

Toitū he kāinga, whatungarongaro he tangata

The land remains, long after people have passed on

A native of Aotearoa (known as New Zealand in English) is a 'tangata whenua'; a person with whose umbilical chord is symbolically connected to the land. In the Māori world the natural world is personified, is our mother, brother, sister and this sense of being in nature is strong even though most New Zealanders live in cities. It is this Māori connectedness to the land that I missed most on moving to the Netherlands in 1989.

In 2008 I was invited to make a new work for an exhibition in The Hague, The Netherlands, entitled “The Unwanted Land.” Initially I was confused because for me a land cannot be unwanted, just as a mother cannot be unwanted. You cannot undo the umbilical chord. Then I was invited to participate in a 6 day waka (a double-hulled canoe) journey along a river sacred to the Whanganui tribes, and coordinated by Julian Priest, a new media artist and activist, with local Māori.

Called SLOW FLOW - Te la Kōrero (<http://greenbench.org/project/slowflow>) 10 new media artists or theorists from 5 countries and 5 local Māori travelled by boat, by foot and by bicycle a journey of 200 km sleeping at marae (Māori settlements).

Working with computers or with new technologies, it can be easy to lose touch with the land, and so Julian designed this event to slow everything down. Everything we needed, we had to be able to carry and there was no electricity, and no internet connection. My project was to film and later this footage became the core elements for the video installation, “Kāinga a roto” (Home within). So for the exhibition I created an inner or spirit home for inside the 'unwanted land.'

This home was an art-system, consisting of five distinct videos, soundscapes, music, lighting and shadows, and a physical space where visitors sat close to the ground. This art-system was used to represent the complex system of a particular biography (a childhood in Taranaki), using a visual language composed of references to the natural world (water in particular, but also earth, wind and bird life) influenced by New Zealand Colonial and Māori cultural values.

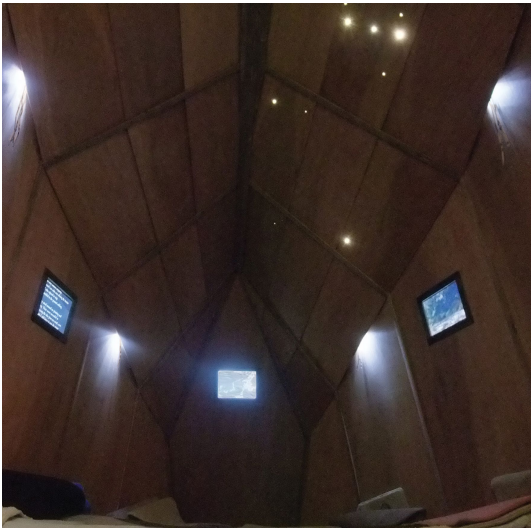
Seated inside this 'home' technology (the videos, lighting and sounds) enabled visitors to feel something of a New Zealand nature-culture.



*Still from the video:
Heart of the Land - Te Ngākau o te whenua
<http://sonjavank.com/kaingadvd.htm>*



*Kāinga a roto | Home within | Innerlijk Huis
in the exhibition The Unwanted Land
Museum Beelden aan Zee, The Hague, 22 Oct 2010 - 13 Feb 2011.
The wood is recycled and the house form is like a Māori meeting
house. Inside the mirroring of elements echoes the traditional
carvings and weavings inside such a house*



Interior of Kāinga a roto | Home within | Innerlijk Huis in the exhibition The Unwanted Land Museum Beelden aan Zee, The Hague, The Netherlands. 22 Oct 2010 - 13 Feb 2011

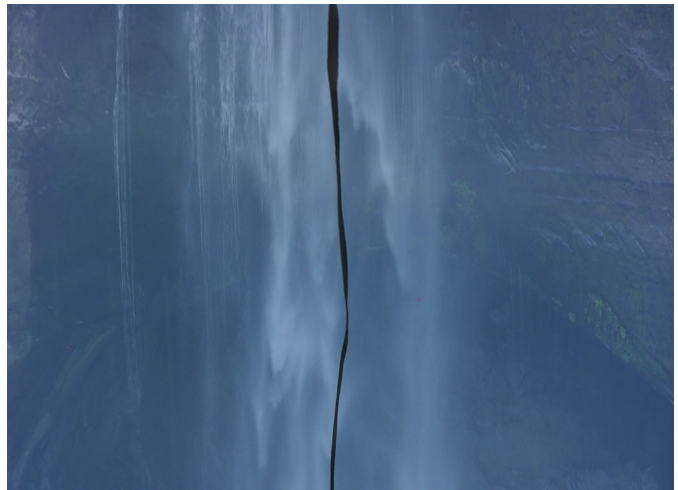
In 2011 we made another version for the New Zealand exhibition, 'Second Nature.' We arrived in Istanbul 3 weeks early to build the physical part of the installation from local materials for the ISEA exhibition. We also built this by recycling cardboard and wood. In Istanbul we bought or bargained on the street in a low socio-economic area.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRSLvY-6qwE>

