

A red line/An Aesthetics of Process

*A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul (text) and D. Jotti (art work)*¹



On Sunday 2 September 2001, the work looked almost serene on the white walls of the ArtsPost Gallery in Hamilton as part of the group exhibition *under new skies*. The gallery context facilitated that Kantian disinterested aesthetic attitude we still feel obliged to entertain in the face of art. A note, mounted next to the three panels of which the work consists, provided information about the conditions of its production – but did not receive much attention. It seemed as if the viewers were indifferent to both the history of its making and that of its subject matter.²

Trying to think through some aspects of the process leading up to the exhibition, we want to go beyond an aesthetics that concentrates exclusively on the work to include considerations of process. Perhaps there is something like an *aesthetics of process*, whereby modern Western binary oppositions of content and form, art and politics, the useful and the beautiful can be confused.

The work's title is taken from a petition by twenty-six women of the Orakei Marae Committee to Prime Minister Frazer in 1946.

No reira whakabokia mai to matou Papakainga i runga i to aroha tika, pono, ki to Iwi Maori e tangi ... ki te marae o Matou Matua Tupuna a, kia waibo ai tenei mea; hei kohatu whaka maharatanga kia koe ...

This line of text, an important element anchoring the image in a context, was until the last minute an intention whose realisation was uncertain. It was to carry-over a particular content from an historical situation into the work. A red line, reinforcing the disjunctive connection of the three panels, was – on the other hand – available for use, but at times also in jeopardy for different reasons.

Between those two lines, a complex field of relationships unfolded in the creative process: while the red line constantly provoked thoughts about aesthetic issues, the line of text brought with it questions of relationships and ways of collaboration.

Aesthetics of care

An *ethic of care* has been defined as a feminist concern for 'sympathy, compassion, fidelity, discernment, love, and trustworthiness'. Might there be, similarly, an aesthetics of care inclusive of, but going beyond, feminist concerns?

Kantian aesthetics – so formative for subsequent modern attitudes to art – are commonly interpreted as promoting disinterest and distance, a perspective that may stand in the way of engagement with community. Whereas Aristotelian aesthetics still included *education* in its agenda, Kant placed such aspects on the side of the *good*, not the *beautiful* (SS5).³ However, he also realised that, as with an empty stomach where any food seems desirable, some basic conditions must be fulfilled for people to be able to appreciate beauty in a disinterested way. 'Only when men have got all they want can we tell who among the crowd has taste or not.' (SS5)

What makes a crowd a community, and who can belong to it? Dorina and I are both immigrants to Aotearoa, from Switzerland and Germany. We both had read there about New Zealand as a country characterised by harmonious relationships between Maori and Pakeha – and for us both this was important in our decision to come here. Once we arrived – two and three decades ago – this illusion quickly vanished. Since then, we have both attempted to grapple with a deep sense of injustice caused by the observation of Pakeha/Maori relationships. Over the years of our friendship, we have talked about this often. But it took this particular project to bring together our experiences and resources, and in the process maintain an ongoing dialogue.

Metaphors embody a process of transition. To be vital, they depend on constant reinterpretation and adaptation – they need to be ‘carried over’. Otherwise, they slip from attention and turn into emotionally and associatively unengaging turns of phrase. They need to represent something in a different context that does not already exist there. So, as we

redefine, for instance, our bicultural relationships, many of our old metaphors will acquire new meanings – meanings that can be relevant and vital. For me, a (German) metaphor has always had resonance for me: ‘When my neighbour’s house is on fire then mine, too, is under threat’. In New Zealand (where the notion of neighbourhood is perhaps not so much integrated into the cultural fabric) it received a new meaning: if Maori, whom I regard as my hosts and neighbours, are threatened – then we all are. When I then learn, researching the background

to the text that eventually anchored the image in a context, that the houses of the Orakei people were set on fire during the process of their forcible dislocation in the 1950s, it takes on yet another meaning, another life energy. But more of that later.

