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**BILLIE LYTHBERG**

## **'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures Conference, Tonga, October 2019**

### **Abstract**

*The inaugural 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference held at the Tanoa International Dateline Hotel in Tonga (October 7–12, 2019) brought together artists, academics, and traditional knowledge-holders from Tonga, Aotearoa New Zealand, Germany, and the United Kingdom to consider how the future of Tongan arts can best be guided by knowledge of their past. This article details the program and associated events.*

**Keywords:** *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures, Tonga, Tongan diaspora, art, material culture, exhibitions*



Figure 1. Traditional knowledge-holders, artists, and academics at the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, October 8, 2019. Photograph courtesy of 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference

The inaugural 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference held at the Tanoa International Dateline Hotel in Nuku'alofa, Tonga (October 7–12, 2019), brought

together artists, academics, and traditional knowledge-holders from Tonga, Aotearoa New Zealand, Germany, and the United Kingdom to consider how the future of Tongan arts can best be guided by knowledge of their past (Fig. 1). The conference comprised a week of events supported variously by Creative New Zealand, the New Zealand High Commission in Tonga, the Tanoa Hotel, the broader 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project, the Dessau-Wörlitz Foundation, and Ancient Tonga Nuku'alofa. It began on October 7 with an exhibition of works made by Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck that were inspired by their access to international museum collections (Figs. 2–4). New Zealand High Commissioner Tiffany Babington officially opened and hosted the exhibition, which was installed in the Me'a 'Ofa Gallery at the Tanoa Hotel. The venue's hosting of the exhibition was a clear example of the commitment it is making to Tongan arts, one that is further evidenced by large-scale murals and sculptures by Tongan artists situated throughout the site.



Figure 2. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, *An obligation to fōnua*, 2018. Woodcut, relief print, and acrylic paint, 300 x 33 cm, Me'a 'ofa Gallery at the Tanoa Dateline Hotel, October 2019. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Scothorn



Figure 3. Sopolimalama Filipe Tohi, works in progress. Me'a 'ofa Gallery at the Tanoa Dateline Hotel, October 2019. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Scothorn

