

Chant Down Babylon System!

Cultural Provocation: Art, Activism and Social Change, a marae-based hui and conference, Auckland, 29-31 August, 2003

I was fairly consumed with anticipation for Cultural Provocation – for a start, I knew the organisers, and I had heard many tales of the arduous birth of the project (matched only by the 37 hour epic labour which organiser Joyce Campbell underwent a month prior). Secondly, I was teaching a course on “Indigenous Issues” at the Manukau School of Visual Arts (I know, I know, a Little White Squibba like myself, the irony is not lost on me) and this conference was tailor-made to my needs. Thirdly, I hadn’t stayed on a marae for a very long time, and I’d been out of the country just long enough (three years) to really appreciate and miss what it is that makes Aotearoa so unique – our continuing and dogged attempt to grow with our indigenous culture when most of the rest of the world seems to have given up (or else they simply didn’t care in the first place).

The conference was the brain child of Jon Bywater, Joyce Campbell, Ann Shelton, and US academic John Welchman, with Natalie Robertson initially acting in an advisory capacity. Originally, *Cultural Provocation* was conceived as an Artspace¹ project, and was designed primarily to bring overseas academics to a New Zealand audience. But as some top-billing names fell out of circulation (Ken Lum and Adrian Piper among them) the emphasis started to shift. The bait to lure the international speakers was, of course, indigenous – the thought of giving presentations alongside Maori radicals in a traditional tribal setting is hard for the global activist-intelligentsia to resist. Pretty soon the organisers realised that for the conference to work, it had to shift its focus to become more localised, otherwise the Maori element would be relegated to mere tokenism. With this in mind, the relationship with Robertson (of Te Ara Poutama at AUT) was formalised, and Robertson garnered the support and guidance of Te Miringa Hohaia, kaitiaki of Parihaka Marae.

The organisers felt pretty positive about having followed tikanga, having obtained support from the mana whenua of Nga Kete Wananga and from Arnold Wilson, kaumatua of MVSA, but they were in for a surprise. Despite their best efforts, an anonymous angry email accused them of overlooking the tangata whenua of Tamaki Makaurau – a reminder that Maori are not “one race”, and the connection of location to iwi cannot be underestimated. But by the time this missive came through, it was too late to change anything – the organisers forged ahead with baited breath.²

As it happens, no protest over this issue was ever made public, and most of the three days passed without even a whiff of controversy, although the third day saw some factions emerge. What follows is a chronology of thoughts and feelings relating to various

speakers and events. It is not a complete record of the conference, but I have tried to be thorough without needlessly exhausting a patient reader.

Friday 29th August

The powhiri was short and sweet, and it was wonderful to be welcomed into such a beautiful house – the first time I had seen the Nga Kete Wananga marae, despite teaching at MSVA. The role of the marae itself cannot be underestimated in terms of the success of the hui, and the difference to the third day of proceedings, when we shifted to the School of Architecture conference suite, was marked (some viewers even speculated that the bad blood that surfaced wouldn’t have seen the light of day on the marae). To be sitting comfortably, on your choice of mattresses or chairs, inside a house whose every inch is covered in details that are both beautiful and meaningful, to be bathed in colour and form and sound, is, for want of a better word, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art” that is always eluding Western practitioners. I cannot understand why we don’t use the hui mode more often – because it makes learning a pleasure. Instead, we seem wedded to the sick-building syndrome (MSVA’s classrooms look more and more like an L Budd installation every day).

So, there I was, lying on my mattress, letting the speakers ebb and flow around me, giving my students a good laugh when I fell asleep (well, I’ve seen them fall asleep enough times). Throughout proceedings, I could not help a sense of overwhelming beatitude. I asked Rakai Gul, an adult student from MSVA, how similar or different this felt from a regular iwi get-together. She said it was exactly the same, that wharenui had the same effect on all people, that they were designed that way.

