

File 7
Critical Text

Written by: Abby Cunnane

**The uses of silence:
Amy Howden-Chapman's
Advice for our Aerial Ocean,
Artspace Mezzanine,
October–November 2014**

Of everything that's said, one can ask: why? (Including: why should I say that? And: why should I say anything at all?)

— Susan Sontag ¹

¹ 'The Aesthetics of Silence', *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin, 1966). This text borrows its structure from her essay; each of the numbered section headings is a sentence from her text, and all the other Sontag references are also from that essay.

On Thursday 20th August 2014 Te Awa Tupua (the Whanganui River) became a legal entity with rights of personhood under the Crown. It was appointed two guardians, one from the Crown and one from the Whanganui River iwi, with the shared role of protecting the river. Further north and a year earlier, Te Urewera (formerly Te Urewera National Park) was also made a legal entity with its own intrinsic values through the Te Urewera Act 2014, the Tūhoe-Crown settlement setting the precedent for management by a board able to act on behalf of, and in the name of Te Urewera. Within a judicial framework, both the river and the former National Park have been said to have 'gained a voice'; perhaps a more accurate representation of the situation is that they have gained the right to *redefine silence*. Not silence as invisible, or passive, or rightless — as resources are — but as an active state.

Susan Sontag's essay *The Aesthetics of Silence* enters the subject via a discussion of transcendence. She suggests that for a contemporary and secular audience art is the most active metaphor for transcendence, the 'completion of human consciousness', and that it represents an effort to resolve aching structural contradictions in the human situation. The transcendence of rational knowledge involves the elimination of existing subject, object and image distinctions: it is the pursuit of a kind of silence. She argues that pure silence — conceptual or

actual—is not possible in a world full of things, that silence is always in a dialectical relationship with these things, that in this way it remains in fact a form of speech.

Sontag's silence is appropriated here in a partial and very pragmatic form, in relation to Amy Howden-Chapman's *Advice for our Aerial Ocean*, and to her project of expanding the language available to speak and think about the natural world. Acknowledging its vitality as a fundamental kind of authority—moving beyond an exclusively economic framework of value—brings the politics of silence-as-voice into the discussion. The idea of listening. The consideration of silence and its *usefulness*.

The scene changes to an almost empty room.

1. One use for silence: certifying the absence or renunciation of thought

There are two images in Howden-Chapman's exhibition on the mezzanine, one of a large stone on the Whanganui River bed, one a view of Lake Waikaremoana in Te Urewera. Stone and water, each offers a form of silence, symbolic and actual: the one obdurate and interminable, the other ever-moving and materially elusive. The images are held inside panes of clear glass that assert their silence, stillness, and their distance from the real. The real stone, the real water, they just *are*; they are the absence of thought or feeling, they just are. The glass with the stone on it sits across a gap in the concrete floor, with a full storey drop below; it would not bear human weight, but it makes a solid fact of the absence of the floor.

Where there might be a third image, there's instead a window in the space, shifting clear to opaque and back to clear again. It might be magic or electronic, but it occurs at a pace that lulls you into not thinking about that. The view of the buildings outside is repeatedly seen and then unseen; the glass fogs as if from a breath. It's a very present kind of silence, it's like the atmosphere. It *is* the atmosphere in the real of the exhibition (and might be seen as a mediated view of the atmosphere in the real world too—a view of air, as far

as that's possible), the 'aerial ocean' of the exhibition's title. Like Te Awa Tupua, like Te Urewera, the Aerial Ocean could be recognised as a finite mass, the Aerial Ocean could be a legal personality. In the silence of its current state it is invisible, acted upon rather than active; in the economy of plans and submissions and legislation to be silent is to be non-existent. This is silence as subjugation; 'Silence exists as a *decision*', writes Sontag; 'Silence exists as a *punishment*'.

2. Another, apparently opposed, use for silence: certifying the completion of thought

On the mezzanine there are recorded voices, three people unfamiliar to each other it seems, and to enter the space and hear them is to hear your own silence in the dialogue. Listening is another kind of silence. From within this silence you can begin to establish patterns in the speech. Each voice—a young woman, an older woman, a young man—speaks in turn: one for the Whanganui River, one for the land of Te Urewera, one for the Aerial Ocean. They speak in clearly articulated single-sentence units, and in past tense, then present tense, then of a version of the future: 'The Aerial Ocean is a non-human entity, but will have the rights of a human entity.' The Aerial Ocean speaker has a low voice; it doesn't sound like she is reading; it sounds like she is tired.

'[L]anguage is the most impure, the most contaminated, the most exhausted out of all the materials with which art is made', writes Sontag. It is immaterial, critically connected to human activity, and, as speech, to the particularity of one individual. It's a vehicle for the delivery of ideas, and sometimes also where they meet the limits of expression. 'The atmosphere is a 500 kilometre thick layer of air surrounding the earth' says the Aerial Ocean speaker, and we don't really know what that means at all, where the physics end and the metaphysics begin.

Each of the speaker's statements takes a single full breath, and is read at the metre of a walking pace. The speech is bracketed by silence, which becomes another quantity in the exchange: this silence is the weight that holds the words and the images still in focus after the speech has stopped. Its weight relates also to a wider discussion about how we absorb information, how images speak or words mean or sounds convey feeling. A catch in the throat looks like an ellipsis, or does it look like the sound of walking on gravel? Simpler, does a river look like a stone through water, or moving water resisted by the irregularity of stones and bed? Reducing the means of expression as the mezzanine installation does—it is a kind of deconstructed movie, its audio and visual elements not allowed to cohere along the well-worn lines of expectation—leaves a space for the

silence, for attentiveness to the immaterial and its politics.