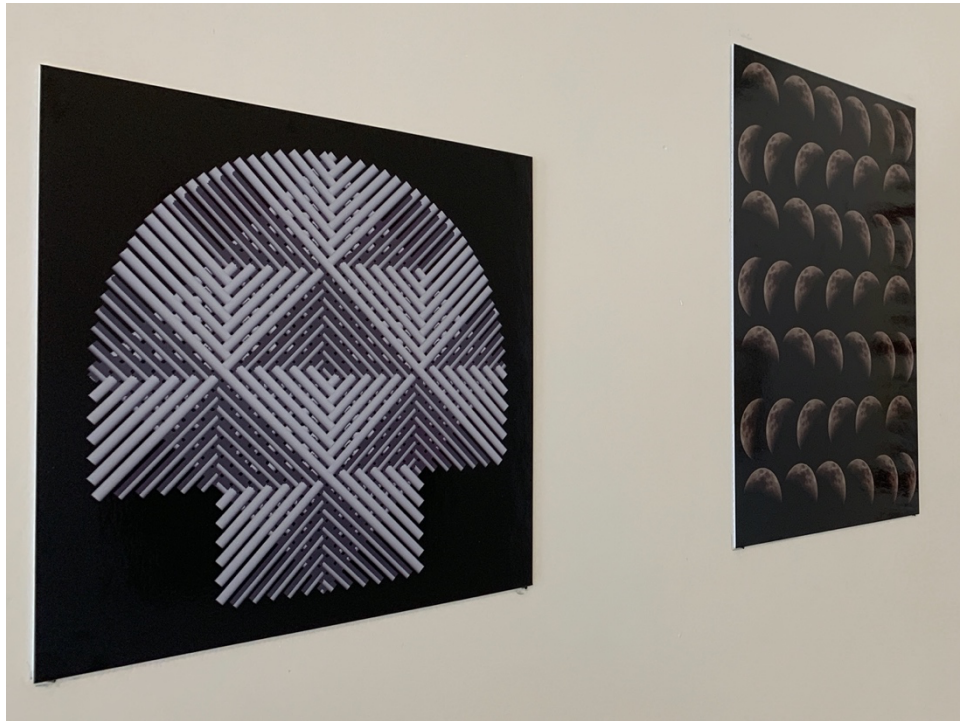


Figure 4. Sopolimalama Filipe Tohi, works in progress, Me'a 'ofa Gallery at the Tanoa Dateline Hotel, October 2019. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Scothorn

On October 8, the conference's second day, the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures team gave keynote addresses: anthropologist and Pacific historian Phyllis Herda described the project, its aims, and its trajectory to date; art historian and organization studies scholar Billie Lythberg spoke on museum collections and singularities from Tonga and how to access these; Pacific studies linguist Melenaite Taumoefolau discussed Queen Sālote's artistry; and artists Tohi and Dyck presented their historically-generated artistic innovations. German curator Frank Vorpahl followed with an introduction to the "Welterkunder" Georg Forster on Captain Cook's second voyage and his assemblage of Tongan "curiosities." As no Tongan artifacts in collections can be confirmed as having been acquired prior to this voyage, artifacts from this voyage are considered the information horizon for the material culture of Tonga. Aotearoa-based Tongan artists T. K. Hards, Loa Toetu'u, Vea Mafile'o, and Emily Mafile'o gave the afternoon's presentations, and a panel discussion that also included Tēvita Lātu and Alisi Tatafu followed.

A report by the news outlet *Matangi Tonga* published after the day's sessions focused on the "many different ways of being Tongan" referred to by the artists and brought to the fore, in particular, by the Mafile'o sisters.<sup>1</sup> Vea Mafile'o, a filmmaker, and Emily Mafile'o, a photographer, both focus their creative and documentary lenses on the realities of their lives and those of their families and friends in Aotearoa and Tonga. A recent product of the sisters' combined efforts is *For My Father's Kingdom*, a personal and sensitive documentary examining their own family that has received critical acclaim since its debut at the 2019 Berlinale. During the symposium week, the film had its official Tonga premiere at the Tanoa. It was attended by the Honorable Sālote Lupepau'u Salamasina Pureau Vahine Ari'i 'o e Hau Tuita; 'Alipate Tu'ivanuavou Vaea, Lord Vaea, Chairman of the Tonga Traditions Committee; New Zealand High Commissioner Tiffany Babington; and local officials and dignitaries. The film was also screened in village halls and school halls throughout the week. Tohi and Dyck likewise toured villages with their artworks and presentations, manifesting the commitment at the heart of the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project: to bring Tongan arts, both made overseas and cared for overseas, back to Tonga. These events were reported on by local television stations and other media.



Figure 5. Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck (right) with keynote speaker Dowager Lady Tunakaimanu Fielakepa, 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures symposium, October 2019, Nuku'alofa, Tonga. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Scothorn

The first keynote presenter on the symposium's third day, Lady Dowager Tuna Fielakepa, is today widely acknowledged as a Tongan treasure (Fig. 5). A stalwart of the Langafonua 'a Fafine Tonga (The National Council of Women of Tonga), which was first established by Queen Sālote in 1953 to uplift Tongan women and their art practices, Lady Tuna gave a heartfelt address about change and continuity in Tongan arts. Brigitte Mang, the artistic director of the Dessau-Wörlitz Foundation, followed by addressing the history of the Georg Forster collection in Wörlitz and the various visits the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures team made to it during their research. The collections manager at Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), Rachel Hand, focused her keynote on the MAA's collections and community collaborations, which have included the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures team. A suite of wide-ranging short talks—given by Tanya Edwards, Terje Koloamatangi, Tēvita Lātu, Tanielo Petelo, Janet Tupou, Stan Wolfgramm, and Benjamin Work—posed questions about Tongan creativity, the recovery of knowledge from museum collections, and ancestors' wisdom embodied in their descendants and held in *tapu* (sacred) landscapes and seascapes. Local hip-hop dancers of the Onion Squad, who had placed second in the International Hip Hop Competition in Auckland in 2019 with their distinctly Tongan dance