I felt something similar when I attended a sweatlodge ceremony in the US. Namely, that this piece of tribal wisdom, this ancient ritual, had been perfected over centuries, probably millennia, and it was so simple, but so perfect; church, a trip, group therapy, and a health spa all rolled into one. I couldn’t understand why this model isn’t practiced everywhere, simply because it MAKES SENSE. Likewise, how are there any “conferences” any more in this sad world of ours? Why aren’t they all hui?

Cultural Provocation was, I think, the most successfully “bi-cultural” event I have ever been to. I’ve been to so many conferences, art openings, and launches, in which protocol has been tokenistically followed out of a sense of duty, to the point when “dial-a-powhiri” became a joke in art world circles. For the first time, I felt that the combination of speakers and issues was pretty much an even combination of Pakeha and Maori (of course it went beyond this and there was other cultural representation, but the two treaty partners were for once given approximately equal weight). I never once felt marginalised as Pakeha on the marae



– hell, there was even vegetarian food and espresso – bi-culturalism at its finest! Likewise it was gratifying to see so many more brown faces in attendance than at business-as-usual art events.

After the hongi, registration, milling around, and a fine dinner, we adjourned to the whareniui to watch **Merata Mita's** new documentary *The Dread* about Maori Rastafarians in Ruatoria.

I had seen many of these Rastas in the book *Moko: Maori Tattoos* by the photographer Hans Neleman, where they appeared aggressive and out-of-it; lost souls. Mita's film, by contrast, showed a thriving rural community that farmed nearly all its own organic produce, made intricate carvings, cooked, prayed and played music together. I asked Mita what she saw as being the differences between her movie and Neleman's book. Mita said that she'd heard Neleman interviewed and had been extremely angry, because he was quite open about the fact that he was making this book for personal profit. The book sold well and the Rasta community never saw any royalties (this despite a note in the book that said royalties would go towards the return of mokomokai – the tattooed ancestral heads held in museum collections around the world.) Mita said that in all her work, she tries to empower the community that she is documenting, or else the documenter becomes just another exploiter.³

One gaffe I kick myself over, is the fact that **Tame Iti** was sitting right next to Mita when I asked her about the book *Moko*. I had forgotten that not only was Iti portrayed in the book, he even wrote one of the essays. It was very uncool that I didn't acknowledge his involvement when I was questioning Mita. She didn't mention it, and he didn't speak up. But now I can't help wondering what he would have said on the issue.

Cultural Provocation panel featuring, from left, Natalie Robertson, Grant Kester, Luc Tutugoro, Peter Robinson, Tame Iti, Ngahiraka Mason. Video still: Nova Paul.

As we were getting ready for bed we were treated to classical Maori instruments, taonga puoro, played by Te Miringa Hohaia, Chaz Doherty, and dance by Terri Ripeka Crawford from the School of Performing Arts at Waikato University; a haunting way to be lulled into sleep.⁴

Saturday 30th August

Saturday morning kicked off with **Te Miringa Hohaia** talking about his work as caretaker at Parihaka Marae and also the exhibition *Parihaka* which he had been instrumental in organising at the City Gallery Wellington.

Hohaia mentioned the recent visit of a foreign delegation from Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist Peace group, Gandhi's grandson and the Dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel. This kind of international recognition of the important role of Parihaka prophets Te Whiti and Tohu, whom even Gandhi had heard of and was inspired by, cannot be underestimated.

Hohaia shared with us his vision for the future – that the villains of the past like Chief Justice James Prendergast and others responsible for needless slaughter, wrongful arrest and subsequent enslavement of the people of Parihaka, should be condemned in Parliament (interestingly Hohaia referred to these Pakeha powermongers from bygone days in the present tense – these wounds were obviously still very raw). Meanwhile, Hohaia felt that Te Whiti and Tohu should be acknowledged on a national level, and the Soka Gakkai/King/Gandhi

delegation was a positive start because they awarded the Parihaka leaders a medal and presented this honour at the Beehive.