Confronted with such carry-over, we may begin to understand, for instance, that our co-operative efforts can challenge commonplace prejudices, which we have inherited from the past and taken over uncritically. In the case of this project and its processes, an important question was how a line of text, deriving from a context neither of us belong to, could be integrated into an art work with respect, attentive engagement and discernment – the danger always being that we assume we understand when we don’t, really.

Aesthetic relationships

In trying to speak of the relationships between form, content and context articulated in this work, I am from the outset handicapped. How to separate the formal qualities of the finished work from my knowledge of its intended content, and of the context in which its making occurred? In Kantian terms, it would be wrong to use images instrumentally, for a purpose beyond their own intrinsic value. Certainly, mere use of a work, to illustrate a cultural theory or political position, would not lead to a discovery of something in the work itself, nor to a critical interpretation of its potential. In writing this text, however, I find it impossible clearly to distinguish between interpretation and use. Like any reading, it is an unpredictable mixture of the two. To use it in the context from which many of its elements stem may, however, show up elements in the work itself that would otherwise go unnoticed. In any event, who defines what is part of the art work itself and what is not?

As I stood in front of the finished work on the gallery walls that Sunday, the way I saw it switched from a processual concern to something more quiet and strange. There was, of course, still the same accentuated flow of the landscape; its rhythmic vertical punctuation by the division into three panels; the strange absence running through the middle not unlike a vein or a river, but as white as the surface of nothing-in-particular surrounding the flow of the land. And, indeed, the red line with its protrusions and blobs, its material congestions and holes – and its own dynamic of flow. But, more clearly than during the process of its making, when it had been immersed in multifarious activities and objects, the work now appeared to be part of a longer line of images not realised, but present as antecedents and future potential. Part of a visual series that had started elsewhere and continued beyond: no definite beginning or end was in sight. An accompanying panel with the translation of the Maori text and an explanation of the background of the

work, so integral and important in the period leading up to the exhibition, suddenly seemed like an adjunct. The old struggle between formalism and engagement was being continued in another context – and the formal side appeared to have won for the moment.

Temporarily fixed to the white wall, the work nevertheless remained ambivalent. It hovered between the clinical and pathetic – somewhere between the revolting aesthetics of an Anselm Kiefer and the cool and calculated ones

of a Max Bill. There are elements of rending, but also of the rational; traces of a working through and of gaining distance and control. Representation here happens on a highly abstract level. The black charcoal of the land descends from top left to bottom right – a land fall? The outlines of the tear are dark and explicit, while the land drifts without anchoring over a vast expanse of blank white isolating it from other elements. This is not mimesis as transparent imitation, but perhaps as an assimilation to an external reality. In an effort to seize it by re-presenting it creatively and

sensuously, perhaps one can come to understand one’s own relationship with it and come to terms. But some of the work’s more enigmatic aspects point to gaps: in the process of abstracting an initially concrete idea that ultimately resulted in the concrete images, something non-presentable had entered and remains present.

Some of these explanations derived after the fact, as it were, towards the end of the process or in discussions of it afterwards. Nevertheless, such motifs may well have been effective in the process of construction, based as it always is on shared cultural meanings or instances that remain often beneath the threshold of awareness. Dorina’s own hindsight explanations are not fundamentally different from a production of meaning by others’ subsequent interpretations in different contexts. In this case, a consideration of relationships between personal and shared cultural meanings was very much part of the creative process. It was not a form of art making where expressivity and unconscious factors are meant to take over in visually shaping a more or less clear concern. If texts only mean in relation to other texts then, in this instance, at least two different traditions of text and aesthetic relationships had to be considered.

For the purpose of contextualising the work I considered using some text from Maori Land Court minutes and a line of red paint which could metaphorically represent blood/whakapapa/hurt/the surveyor’s line/revolution/ passion/sky and so on ...

These intended associations are not small issues – and perhaps this is why Dorina began to think at some point that the red line might be too much of a cliché. Whereas the text could exemplify a specific instance in the long and complicated history of land alienation, and thus anchor the work in this context on different levels depending on whether the viewer was able to read the Maori text, a red line does not necessarily succeed symbolically in the same way in motivating viewers to stay with the work and to think about it. There was a danger that it would be perceived purely formally in a facile way.

