

## **CONJECTURAL RECORDING:**

### **From Methodology to Cosmology.**

There was a milky smell

The trunk seemed as lively as the fronds

The wise holding the wild

Further animated by a covering of hair

As I touched her an intimacy grew.

Spearheads were her armour, her safekeeping

Bust at her base like water solidified

A rock of brown-black substance

She is water rising not water falling

Provider

Sun reacher

Memory holder

I saw her from the belly up.

*“Close To Her”* Britney Saywell, April 2023

Recently, I spent some time with a tree fern or ponga in my neighborhood, and recorded my experience through written word. In this I engaged with one of the many modes of conjectural recording. This essay will discuss and explore the notion of 'conjectural recording' within the context of my own personal art practice. The notion recognizes and honors indigenous- specifically Māori- cosmologies. Throughout the writing we will move through anthropological discussions regarding different epistemologies, and how these alternative ways of life relate to the artmaking process.

### METHODOLOGY

Conjectural Recording occurs when an experience of place or material is recorded. The story and conclusions made in this recording are personal, often without solid or measurable evidence. The recording carries the heart and story of unique experience<sup>8</sup> and therefore is respectful, and calls for respect from its hearers. As a New Zealand artist I've engaged with many contexts and ideas. Conjectural recording remains at the heart of my practice. Regardless of the purpose for which I seek materials for art practice, they are all gathered through a process of respectful, mindful, and inclusive recording of the landscape. The recording serves as an expression and archive of the experience.

Usually when someone wants to make a recording they have a clean intention or aim. They therefore record and archive according to their intention, all control is in the hand of the recorder. Conjectural recording dismantles and removes the single focused objectives and intentions from the recorder, so much so that the materials gathered and history of experiences in that place are given a voice all of their own.

In conjectural recording you move past the face value of an archived material, beyond your current understandings or perceptions. Rather, you allow the inanimate material to become animate. This anthropologic cosmology toward the recorded material passes over control and conclusion to the now animate material. Encourages the recorder or participant to interpret their experience without their perception at the center of the experience, thus removing the hierarchy of human over inhuman.

Conjectural recording methodology draws on thinking found in Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman's study, 'Stone walks: Inhuman animacies and queer archives of feeling'. Springgay discusses her walking methodology stating "Stone walks do not have a predetermined trajectory... They refuse a framing of pedagogy as an exclusive human activity, and insist on entangled relations between human and non-humans" (pg 1, SSSET 2016). As a stone walker myself, Springgay has expanded and deepened my response to walking along a shoreline. Stones and I are both holding memories and sensing movement. Therefore, a dialogue is present between the human and inanimate. As I go to archive my experience, I now collect a stone acknowledging the memory and origin of the stone in my hand. This stone now begins a new experience and memory as an animate teacher. The inanimate material will exist as an archive of my experience and as a stone in its own right, including both memory and sense. Therefore we are archiving a shared memory. Conjectural recording fully adopts these concepts allowing the inanimate to become animate. Stepping from a walking method to a recording method shifts the focus to be inclusive of archiving these experiences.

Conjectural recording as a methodology parallels the concept of conjectural recording as a contributor to a wider cosmology. Through a western lens conjectural recording is a practice you apply or participate in as you treat non-human material as animate and respond accordingly and appropriately. Current western archives of the world are a reflection of disconnected humanity rebutting life beyond their taught knowing, either historically or morally. Stone walks push for the inanimate to exist with a human, not apart from one, disestablishing the human craving of dominance over that which is inhuman.

The notion of inhuman material holding animate qualities such as memory, sense, belonging and relationship is more than a task to participate in. Many indigenous communities, eg: Māori, Aboriginal, Native American, Pasifika, Hawaiian, (Te Moana nui a kiwa), live out this perspective as their cosmology. Humans and material, especially in the case of land, are acknowledged and respected in every way within the common practice and daily lives of these communities. Building on this notion, conjectural recording is vital to involve specifically Māori cosmology (Mana whenua, Taonga).

