ambiguity that surround her/him everywhere.

5.3 Aperture and frame, 6x6. The philosophy of the square.

What is the fundamental difference in photography (and other mediums) between square format and other rectangular formats? Is there a different dynamic happening in square format photographs? The square format seems to be a very balanced composition, and is itself a contrast to content, which may not possess the same feeling of being stable as a square. So, square format has the capability of highlighting, or 'framing' certain content (particularly content with a lot of movement, abstract content or 'irregular compositions') better than a rectangular one. Photography for the masses comes in rectangular packages, pick up any newspaper or magazine and it will be hard to find a square image. Personally I feel my project functions better in the square format; I like the square, this depends on the individual. Considering that the questions for my project were predominantly about the movement inherent within the text/content in graffiti art, the square format seems to hold these perceived movements and abstractions in a way that is somehow un-defined. However, in cropping for this project the square realised a such-ness (a Taoist principal) for whatever tool that was being constructed through at the time.



'6x6', *an image in the square*. Line reduction x Photoshop.

6 Rhetorical summation

My intention with Project *Urban Voodoo* was to create a visual system of signs that modified the initial act of simulating Iroiro, the sign of the worm. Further, my research puts forward various documents that record how this system of signs engage with and imitate the Graffiti/Tagg markings that are left as a trace of Graffiti/Tagg performance in our social spaces. Through my art project I found expression by operating sets of ambiguous signs, organic and almost non-organic, that mimic semiotic elements embedded in languages used by the dominant in western society. I have used my project, *Urban Voodoo* to insert art pieces into the social spaces (supposedly) owned by the hegemony and to represent the un-interpretable identity of a new element within the sub structure of one of society's cult identities. It is hoped that this form of art will disrupt the language systems and the so called *order of the landscape* used by the dominant in western society, by surfacing an alternative process of intervention and interrogation with a disorienting impact on the normative visions of culture and society.



Line reductions for proposed paintings 2008. X Graffiti Images Parihaka, Whangarei 07.

7 Some Thoughts After the Exhibition

7.1 The Semiotic Pou Whenua

Pou Whenua can be described as markers, signs or posts (carved or not carved), a person, a weapon, place or event.¹⁴ As posts, they are placed strategically on the land to acknowledge and represent the relationship between Tangata Whenua (the people of the land), their ancestors and their environment or tūrangawaewae (place of standing).

My ideas surrounding Poupou started as I looked for ways of making my work visible, to delineate a place to stand, an issue/idea. Many of the photographs of Iroiro, trace of the worm in nature, were taken on old fence posts and wharf piles. I began to see the possibilities in Poupou as a metaphor for self-identity within a structure of ideas. Following my hunches and intuitions, I sought to design and construct a set of Pou Whenua that would sculpturally convey my ambiguous system of signs. As a Maori carver, I understood the methods of demarcating person, culture and space by way of Pou Whenua. Later on, I had an idea to site these Poupou within the white cube space of the gallery. Similar to graffiti, they claim or occupy space. In accordance with the above description of Pou Whenua, I leave a system of signs (as well as a sign of identity/person) as trace of my own worm passage: to say that I am here, I see what you do, and, I protest. In the end, I have attempted also to leave a representational mark signifying the advent of a new application, as a carver inside the structure of the systems of language – ambiguously, of course.

The work placed for examination could have been put forward in diverse ways. I chose the white cube of a gallery to place a claim on a space owned by others to reinforce the way my use and representation of graffiti demarcates within this chosen space. I saw the show as a performance piece of graffiti as a whole.

7.2 Artist's Statement:¹⁵

Cognitive linguistics and experimental psychology have produced interesting hints that a substantial portion of language is encoded in the mind in the form of spatial representations that are grounded in perception and action.

So, however much we would like to discuss architecture in terms of the visual, its most far-reaching pragmatic effects may not be at the level of appearances at all, but at the level of *space*.

By giving shape and form to our material world, architecture and language structure the system of space in which we live and move. That they do so has a direct relation as well as a symbolic one, to social life, since it provides the material preconditions for the patterns of movement, encounter and avoidance which are the material realization, as well as sometimes, generator of social relations.

So enter my ‘language/space reality game’, a personal form of Lyotard’s *Differend*, and join in the ‘argument’, the *Wachowski Bros.* (the film *Matrix*) ‘fake’ syndrome, which I operate as a meta-narrative foil lurking just under the surface of my art.

Play with the subtle ‘allusions’ that you may or may not find hidden in the layers of my work. I hope that you the viewer (well, some of you) find the invitation to actively participate in the game, or even just become involved with your own genre of ‘fake’ rather than be content with a passive spectatorship.

7.3 Exhibiting through layers

The photographic elements of my exhibition were placed at (approx) eye level on the walls surrounding the Pou Whenua. My intention was to create *movement* through my exhibit (to control the flow of people and the movement of sight), around a slightly off-centered space defined by the sculptural layer of my exhibit – *The Semiotic Pou Whenua*. Both of these two distinct but inter-related layers of the work were presented, within the context of the gallery (the white cube space), as an art which the dominant opinion and those that are influenced by it, may see as a threat to the order of the (their) landscape, or, their shared vision of social spatial syntax.