It was at this point in the project that Dorina rang me to talk about her project. Her primary motivation then seemed to be to clarify the context and discuss whom she might contact for consultation on a text she had found in a Maori Land Court record. Surprisingly, though, it was the red line we talked about for a long time. Dorina showed me two different versions of her design: one with the red line and one without, which she then preferred. But the latter stubbornly refused to deny the previous application of the line, and would not release a faint smear as a trace. In any event, it seemed the red line had a reason to be there ... not only for compositional, formal reasons. Perhaps precisely because of the danger of triteness, and because of a possible association with what has (in Pakeha treatment of Maori culture) become a canonical combination of colours: black, white, and red,⁴ it seemed to highlight the tension in this project between aesthetic form and social history. Simultaneously, a stereotypical reading produced by colonial canons could have undermined the intended impact of the project, in that it would have re-imposed facile interpretations of Maori culture.

The text’s problematics were different. Unlike some ‘universal’ visual elements, almost any text taken from Maori Land Court records is specific and refers to particular people and events. It was therefore important to ensure that the issues it arose from would not be decontextualised to a point where it would itself become a floating signifier, a universalised aesthetic element.

The text that was eventually incorporated into the work has formal characteristics that help to prevent this. Whereas the initial selection from a Maori Land Court document had been recorded in English by a professional court scribe, whose immaculate handwriting would record each and any occurrence before the court in the same undisturbed penmanship, this text was written by one of the petitioners in Maori.

Therefore, return our settlement on the basis of love, correctness and good faith to your Maori people that cry for the marae of our ancestors and leave this for us as a remembrance to you ...

There are still traces of the process: the writing starts and stops, as it were, and its edges seem personal as well as historical – as the content is. Both content and form thus seem able to resist the danger of sliding into arbitrariness. This was an important consideration: given that the subject matter is specific, and certainly problematic, it would have seemed irresponsible to use it in a way that would have allowed universalised and indifferent readings. If the text was to anchor the work in a context, it was important also that the text remained connected with its context. Again, explorative engagement called for a position that fell prey to neither detached formalism nor facile political didacticism or patronising moralism.

Another formal device aims at the opposite of connection: the decisive interruptions to the continuous and sinuous horizontal flow of the landscape, as much as of the flow of the hand written text, by the vertical gaps between the three panels emphasise the notion of division and disturbed balance that lies at the heart of the issue the work deals with. It accords with the punctured and ruptured process that eventually deprived most iwi and hapu of their communal lands.

Dorina: When I started to think about a contribution to the exhibition under new skies, issues of colonisation and land grievances were the first that came to mind, and remained the only ones. This connected with the gap I remembered from my experience of arrival: the gap between the version of reality I had read about and the reality I was exposed to. And when I started to research the issues in 1996, the obvious injustices came to light even clearer.

In the creative process, the translation of the idea into the visual work is at the heart of what I am concerned with. I often work with metaphors, because they can better represent that which is not there.

This work involved a constant weighing up of issues and aesthetics. You could say, ok, I want to talk about gaps, just rip something and frame it, or else you can choose something visually engaging that leads you to the issues. I wanted to represent the gap, the divisions between people regarding land issues in New Zealand.

Using organic material such as art paper and physically ripping it apart to create a metaphor for a landscape and a divided people. I used charcoal to emphasise the contours while also referencing the burning (charring) of the land for agricultural purposes.

Aesthetics of process

To make formal decisions when dealing with highly political issues is difficult, and at times anxiety-ridden. Given a sensitivity to human relationships, such anxieties are likely to increase when dealing with events that have impacted on a culture one is not a member of. Too many concepts and perspectives may differ, views of history and politics can be opposed, even the use of images can be unwittingly offensive.

In this work, it was mainly the text that highlighted these aspects. To ethically use a statement by a Maori person requires knowledge and understanding of historical processes not necessarily accessible to everyone in Aotearoa.