Rangihiroa Panoho pointed to the original 'cultural provocation' of Hone Heke cutting the flagpole and much more recently, Ben Nathan, the America's Cup smasher. Nathan had noted that as history had vindicated Heke, so too he would be vindicated for his "crime." What I didn't realise was that Nathan had left an installation behind him, including a speech by Theodore Roosevelt screwed up and stained with blood in the smashed case. A real artist/activist, then? Looking up Ben Nathan on-line it seems he's writing and acting these days in Dargaville; just last year he staged a solo show that was commended by both Dean Parker and Don Selwyn.

Panoho went into a detailed discussion of works by Para Matchitt and Emily Karaka, which I realised on reflection, were reiterations of his famous "Maori, at the Centre, On the Margins" essay from the *Headlands* catalogue back in 1992. I know that Panoho, "the first Maori with a PhD in Art History" has done a great deal of work in the intervening eleven years, but his korero had me wondering what he thought of Michael Parekowhai, Shane Cotton, Peter Robinson, Lisa Reihana, and other important artists that had come into prominence since his seminal essay?

Panoho did mention Maureen Lander's *This is not a kete* and said that it referred to the divide between the western art world and the Maori world of taonga. After he spoke, Tina Barton got up and said that she had been the curator of the show where Maureen had first presented the work, and that she thought there were other valid readings of the work. Panoho had a peculiar attitude to questions from the audience – he seemed to want to dodge them altogether.

After Panoho there followed a number of different panels. While it was great to see such a variety of people engaged, the amount of time each individual was given to talk was negligible, allowing for only brief glimpses of ideas, some of which I've picked out below.

Peter Robinson presented slides of his work and my favourite was the piece that involved constructing a Real Estate billboard "For Sale" outside an Austrian Kunsthalle. Robinson said that he had stopped making political work because he had become disillusioned with his own status on the national and international "circuit." However, his apolitical works started to bore him also, and he felt it was impossible to ignore politics post 9-11, so his recent work looks at issues of race, terrorism, etc... I thought it was great that the typically reticent Robinson was so open about his MO, although he did make a fuss about having the video camera turned off. He is, after all, an indigenous artist, and you know what they say about stealing souls...

Davina, who was very softly spoken, mentioned that one of her projects is protesting the plans to build a prison on tapu geothermal land up north in Ngawha. A prison on waahi tapu – sounds like Woomera in Australia, which was used to confine illegal immigrants, and look what happened (such a furor was made over the appalling conditions that the whole place was scrapped and a new urban prison was

built with public scrutiny). It also reminds me of the movie *The Kingdom* in which the victims of Victorian scientific experiments were buried in a marsh where years later a giant hospital was built. The haunted hospital was literally coming apart at the seams. Well, I sent a letter of protest to the Minister of Corrections and he assured me that all the correct avenues had been followed⁵ so now I don't know who to believe.

Sean Cubitt gave a hyperactive presentation on the idea that art might have reached the end of its use value. Cubitt was playing devil's advocate – he knew his livelihood depended on the institutionalisation of art but he thought it was time to barbecue the sacred cow and see if art wasn't over-rated or even antithetical to social change. He even went as far as saying that art, which normalises theft, was no different from the insidious forces of globalisation which cannibalise indigenous cultures.

Sadly enough for me, coming from MSVA's Contextual Studies department, the people who were most excited about Cubitt's talk were MSVA students who thought they detected a "theory is dead" theme, when 1) he was being facetious and 2) he was talking about the death of art as a whole, not just the death of theory. Loloma Andrews piped up from the audience that she found the compulsory theory quotient at school very difficult, saying "us indigenous artists work intuitively," as if there was only one kind of indigenous artist working in one way. This rampant essentialism went unchecked which is troubling since I heard "essentialism" listed as the main reason why three people I knew weren't interested in attending the hui. They had decided, in advance, that it would all be about blanket statements, feel-good platitudes for the brown folk and compulsory guilt-mongering for the whites. I don't think they were right, but neither do I think that the academic standard of the presentations was particularly high (which to be honest was probably one of the reasons I enjoyed it so much). On the other hand, at dinnertime Hohaia admitted to me that he'd been finding the level of discourse difficult to follow, proving that you can't please everyone. He singled out Cubitt for praise, and I think it's to Cubitt's merit that although he's widely published, he can read his audience, and adjust his tone accordingly.

