

TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF CARE

On Advocacy and Community in the Arts



Installation view, 'From the Ground Up: Community, Cultivation and Commensality', The Dowse Art Museum, 2020 with Hōhua Thompson, 'Te Kete Rokiroki', 2020. Image by Ted Whittaker, courtesy of the Dowse Art Museum and the artist.

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WHEN I FIRST encountered 'Te Kete Rokiroki' I was struck by its elegant clarity of form. Made by Hōhua Thompson (Te Arawa, Ngāti Awa, Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, Ngāti Kahu), the work was exhibited as part of [From the Ground Up: Community, Cultivation and Commensality](#) at the Dowse Art Museum in late 2020. Banks of Wardian cases, arranged in three receding chevrons, housed uniform mounds of dark soil. A diffuse scatter of water droplets clung to the interior of each

transparent case, the beading disrupted by small rivulets of condensation tracing downwards to nourish the soil. Young kūmara shoots emerged from this soil, the bright chlorophyll-green of their leaves tightly clustered, emergent, vulnerable.

The significance of this precarious new growth was contextualised by a pūrākau, passed down to Thompson by his father, detailing the migration of their tipuna from Hawaiki to Maketū in the Bay of Plenty. Thompson recounts part of this pūrākau in the exhibition wall label, writing, ‘most of the fruit, vegetables, plants and seeds were lost, except for the kūmara, which had been saved by Whakaotirangi. She held fast to the basket and didn’t let it go overboard—this basket became known as Te kete rokiroki o Whakaotirangi, the secure basket of Whakaotirangi.’¹ That kete, and the kūmara it held, were made secure through the care—rokiroki—enacted by Whakaotirangi. In Thompson’s work, the physical aspect of this kete is replaced by the Wardian case. This apparatus was invented in the early nineteenth century to transport plants on long ocean voyages, serving the enlightenment ideals of discovery and scientific categorisation which fuelled colonial expansion. By placing the Wardian case within the confines of an art gallery, Thompson utilises these tools of the European colonial project, but leverages their power to privilege indigenous modes of knowledge transmission. ‘Te Kete Rokiroki’ layers together multiple ocean voyages with culturally embedded systems of meaning, offering a complex meditation on whakapapa, colonisation, kaitiakitanga, and the power and politics of storytelling.

Over the five-month period that ‘Te Kete Rokiroki’ was on show, the kūmara plants continued to grow, thriving in their purpose-built environment. I returned more than once, observing the passage of time as it was made visible by the growth of each plant, their ability to flourish in the gallery striking me as something both fragile and miraculous. For me, Thompson’s work gains its power—in significant part—by explicitly situating the gallery as a site of care, a space in which the ideal conditions have been provided for life to thrive. The care embodied in this work is multifaceted. Most obviously care is given to the plants themselves, but it also extends to encompass the histories these plants embody.

¹ Hōhua Thompson, wall label for ‘Te Kete Rokiroki’, 2020, in *From the Ground Up: Community, Cultivation and Commensality* at the Dowse Art Museum, 2020

The concept of care is, in one respect, central to the infrastructure of the art world. As a rapidly expanding archive of essays persists in reminding us, the word curate traces its etymological roots directly back to care. In the context of a European arts system, however, this care is grounded in notions of preservation and conservation—the custodianship of significant objects by people working within an institutional framework. But what apparatus of care exists for the people that operate within that framework? What provision of care is built into the arts ecosystem to nurture the careers of the artists, curators, conservators, technicians, administrators, educators, and writers who sustain it? In 2018, Creative New Zealand and NZ on Air commissioned research into the sustainability of artistic careers in Aotearoa. The findings, published in the report, [*A Profile of Creative Professionals 2019*](#), confirmed what many of those working in the sector already knew to be true: that it is prohibitively difficult to make a full-time living working in the arts in Aotearoa. The scarcity of consistent financial remuneration, coupled with the highly competitive nature of an industry based on individual excellence, has resulted in a perpetual state of uncertainty for most arts workers. While the events of recent years may have wildly exacerbated the precarity of working in the arts sector, the burnout caused by temporary contracts, piecemeal funding, job scarcity, and volunteer labour is far from new. These issues are deeply entrenched and require more than surface-level alteration: the resulting inequities must be challenged at both a fiscal level and at a more human one. An ethics of care offers one possible pathway through this terrain.

