

Prompts

Lubaina Himid, Michael Parekōwhai

1 February – 17 April 2025

In the English language, the indefinite article is used when the identity of the noun is not known (a, an, some). This accounts for language's inability to capture the full breadth of the noun, whether that be an object, person, place, or experience. The indefinite article describes a limit of language, but as with the Artspace Aotearoa annual question "is language large enough?", it is also an opportunity to closely examine context.

This exhibition presents the work of Lubaina Himid and Michael Parekōwhai, who have sharply scrutinised their respective socio-political contexts through decades-long practices. In their wide-ranging work, both artists have grappled with identity and how the languages of visual art can play an essential role in enlarging societal conversations on participation and representation.

Himid has been a significant voice in contemporary art since establishing herself as a pivotal figure in the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s, to working as an educator, and exhibiting widely in the United Kingdom and internationally. Often subverting approaches to visual storytelling, her work explores the figuration of identity. In the series *Negative Positives* (2007-2017) presented in *Prompts* she over painted pages from the London-based newspaper *The Guardian*. Her brightly coloured, delicate paintwork weaves into the printed press and releases a glitch into the system. *The Guardian*, founded in 1821 in Manchester, has a reputation of high journalistic standards that represents the voice of the British mainstream left. Nevertheless, it exists in the media landscape, where the artist notes until the second half of the 1980s it was rare to see a Black person's face in print in the United Kingdom. These drawings present snippets of life where people suffer, play, rise up, and continue on. By hijacking the serial nature of the newspaper format, Himid firmly places the brittleness of life's many complex languages into a conversation that unfolds over time. Consider the variations of bodies in action this work presents us with, on the one hand exaggerating the finite nature of living things, and on the other inviting a revelling in potential. Drawing from her

Artspace Aotearoa is a public contemporary art gallery founded in 1987 by artists and arts workers, it continues to be artist-led. We work within a specific city context, and spiral out into national and international conversations that promote practices that present emancipatory world views.

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background in theatre design, Himid's *Negative Positives* and the text *Audience as Performer* (2021) installed directly onto the gallery wall, artfully allude to action to come.

Although a static sculptural object, *The Indefinite Article* (1990) acts within the gallery space. Made by Parekōwhai while still a student at the Elam School of Fine Art in Auckland, it can be considered his breakthrough work. It was first presented in the seminal exhibition *Choice!* (1990) curated by George Hubbard at Artspace Aotearoa as part of the sesquicentenary celebrations for the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Treaty of Waitangi. Since striding into the contemporary art conversation, Parekōwhai has continually contributed in a dynamic way as artist and educator. *The Indefinite Article* presents human-sized, cubist-style letters constructed out of wood, which spell out I AM HE. As an art student Parekōwhai was undoubtedly directed to look at painter Colin McCahon (1919-87). Rather than responding neutrally he was prompted to establish a game. As with Himid's glitch into the printed press, Parekōwhai takes on McCahon's *I AM* (1954), one of his many religious paintings. Whilst addressing local art history, Parekōwhai also speaks to the position of Māori within that locality. 'He' is the indefinite article in te reo Māori (a, an, some), but when a macron is added, hē, its meaning becomes: wrong, mistaken, incorrect. By thickening and interlocking multiple variations of local experience, Parekōwahai's work engages the viewer in an undoing of classical temporal divisions. The work bounds from a foundational expression of metaphysicality ("I am" as uttered to Moses); to the height of modernism in Aotearoa; and to the experience of a young artist beginning to ask questions of their context. How can I participate? What is representation anyway?

Consider the complex network of relationships that make up representational and participatory society: subjects, social institutions, history, and the media. Both artists implicate themselves into this network by toying with misrecognition as an unavoidable aspect of these complex relationships and the significant differences that various social groups experience. Himid and Parekōwhai both experiment with the genre of portraiture as a means to tussle with established rules of engagement. In this tussle, the artworks presented undo habituated perspectives by enabling a literal encounter with various scales of language. The artworks establish an interplay between the formal scales of large and small, delicate and bold, and audience members are invited to join the artists in their ongoing examination of context that transforms definites into indefinites, and exposes possibility.

1

Michael Parekōwhai

The Indefinite Article, 1990

Wood, acrylic, 248.9 x 609.6 x 356 cm.
 First presented publicly in 1990 in *Choice!* an exhibition at then Artspace curated by Geroge Hubbard. The exhibition was the Artspace contribution to the 150th anniversary of the signing of The Treaty of Waitangi Te Tiriti o Waitangi. It has since been included in numerous significant exhibitions as a key example of sculpture exploring place and identity.

Courtesy of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and Chartwell Collection, purchased with generous assistance from Jim Barr and Mary Barr, 1990.

