

## *About the Artist: Latai Taumoepeau*

Latai Taumoepeau makes live art, drawing from her homeland, the Kingdom of Tonga, and her birthplace, Sydney, land of the Eora Nation. Her body-centered faivā (performance practice) emerges from Tongan philosophies of relational space and time, integrating ancient and everyday temporal practice to illustrate the impact of environmental and social crisis in Oceania. Through her engagement with the sociopolitical landscape of Australia, spotlighting issues related to race, class, and the female body politic, she seeks to bring minority community voices and experiences into the foreground.



PHOTO BY  
STELIOS PAPADAKIS

Taumoepeau has presented and performed works at various events and venues in Melbourne, Queensland, and Sydney, as well as at festivals and galleries in Berlin, Hong Kong, and London. Since 2016, she has been working with Arts House in Melbourne on *Refuge*, an annual artist-led community preparedness program held in collaboration with Emergency Management Victoria and other community stakeholders (see also Mangioni, this issue). She is also involved in climate change advocacy for Pacific Island nations through various community engagement projects and regional campaigns.

In addition to her artistic practice, Taumoepeau has worked for Playwriting Australia, where she facilitated an introductory playwriting program for communities and schools with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and for Radio Skid Row, a community radio station in Sydney, where she engaged communities underrepresented in mainstream media in creative digital media projects. She has also received numerous awards, including the Prague Quadrennial Award for Excellence in Performance Design for *Repatriate* (2019), which is featured in this issue.

In the near future, Latai hopes to return to her ancestral home and continue the ultimate faivā of sea voyaging and celestial navigation.

*The art featured in this issue can be viewed in full color in the online versions.*

After selecting this issue's featured artist, I was thrilled to learn that the journal had also accepted Talei Luscia Mangioni's peer-reviewed article "Confronting Australian Apathy: Latai Taumoepeau and the Politics of Performance in Pacific Climate Stewardship" (this issue, 32–62), which analyzes Taumoepeau's artistry in more detail.

KATERINA TEAIWA



*The Last Resort*, by Latai Taumoepeau, 2020. Performance, Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island. Photo by Zan Wimberley.

In this endurance performance installation, part of the series *Stitching (Up) the Sea*, Taumoepeau and her co-performer and relative Taliu Aloua channeled ceremonial Tongan practices while wearing brick sandals and worn-out hotel bathrobes emblazoned with the words “The Last Resort.” They proceeded to smash glass bottles and other refuse sourced from Sydney nightclubs. In an October 2020 dialogue with fellow artist Taloi Havini, Taumoepeau explained that her goal in the work, a commentary on the impact of climate change on the Pacific and its dangers to both human and marine life, was “to expose the relationship, the genealogy, between glass and islands and sand . . . that led to the ‘resort life’” (“The Last Resort: A Conversation,” *e-flux* 112 [October 2020]).





*Ocean Island, Mine!*, by Latai Taumoepeau, 2015.

Performance, Carriageworks, Sydney. Photo by Sanja Simic.

In *Ocean Island, Mine!*, also performed as part of AusDance's Australian Dance Week, held 29 April–6 May 2017, Latai Taumoepeau relocated a 500-kilogram pile of ice from one end of the performance space to the other, scooping it up with a shovel and steadily carrying it bit by bit from point A to point B. As the performance description explains, with specific reference to phosphate mining in Banaba, "Back and forth, she works the open-cut mines of the past into the future of climate change; excavating the solid white rock into invisibility" (<https://newacton.com.au/events/ocean-island-mine-by-latai-taumoepeau/>). For more on this work, which is part of a genealogy of durational performance reflections from Taumoepeau's suite *Stitching (Up) the Sea*, see Mangioni, this issue.



*i-Land X-isle*, by Latai Taumoepeau, 2013. Performance, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney. Photo by Zan Wimberley.

In *i-Land X-isle*, Taumoepeau suspended herself under a block of melting ice to draw attention to the impact of climate change on island communities. For a detailed discussion of this work, see Mangioni, this issue.





*Repatriate*, by Latai Taumoepeau, 2015. Performance, Liveworks, Eveleigh, Australia. Photo by Alex Davies.

Taumoepeau's powerful work *Repatriate*, originally presented as a video installation and then restaged the same year as a live performance (pictured), draws attention to the devastating impact of rising sea levels on vulnerable communities in the Pacific Islands, including her ancestral homeland of Tonga. For a detailed discussion of both versions, see Mangioni, this issue.



*Dark Continent*, by Latai Taumoepeau, 2015. Photographic installation. Live performance commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney. Photographic performance documentation acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) and presented at the ninth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT9), Brisbane, 24 November 2018–28 April 2019. Photo by Zan Wimberley. The photographic series *Dark Continent* “documents Taumoepeau over a period of 48 hours as she slowly stretched and contorted her body into poses that enabled her to apply an artificial colouring solution to her skin, using a small electric compression gun. . . . The work explores prevailing ideas of the Australian national identity—iconic sun-bronzed, beachgoers of European heritage. Focusing on the artificial tanning of a [Pacific woman], this work [foregrounds groups] who, historically, are largely unrepresented in the national imagination. . . . The slow transformation of Taumoepeau’s skin raises questions around [racialized] markers of national identity” (QAGOMA Collection Online Beta [<https://collection-online-beta.qagoma.qld.gov.au/stories/3034/>]).



*Stitching (Up) the Sea*, by Latai Taumoepeau, 2014. Performance, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney. Photo by Katy Green-Loughrey.

In this durational performance ritual and meditation, Taumoepeau, surrounded by white sacks filled with empty glass bottles, wore brick sandals and carried an 'ike (mallet) used to beat mulberry bark into ngatu (ceremonial cloth). Over the course of the performance, she used these to crush the glass refuse into shards.

Regarding her faivā, Taumoepeau has explained:

The more ancient I am, the more contemporary my work is.

I'm not doing anything new.

When I do faivā, I perform space. When I do space, I do time—they are inseparable.

When I faivā, I do form. When I do form, I also do content—they are inseparable.

Faivā is the art of organising and performing social duties related to place, the body and environment—they are inseparable.

I am an anti-disciplinary artist. Alive today. (quoted in *22nd Biennale of Sydney Catalogue: NIRIN* [2020, 202])