Caring remains a deeply undervalued concept in Pākehā society. This devaluation stems, largely, from gendered expectations around care work. The longstanding feminization of care may have its ideological roots in Victorian England, but it retains a powerful influence in the contemporary world. The labour of care remains predominantly unpaid—in the domestic sphere—and severely underpaid in the professional sphere. To work towards an ethics of care, the concept itself must be reclaimed as a dynamic, reciprocal one—a value that is crucial to an enriched human existence. The field of care ethics, which emerged in the 1980s, has reframed care as both a moral and a political concept. Olena Hankivsky has argued that within care ethics, ‘care is seen as a contrast to the individualistic nature of liberalism and a radical basis from which to rethink human nature, human needs, and how political judgments are made to ensure more democratic policies in which power is

more evenly distributed.’² The even distribution of power is central to this understanding of care ethics, a principle antithetical to the hierarchical structure that has shaped the Pākehā-dominated arts infrastructure of Aotearoa since its establishment.



Installation view, ‘From the Ground Up: Community, Cultivation and Commensality’, The Dowse Art Museum, 2020 with Hōhua Thompson, ‘Te Kete Rokiroki’ (detail), 2020. Image by Ted Whittaker, courtesy of the Dowse Art Museum and the artist.

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² Olena Hankivsky, ‘Rethinking Care Ethics: On the Promise and Potential of an Intersectional Analysis’ in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (May 2014), 252-264, 253.

THE SHARING OF POWER through collaboration and collectivism, then, is foundational to a sector-wide embrace of an ethics of care. Recent years have seen a global shift towards such models, whether in the establishment of independent organisations structured along collective lines, or in attempts at change within existing institutions. The recent wave of unionisation sweeping through the museum and gallery sector in the US is indicative of this, with workers at [the Philadelphia Museum of Art](#), [the Museum of Fine Arts Boston](#), and [the Whitney Museum](#)—among others—all voting to unionise. A core motivation for this movement is the dramatic discrepancy in pay-scale and job security propagated by the hierarchical organisational structures in place at those institutions which work to concentrate, rather than distribute, both power and wealth.

A more equitable distribution of the wealth circulating within the art world is, of course, not the only route to care. However, the pursuit of fair financial recompense for arts workers offers one of the most tangible pathways towards measurable, systemic change. Significantly, many of the most effective and high-profile examples of such campaigns have been waged collectively. For example, an anonymous, crowdsourced salary spreadsheet, circulated in 2019 by the collective [Art and Museum Transparency](#) quickly racked up over 3,200 entries, making evident the sector-wide hunger for transparency around this subject. By breaking the taboo of salary sharing, the spreadsheet made visible the financial iniquities built into the arts and museum landscape. It is unsurprising that this initiative operated at a grassroots level, anonymously disseminating crowdsourced information. This collective commitment to transparency exists in opposition to the individualism of competitive neoliberalism, which depends upon a secretive approach to pay-scale iniquity.

Challenges such as these are not the only efforts being made to create more financial stability within the arts sector. The Irish Government recently announced a ground-breaking €25 million (roughly NZ \$42.7 million) [universal income programme for artists](#), to be administered over a three-year period. Though specific details of the programme's delivery are yet to be announced, the commitment to providing artists with a consistent income over a relatively long period is encouraging. In Aotearoa, the long-waged campaign to instigate artist resale royalties was given renewed energy in the wake of a bumper weekend of contemporary art auctions late last year, which saw auction houses turn a significant profit, while the artists whose work was sold received no

financial reward. This lack of secondary resale income for artists in Aotearoa indicates the extent to which artists themselves are often devalued in a sector built upon their labour.³ Spearheaded by [Equity for Artists](#), a group formed to advocate for both resale royalties and image licensing fees, the campaign rapidly gained traction with coverage in [the Guardian](#), [the Big Idea](#), [Stuff](#) and [NZ Herald](#), among others.

