

Photographing Moments to be Seen: Edith Amituanai's Little Publics

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Abstract

The photographic work of Aotearoa New Zealand artist Edith Amituanai generates the confident self-assertion of publics that potentially shifts misperceptions of people and place for both subjects and their audiences. A belief in service, a characteristic legacy of Amituanai's Sāmoan family background has led her to document people, particularly diverse diaspora communities, in the western suburbs of Auckland city where she also lives, and to documenting people more broadly in their neighbourhoods or personal environments. Her images have enabled largely unnoticed and hence provisional publics associated with disregarded public spaces to see themselves presented in mainstream society in art galleries, publications and social media, thereby potentially shifting the stereotypes of people and local places to aid a more complete depiction of a society beyond the dominant European settler demographic. Amituanai's images of youth, family, cultural and interest group communities and those connected with educational institutions convey the multiple associations that connect individuals. While these associations can be aligned with Grant Kester's concept of politically coherent communities' or Michael Warner's 'counterpublics' I argue that the people visible in Amituanai's work or who take agency to respond to her photos are making themselves publics on their own terms, creating publics that are equal to any other public. The activation of public identity that claims shared space has occurred during the institutional exhibition of Amituanai's images where subjects and visitors respond to photographs in demonstrations of their own agency.

Keywords: Auckland, Edith Amituanai, photography, little publics, Pasifika community

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Introduction

Before leaving art school Edith Amituanai had resolved to make a practice of photographing people in her local area of the western suburbs of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) in bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand (2020, *pers. comm.* 3 July). A city of nearly five million inhabitants according to Statistics New Zealand (2020), Auckland has undergone waves of significant demographic change as is common with most colonial settler nations. European (*Pākehā*) arrivals initially displaced the Māori inhabitants beginning from contact in the mid-17th century. Since the 1960s immigration has flowed across the Pacific into Aotearoa, mostly from islands that had been former colonies, subsequently followed by an ongoing wave of migration from East and South East Asia. Auckland is the largest Polynesian city in the world. The suburb of Ranui where Amituanai has lived since the early 2000s has a larger proportion of Māori and Pacific peoples than in central Auckland city: 40.9% Pākehā (Auckland 53.5%); 21.0% Māori (Auckland 11.5%); 26.1% Pacific peoples (Auckland 15.5%); 26.8% Asian (Auckland 28.2%) and 3.7% other ethnicities (Auckland 3.4%) (Rānui totals add to more than 100% since people could identify with multiple ethnicities, New Zealand Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Pasifika scholar Damon Salesa (2017, 10) has described the uneven settlement of Pacific peoples in Auckland as having generated a 'Pacific archipelago' made up of "islands" of neighbourhoods, suburbs and institutions such as churches that became 'unabashedly Pacific places.' These 'islands' have shifted suburbs across the decades with new arrivals and inter-marriage, as Salesa notes 'genealogies connect tangata whenua (the people of the land) with other tangata o le moana (as one might say in Samoan) – the many peoples of what is now called Polynesia' (2017, 9). Amituanai's family background is Samoan, the most prevalent of Pacific residents in Aotearoa at almost 50% or 144,138 people, yet Samoans are a minority representing less than 3.6% of people identifying as an ethnic group in New Zealand (New Zealand Bureau of Statistics, 2013, Census Ethnic Group Profiles: Samoan and, Demographics of New Zealand's Pacific Population). Ethnic profiles and terminology reinforce the stereotyping and negative implications for national identity that Pacific peoples have yet to overcome in New Zealand (Grainger, 2009). Recently the New Zealand government has officially recognised that terms such "Pasifika" used to describe people migrating from Pacific islands emphasise broad generalisations about people who are extremely diverse, leading to the integration of more fine-grained perspectives (Chu, 2016 and Thomson, Tavita & Levi-Teu, 2018). General understanding has largely ignored the fact that Pacific people align themselves variously and at different times along ethnic, geographic, church, family, school, age/gender, island or New Zealand born, occupation or a mix of these (Anae, Coxon & Mara, 2001).

