

Place, Portals and Alternative Realities in Te Tai Tokerau

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Abstract

Place, portals and alternative realities are vital themes within the Awhi Incubator Project, a region-wide capacity-building project developing resilience in science-art-technology and transdisciplinary practice in Te Tai Tokerau | Northland (NZ). AwhiWorld (the creative innovation lab leading the project) will reflect on how these themes have played out in the course of the overarching project – including two specific outcomes: BIOS, a creative innovation lab focussing on portal generation and place-practice, and Alternative Reality Gardening, an international publication and symposium.

Keywords

Capacity-building, Place, Transdisciplinary, Science-Art-Technology, Resilience, Alternative Realities, Cross-disciplinary Facilitation, Innovation, New Zealand

Introduction

Places today are complex ecologies where multiple intelligences, materialities and life forms are intersected by a rich array of alternative realities and parallel worlds. Flora, fauna, signals, code entangle, and what is considered real, true, alive and beautiful is negotiated.

In this context, AwhiWorld (pronounced "aafi-world") is working to support cross-disciplinary practice in Te Tai Tokerau | Northland through the Awhi Incubator Project. AwhiWorld would like to present this project as its institutional submission for this event. In particular, two of its sub-projects: BIOS Creative Innovation Lab and Alternative Reality Gardening publication and symposium. AwhiWorld welcomes the opportunity to join the ISEA institutional track to connect and potentially collaborate with institutions and organisations worldwide.

Background

AwhiWorld is a creative innovation studio that operates at the community level, independent of academic or civic formal institutions. The organisation has used emerging technologies in grassroots settings for ten years to build community resilience, share stories, and regenerate locations. The aim is to expand possibilities, disrupt mindsets and activate innovation in specific localities. Climate change, bio-

degradation, social exclusion and systemic disconnection have been topics covered by particular projects.

AwhiWorld has worked for six years in the Te Tai Tokerau | Northland region, first with individual sites and most recently at a regional level. AwhiWorld is primarily run by Dr Buxton (Director), often in partnership with Kim Newall, a creative technologist and multi-media performance artist. They have nearly 60 years of combined experience in creative digital and community development.

Te Tai Tokerau | Northland

Located in the northern tip of New Zealand, Te Tai Tokerau is a peninsula with few communication links to its relatively prosperous Auckland neighbour.

First, COVID-19 lockdowns and then a series of weather events (including Cyclone Gabrielle) cut off the area from the rest of New Zealand, severely impacting the creative sector (which encompasses storytelling in tourism, arts events, and fine arts practice).

Interartists, cross-disciplinary creatives, science-art-technology practitioners and creative technologists are a burgeoning sector within the region but struggle to gain recognition (and support) alongside more traditional and accessible art forms in this relatively isolated area of New Zealand.

When the Ministry of Culture and Heritage offered significant funds to support COVID-19 recovery in the arts, AwhiWorld saw an opportunity to support their sector and created a programme to help cross-disciplinary approaches – particularly those with an arts-science-humanities-technology focus. The Awhi Incubator was born.

The Awhi Incubator

The Awhi Incubator Project provides free coaching, mentoring and training for selected local cross-disciplinary artists. The aim has been to raise the profile of the innovative local arts scene and connect it to national and international networks.

As mentioned, the target was those creatives who work between science, art, technology and humanities and have ungenerable practices. A particular focus was on grassroots practitioners who operate within a network or community setting, early career artists (e.g. new graduates or those who have never formally shown work in public before), and creatives who wish to move into cross-disciplinary practice by, for example, integrating technology. Several places in the

Incubator were given to representatives of selected community organisations representing the region's different demographic or geographic groups.

Individual applicants were peer-reviewed by Te Tai Tokerau art and technology experts to ensure fairness. From June 23, a diverse cohort of twenty began twelve months of intensive one-to-one coaching with project directors Dr Maggie Buxton and Kim Newall, plus a wide array of experts. Participants attended specialist workshops and group networking sessions and have had the chance to showcase their work via international publications and labs.