2

Lubaina Himid

Selection of *Negative Positives*, 2007–2016

Acrylic on newspaper, 5 elements 46.7 x 63 cm, 22 elements 46.7 x 31.5 cm.
 This selection of work represents a portion of a large series produced from 2007–2017. Each individual work in the series is titled as per the headline that appears on the page of *The Guardian* newspaper the artist has intervened into with paint. This protocol work began the year of the bicentenary of the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1807) which banned the trading in enslaved peoples in the British Empire.

Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

3

Audience as Performer, 2021

Vinyl on wall, 280 x 500 cm.

The artist often produces text works that sit alongside and within her diverse multimedia practice. Sometimes her writing appears as statements hand painted onto textiles, within publications, or drawn directly onto the wall of the gallery as was the case with a previous presentation of this piece at the Tate Modern, London. This piece reflects Himid's background in scene design and her preferred form of communication: the conversation.

Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

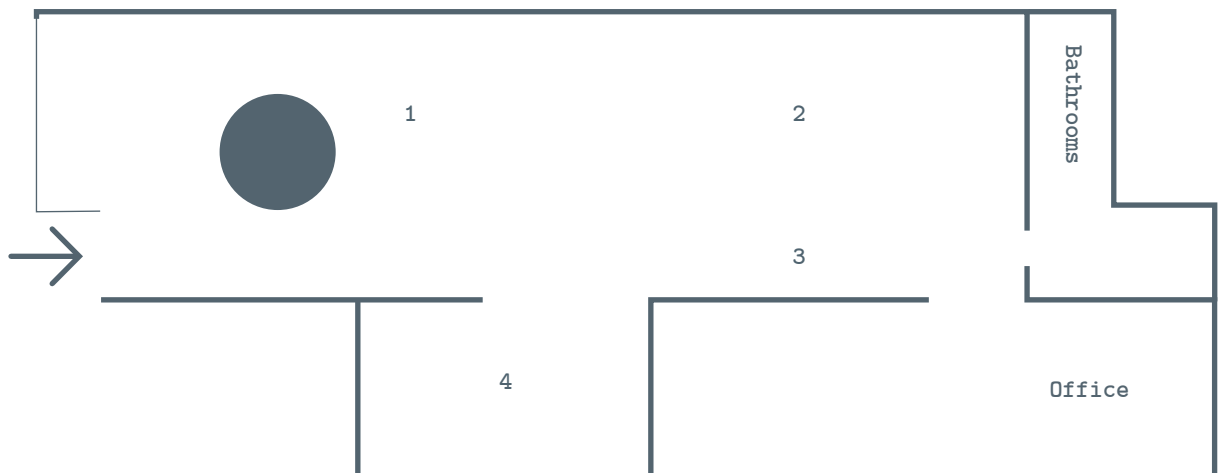
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Ephemera, *Choice!*, 1990

Various original material associated with *Choice!*, an exhibition held at Artspace, as it was then known, in 1990 curated by George Hubbard. The material includes the exhibition text and press release, a list of works, selected documentation, and response in the media at the time.

Courtesy of the Artspace Aotearoa archive, E H McCormick Library, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery.

Karangahape Rd



East St

Lubaina Himid CBE RA was born in Zanzibar in 1954 and lives and works in Preston UK. For more than four decades, Himid has created paintings, drawings and installations that uncover marginalised and silenced histories, figures and cultural moments. She first studied Theatre Design at Wimbledon College of Art and went on to receive an MA in Cultural History from the Royal College of Art. One of the pioneers of the British Black Arts Movement, Himid is deeply engaged with the problem of the lack of representation of Black and Asian women in the art world, and she has been committed to showing the work of underrepresented contemporaries since the 1980s. She is the winner of the 2017 Turner Prize, the 2023 Maria Lassnig Award, and the 2024 Suzanne Deal Booth | Flag Art Foundation Prize. Himid has exhibited extensively, recent significant solo exhibitions include UCCA, Beijing (forthcoming); The Contemporary Austin, Texas; Greene Naftali, New York; The Flag Art Foundation, New York, Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE, and Tate Modern, London.

Michael Parekōwhai is an artist of Ngāriki Rotoawe, Ngāti Whakarongo, and an Emeritus Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. For more than 30 years, he has continued his whānau passion for and commitment to education. Working across the disciplines of sculpture, installation, and photography, Parekōwhai's career spans more than three decades and multiple continents. Parekōwhai's work plays with scale, space, and time, skewering the intersections between national and personal narratives, colonial histories and popular culture. Parekōwhai was awarded the Arts Foundation of New Zealand Laureate award in 2001 and appointed a Te Apārangi Fellow by the Royal Society in 2017. In 2011 he was the sole presenter for New Zealand at the 54th Venice Biennale and was awarded the Premier of Queensland's Sculpture Commission. He has presented work at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Te Papa Tongarewa, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Art Gallery, and most recently the 16th Sharjah Biennale.