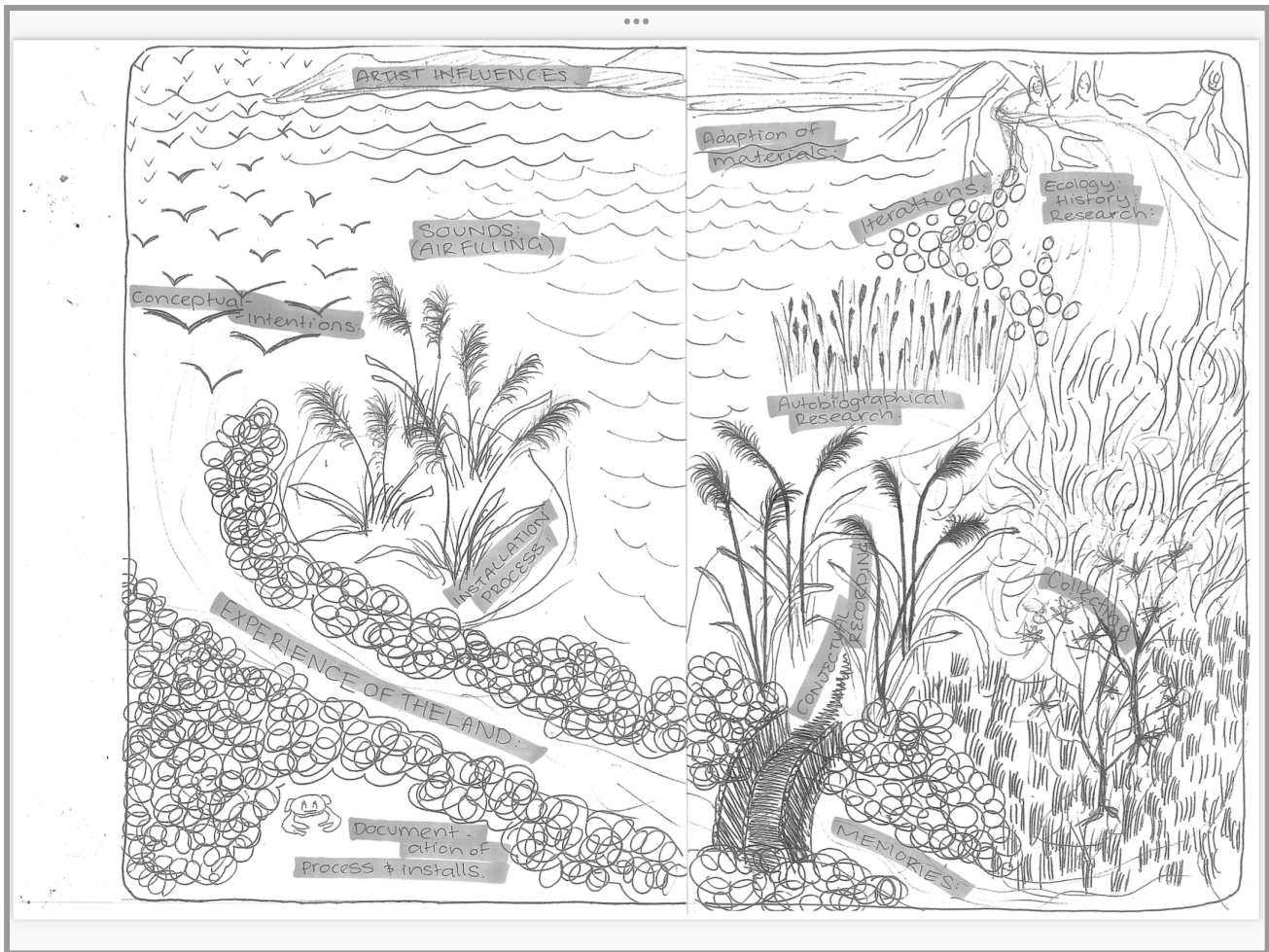
Collective writing from Cain, Kahu and Shaw (2017)<sup>1</sup> discuss Māori concepts of the world and one's being within the world. Interested in Manawhenua, the collective writing explains Māori understanding of human and nonhuman connections: "Acknowledging maunga or ancestral mountains, awa or ancestral waterways, and wāhi tapu or sacred places make up part of tūrangawaewae, each person's sacred, special place where they feel they belong." We begin to sense the respect and value Māori view the land from. This loss of western hierarchy; human above material or land is further visualized by Carolyn Hill in her book 'Kia Whakanuia Te Whenua, People, Place and Landscape' 2021. The Whanganui River Act 2017 is used by Hill to open the reader to a lacking acknowledgement of Māori cosmology within western perspectives held by settlers following British colonialism in 1880's. Hill refers to the Māori locals in Whanganui, quoting their response to political strains toward the river: "I am the river; the river is me. If the river is dying, so am I." The reader grasps the deep animate quality that land holds in the Māori cosmology, 'Tūrangawaewae' Māori moral is exercised by Whanganui locals. Empathy and relationship is apparent when discussing nonhuman material (land).