Further, concepts are culture specific and often incommensurable. For instance, Maori Land Court documents are commonly regarded as being in the *public sphere* – and thereby freely available to everyone – but they have, from another perspective, usually been recorded in stressful situations, and conflicts between Maori and Pakeha interests and philosophies. Since the public sphere is a Western concept that has no direct equivalent in Maori culture, Dorina and I both felt it was important to find out who was the person whose words had been recorded, what the context was, and to consult with that person’s descendants.

A colleague provided information about the initially selected text and – since it was impossible to contact the person’s descendants within the time frame given – offered another text for inclusion in the work on behalf of Ngati Whatua o Orakei. This text (the 1946 petition by the women on the Marae committee) was closer to Dorina’s own interests and experiences. She had established links with Orakei when she participated in the land occupation in 1977. From her own feminist position, it also mattered that the petition had been initiated and signed by the women on the committee.

What became increasingly important about this project was an unfamiliar and at times complex process of collaboration with different people. Not only was an accurate translation of the Maori text needed in order to be able to select a pertinent line for the images, but also formal permission to use it in the context of the work to be exhibited. This asked for finely tuned initiatives and responses – all under different time constraints. There was a point where Dorina started to consider alternatives in case permission might not be given. The alternative she chose involved the letting-go of any text: the image would have to stand for itself. At this point, two different elements of the work were in jeopardy: first the red line, then the text. Eventually, permission to use the text was given just in time, and in a way in which things fell into their right place. Dorina had offered the work to the Orakei tangata whenua, and her offer had been accepted. It was to be welcomed with a powhiri in due course. When we met one of the following evenings, the red line was back.

This seemed to confirm my feeling that the problematics of the red line were not purely compositional. It exemplified how formalism and contextual engagement constantly interacted and confronted each other in the process of construction. Take, for example, the fact that the original elements making up the landscape in the images: art paper and charcoal, were re-photographed rather than included in the final product. The tearing of the paper, re-enacting, as it were, the creation of ‘an uneasy gap, reminiscent of the land torn’ was materially effaced when it was photographically reproduced. This can be a way of re-framing an issue and eliminating traces of history and production in order to reconstitute them in another form. It adds yet another layer to the processes producing distance that are typical of photography as a non-original medium. If ‘photographs are never “original”, anyway’, then the re-photographing produces a further remove from a self-evident originality or natural truth, and in a sense places the work in a ‘context of copy, or history, or bias that derives from secondary representations – such as history books written by Maori or Pakeha – where the authors inevitably bring their own bias, or world-views, to bear on their accounts. Such texts are comments, removed from the events of war, or conflict, or court cases’. While re-photographing is a process that Dorina often uses in her work, in this case it has an analogy in the court records. Like them, it amounts to a re-writing of history.

The successive reconstructions produce ‘palimpsests – layers that get added as you spend time with the work’, and traces of a working through which seems very typical of both the work’s process and formal organisation: its rhythmic articulation and repetitive steps of production. While the latter might signal an effort to come to terms with the subject matter by way of emotional detachment, the last layer to be added re-invoked a surplus of signification that cannot be

articulation and repetitive steps of production. While the latter might signal an effort to come to terms with the subject matter by way of emotional detachment, the last layer to be added re-invoked a surplus of signification that cannot be contained in rational and abstract symbolic formations. This was the application of the red line, the only ‘original’ element in the finished work. ‘As I was applying it to the prints, I was shaking, I was so scared’. Different from the

26th April, 1918 - Re: Orakei Purchase - From my point of view, it is absolutely necessary that the Crown should acquire this entire Block, and therefore suggest that in the event of the Land Purchase Officer being unsuccessful in his negotiations, that special legislation should be introduced to enable the Crown to compulsorily acquire the balance of the Block. - *Chief Surveyor*

31st July, 1940 - The village was, in the opinion of Auckland’s mayor ‘a dreadful eyesore’. - *The Observer*, p. 5

23rd July 1946 - No reira whakahokia mai to matou Papakainga i runga i to aroha tika, pono, ki to Iwi Maori e tangi ... ki te marae o Matou Matua Tupuna a, kia waiho ai tenei mea; hei kohatu whaka maharatanga kia koe ...