The invisibility and marginalisation of Pacific peoples in Auckland goes beyond concerns of oversimplification and the geographical condition of Salesa's 'Pacific archipelago' to issues of persistent inequality in education, health, employment and home ownership associated with the fact that more than half the Pacific population live in the most deprived areas of Aotearoa (Sorensen & Jensen 2017, Daldy, Poot & Rokskrue, 2013 and Spoonley, 2011, 2018). Despite attention to inclusion and increasing the representation of tangata o le moana and other non-Pakeha residents in all city and national public institutions, the issue of Pasifika invisibility was regretfully personally bought home to me when I commenced as Principal Curator at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki in 2013 in a visitor survey that recorded the comments of a local Pacific

family who had not seen themselves in any of the on displays. Living and working in part of Auckland's 'Pacific archipelago' Amituanai's attention to people far from the central city provides a visible identity for individuals and groups in gallery and media spaces. This paper argues that each stage of Amituanai's process – the taking of photographs and their public presentation – can support the production of micro publics, that is necessarily far from theoretical models of the ideal public sphere in bourgeois democratic societies that were proposed by Jürgen Habermas (1962). Based in the presumption of freedom of speech, space for public assembly, and equitable cultural and social status of the public, the essence of Habermas' definition was noted by critics as being inevitably compromised by state and market powers, the mass media and other inequalities. Today neo-liberal capitalism is understood as refashioning the public in its own image (Arden, 2014). Applicable to the context under discussion are the ideas of theorists such as Rosalyn Deutsche (Deutsche, 1996, 279-90) and Grant Kester, following the philosophy of writers including Nancy Fraser and Chantal Mouffe, who understand the notion of democracy as a site of contestation, a struggle about the definition of the people. Amituanai has developed a practice that embraces the challenge of gaining people's trust to be photographed in public space, creating work with a public which is necessarily provisional and also unappreciated in the perception of many other New Zealanders.

Photographing Community



Figure 1. The Amituanai Family Lotu, 2005. Photo: Edith Amituanai.

Concerned to document 'What's ... right under my nose, just next door to me and down the street' (The Big Idea Editor, 2009), Amituanai's embeddedness in her Ranui neighbourhood and her Instagram social media photographs are a means to establish trust with people that she approaches on the street in an impromptu way. Her early series taken in the homes of her extended family in Ranui, such as *The Amituanai Family Lotu*, 2005 or *House of Tiatia*, 2007, had introduced her interest in images that evoke the complex cultural code underlying Samoan life, 'fa'a Samoa' or the Samoan way. Dress, behaviour and possessions can signify a sense of the overarching values and protocols of fa'a across all aspects of life and are closely associated with honouring one's family and generating respect and social cohesion within the Samoan community. Amituanai's photos of Sāmoan and other diaspora families – particularly the Burmese refugee Lai family in *La Fine Del Mondo* 2009-10 in which the lives of children predominate – in western Auckland made 'visible what dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate' in Chantal Mouffe's understanding of publics (2007, 4 in Desai & Darts, 2016).



Figure 2. House of Tiatia, 2007. Photo: Edith Amituanai.

The people and interiors in the photos support understandings of the complex social and cultural associations of the subjects, and that individuals can hold allegiance to multiple and overlapping communities (Delanty, 2012, 1–12; Graves, 2005, 25). Amituanai's reflection on home as 'both personal and political, cramped yet uninhibited, secure and unfixed, cultural and constructed' (The Big Idea Editor, 2009) underlines the multiple conceptualisations of "community" that are relevant to the people she photographs in their associations with nationality, culture and its diasporas, religion,

family, work, identity, education and interests, including the tensions arising between communities.

Amituanai's work does not achieve Grant Kester's (2004 150–51) idea of a coherent community that is based in a political solidarity initiated around an experience in which he includes class, race or sovereignty, as the collective experience of marginalisation or resistance to external forces rooted in specific historical moments and particular constellations of political and economic power. For Kester communities are activated by the artist in contrast to “the grain of a dominant culture” or unfold “against the backdrop of collective modes of oppression” (Kester 2004, 150). By contrast, Amituanai's immediate way of working in public space, having to work quickly to capture individuals she identifies as ‘moments to be seen’ (2020, pers. comm. 3 July) is distinct from Kester's cohesive “politically coherent” community (Kester, 2004, 137, 150–151) that he proposes emerges through a process of dialogue and consensus formation. Rather, I interpret Amituanai's work as generating counter or little publics of youth, who are often antagonistic or resistant to concepts of community, as well as publics based in family and community associations.

