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# *Waimanawa: The Water From Under the Land*

Johanna Mechen

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### Abstract

The video installation *Waimanawa* (the Māori word which means water that comes from under the land) was commissioned for the Lower Hutt City Council-sponsored Common Ground Hutt Public Art Festival: Groundwater in 2017. A video was presented on a screen placed on the ground over the proposed location for a public tap to a newly drilled aquifer bore, with accompanying voiceover.

*Waimanawa* mines fragments of stories about the Waiwhetu aquifer in Lower Hutt, those who care for its wellbeing, and the age testing of a new bore. It presents a poetic microhistory that attempts to negotiate the different groups and members of this community's connection to water. The philosophies or approaches to the guardianship of water which are gleaned from the research are visible and invisible, spiritual and scientific, and reflect European and Māori world views in particular. On some points, there is overlap and on others there is conflict. The thread that is drawn through the video is the connectedness, or lack thereof, by us as people, to water and how it sustains us physically and emotionally.

Keywords: public art, aquifer, water quality, video essay, ecological history, cultural history, Waiwhetu

All water is connected in the present by an unbroken circuit that ties together oceans, rivers, streams, lakes, and aquifers. In this way, information travels through the bodies of water in currents, and like that of an (electrical) current. This connection is not contained only in the present, but extends backward in time, and reaches forward into the future. Water holds a memory of human activity. For example, the atomic events of the 1940s and 1950s are present in water in the form of Tritium, the radioactive isotope of hydrogen with a half-life of 12.4 years. This isotope lives in the hydrologic cycle and provides the marker by which we date the aquifer water beneath us.<sup>1</sup>

Teri Puketapu's newly drilled, but unopened, bore has water certified as six years old. Puketapu, who is a *kaumātua* (Māori elder) of Te Ātiawa in Waiwhetu, gives his voice to my video work. He talks of his fear for the safety of the aquifer and the threats to the quality of the water it contains. The *mauri*, or life force of the water, needs to be protected. He speaks at a time when—after a long struggle—he is months away from opening a new bore to supply *wai māori* (freshwater) to the Waiwhetu Marae, local health centre, and greater community. But the access to this unseen body of water—linked inextricably to all others but often beyond our imagination—could easily be lost. Like a plug pulled from a bathtub, if the aquifer is ruptured by dredging at the Wellington harbour mouth or contamination caused by the failure of aging sewage infrastructure in the event of earthquake, the water could simply be gone. Puketapu, who states in the video, 'I'm not a scientist, I'm a carpenter' has however worked closely with water scientists over many years and points to the relationship between science and Māori world view to highlight the importance of a common understanding and appreciation for the precious groundwater resource.

*Mauri* describes the life force in all things, whether it be inert like a stone or a living tree, or a human being, but everything. This concept is long standing in Māoridom, it goes back a thousand years or more. And what it means is that we have a recognition of the life force in all things, just as scientists have told us in discovering the atom, that an atom is made up of a nucleus and protons etc. that are in constant motion so give a life force to whatever it makes up. In addition to the term *mauri*, describing the life force of water, like most peoples, Māori have words for water that's drinkable, water that's not drinkable. In the water we commonly use, we call it *wai māori* and water that we wouldn't—such as water that is stagnant—we would use the term *wai mate*, in other words, dead water.<sup>2</sup>

My research for the video includes conversations with others at Waiwhetu Marae and those Māori living there who remember when their wells were capped so they could be charged for town water supply. This loss—which began in 1943 when a 100-acre block of the land called Section 19 was claimed under the Public Works Act—was a direct result of forced *Pākehā* (European) ownership and governance. The ensuing grief is still felt today. The loss of *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship and management) has wide reaching implications in terms of the relationship with the

natural world including the spiritual hurt of witnessing the damage to waterways from pollution.

As a *Pākehā* and an artist working here, my privilege has been at times uncomfortable while working on this project. The opportunity to record, hear, and visualise, then reflect on and reflect back, was a humbling one. The core strands of this site-based investigation are not my story to tell, as I have not suffered the same loss. My own emotional connection to place and others through care and understanding of water is in this video artwork, felt with the imagery and the process of making. But I am at a cultural and economic distance from the experience of Te Ātiawa in Waiwhetu. I offer a visual translation of gathered research; a small experience which is not the whole story but a subjective telling, with some fragments picked up and some left behind, as nothing can ever be neatly fitted in.

Figure 1. *Waimanawa* installation, Waiwhetu, Lower Hutt, New Zealand, 2017. Photo: Johanna Mechen.



<https://vimeo.com/210698756>

## Endnotes

1. William E. Motzer, “Age dating Groundwater”, *Primary Water Institute*, accessed 5 February 2017, [http://www.primarywaterinstitute.org/images/pdfs/Tritium\\_in\\_groundwater.pdf](http://www.primarywaterinstitute.org/images/pdfs/Tritium_in_groundwater.pdf).
2. Teri Puketapu as quoted in Johanna Mechen (artist) *Waimanawa*, 2017 (audio recording), 01:23.

## Biographical Note

Artist Johanna Mechen’s work explores performativity and participation within her photographic practice and the role this can play in investigations which are scientific, site-based or autobiographical. Her recent projects have focused on engagement and participation with a site and its community in order to tell ecological, historical, and cultural stories. This can include many methods of collection of research material and collaboration with groups or individuals. Mechen works with the video essay and still image and is particularly interested in the relationship between these two forms in terms of the installation of work. Mechen graduated with a Master of Fine Arts at Massey University Wellington in 2014. Her broader practice is experimental and has included exhibiting, curating, creative writing and teaching photography.

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