Dean Hapeta AKA Te Kupu dominated the afternoon. I started thinking that maybe the man is a genius. He said the whole reason to rhyme was to "Chant Down Babylon System" which I think would make a great t-shirt (or a good title for an article). He taught himself Te Reo – he wasn't born speaking it. In fact, he let us in to a little secret – his white mother had him singing in the choir and taking violin lessons!⁶

Hapeta left us with a DVD for after-dinner viewing of his travels to places as diverse as Australia, Colombia, Hawaii, Jamaica and Cuba. Called *Ngatahi – Know the Links*, we saw the first part of a four part 'rapumentary' focusing on indigenous hip-hop. This was low-key filmmaking with a very DIY aesthetic, but it worked. I really admire Hapeta, he's the kind of person who makes things happen. He gets out there, he meets people, he makes connections.

Sunday 31st August

The final day was held at the University of Auckland School of Architecture – it was a big shame to leave



the Marae!

Te Miringa Hohaia. Video still: Nova Paul.

Unfortunately, **Merata Mita** couldn't show us clips of Alanis Obomsawin (Native Canadian filmmaker) as advertised, because the tapes hadn't arrived in time, but she did show us some segments of the wonderful Australian Aboriginal feature *Beneath Clouds*. Again I was struck by what I can only describe as Mita's "wisdom" – a devastating combination of beauty (at 60 plus!) calm and anger, like Mother Kali; emanating warmth and warnings at the same time.

I had been looking forward to **John Welchman** because he has a reputation as a first class academic, but his presentation seemed to be very much a traditional Eurocentric⁷ art history lecture. He talked about the "overprivileged couplet" of *Cultural Provocation*, and used the title as a springboard; having entered it into a Google search engine he proceeded to list all the random ephemera that he'd pulled up, an "absurd scrambling" and "carnival of metaphors" that was supposed to reflect the zeitgeist, I guess.

Welchman quoted Peter Burger who said that the problem with art based on provocation is that after a while it no longer provokes. Shock becomes a ritual, it becomes outmoded. However, I was thinking that "ritual" is exactly what is missing in the Western world. Why do we shy away from repetition, why are we forever craving the shock of the new? Welchman's presentation had meant to reexamine the efficacy of some of the canonical "provocative" art of the 20th Century, and he conceded that Sean Cubitt's presentation the day before had covered some of the same ground, albeit in a more "pantomimic" fashion – an insult whichever way you slice it, but softened with the proviso "and maybe more effective." Well, maybe it was. For, oddly enough, Welchman the seasoned lecturer only got a quarter of the way

through his paper. "I shouldn't have written a four hour paper, I don't know what I was thinking." We got up to Freud and Stalin. Who knows where the paper was supposed to go?

PanoHo got up and after a cursory thank you started saying how sick he was of everyone in Art History being hung up on the West and Europe as the centre of all discourse. He said that in his own work, he manages to be a "bridge" between cultures, and asked Welchman why he couldn't be. Welchman said that he thought that was PanoHo's job, and a large chunk of the audience started clapping (lead by Jenny Harper with a very jolly old girl "hear hear!") PanoHo left hurriedly – everyone assumed he was in a huff, but apparently he had an appointment to keep and hadn't taken offence at all. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling as though a pall had been cast over proceedings.