Public Moments



Figure 3 (left). Girls outside the library, 2016. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.
Figure 4 (right). Pasifique and friends get bikes, 2015. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

Since 2015 Amituanai has developed *Edith's Talent Agency ETA*, an ongoing photographic series of young people snapped performing their lives in public space. Amituanai has been an interloper into the domains of youth where she has established their trust through the proximity of living and working as arts coordinator in the neighbourhood and showing her credentials as an art photographer. The *ETA* images show gatherings in parks, shopping centres and in the street where young people are actively creating their own worlds. I would argue that these images of single subjects or small groups gaining visibility in *ETA* support the argument by Anna Hickey-Moody (2013, 19) that youth can perform or enact important forms of citizenship through being recognised as ‘little publics’. Space is often occupied in a gendered way as in the bodies of the *Girls outside the library, 2016* or *Girls at Starling, 2017*. The ownership of a bike enables the ebb and

flow of male groups seen in numerous images such as *Pasifique and friends get bikes*, 2015. School uniform or codes of dress and behaviour associated with street culture indicate purposeful or shared identification. A key interest group is evident from a number of boys with sirens on bikes, including *Roberto from the Mimika Boys*, 2017.



Figure 5. Roberto from the Mimika Boys, 2017. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.



Figure 6. Tups hits the human flag, 2016. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

These immediate images taken as a response to Amituanai's observations of the subject convey the sovereign identity of the individual as they desire. Some kids are snapped as they exceed codes of conventional public behaviour such as in *Tups hits the human flag*, 2016. Every photo is responsive to the subject; for Amituanai 'every picture needs to be based in 'a connection' (2020, pers. comm. 3 July).



Figure 7. Treynar, 2017. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

Her method has been refined to maximise people's engagement with the image; she uses a Medium Format Camera that enables face to face conversation with her subject over the top of her equipment (Dunn, 2019), gives people their own photo and invites them to its exhibition. Immediacy is often established through time spent "on location", for example, she waited years to approach her subject in the casual looking portrait *Treynar*, 2017. Amituanai's 'talent agency' appear as little publics who find public space a safe place to express themselves.

By contrast, counterpublics have been generated when Amituanai's photos were publicly presented. As a project for the Whau Arts Festival 2016 curated by Whau the People and the Moveit Holiday program, Amituanai's photo of Houstyn became the billboard for a 40ft container. During the Festival people crammed into the container to watch a projection of a lip sync video made by kids from Ranui in a holiday program.



Figure 8. Houstyn with billboard. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.



Figure 9. Watching the Ranui I35 video in the container. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

Watching the way they had defined themselves in the photo and video, the individuals depicted and their friends cohere as a political identity defined by the status of otherness, close to Michael Warner's (2005) conception of counterpublics. Warner posited an argument that gendered, feminist and queer publics can comprise discursively formed and socially distinct "counterpublics" (or sub-publics), which he described as "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Warner 2005, 90). The 2016 Festival exhibition of Amituanai's work facilitates the assertion of a sub-publics who mediate their own real and poetic world-making in opposition to dominant social forms of family or social life.

Another sub-public was evident during the event Urbanesia, 2017 when a number of Amituanai's *ETA* photos were reproduced in bus shelters and billboards in Henderson and Avondale (lower and middle class suburbs in west Auckland). This little public was visible travelling on a train with local musicians from Henderson to Avondale for the opening event and in an impromptu dance party on the streets of Avondale. Celebrating the people in Amituanai's photographs as they were displayed on the street was an act of claiming some agency over public space and connecting people to place while countering invisibility and unfamiliarity.



Figure 10. Amituanai photos on street billboards in Henderson, part of Urbanesia, 2017.
Photographer: Edith Amituanai.



Figure 11. Street dance, Urbaneisa opening, 2017. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.