Therefore, return our settlement on the basis of love, correctness and good faith to your Maori people that cry for the marae of our ancestors and leave this for us as a remembrance to you ...

From a petition to Prime Minister Peter Frazer signed by 26 women of the Orakei Marae Committee

1951 - The Crown against the wishes of Ngati Whatua compulsorily acquired their marae at Okahu Bay. It was situated on the papakainga on an area of 1.5 acres in multiple ownership. The marae was held sacred and inviolable by Ngati Whatua. it was nearby the ancient burial ground which, along with the Church, alone was spared by the Crown. - *Waitangi Tribunal, Department of Justice, Wellington, November 1987*.

1952 - Those left had to be burnt out and physically carried from their homes. It seemed necessary that that should not be delayed. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was to visit Auckland in the coming summer 1952-1953. The procession route, it was first thought, would follow Tamaki Drive past the ‘unsightly Orakei shacks’ and since this was to be the first time a reigning Monarch would see Auckland, Auckland wished to be seen well. Ironically, the visit was almost 100 years to the day after Te Kawau had farewelled Governor Grey from Auckland, saying

Friend, when you arrive on the other side tell the Queen about the good arrangements you have made in regard to the formation of a township on our land and let this land (Orakei) be reserved for our own use forever ...

One hundred years later it seemed important the Queen should not see any part of the arrangements made for her Treaty partners. Only months before she came the last of Te Kawau’s descendants at Okahu were to be torched from their homes. *Waitangi Tribunal, Department of Justice, Wellington, November 1987*.

landscape, and different from the line of text which was far more importantly tied to extra-formal aspects, the red line sometimes seemed to have a peculiar urgency to it. Not only was it ‘almost like telling the truth ... it cannot be reproduced; it brings it back to the bloodline, the heart of the matter.’ The paint and the brush had their own ways of bringing something into existence. It was ‘difficult to do, stuffed several up. Then thought about making it wider, just a technical problem – no, that’s a cop-out, I could easily have made it wider. But it could stuff up the whole thing in the last minute’. The drawing of the line was much more dependent on the chance of body movement, on the right moment to occur, on a lucky stroke, and a confluence between mind and matter.

Aesthetics and violence: the tear and the torch

‘There is also a violence about the red line being put on a photograph, you violate photographic convention’.

Not surprisingly, those who have painted over photographs in the past are known as painters, rather than as photographers. One of them, Anselm Kiefer, produced haunting images partially through his use of media. In Dorina’s work, an element of violence in the red line – however explained – evokes the separation of land from land, people from people, on yet a another level from the text and the tear.

Violence also resided in the images that came to Dorina’s mind when beginning to think about her project: earthquakes, drought, wounds. They were associated with hurt, damage, and ruptures. An aesthetics of unease? Of course it was clear that violence was always present in the story this work was attempting to deal with. The tear – the physical tearing of paper, the application of charcoal onto it – was meant to symbolise, metaphorically to re-present, an engulfing experience of division that the line of text was to make more specific.

But knowing in general is always different from knowing the details. Dorina and I had both heard anecdotes about the reasons why the papakainga in Okahu Bay was eventually completely destroyed, and one person present at the exhibition opening recounted the yet story again. Again and again, the rationale represented a bizarre interpretation of acceptable aesthetic standards and their aggressive implementation. The accounts varied: in some, the impending Monarch’s approach (or perhaps rather: passing by) was to be by ship, in others by road. Only when reading more material (not even talking to people) did this tear, this violence, become obvious and inevitable. In all versions, including the official one documented in the Waitangi Tribunal report above, an ‘eyesore’ element featured prominently. An

eyesore that the Queen ought not see on her arrival. Did the mayor care – with the appropriate modicum of distance and disinterestedness – for beauty? But then, had he failed to read his Kant who, after all, mentioned the need to satisfy basic human needs as a prerequisite for the appreciation of beauty for itself? What did he care for?