The wonderful **Andy Bichelbaum** of The Yes Men managed to lighten things up again with his incredible videos of his even more incredible stunts as a WTO impostor (check out www.yesmen.org and look out for a feature documentary on this group on film festival circuits). This is the funniest and most liberating stuff I have seen for a long time – but seeing is believing so I'm not going to go into it here.

Grant Kester from the University of California in San Diego strode about like a mad professor as he pontificated on Empire and art and architecture from Tibet to New Caledonia. I think what set apart these two presentations from Welchman's in the minds of the audience was that although none of them mentioned local politics, all of them hailed from the US, and all of

them were white males, Kester and Bichelbaum were clearly engaged in some kind of counter-hegemonic struggle, while Welchman seemed to be situated in the very locus of Eurocentric power. (Ironically, it was Welchman's kudos and nouse that had secured the participation of Bichelbaum and Kester, yet these superb choices only made Welchman appear the more dry and pompous by comparison.) Perhaps Welchman's brand of provocation was too subtle to register on our activists' richter scale, or perhaps he had, with devilish smarts, orchestrated the whole thing to get us incensed?

Jenny Harper, director of Art History at Victoria University talked about the continuing controversy over her displaying the Peter Robinson painting *Untitled (Pakeha Have Rights Too)* in her office. The painting features a swastika and has been found offensive by both Maori and Jewish students and staff. Harper says that the painting "stood for the way we teach Art History" which I guess was supposed to mean "we defend controversial works" but could just have easily meant "we teach from a fascist, Eurocentric perspective".

Harper claims she was only alerted to the offence the work might cause a Jewish person in 2001! This seems plain ignorant, as I was involved in a panel on the TV programme *Backch@t* in 1998 which included a Rabbi who said many Jews would be offended by such a work. She now has a Jewish colleague who has been asking her to remove the work for the past two years. I think that if Harper were in the US, where there are so many Jewish intellectuals in seats of power, she would never be allowed to get away with this. Even the way she pronounced the word holocaust – "hollycost" – sounded glib – as if she was discussing the price of Christmas wreaths, not the murder of millions.

Harper mentioned all the controversy surrounding the exhibition *Mirroring Evil* at the Jewish Museum in New York last year which is the first time the institution really looked at artists' fascination with the propaganda of the Nazi Party. Of course many people thought this show was in poor taste while others thought it was a valuable window into the human psyche and of a specific historical moment. However, I think it is less than genuine of Harper to make this comparison given that the Jewish Museum is dedicated to issues of Jewish experience, run by and for Jewish people, while Harper's office has never and will never be a site dedicated to the cultural experience of a minority group, it is a seat of academic power in which Harper is used to exercising her birthright to total control, and she always acts surprised when anyone else gets offended by this.

Many people in the audience let Harper know that they were offended by the painting and by her continuing to hang it in her office. Hohaia, however, said that he would be delighted to hang the work at Parihaka. I think, though, that this was just his polite way of segueing into a story about the menfolk from his area who fought in World War II. I could see him getting angry as he said that Pakeha treated the Maori Battalion so badly, and that the reason the Maori Battalion were such good fighters, is that they were letting out all their aggression from accumulated frustration at their lowly place in New Zealand society. The passion in his speech underlined by its very

omission exactly what Harper was lacking: respect.⁸

One concession Harper made at the close of the day, was that irony has its own cultural relativity – and that maybe it doesn't travel well across cultures. This was a brave admission, and it's something we all need to be reminded of.

Annie Goldson talked about the Counterterror documentaries she made in the 1980s in New York. These works are more relevant than ever, as they trace instances in which so called "terrorists" have been brought to justice, and give some of the background on why they resorted to acts of violence in order to have their voices heard. Goldson's clear-headed contribution to just causes cannot be underestimated. Her work is not about having a "signature" or personal fame, it is simply about telling stories that no one else is.

