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Title
Media Review: Whakapapa/Algorithms

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Media Review: *Whakapapa/Algorithms*

Abstract

Media review: Whakapapa/Algorithms. *Film, 22 minutes, digital video and sound, 2021. Directed by Jamie Berry; distributed by CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image. Purchasing information available at https://www.circuit.org.nz*

Keywords: *Jamie Berry, film, Aoteaora New Zealand, Māori, genealogy, water, family, Pacific Ocean, sound, Indigenous media, digital art, video installation*

Figure 1. Jamie Berry, *Whakapapa/Algorithms*, 2021. Digital video and sound (video still). Courtesy of the artist

Jamie Berry's *Whakapapa/Algorithms* begins with an image of a full moon accompanied by humming, electronic vibrating sounds. After a few seconds, red hand-drawn eyes appear on top of the moon, and soon they multiply, becoming an audience. The image is juxtaposed with a mirrored video depicting waves, which make way to clips of a ship, then mountains, then a little source of water. We see a child in a field from behind superimposed on an image of a shoreline (Fig. 1). Two drawn figures flank the child, and then a third one appears in the center, made of Arabic numerals and Latin letters. These different components catch the rhythm of the music and "breath" with it. They give space to more

videos: the child in a field juxtaposed with an album of photos that span decades, beginning with old black-and-white ones and moving to faded color 35mm "pocket" camera prints.

Figure 2. Jamie Berry, *Whakapapa/Algorithms*, 2021. Digital video and sound (video still). Courtesy of the artist

These are, to some extent, the seeds of the video, which was initially presented as an installation at the Audio Foundation in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland in March 2021. Understanding the video as an installation—one resulting from Berry's practice as a video jockey (VJ), and relating to techniques of live improvisation and juxtaposition of both video and audio materials—is instrumental in thinking about the way the work situates itself between the artist and her community, and the communities of audiences, a documentation of a performance, whose temporality is reaching out beyond the nowness of its conception into a past and a future. As the video reveals itself, the seed components change, bloom, multiply, come back, and move forward.

A descendant of Rongowhakaata, Te Aitanga a Mahaki, Ngāti Porou, and Ngā Puhi, Berry places herself within her *whakapapa* (family, genealogy) and

weaves it throughout the artworks. In her earlier *Waimaori* (2017), the title meaning "freshwater" or "mineral water," she mixed triangular images with flickering organic images and mirrored clips of trees, dolphins, and the sea. Words such as *wairua* (the spirit of a person that exists beyond death) and *ake* (upwards, upstream) also appear on the screen; they are heard, too, together with other speech. The flow is sometimes naturalistic, with a video of water or of fish swimming in a stream, but it is also an over-saturated, colorful interpretation of a stream, digitized and processed. In the video *Ake Ake Ake Ake* (2020) she translated her own DNA sequencing into audio while projecting personal video clips on a 3D triangular sculpture. As with *Whakapapa/Algorithms,* a crucial element of these works is cyclicality attached to rhythmic soundscapes. Graphic depictions of triangular shapes often appear in the works, as well as metaphorical throwbacks and throwforwards that stretch the temporality of the sensorial experience.

Figure 3. Jamie Berry, *Whakapapa/Algorithms*, 2021. Digital video and sound (video still). Courtesy of the artist

The 2021 exhibition at Audio Foundation in Auckland featured three works that, according to the gallery's statement, "reflect[ed] the artist's past, present, and future through her DNA and *whakapapa* connecting the spiritual and physical realms, ancestors, and descendants, and the natural world."[1] Describing her visit to the exhibition, fellow artist Israel Randell writes that "moving through . . . the

visitor embodies the *whakatauki Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua* (I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past)."[2]   In the video installation, images of her younger family members, candidly captured on camera, are layered with digits and Latin letters running through the canvas as if a computer program (Fig. 2). They are layered with pyramidal, pixelated shapes and accompanied by repetitive electronic music.