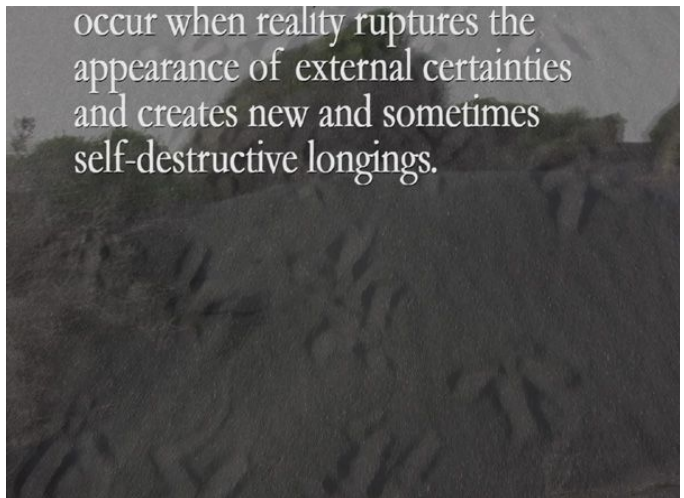


Then in 2013 we made a third version for the exhibition "Third Nature" where this time we built a spiral shape people walked into for the Puke Ariki museum in New Plymouth, Aotearoa (New Zealand). Again we recycled local materials, using wood and cardboard from a construction site.

Each time we built this work, this involved getting to know people outside the art or the technology worlds, such as street people (with the cardboard) so that each time a bit of the local 'land' was part of this too.



Still from the video, The Two Lands



occur when reality ruptures the appearance of external certainties and creates new and sometimes self-destructive longings.

Still from the video, The Dark Valley



Interior and exterior views of one of eight projects in the Aotearoa / New Zealand exhibition: Untitled: {second nature} Te Kore Rongo Hungaora for ISEA 2011 Istanbul 14 September - 7 October 2011 Cumhuriyet Gallery, Taksim Square, Istanbul, Turkey.

Ka pū te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi

As an old net withers a new one is ready

While the land is mother and inspiration for a Māori person, adaption and change as expressed in the proverb above means that new technologies and new materials are nothing to fear. What is important is to maintain a balance or a balanced connection between the various worlds. So the old net might be discarded for the new but the new comes from the knowledge of the old net.

So for example, one of the Māori words for the internet is ipurangi which literally means Rangī (the skyfather)'s vessel * A new technology is that enabled by an old net – the sky.



*Waka Huia | Feather Vessel
transparency print edition of 35, 2009
by Sonja van Kerkhoff + Sen McGlinn.*

Ehara taku toa,

he takitahi, he toa takitini

My success is not just due to me, it is the success because of the collective.

In 2003 via the internet I became connected with New Zealand new media artists via the Aotearoa Digital Artists network (www.ada.net.nz) and it was through this that I participated in the SLOW FLOW project but more importantly am able to exchange ideas and participate in discussion via the email list.

*A "wakahuia" is a container for holding valuables, but this also means "feather boat" in New Zealand Māori. Our 'vessel' formed from the scan of a feather of the extinct New Zealand bird, the Huia (*Heteralocha acutirostris*) is combined with drawings by Sonja. The huia bird was last sighted in the 1920s but its feathers and body have travelled the world, following the trade routes of colonialism.*

*** See the forward by Sally Jane Norman for more about Maori world views in The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader, 2008. http://www.ada.net.nz/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/ADA_reader_full_text.pdf**

Sonja van Kerkhoff was born in Taranaki, Aotearoa / New Zealand in 1960 to a Dutch immigrant father and a 4th generation New Zealand mother of Scottish, Isle of Man and Irish descent. She moved to the Netherlands in 1989 after completing a diploma in fine arts (Dunedin). She completed a Masters in Visual Arts (Maastricht) in 1993 and a Masters in computer science (Leiden) in 2008. She works in diverse media ranging from interactive screen or wall projections to live performance. See: <https://www.sonjavank.com>