A layer of my work is about making graffiti pieces in a text/space (i.e., a gallery). It was vital to this part of the work to question how I could escape the dominant’s own desire to legitimise, and to own by legitimisation, and thereby take my graffiti out of its context: the place of dissent. So, I dissent through my art within the dominant’s own codices (the context of Gallery), by means of disrupting the order of the place, to change the way that we, the viewers, might perceive and so behave within the built space around us. Demarcating a space within a space served this purpose: the single pieces of Poupou (eight in all) were linked with 16mm angles of jacketed (black) tubular metal, forming an octagon out of the Pou Whenua, and placed asymmetrically within the space. Thus, a space was marked (identified) by an ambiguous sign system, consisting of my photographic representations of graffiti and the pieces of semiotically weighted sculpture.

And so, the viewers are presented with art that disturbs through the way that language and space are used, questioned, and explored. It disrupts at the same time their so-called hallowed description of text/space/reality. The central strength of this presentation is its very softness of engagement. The work seeks not to ‘fuck’ with the viewer, but to attempt to infect the viewer’s very powerful need to translate the ambiguity that surround her or him within the context of the space.

8 Epilogue and Dedication

Some of my early graffiti research experiments in placing art into in this skate park were perpetrated after daylight. This proved to be a very dangerous undertaking,

because the park's residents tend to draw powerful territorial demarcation in the so-called Zone. These so-called residents/artists are aged from nine years to through twenty. There was a strong possibility that they would violently defend personal spaces/territories and artworks. So, daylight tagging became the normal operating practice. This is safer because, generally, the territorial skate park artists are elsewhere during the hours of daylight. Although inter-relations with skate park graffiti artists improved gradually as, with time, the relationship between skate artists and myself softened, it never improved enough to allow me night access with safety. It is interesting that the authorities (i.e., the local councils and the police) did not interfere with the daylight performance/paint practice.

The following records some of the words overheard in the skate park whilst exploring the ramifications of making art in this location. So I would like to list just some of the major key words overheard, *anonymous, suicide, disposable, revolution, fear, destroy, shit, scapegoat, nothingness, words, statue*. I have out of respect for the artists of this skate park that committed suicide during my masters' project, formed some of these comments into a poem of dedication.

For the dead amidst the anonymous adult/children artists and denizens of the skate park. Suicide *is* such a drag.

9 Poor Anonymous

No Language,
Just a statue stick, goldpaintwood,
And a semiotic calm as a facewomb,
Incense smoke rapping in silence,
Aping the hallelujah chorus,
Movement between ghost nothingness,
Grief,
We are all ghosts of our thoughts,
Voices on the wind unknown to our selves,
KILL WORDS with the dead of night,
And the wound becomes your world,
Discourse is not home,
Language is life having its way with us,
And,
Pain is the piece of mind we give back.

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11 Notes

- ¹ Latin; Inter" denotes "among" or "between," so "between symbols" or "among symbols" is a reasonable meaning. "Intra" denotes "within," as "intra muros," meaning "within the walls.". See also http://arden.aut.ac.nz/moodle/login/index.php#_ftn1
- ² Iroiro, the mark of the worm found in nature, under the bark of trees or etched into the surface of seashells. It is these intriguing patterns that are of interest to this research. These marks perform a role in which systems of language surface. See also http://arden.aut.ac.nz/moodle/login/index.php#_ftn2
- ³ Graffiti Piece; the terminology used to define larger works of graffiti art as opposed to tagging, a form of territory recognition mark. See also http://arden.aut.ac.nz/moodle/mod/forum/discuss.php?d=3410#_ftn3
- ⁴ “Thus the mosquito and sandfly are said to be the grandchildren of Te Hekapona and Te Monehu, while the *purerehua* sprang from Fu-te-hue (origin of the *hue*, or gourd), the *kihikihi* from Hikawaru, the *puwerewere* from Katipo, the *ngaro* from Moenga-nui, its offspring being Iroiro (maggots). Earthworms originated from Pane-wharu, whose younger relative was Mokoroa; the next born was Whiti, and the next Tea”. (Best, 1908)
- ⁵ “Britannica Online” (2007), “mimesis”.
- ⁶ “**Surface design** (Paint brush / chisel icons symbolises different methods of adding beauty to the forms of carving, whether it be by painting and or the various types of *Whakarei*.)” (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2002)
- ⁷ “also spelled *Voodoo, Voudou, Vodun, or French Vaudou* an official [religion](#) of Haiti (together with [Roman Catholicism](#)). Vodou is a creolized religion forged by descendents of Dahomean, Kongo, Yoruba, and other African ethnic groups who had been enslaved and brought to colonial Saint-Domingue (as Haiti was known then) and Christianized by Roman Catholic missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries. The word Vodou means “spirit...” (“Britannica Online,” 2007, “Vodou”).
- ⁸ This is a reaction to the work of C.W. Twombly, an artist that in my view is a legitimised graffiti-ist. See See [4.1 C.Y. Twombly. The little scratchings](#), p. 2.
- ⁹ These sculptural pieces may at some latter date be re-placed into an alternate architectural site, perhaps as a space within a space.
- ¹⁰ Discussion on Arden forum, <http://arden.aut.ac.nz/moodle/>
- ¹¹ Discussion on Arden forum, <http://arden.aut.ac.nz/moodle/>
- ¹² “also spelled *rag (in northern India) or ragam (in southern India)* (from Sanskrit, meaning “colour” or “passion”) in the classical music of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, a [melodic](#) framework for improvisation and composition. A **raga** is based on a scale with a given set of notes, a typical order in which they appear in melodies, and characteristic musical motifs.” (“Britannica Online,” 2007, “raga”).
- ¹³ See [4.1 C.Y. Twombly. The little scratchings](#), p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Auckland Regional Council (2007)
- ¹⁵ The statement was displayed at the entrance to the exhibition.