Leonie Pihama showed a video she made called *Not Negotiable*. It was an "anti-colonial" video as opposed to "post-colonial" which Pihama said was a misnomer, since as Bobbie Sykes (Australia's first Aboriginal woman PhD) said, "I didn't see anyone leave, so how can we be "post-colonial"?" I thought the sentiments of the video were important, but the production values undermined the message. There was blood dripping down a book (a bible?) and it was too fake, then to make matters worse, a little plastic water-pistol masquerading as a gun! Usually, I love lo-fi, but the serious intentions of this video required something more convincing.

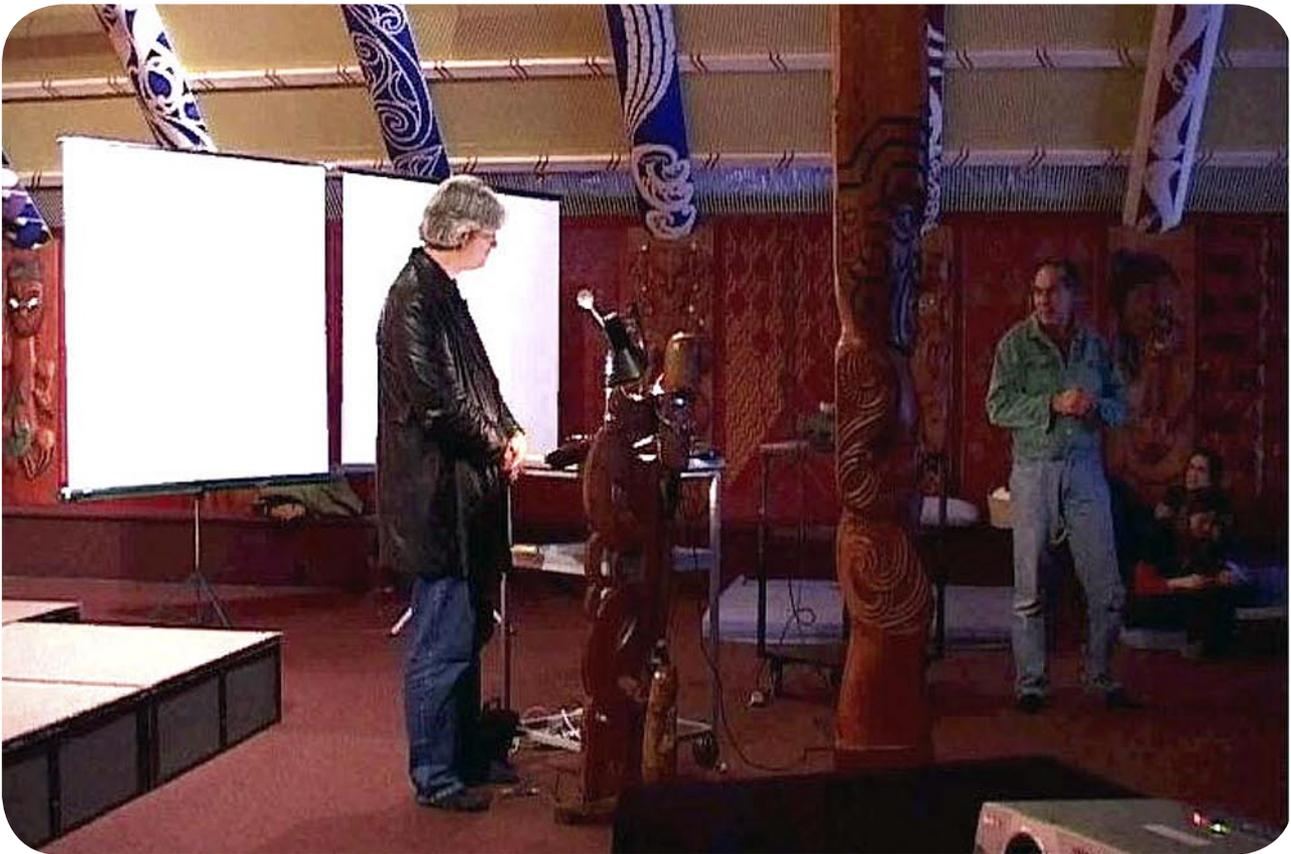
Last of all, there was a final panel of the day's speakers. A few questions were asked and then I heard Danny Butt ask Welchman the question I was too afraid to ask, which was why he had sidestepped Panoho's question. Butt also asked why everyone had clapped when Welchman had said to Panoho "That's your job." Harper admitted (proudly, of course) to being the one that lead the clapping, because she thought that it was an admirable sentiment (let the Maoris look after themselves?) Pihama said that people clapped because they'd been "let off the hook."