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EQUITY FOR ARTISTS IS an artist-led initiative, founded by established artists Judy Darragh, Dane Mitchell, and Reuben Paterson. Darragh asserts that now, ‘more than ever, it is the time for artists to work collectively and lead these conversations as the post-lockdown realities continue to affect all areas of cultural life.’⁴ This grassroots approach has led to widespread support within the artistic community, as has the specificity of their project. By working closely with a lawyer and members of Copyright Licensing New Zealand, Equity for Artists seek to empower artists in Aotearoa through the open pooling of expertise and knowledge. By campaigning for specific and tangible objectives, their project aims to enact change at a structural level, building equity systemically for the benefit of all artists. As Mitchell has said, ‘artists struggle to put food on the table. This doesn’t go far to address that, but it’s a social, ethical and legal proposal to uplift artists.’⁵ The problems inherent in these attempts to redistribute resources and power are certainly not straightforward, the size and scope of the issues matched only by their complexity. It may be

³ For a more comprehensive discussion of the issues surrounding an artist resale royalty see [New Zealand’s secondary art market is booming – now artists want a share | New Zealand | The Guardian](#) and [Time for Change - Aotearoa Artists Rise Up for Resale Royalties | The Big Idea](#)

⁴ Judy Darragh quoted in [Scandal, Controversy & Speaking Up: The Lowdown Review of 2021 | The Big Idea](#)

⁵ Dane Mitchell quoted in [New Zealand’s secondary art market is booming – now artists want a share | New Zealand | The Guardian](#)

tempting to pitch the creativity of the artist against an art market that we falsely perceive to be monolithic, but the reality of the situation is, of course, far more nuanced than this. Both the primary and secondary market are home to dealers and collectors who bring a genuine sense of care to the artists they represent and the works they collect. Many commercial dealers, in particular, have proven the potential for care, nurture, and growth within the dealer-artist relationship, with the long-term commitments they make to the artists they represent often helping to shape successful careers.

While fair and consistent financial recompense for art workers' labour is the most obvious way of providing material care within the sector, it is certainly not the only means of doing so. In fact, by reducing care strictly to the realm of the financial, there is a danger of enforcing transactional and extractive modes of interaction over those that are more reciprocal and human. In light of this, it might be tempting to argue for the foregrounding of concepts such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, rather than a broader ethics of care. Decades of consistent work has been undertaken by Māori within the arts sector to ensure concepts such as these are both acknowledged and embraced within institutional spaces. It is difficult to balance this progress, which has largely been gained through the undervalued labour of committed individuals, with the all too common practice of appropriating the language of tikanga. Pākehā institutions, agencies, and organisations have a proven track record of adopting te reo Māori names or principles, while consistently failing to hire Māori in positions of power and neglecting to undertake meaningful engagement with mana whenua, or a concerted effort to put into practice the values those terms embody. An ethics of care, enacted at an institutional level in Aotearoa would necessitate the foregrounding of tikanga Māori, as well as the privileging of a range of voices from across the wider Moana. This can only be achieved through the appointment of more Māori and Pasifika in positions of power, rather than through the maintenance of a small directorial class dominated by Pākehā and relatively short-term appointments from outside of Aotearoa. As a Pākehā art historian, it is essential that I acknowledge the limitations inherent in advocating for an ethics of care from my specific position. However, this acknowledgement should not lead to paralysis, nor to the relegation of the labour of advocacy to those who have already been left to do too much heavy lifting. There remains a collective responsibility—shouldered by every one of us working within the industry—to actively reimagine the ways we distribute power.

At an institutional level an ethics of care might, in fact, look like the dismantling of this hierarchical structure of power, and the forging of more lateral, intersectional ways of working. This type of structural change, if and when it does happen, often unfolds at a glacial pace. However, the emergence of groups such as Equity for Artists, [Arts Makers Aotearoa](#), and the newly formed [Dignity And Money Now](#), demonstrate the hunger for collective care and advocacy. An ethics of care can be enacted at both individual and structural levels, through the prioritisation of care as a relational strategy to foster collaborative and reciprocal relationships, rather than transactional ones.



Fiona Clark, 'Living With AIDS 1988: Albums I-IV' (detail). Auckland: Michael Lett, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

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SUCH A RELATIONAL STRATEGY lies at the heart of Fiona Clark's photography. It is a photographic practice that traverses the space between activism and artistic representation, while being grounded in community. Clark's work offers an example of the way an artistic practice can be guided and enriched by an ethics of care. Care is made visible in her work, *Living with AIDS*, first exhibited as a series of photographic albums in 1988 and reissued as a three-volume publication in 2018. To make the work, Clark spent several months photographing four people living with an HIV diagnosis in Aotearoa. While much documentary photography has been characterised by the extractive and exploitative relationship between the photographer and their subject, care and consent are central to Clark's approach. As she points out, she 'had a connection to the community already through friends who died and just being part of that early gay, lesbian and trans community that existed.'⁶ The connection and community that Clark emphasises here is evident in the photographs she has taken of Peter, Grant, Alistair, and Sherrin. She pictures them in quotidian spaces, building a picture of their lives as they unfold inside homes, at the shop, in the street, the park, the clinic, the hospital.