## COSMOLOGY

When pulling conjectural recording and Māori cosmology into the same space, a turning motion occurs. Beginning as a method to engage with the inanimate in an attempt to reach experiential conclusions, we turn our focus to conjectural recording becoming a way of remembering with the land. Becoming a lifestyle one carries through all areas of their life. Conjectural recording is at the heart of my art practice. This notion encapsulates the way I approach my art making. I live out this recording methodology in my day to day life, specifically when I am experiencing the bush or ocean of Northland, New Zealand.

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<sup>1</sup> Cain, Trudie, Ella Kanu and Richard Shaw.' Tūrangawaewae: Identity and Belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand,' Auckland: Massey University Press, 2017.



Artist Influences- Conceptual intentions- Sounds( air filling)- Adaption of material- Iterations- Ecology, history research- Autobiographical research- Installation process- Experience of the land- Conjectural recording- Collecting- Memories -Documentation of process and installs

I have created a map of my art practice neighborhood. You will notice there is no direction or cycle to my work. Highlighting the capacity for my practice to move back and forth from any area. Additionally, I am able to visit two areas at a time on occasion. Conjectural recording is relevant to my art practice by not limited to it. Rather, it educates the way I exist in the world. Hence I am simultaneously engaging in both areas/parallels of conjectural recording; as a methodology and as a cosmology.

An artist that supports inhuman material such as landscape with a similar extended relation outside of their practice was Colin McCahon, viewing his work through a cosmology of conjectural recording. We can acknowledge the depth of relation McCahon held within the land. Solely autobiographical works depicted as a landscape, it is tempting to assume McCahon lived with the land as though it too was experiencing and reacting to the conscious world of mankind.

In *"I belong to the wild side of New Zealand' the flowing land in Colin McCahon"*, Park claims "McCahon once said that his landscapes weren't landscapes. But in interpreting a place through symbol and imagination, they heighten our own perceptions in ways that are rarely permitted by the ordinary process of seeing."<sup>2</sup> McCahon acknowledges that he is recording through painting without representation. McCahon's landscapes are really not the landscape but are the result of man's attempt to record the landscape. McCahon goes further than to merely record pictorially or representationally. In McCahon's attempts to engage with the land he allows a dialogue to take place between human and non human. From this McCahon records the connection, the dialogue, the voice of the animated landscape.

Conjectural recording fluctuates between methodology and cosmology. My personal outworking of conjectural recording as a way of being in the world bleeds into my method of material engagement. The action of making and engaging with inhuman material is respectful and acknowledges life beyond personal relations. Holding a speculative approach to inhuman voices, audiences are open to a dialogue between landscape as inhuman material and human relations.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Theatre Country' Geoff Park 2006 Essays on Landscape and whenua essay.

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