Mita wasn't going to let Welchman off the hook, she said, "When I go overseas I do my homework." Welchman said that he HAD done his homework, he'd just chosen not to talk about local issues. This is his right, I guess, but I still couldn't fathom why someone who had been so integral to the genesis of the conference had ended up seeming so antithetical to its spirit.

The debate could have gone on longer, but Joyce Campbell suddenly jumped up at five minutes to 7pm and said that the doors were going to automatically lock so we'd better get out. Hohaia did a hurried but beautiful closing prayer and we all left in a hurry. But we continued to discuss these issues in the weeks and months that followed...

Notes

1. Strangely, both Robert Leonard and Tobias Berger, former and current directors of Artspace, were conspicuous by their absence from the entire conference proceedings, despite Artspace contributing significant funds to the project.
2. To be fair, Hohaia had for some time been stressing the



importance of local support, and in his closing speech said that if another conference was to be held, it would be under the supervision of tangata whenua.

Rangihiroa Panoho. Video still: Nova Paul.

3. Interestingly, Hans Neleman's latest photobook is called *Night Chicas* and consists of portraits of Guatemalan prostitutes. The paperback retails at US\$50. I wonder if any of the profits went back to the women who are its subject?
4. "Sleep" of course is a euphemism for having one's head drilled to bits by ungodly choruses of snores – which makes the option of listening to the next days proceedings on your mattress a matter of necessity rather than choice.
5. "The decision of the Environment Court, which was subsequently upheld by the High Court and the Court of Appeal, was that there was no evidence that the site was waahi tapu. The latter decision was also supported by Ngati Rangi, who are the hapu acknowledged as kaitiaki (guardians) of the land on which the facility is being built." Paul Swain, letter dated 5 November, 2003
6. This reminded me of the scene in the awful 8 Mile where Eminem outs his adversary in the MC battle for being a mummy's boy from a well-off part of town. Eminem may be the only whiteboy in the room, but he figures if he doesn't lie, he can't be dissed. So he lists all the embarrassing things that could be said about him; yes, he IS white trash, he DOES live in a trailer with his Mom. Hapeta was kind of doing the same by letting us know his shamefully middle-class roots before any whities could out him. But he didn't need to worry, co-panelist Daniel Malone was too in awe of Hapeta to say much at all...for a change!
7. I know I started out this article lauding the traditions of Native American sweatlodges and Maori hui, and now here I am dissing the traditions of the European academy. The difference, I suppose, is hegemonic powerplay. When something becomes the norm, it deserves to be questioned. Maybe if art history

lectures became clandestine events in danger of being shut down by the ruling elite, as sweatlodges had to be for many years, the inherent mana of the slide-show-and-pompous-drawl will overwhelm me with its arcane mystery.

8. Gwyn Porter was rolling her eyes at the earnest debate and said to me "I'll give you \$50 if you mention Manwoman." Manwoman is a crazy Canadian who has dedicated his life to redeeming the swastika. I have a copy of his book *The Gentle Swastika* which talks about the history of the symbol, which was alive and well millennia before its Nazi appropriation. Personally, this is far more interesting to me than Peter Robinson's painting, and a far more genuine crusade than the one Harper is involved in. I mentioned Manwoman but I told Porter to keep her \$50. She said she'd give it to an animal charity.

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