In one photograph, Alistair and his friend Noeline stand on the steps outside the front door of a home. Clark pictures them from an oblique angle, her lens tilted up to look at them as they stand above her. Alistair and Noeline are positioned in a way that counters the discrepancy in their heights, as they share a tight embrace. Each face is pressed close into the shoulder of the other, concealing their features from view and protecting Alistair's identity. Making his diagnosis public would have been a dangerous move during a period of overt discrimination, driven by misinformation, hatred, and fear. Clark's images provide a stark contrast to dominant depictions of people diagnosed with HIV and AIDS in the late 1980s, many of which sought to elicit pity or fear through dramatic deathbed images of emaciated solitary figures.

Here the figures are vital and alive, equals offering each other both comfort and support. The photograph is accompanied by a text, hand-written by Alistair, in which he details his emotional journey since diagnosis. This text emphasises the care he has received from many people: 'my

⁶ Fiona Clark in Ron Brownson, 'A Conversation with Fiona Clark,' *Living with AIDS 1988: Albums III & IV* (Michael Lett Gallery, 2018), 9.

parents and family in the South Island, my wonderful friends and my friends in the PWA collective, people living with HIV and my support system who have helped me live with my virus more fully'.⁷ Clark has often invited the people she pictures to include written commentary on their photographs, extending authorship of those images to the people they represent. This dual authorship provides representational agency, enabling both photographer and photographed to forge a space for self-determination. The photograph of Alistair and Noeline is, at one level, a straightforward depiction of care—of one person offering physical and emotional comfort to another. It is also indicative of the way that Clark's practice is embedded in relationships and community, allowing her to construct images which present nuanced individual subjectivities. These tender and intimate depictions of people frequently marginalised and pathologized by societal discourse offer a moving example of the efficacy of an artistic practice grounded in an ethics of care.



Fiona Clark, 'Living With AIDS 1988: Albums I-IV' (detail). Auckland: Michael Lett, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett.

⁷ Alistair writing in *Living with AIDS 1988: Album II* (Michael Lett Gallery, 2018), unpaginated

THE CRITICAL POWER of Clark's artistic practice lies, in significant part, in her ability to harness photography as a mode of activism for the communities in which she lives and works. In considering this element of her practice in relation to the broader issues at stake here, I cannot help but think of the work of bell hooks, most particularly her belief that 'we best realize love in community'.⁸ Love and care may not be truly synonymous, but the power of each concept to effect change lies in its active and reciprocal expression. A relational understanding of care implicates—and supports—every person working in the sector, and encourages the prioritisation of community over competition.

Both 'Te Kete Rokiroki' and *Living with AIDS* demonstrate the potential for complexity and richness held in this mode of working, Thompson and Clark exemplifying the power of an artistic practice grounded in an ethics of care. However, they are not the only ones doing so—a number of artists and arts workers have been practicing within this paradigm for decades. By enacting an ethics of care at both individual and structural level, we can help them to foster the conditions in which our sector can thrive. On a personal level I would argue that this might begin with anchoring our practice—whether artistic, curatorial or written—in consent. It would require transparency about our own positionality which, at times, may result in the need to pass up opportunities that would be more appropriately undertaken by somebody else. A practice shaped by an ethics of care would be characterised by the active attempt to share both power and knowledge. It is easy to say that we work from a place of care, but these are not strategies that can simply be named, they must be enacted. Or, as bell hooks might say, an ethics of care requires us to use the word care as a verb, rather than a noun.⁹

⁸ [Building a Community of Love – Lion's Roar \(lionsroar.com\)](http://lionsroar.com)

⁹ This familiar phrase is taken from a powerful discussion of love by bell hooks in *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), 4.

About the Author

Originally from Scotland, Doctor Kirsty Baker has lived in Aotearoa since 2005. Based in Pōneke, she gained her MA and PhD at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka and works as an independent art historian, researcher, and writer. She has written extensively on contemporary art for a range of publications and galleries, and is currently working on a significant new book about women artists in Aotearoa to be published by Auckland University Press.

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