

## **Open Letter to Simon Denny**

The pressure to create this artwork, an artwork that captures the voice of raw dissent and incredulity that I gave to you as a proposal, was immense.

The voice that appealed to you at the beginning, naïve in its ambitions, hopeful, ceded to the voice of ego, eager to impress.

I was Pandora, curious and testy, and your open invitation was like giving me the box with key already half-turned.

At first, I was just being audacious and cocky; having a jab at the institution of New Zealand art.

But then I became focussed on trying to please you, on trying to impress you. I wanted to impress you because you had high hopes for me. And you had high hopes because I proposed something enticing, something that is impossible to deliver:

To create an artwork that is truly sovereign, within an exhibition narrative that is inherently colonial.

I did not realise the insurmountable challenge that I had created for myself upon entering into this. Still, I attempted to rise to it.

I wanted this to be a story about love. The more I attempted to accomplish this, the more of myself I lost. I was fixated on finding legitimation in your narrative, failing to recognise that in doing so, my own self would cease.

By involving myself, voluntarily I might add, in this exhibition, I entered irrevocably into a conversation about how to represent a sovereign body in a colonised space. Yes, it seems laughably paradoxical when written as an afterthought.

I didn't know that this was the conversation I was to be part of. I thought that I could be the one to disrupt the space. I thought I could be the voice. I wanted to be the body.

The burden of responsibility, of your narrative and my own, implies a fundamental compromise.

You wanted that earnest voice I generously gave you. But hanging on the walls of this gallery, on your terms, my voice would be read in ways I never intended. My heartfelt plea would

become a spectacle, already has, and you would be congratulated on being open, critical, diverse, contemporary, decolonial.

My image would circulate as a testament to the ironies and aporias of contemporary art spaces and postcolonial theories and repeated but misguided attempts at shooting the firmament, waiting in vain for the stars and the cosmos to come crashing down.

I do not deny my part in this, a complicity that has in part led us to where we are now. I use your language; participate in your sign system, refer to texts you know.

Because my plea is genuine: I want to help you understand my story. I want you to hear it. If we can communicate, we could find a shared language, one of difference but with deep acknowledgment of colonial hurt and one in which voices once silenced have weight and reach.

My voice though, does not want to be used in your narrative for plurality's sake. Nor does it want to suffer decontextualisation at the hands of bureaucratic diversity.

I may insist on my sovereignty by resisting your reading, withholding my narrative.

Without my body, you have an image of my body, an image that is already a colonised space, has already entered into your system of lingual exchange.

What you have right here is not my body, but words that substantiate the story of my body. They are saying that I exist in narratives and numinous spaces that your tongue cannot reach.

When you are ready, you will find yourself looking to liquid spaces, waiting in the murky water with pen and paper, looking for my body, looking for my love. And your ink will dissolve and your paper will perish. And there I will be, with box in hand, finger on the clasp, always. And you will tell me to leave it closed. And I will not hear you. And I will speak. And you, you will listen.