Augmented and virtual reality, sensor-based interactive installations, projection mapping and future textiles were supported, and more general coaching on marketing, IP and funding skills.

When this paper is presented in 2024, the Incubator will be completed, and critical challenges and positive outcomes can be shared with other institutions interested in building capacity in this area. So far, a few key milestones have been achieved.

BIOS Creative Innovation Lab

The BIOS lab was the first sub-project of the Awhi Incubator Project. It transformed a regional gallery (known locally as the Whangārei Art Museum | WAM) into a creative innovation lab during May/June 2023 (Figure 1). The large-scale experience consisted of multiple zones combining art and technology, including areas dedicated to experiments with bio-matter, mini-installations using 3D projection and interactive sensors, and a 'future fibre' area where natural fibres and traditional techniques are interwoven with light or created with materials that change their properties in response to light or other elements.

The lab opened a portal for audiences to engage with a less traditional creative practice. It also connected Te Tai Tokerau to the rest of the world using microcontrollers and VR-based technologies.

BIOS was named for the Greek word for life and the primary system used to run a computer. The lab created a learning container for local creatives to engage with biology and technology with a solid lean into investigating or bringing awareness to deforestation and climate change. Individual incubator participants were inducted into BIOS within a week of being selected. Many of their introductory skills workshops and one-to-one planning sessions occurred in this context.

BIOS was the fifth site-specific lab hosted by AwhiWorld (the first under the auspices of the Awhi Incubator Project) and the most ambitious in scale and level of sophistication. Given the scale, it was supported by other groups: the ThoTho creative team, SEADS (an international transdisciplinary network to which both Kim and Maggie belong), and TreeCreate (Dr Tracey M Benson) collaborated on works and projects within the space. Local community groups also created works, primarily in the e-textiles zone.

The project with SEADS exchanged signals via an IoT system connecting New Zealand with Brazil and Scotland and shared content in two virtual spaces, which were beamed into the lab space. The project with Dr Tracey M Benson exchanged knowledge across the Tasman between Bribie Island (Yarun) and Te Tai Tokerau. It included several joint experiments focussed on mangroves and other local botanicals.

At the ISEA conference in 2024, AwhiWorld will present some of the learnings from BIOS and the second public-facing lab in May 2024.



Figure 1: BIOS Lab 2023 (Image Dr Maggie Buxton)

Alternative Reality Gardening

A second critical sub-project within the Awhi Incubator is Alternative Reality Gardening, an international art-science publication and symposium (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Alternative Reality Gardening Promo Image

Alternative Reality Gardening was built on international collaborations involved in BIOS. It was explicitly designed

to hardwire Te Tai Taokerau to the rest of the world by allowing incubator participants to be published and present alongside established international cross-disciplinary creatives.

The symposium consists of pre-recorded content to maximise resilience and to remove the bounds of time (harking to the conference theme of *everywhen*).

The book, positioned as a *miscellany*, is content sliced in time: research in progress, musings as well as physical and digital work, poetry and writing created explicitly for the publication.

Scientists, psychotherapists, gardeners, technologists and creatives across most disciplines (including dancers, print-makers and painters) contributed works representing their understanding of alternative reality gardening. 3D printed seaweed, space station ecology, foraged algorithms and many other contributions eventuated. Both platforms provided an opportunity for realities to inform each other and collectively present the reader or watcher with a multidimensional understanding of creative practice and a more expansive understanding of our region's innovative capability.

Again, the legacy and learning of this experience will be presented at ISEA 2024.

Summary

As an independent community organisation in regional New Zealand, AwhiWorld is excited to share our work and learn from others engaging in cross-disciplinary capacity building and education, whether academic institutions or independent organisations such as ourselves.

By the time ISEA 2024 happens, our Incubator programme will be over. We want to use the conference to reflect with peers and activate portals for collaboration going forward.