‘The atmosphere is an ocean. The atmosphere has currents that deliver weather to different parts of the globe’, says the third speaker. The immaterial has effects on the real in this way; we’ve rehearsed that already, through existing language. *Exogeny*, there’s a word for it: an action or force or object coming from outside a system, and altering the equilibrium of that system. Weathering, erosion, sedimentation; they change the state of things. Humans, they change the state of things; this is the Anthropocene. Anthropocene: the thought is completed in the silence of its largely unseen effects, in the rocky lithosphere, and in the atmosphere.

3. Still another use for silence: providing time for the continuing or exploring of thought

The written text is a kind of silence. Within it the words are slower, time is slower, even. With Howden-Chapman’s work there are always texts, writing to take with you where you’re going next. In this room there are two photocopied texts, and the rectangle of a mattress on the floor marking out a rectangle of time to read them in. ‘Should Trees Have Standing: Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects’ by Christopher Stone—the essay that in 1972 first introduced the idea of ascribing legal rights to natural things—begins by talking about the *unthinkable*, the specific silence of sitting outside the law. ‘Throughout history, each successive extension of rights to some new entity has been, theretofore, a bit unthinkable. We are inclined to suppose the rightlessness of rightless “things” to be a decree of nature, not a legal convention acting in support of some status quo’, Stone writes.² It’s here in the text that there’s space to follow the thought that the Aerial Ocean dialogue has begun, to try out the conceptual extent of an idea that the window—fading to opaque, clearing, clouding—the images in their glass, the mezzanine space itself, elevated and lit with cool hard-edged slants of the day outside, have begun.

² Christopher Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing: Law Morality and the Environment*, third edition (Oxford University Press, 1972), p.6.

The second text is 'Ruruku Whakatupua te Mana o te Awa Tupua—Upholding the Mana of the Whanganui River', a document containing the terms of a new legal framework for the Whanganui River system. The language is particular to legislation, as taut with intent as that of Hemingway, taut across the sparest bones of narrative. Within the silence of this second text there is a further way of continuing the thought of silence-as-autonomy, through its use of language. The legislative plan for the guardianship of Te Awa Tupua is built around a whakataukī:

*He pā kaha kua hangaia kia toitū ahakoa ngā
waipuke o te ngahuru, o te makariri me te kōanga.*

*The broad eel weir is built to withstand the
autumn, winter and spring floods.*

The metaphor of the broad eel weir underpins the conceptual direction for the whole, as well as providing cultural orientation through language. Linda Te Aho has written in her discussion of the deed for the *Māori Law Review*, 'A striking feature of both the Deed of Settlement and the River framework document is the prominence of te reo and matauranga Māori. Standard template terminology and structure such as sections devoted to a Historical Account, Cultural Redress, Commercial Redress, and so on, is nowhere to be

seen....Te Heke Ngahuru is the first autumn migration of eels, signifying well-stocked storehouses for the winter. The name is said to symbolise the potential of Te Awa Tupua to provide for all it cared for and protected as a living spiritual and physical resource.'³

³ Linda Te Aho, *Māori Law Review*, May 2014, <http://maorilawreview.co.nz/2014/05/ruruku-whakatupua-te-mana-o-te-awa-tupua-upholding-the-mana-of-the-whanganui-river/> (accessed 21 October 2014).

The eel weir, like all metaphors, furthers the possibility of the subject it accompanies. As a metaphorical image it extends the possibilities of the text, in the same way that the Ruruku Whakatupua Te Mana o te Awa Tupua text as a whole extends the possibilities of the images and audio that Howden-Chapman has set up in the space. In the transition from images to words, and from sound to silence, there is the time for continuing thought. Howden-Chapman's practice is deeply interested in the way the image and idea relate, in what changes of mind might happen in between one and the other.

The window in the space goes blank and milky, softens, and clears again.

4. Still another use for silence: furnishing or aiding speech to attain its maximum integrity or seriousness

High above the street, the concrete walled space of the mezzanine is high-ceilinged and architecturally irregular, with vertical slithers of view. The exhibition's various elements amplify this: the tall thin piece of glass levered out from the tall thin existing window, another spanning the gap in the floor with its rock—an impossible stepping stone—suspended in defiance of the thin air. The concrete wall in which the changing glass window sits makes the spare room cell-like, as does the mattress with its two texts. It's possible to name everything here in a glance; it's a room after all, not a panoramic landscape.

To be here on a late afternoon is to see the room and its works as diagram, as parts of a whole that will not be completed with words, though language is part of it. The small room-as-diagram holds within it other things: the space for an ocean of air, the idea of the end of a functional atmosphere, the carefully chosen words that delineate legal personhood. At some point in the weeks coming the scene will change, and the white-white, emulsion white, lucent-white again window will stop its changing. The temporary exhibition is a forecast of future silence. '[Silence provides] a kind of ballast', Sontag writes, a counterbalance to the inauthenticity

of language. The atmosphere is a finite resource, jeopardised by carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide, and methane. Why should one say anything at all? There aren't words to say how this will change things.

5. Silence is the precondition of speech

And it is what comes after. In contemporary discussion about the environment, and more specifically, climate change, art might be seen as a kind of silence, a breach in established language. It recognises that there is a gap between all that can be thought and all that can be said. Howden-Chapman's work suggests that in this gap might be a way of thinking of the immaterial, the unthinkable. Its 'advice' comes in the form of intermittent speech, something un-solid and yet living, in a room where the light itself seems regulated by geometry. Its advice is a summons to the silence, which is the sound of *things let be*.

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