repertoire, brought vital energy to the stage. The day's program concluded with a second exhibition opening at the Tanoa, *Art in the Dark* (Fig. 6), which included works by many of the presenters, and the first night of the Nuku'alofa film festival.



Figure 6. Artists and supporters at the opening of the *Art After Dark* exhibition, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, October 2019. From left to right: Emily Mafile'o, Tanya Edwards, TK Hards, Terje Koloamatangi, 'Ahota'e'iloa Toetu'u, Ercan Cairns, Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, Taniela Petelo, Tevita Latu, Andy Leleisi'uao, and Benjamin Work. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Scothorn

Thursday, October 10, included dance workshops offered by Sefa Enari, and the continuation of the film festival. Before Friday evening's film premiere, Terje Koloamatangi began a two-day *tātatau talanoa* (Tongan tattoo and deliberative discussion), marking skin with old and new *kupesi* (designs) and operating an open-door policy for conference attendees to bring their questions about the revival of this practice.

On Saturday, October 12, the Honorable Frederica Lupe'uluiva Fatafehi 'o Lapaha Tuita opened a new pavilion at Ancient Tonga, a Tongan cultural center in Nuku'alofa designed and built to house replica artifacts from the Georg Forster collection (Fig. 7). During their first visit to Dessau, the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures team had been impressed by replicas of Tongan *'akau tā* (war clubs), a *tuki* (food pounder), and a *kali* (headrest) that were made in the 1980s, after it was discovered that the original artifacts were suffering from mildew; the replicas had

been intended for display in their stead. Robust, finely detailed, and with no risk of deterioration if they were handled without gloves, the replicas immediately inspired the Ancient Futures team to suggest the creation of a similar display in tropical Tonga, which currently does not have a state museum. The replicas were installed and the pavilion officially opened as part of the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures conference. Frank Vorpahl and Brigitte Mang spoke with warmth and generosity about their experiences in the "Friendly Islands" and about the connection that the presentation of these replica artifacts to Tonga—a first for Germany—has instantiated. The Honorable Frederica Lupe cut the ribbon to the pavilion and received a tour of its exhibits, which also included fine mats, *ngatu* barkcloths, and contemporary *mosi kaka* (finely woven baskets made in the eighteenth century) woven by Lesieli Tupou. The international collaboration that facilitated the presentation of the replicas fostered new connections and the weeklong event wove conversations through the sharing of knowledge, building new and strengthening existing relationships.



Figure 7. Ofa Simiki, Phyllis Herda, Brigitte Mang, Frank Vorpahl, Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi, Billie Lythberg, and Dagmar Dyck with replica artifacts from the Dessau-Wörlitz Foundation Georg Forster collection at Ancient Tonga, October 12, 2019. Photograph courtesy of Martin Chaudhuri



*Billie Lythberg is of Swedish, Scottish, and English descent. She is a senior lecturer in the Department of Management and International Business at Waipapa Taumata Rau|The University of Auckland and an affiliated researcher of Vā Moana–Pacific Spaces at Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau |Auckland University of Technology. She has worked with Māori and Moana colleagues on multiple projects for the Royal Society of New Zealand, including the Marsden Grant-funded 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project. She publishes extensively, curates and critiques exhibitions, and develops documentaries for broadcast television.*

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Mary Lyn Fonua, “Creative Sisters Explore Different Ways of ‘Being Tongan,’” *Matangi Tonga Online*, October 8, 2019, <https://matangitonga.to/2019/10/08/creative-tongan>.