"Do they know it's a visual/audio installation?" writes Berry, describing her first thoughts after learning that *Whakapapa/Algorithms* will be screened at the prestigious Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage in a theater together with other short films, one of the oldest short film festivals in the world, taking place in Oberhausen, Germany. [3] An immediate subsequent question is what happens to the *Whakapapa/Algorithms* installation when it is transplanted to a different continent, thousands of miles away from the members of Berry's family who are depicted in it? Taking the work to a European film festival is not an act of uprooting or decontextualizing, but rather the addition of a parallel, external angle in a work that already prepares itself to not only allow an outsider's gaze into its community but rather be an opening of different directionalities made *for* those depicted on screen. "With the permission and blessing of my *whānau* (extended family) to show the work overseas, I traveled to Germany," says Berry. There, in Oberhausen, it was shown alongside other short works—narrative and non-narrative, stop-motion animation and live-action—by filmmakers based in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere*.*

Figure 4. Jamie Berry, *Whakapapa/Algorithms*, 2021. Digital video and sound (video still). Courtesy of the artist

The installation itself combines the imagery of playful family members, the vicinities of their community, and a lot of water—waves, ocean waves, and multiplied waves, often mirrored horizontally, vertically, or both (Fig. 3). But there are also movements upward and, metaphorically, outward—an airplane wing seen from the comfort of a passenger seat (Fig. 4), the "bird's-eye view" of shoreline and of farmland, a video of an airplane that is taking off, and slow-motion clips of being above the clouds. These segments, it seems, anticipate what is inevitable with any recorded medium: the transplanting of the film onto distance—be it temporal, geographic, and or contextual.
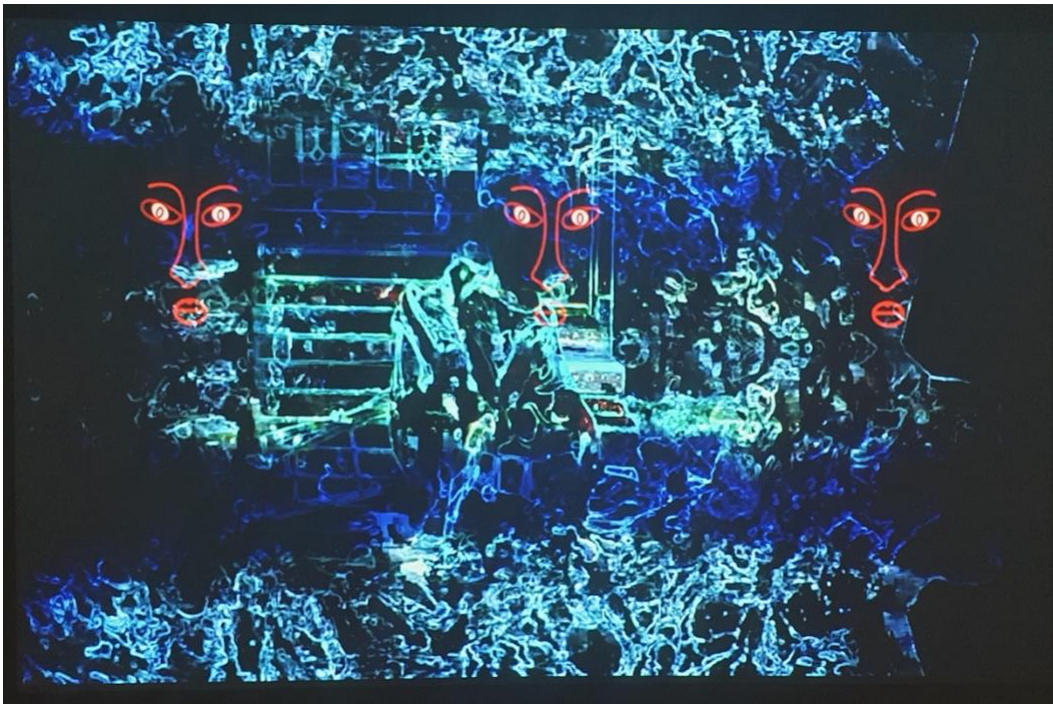

Figure 5. Jamie Berry, *Whakapapa/Algorithms*, 2021. Digital video and sound (video still). Courtesy of the artist

As she did with *Ake Ake Ake Ake*, here too Berry translates her own DNA sequencing into sound. What happens when such information is transformed into a temporal, sensual experience? Without the personal attachment to the subjects of the videos, the installation would be void of meaning. Those sounds, as well as the chanting or the arrows on the screen or the multiple hand-drawn eyes (Figs. 4–5) that accompany the videos, are the multiplicity within the singular voice, the community that is activated within the artwork.