Events

Saturday 1 February, 2pm
Kaitohu Director's tour

Wednesday 26 February, 6pm
Deep dive: Lecture by Hanahiva Rose

Thursday 6 March and 3 April, 6–8pm
First Thursdays Open Late

Saturday 15 March, 10am–3pm
Portrait workshop with Māpura Studios

Sunday 16 March, 11am–12pm
Inside Ngā Taonga Tūturu

Friday 28 March, 10am–3pm
In focus: Shaping our art histories

Saturday 5 April, 2pm
Audio described tour

Reading Room
Prompts - a reply, Shiraz Sadikeen

To learn more about these events, visit artspace-aotearoa.nz
To read the text by Shiraz Sadikeen, visit artspace-aotearoa.nz/reading-room
To request a tour for your group contact info@artspace.org.nz

Acknowledgements

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To support our work and enjoy additional events consider joining a Supporters Circle.
To learn more about this programme, visit artspace-aotearoa.nz/tautoko

The annual question

Each year Artspace Aotearoa sets one question which our exhibitions and events orbit in the company of artists and audiences. Across the year, we explore what this question offers us and what artworks and their authors can weave together. In 2025, we ask “is language large enough?”

In Lubaina Himid’s 2022 drawing made directly onto the wall of London’s Tate Modern she asks, but also states: “we live in clothes, we live in buildings – do they fit us?” When I encountered this prompt, it turned my attention to the essential infrastructures of daily life: places in which we shelter and what covers our bodies. It struck me how each part of this prompt straddles the technical and the erotic frameworks for forming our world. In asking her question, Himid draws a diagram arcing the zones of the technical and the erotic, subsequently highlighting the friction existing between them. This same friction is activated when language shuttles between the organisation of bodies, space, and culture as a crucial instrument in shaping and scaling our lived experiences. In asking this necessary question “is language large enough?” Artspace Aotearoa invites its audiences to consider contemporary society—from the public to the private, the artistic to the bureaucratic—and language’s charged role in defining these domains.

Language—whether written, aural, somatic, or otherwise—is not a fixed object but is highly unpredictable,

fluid, and consequently evolving. Despite this fluidity it can be wielded to establish and entrench what Audre Lorde has described as the “mythical norm”.¹ In this scenario, a certain type of subjecthood is established as standard and subsequently prioritised, often at the cost of another kind of subjecthood.² If territory is the outline that defines the differentiated but interconnected zones of life (the public, private, artistic, and bureaucratic), then language forms or flattens the contours of these zones as it determines possible ways of relating. In other words, through repetitive use, language constitutes individual subjects by providing frameworks for sets of behaviours that are normalised. This becomes a feedback loop: we relate to one another through and within the languages we have received or accessed. The often invisible impact of contextual access also describes the limit of language.

While this analysis might sound discouraging, encountering the limit of language and its capacity to capture the wholeness of life may propel precedent-setting opportunities. The limit then acts as the enabling context where the capacity for language to become a vital force in any process of transformation is underscored, whether at the scale of the individual, organisation, or community.

In his article “Rethinking Free Speech” Moana Jackson describes

1 Audre Lorde. “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. (London: Silver Press, 2017), pg 96.

2 Audre Lorde expands: “In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure. It is within this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.”

spoken language on the marae where two forces are activated: the force of the atua Rongo (deity associated with peace) and the force of the atua Tūmataunga (deity associated with war). Each atua plays a specific role in establishing points of contact between speakers which cover the gamut of expressive capacity, from confrontation to reflection to nourishment. Jackson states: “In that situation, both the right to speak freely and the exercise of the right itself are ideals to be protected because the marae exists to nurture relationships.”³

Drawing from Jackson’s description of marae oration that requires relationships to be at the foreground and the establishing of a specific argument in the background, this year’s programme considers relating in the capacity of being in relation with one another and with the world. “Is language large enough?” therefore also asks how to construct a condition for life flexible enough to contain the span of the technical to the erotic? How can a condition for life be built that deviates from the entrenched “mythical norm” that Lorde so starkly warns us of? What languages are required to conjure deviations from the standards of form, of thought, of body, of desire?

Tenuous political, social, economic, and environmental terrains might adrenalise our current moment but they also expose the hegemonies allowing these conditions to develop at alarming rate and scale. Artworks and their makers, however, wield scale

with other tempos in play: the intimate, the critical, the imaginary. Rather than exploding at exponential pace, these tempos enable the emergence of a beat that is varied and compensatory. Across 2025, the programme at Artspace Aotearoa activates artwork and artistic positions from multiple contexts, diverse mediums, and between generations to consider the potential of forging an otherwise, a deviation—however provisional—through the potency of communicating in the language of contemporary art.

Ruth Buchanan, Kaitohu Director
January 2025

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³ Moana Jackson. “Moana Jackson: Rethinking free speech.” E-tangata, August 19, 2018, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/moana-jackson-rethinking-free-speech/>.