



SHANNON TE AO:
A TORCH AND A LIGHT (COVER)

Martin Patrick

A 24/7 world produces an apparent equivalence between what is immediately available, accessible, or utilizable and what exists. The spectral is, in some way, the intrusion or disruption of the present by something out of time and by the ghosts of what has not been deleted by modernity, of victims who will not be forgotten, of unfulfilled emancipation.

– Jonathan Crary¹

Life is no way to treat an animal.

– Kurt Vonnegut²

At the start of Shannon Te Ao's video work *A torch and a light (cover)* one encounters darkness, and an accompanying spoken narration of a poetic verse:

Sparkling brightly on high
Are a hundred stars of early morn;
Would ye' together were my spouse
I would then enclasp ye all in close embrace.

1. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso, 2014, pp. 19-20
2. Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without A Country*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005, p. 88

I would savour unto satiety
This woman's longing within,
Rather than the fleeting caress
Of thee, O thou chilling breeze.³

This evocative text summons a broad, lyric expanse; an open reach of the senses, yet rooted in the physicality of romantic love. The origin of this particular waiata remains unclear in terms of its attribution, but its poetic beauty is crystal sharp.

Much as is the visual information revealed by a slowly panning camera once we emerge from the initial darkness: a grey, industrial locale, almost as if a painterly conjuring of a once busy site, now more notable for its quietude as we examine its pipes, seams, pores. This specific place happens to be a now-disused meat processing and distribution plant located in the city of Auckland. The fact that it's a former abattoir relates peripherally to the premise of the exhibition for which Te Ao's video was initially commissioned. *Unstuck in Time* is a grouping of contemporary artworks linked to discourses around time, labour, history, its title referring back to *Slaughterhouse-Five* by the late American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, in which the author recounted a science-fiction inflected narrative based on his very real experiences of the bombing of Dresden during World War II.

While Vonnegut's 1969 novel has sold millions of copies and become a classic anti-war text, what's particularly innovative and still influential about the book is the manner in which Vonnegut overcame his struggle to write a World War II novel by taking stylistic liberties, including with his protagonist Billy Pilgrim who becomes a temporal voyager, 'unstuck in time'. (Vonnegut himself was a fortunate 'non-witness' of the bombing itself, being sheltered in a slaughterhouse, ironically assisting his own survival.) That said, Te Ao has done a fair bit of virtual time travelling himself in his own artworks, which often speak towards unresolved dilemmas, confounding problematics, and historical traumas.

Often this has been in the mode of performative actions responding to charged sites, such as in *Untitled (Andersons Bay)* (2012) and *Follow*

3. Apirana Ngata (ed.) and Pei Te Hurinui Jones (trans.). *Nga Moteatea: The Songs, Part II*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005, p. 79

4. For more extended discussions of Te Ao's previous video works, see Shannon Te Ao. 'I can press my face up against the glass.' Christchurch: The Physics Room/Ilam Press, 2014

the *Party of the Whale* (2013),⁴ bringing us also to a not unrelated notion of whether one can offer meaningful commentary on historical events one has not witnessed. (Of course one could say this is the historian's task.) But Te Ao's work is less documentary based (although he has often collaborated with and been assisted by videographer Iain Frengley, himself a filmmaker and camera operator) than speculative and ruminative, even hallucinatory. What is the place of an artist faced with the chaotic entanglements of past and present, then and now, Pākehā and Māori, bi-cultural nation-state and indigenous traditions, belief systems, and protocols? Te Ao has been making works that incorporate sites, incidents, and the poetry of Aotearoa New Zealand for the past several years, building an intriguing emergent practice, characterised by a precarious balance between ambiguity and specificity. This precarious balance, or even a brittle quality to the work, is found most captivatingly in the third segment of the video, subsequent to the introductory narration of the waiata which overlaps and folds into the slow camera-eye tour of the abattoir.

Here we see an assortment of towels, wet, slippery, bodily, a pair of man's hands folding them, shaping them, almost caressing them. Not sluggishly, but certainly not in an accelerated or frantic manner; deliberate, but strange to call such seemingly absurd actions methodical. Although in turn they also become highly reminiscent of more straightforward, practical actions, such as kneading bread, plaiting hair, modelling clay. And there is the building of an eerie landscape or a body, in the manner of optical illusions: do you see a vase or profiles? Duck or rabbit? But this shaping, this activity, occurs in the formal mode of Baroque chiaroscuro, as if in some echo of Caravaggio, but rather than religious iconography we encounter a more homely, concrete action. In Te Ao's video, I particularly note, as it progresses, the decisive shift from spoken text to muted performance, as the central activity of interest moves from narration and camera work to the protagonist/artist manipulating his unwieldy choice of materials – the soggy serviettes – which allude to the ways we wrap and comfort bodies: small children wrapped with towels on exiting the bath; perhaps at the other end of the timeline an elderly parent needing assistance with the same; perhaps swaddling babies for comfort.



Slaughterhouse-Five bears the subtitle or, *The Children's Crusade*. The author recounts in the first (magnificent) chapter of the book how he is verbally confronted by Mary, the wife of his friend and war comrade Bernard V. O'Hare, who states:

**You were just babies in the war – like the ones upstairs! . . .
You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played
in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those
other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just
wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by
babies like the babies upstairs.⁵**

Perhaps much as Vonnegut was reprimanded, all we can do is hope our children respect the darkness of dreams and possibilities but not to continue to induce and hasten calamities. Vonnegut also writes, 'I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.'⁶

Theorist Jonathan Crary in his fervent manifesto *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* decries our current near-blind acceptance of seeming non-stop activity, which has steadily eroded cycles of 'down time' and rest since modern industrialisation. For Crary, the imagination is inevitably impoverished with the disruption of our sleep/wake patterns. Relinquishing of the state of dreaming is a manifestly political matter:

**A 24/7 world is a disenchanting one in its eradication of shadows
and obscurity and of alternate temporalities. It is a world identical
to itself, a world with the shallowest of pasts, and thus in principle
without specters.⁷**

The urgency of Crary's lament has an undeniable power and a particular relevance to artists such as Te Ao and his summoning of specters.

There is much that is unseen that is extremely important to reinscribe, revisit, muse over. The critic Mark Fisher has written of 'hauntology'

1994, p. 14

5. Kurt Vonnegut. *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1994, p. 14

6. Vonnegut. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. p. 18
7. Crary. 24/7. pp. 19-20.



initially in relation to contemporary music, another 'flipping' of linear time structures. As he states:

What haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth-century taught us to anticipate . . . More broadly, and more troublingly, the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live. It meant the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing, and where politics was reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system.⁸

And in an era of near-absolute acceleration of all things, Te Ao's video work exemplifies an uncharacteristic slowness: how might we better linger upon things in order to reflect upon and recognise them, see them for what they are, and could potentially be. Piercing the darkness is the glimmer of shiny, moist surfaces, highly ambiguous but leaving things up to the viewer. Make your own decisions, Te Ao seems to say, your own sculpture, your own song. The video has conjured and thrown us into a residual child's play. Sometimes via memory, song, interactions, we travel back in time or in interconnected, non-linear time to encounter evocative glimpses of love, boundless and unpredictable, until it catches us by surprise. And whether reciting a poetry which responds to emotional intimacy, visiting a site charged by intense labour, or enacting a performance that remains open ended, Te Ao has delivered a visually rendered ode, spanning heart, earth and sky.

8. Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?' *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1 (Fall 2012), p. 16.