Figure 6. Jamie Berry, *Whakapapa/Algorithms*, 2021. Digital video and sound (video still). Courtesy of the artist

Throughout the video, we see many video clips of young children and babies (Figs. 1 and 6). One kid is in a superman outfit. Another has a red cap and a Batman T-shirt on. A group of kids stands in front of a mural, looking into the camera. Babies are held by their parents. In one of the clips, the kids are posing in front of a door, above which a string of family pictures is hung. The clips give a strong sense of intimate familiarity. Sometimes the kids are placed in the middle of the frame, accompanied by hand-drawn figures. Other times, they are juxtaposed on mirrored videos of ocean waters or skies. Eventually, some of the clips of the children begin to loop, forward and backward: one child is staring into the camera, then moving their gaze away. At first, it looks like the action is being repeated by the child, but soon it becomes clear that the action is digitally looped in the editing. The family members comically move like digital marionettes. It's easy to imagine the children's own reactions to the looping effect and to speculate that it was made not for us, the outsider viewers, but to amuse them.

The children gaze into the camera, away from the camera, acknowledging lovingly, casually, the presence of the cinematographer. They express ease. I was reminded of Allison Griffiths's discussion of" the returning gaze" in early anthropological photography of "others," and how different Berry's returning gaze is.[4] Here, the camera's gaze is not the apparatus throwing its shadow on the

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children. It's not a "loving" gaze of an outsider layered on the faces of the young, creating mass-consumed images of children looking back into a camera's lens behind which stands the authority of the powerful traveling-photographer stranger, and whose authority is represented in the alluring "glow" on the subjects' faces as they are captured at the moment of encounter. Here, we are the witnesses of Berry's interaction with the kids as *whakapapa*—the returning gaze is casual, daily, and is a low-stakes action, within daily life. The young subjects are playful, and Berry, the VJ, is digitally playing as well, running them forward and backward, juxtaposing them with arrows and sound. Instead of an immediate moment that is captured by the performance of the photographic action—anonymized, without a past, and futureless, and caged by the technical apparatus—these low-stakes interactions allow the motion pictures to leak into the past and the future, within intimate and cyclical daily lives, in what Maya Deren would call a "vertical" development.[5] Berry pairs their presence with a chain of meaningful connections, hinting at what is beyond the immediate encounter, as one's relationship to one's *whakapapa* ultimately is.

Lior Shamriz is a PhD student in the Film and Digital Media Department at the University of California Santa Cruz. They received a masters in experimental media design with honors from the University of Arts Berlin (UdK) in 2009. They were a DAAD Visiting Fellow at the California Institute of the Arts in 2013–2014. From 2016 to 2018 they curated programs at PAM performance space in Highland Park, Los Angeles, and since 2018 they have been curating films for Project Space Festival Juárez. They were a guest instructor at the FilmArche self-organizing film school in Berlin (2011, 2012, and 2013), the Hangzhou China Art Academy New Media's Masters programs in collaboration with the University of Arts Berlin (2012, 2013), and taught master classes at the Sarajevo Film Festival (2008) and Ars Independent in Katowice (2012). Their films have been presented at festivals and venues including the Berlinale, Locarno IFF, Sarajevo IFF, MoMA's ND/NF, BAFICI, Frameline, MixNYC, Torino IFF, Walker Art Center, and Lincoln Center in New York City, and won several awards at Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage.

Notes

[1] "*Whakapapa/Algorithms*," CIRCUIT Artist Moving Image, Aotearoa New Zealand, accessed August 26, 2022, https://www.circuit.org.nz/project/whakapapa-algorithms-an-exhibition-by-jamie-berry.

[2] Israel Randell, "Kia Whakatōmuri Te Haere Whakamua (I Walk Backwards into the Future with My Eyes Fixed on My Past)," *The Art Paper*, August 5, 2021, https://www.the-art-paper.com/journal/whakapapa-algorithms-jamie-berry.

[3] Jamie Berry, "Representing Whakapapa in Prestigious Film Festival in Europe," *Stuff*, August 4, 2022, https://www.stuff.co.nz/pou-tiaki/300651904/representing-whakapapa-in-prestigious-film-festival-in-europe.

[4] Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 196.

[5] Willard Maas, "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium," *Film Culture* 29 (1963): 55–63, https://ubu-mirror.ch/papers/poetry_film_symposium.html.