The work addresses an existing condition: the gap created through acts of violence between cultures and the tearing of the cultural fabric that safeguarded the integrity of Maori relationships with the land. But in re-enacting this tear, by re-producing the gap, a space is also opened that can be re-shaped. For this to take place, an opening power is required, the power to ask questions rather than supplying ready answers. An alert and engaged experience of the gap as an open space maybe the beginning of the tear’s healing. There is perhaps as much violence in it, as there is potential for redemption. We might not be immediately prepared for living in this gap, but nothing will spare us the getting-to-know it, nor the confrontation with the fruits of a frightening tradition that is ours, whether we want it or not. The present as the gap between past and future.

When I asked Dorina about the making of the gap in the land – it did not seem to be simply the result of a tear – she told me that she had resisted the temptation of aligning the torn pieces in a way which would have suggested the possibility of an easy closing of the gap. Seeing herself as part of those who succeed the colonisers who had ‘*destroyed that connection ... so that it cannot fit anymore*’, she would not make it look as if it could: ‘*for me, it’s not going to fit*’. In the making of the central landscape with its gap, she therefore found herself bashing the edges produced by the tear with a ruler, reproducing the aggressive interferences that had occurred historically, and ‘*deliberately destroying the possibility of an easy fit*’ – producing, instead, a ‘*frustrating connection*’.

Acknowledgements

¹ This article is a result of ongoing discussion of the project between us, as well as discussions with Shane Edwards and Yvonne Hawke. Ross Jenner, Tony Green and John Geraets have commented on the drafts.

² While I am not calling upon authorities in the writing of this text, it is clear that many ideas or phrases I use are informed by the writings of others. Here are some of the texts running through my own that I am aware of:

Pierre Bourdieu about the indifference to questions of social conditions of art production and circulation: 1989 *Outline of a theory of practice* (Nice, R., Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

T.L.B. about an *ethic of care*: in Honderich, T. (Ed.) 1995 *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Umberto Eco about the difference between use and interpretation of art: 1988 Intentio Lectoris: The State of the Art. In G. Borradori (Ed.), *Recoding Metaphysics. The New Italian Philosophy*. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press, 27-43

Julia Kristeva about the semiotic surplus of signification in art and its relationships with symbolic formations: 1973 The Semiotic Activity. *Screen*, 25-39

Martin Heidegger on the act of clearing, the rift and the opening power of questions: 1975 The Origin of the Work of Art, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 17-81

Antonio Gramsci on challenging theoretical constructs we have inherited from the past and taken over uncritically: 1994 *Gefängnishefte. Philosophie der Praxis*. (Vol. 6). Berlin: Argument Verlag

³ Kant, I. 1790, 1999 *The Critique of Judgement*, [www document]. Hannibal Travis. Available: <http://sites.netscape.net/hannibalism/judge.html> [2000, 14 January]. Kant’s discussion of free beauty was prefigured by a crisis of representation in the preceding century. Meaning, in the eighteenth century, was perceived no longer in terms of cultural order but more in terms of ‘surface and appearance, a shift characterised as a contrast between ethics and aesthetics’. The loss of *decorum* – a concept concerned with the relationships of (architecture and) art to the public realm – contributed to the perception in the nineteenth century of a disconnection of art from society. Kohane, P., & Hill, M. 2001 The eclipse of a commonplace idea: decorum in architectural theory. *Architectural research Quarterly*, 5 (1), 63-77

⁴ Also – as a tripartite chromatic system – ‘canonical’ in African, Asian and European civilisations; canonical colours of modernism and suprematism ...

The extracts from the *Report of the Waitangi Tribunal on the Orakei Claim (WAI 9)* can be accessed at <http://www.knowledge-basket.co.nz/waitangi/text/wai009/doc110.html> and <http://www.knowledge-basket.co.nz/waitangi/text/wai009/doc048.html>