Figure 12. Father and child with Amituanai billboard, Tups hits the human flag, 2017, part of Urbaneisa, 2017. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

Creative Community

Amituanai's work facilitates counterpublics or Hickey-Moody's little publics to be visible as subjects, audiences and photographers in ways that also deliver Warner's theoretical possibility for the political potential of transformation of public thought and life. As photographers, the children in Amituanai's *Keep On Kimi Ora*, 2017 project demonstrated ownership of their representation. Additionally, youth audiences of Samoan background or interest groups who visited her survey exhibition 'Double Take', 2019 generated a public presence in response.



Figure 13. Joseph in his hut by Roger Hohepa, part of *KeepOnKimiOra*, 2017.
Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

Keep On Kimi Ora was the outcome of a partnership between Kimi Ora Community School (Years 1-8) in Flaxmere, Hastings and Hastings Art Gallery that provided Amituanai with a six week residency at the school, which at the time had a student demographic of 65% Pasifika and 32% Māori (Brownson, 2018, 10). During the residency she taught students how to represent each other photographically and lent them her camera to take photos at school and at home. In order to address perceptions of Flaxmere as associated with poverty and crime in the media (du Fresne, 2016), Amituanai purposefully ensured that the 55 photos exhibited at Hastings Art Gallery in *Keep On Kimi Ora* (17 June – 3 September 2017) showed both home and

school scenes. The photos depict moments of school life, such *Joseph in his hut* by Roger Hohepa (Year 1) or domestic life as in *Javan* by Jason Naea (Year 7). The students hosted the opening and in the public talk proudly claimed the photos as their own, according to Amituanai (2020, pers. comm. 3 July).



Figure 14. *Javan* by Jason Naea, part of *KeepOnKimiOra*, 2017. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

In uniting around this project and creating their own presence in public, individual students, families and the school community formed counter or little publics in Warner's and Hickey-Moody's terms.

Audiences who are not depicted in Amituanai's photographs have also created a public space of their own within the white cube art gallery. Amituanai's extensive survey exhibition *Double Take* curated by Ane Tonga in 2019 was at the Adam Art Gallery, on Victoria University of Wellington campus. The groups and individuals drawn to the exhibition on the grounds of their cultural and social connection to her work, including a Samoan language preschool group (the first preschool for this gallery) and Victoria and Massey University's Pasifika students, shared their knowledge and experiences related to the photos and in so doing formed counter publics. One student was observed by Amituanai to be keeping her mural scale image in the front window company, leading to inviting him to bring his siren car crew from greater Wellington to play at the opening, an exceptional event on campus.

The closing of *Double Take* generated a temporary public presence comprising students performing spoken word and traditional Samoan and urban dance moves, siren car broadcasts and the singing of White Sunday School songs (a Samoan church celebration of childhood) amongst other responses. The gallery space became part of Salesa's shifting archipelago, a place inhabited by young audiences who showed respect for both 'fa'a Samoa' protocols and performed the contemporary codes that youth employ in their adopted homeland within their own little publics.



Figure 15. Victoria and Massey University fashion students respond to Double Take, closing event, Adam Art Gallery, 2019. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.



Figure 16. Mason at the Adam Art Gallery window prior to Double Take opening, 2019. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.



Figure 17. Siren cars, Double Take opening, Adam Art Gallery, 2019. Photographer: Edith Amituanai.

Conclusion

The photographic practice of Edith Amituanai has demonstrated that photography including its exhibitions can be a potential platform to enable individuals and specific little publics to become visible and participate more fully in society. Amituanai's photographic method of responding to the actions and moments of tension in public space produces images in which participants see themselves singularly and collectively acting as an intimate member of their publics, in neighbourhoods that constitute the shifting archipelagos of Pacific cities. Working in short duration with the photographer these groups of youth, students, families and others have demonstrated behaviour that is associated with Warner's counterpublics or more closely connected with Hickey-Moody's little publics in demonstrating pride in sharing the associations held in common with each other. Generating multiple little publics in her photos and in audience responses, Amituanai's practice both respects and questions ideas of collectivity and community whilst also encouraging the agency through which people can create their own public worlds.

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