



An exhibition response by Jamie Rhiannon Howse.

It's the middle of summer in the Wellington CBD, the footpaths are heaving with people and weeping from leaking water pipes. There's a tension from being pinched between the vertebrae of te Ahumairangi and te Ahumatairangi which puts everyone's nerves on edge. Deep below the yellow-stickered buildings, the Pacific and Australian plates tenderly embrace. The earthquake becomes a release from the tectonics of forgotten histories churning away deep below the footpaths of the city, both a physical and emotional rupture of the built environment. The genealogy of Millie Dunstall's banner installation series 'Yeah-yeah, oh-woah-oh. Baby, I need to know-oh' rides the tensions of these civil faultlines that spread along spaces private and public, hidden or memorialized.

"I got obsessed with the building site and I wanted to do an installation on it to connect with it. [...] That is until the site took it down the next morning - The site manager caught me at 8pm putting them on but I just... ignored him kind of and carried on."

Beginning as an unlawful off-site installation in 2022, the first version of YYOWOBINTKO was thirteen giant bows adorning the fence of the McKee Fehl Frederick Street site, the result was yassifying the act of vandalism. Work sites find themselves the victim of vandalism frequently, partially due to the in-betweenness of these spaces: an open place, yet closed to the public, it's a building halfway between being built and being demolished. A reproduction of the initial installation was then displayed (with permission this time) at the Fulton Hogan Depot in Lyall Bay, followed by test installs at the empty lot where the Toomath Buildings were set ablaze in 2023. One year after the installation at the Fulton Hogan Depot, YYOWOBINTKO II makes its gallery debut. With the addition of three new banners in the gallery Dunstall documents her past year of vacationing in Greece and commuting from a flat she's since moved out of. Throughout these installations, Dunstall uses symbols of the feminine, nostalgic, and famous, creating an 'icon-noclasm' of the built environment; both venerating and vandalising the construction site as a place of change and potential.

Construction plagues cities as the growing pains of civic progression. Decades-long underinvestment in the infrastructure of Wellington City has led to a slow-moving crisis

of the CBD being crammed full of heritage buildings that cannot be used for purpose, if at all. The way we refer to these structures as 'earthquake-prone' has always fascinated me. Architecture that's most vulnerable to quakes features signifiers of its place in history, the unreinforced masonry of the Toomath Buildings has a turn of the 20th century opulence that also required shipping containers for the safety of pedestrians passing by. *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present* (Basar, et al. 2015) suggests that the deep-earth-time of geological shifts has more to do with our present-day fascination with constructing history than previously thought. Basar et al. suggest the dual destabilising of the Earth's upper mantle due to climate change alongside the destabilising of one's ability to form a coherent sense of history has formed an extreme present, where all forms of temporality are flattened, virtualised, and de-narrativised.



Condition of road, Ghuznee Street [Notes from old record system: 11,13 Ghuznee Street] (2007-2009), Wellington City Archives, On '24' by Millie Dunstall, 2023.

"I think it must have been a time when I still had tik tok and musicians were going crazy trying to get their songs to trend - My hope was that my work would blow up in the same way. I couldn't even tell you the rest of the lyrics to YYOWOBINTKO because I already know all that I need to!"

Yeah-yeah, oh-woah-oh. Baby, I need to know-oh II', a Doja Cat lyric, employs the vernacular of this kind of cultural consumption, the tongue-in-cheek hope of virality that many working in creative industries play into for some form of relevancy; posterity is no longer a concern if you keep posting.

In times characterised by earthquakes, perpetual economic uncertainty, and the virtualisation of our lives the transience of the construction site, the bus commute, and the vacation create a perpetual nostalgia of vignettes from our personal histories we cannot quite fit together anymore. The construction site is debased in its materiality but it holds promise of something complete, something resembling a (w)holiness to strive towards.

Wellington construction sites feel different from the ones I've observed in Hawkes Bay or Christchurch, all cities on the faultline, slowly falling apart and into themselves. The ghosts of these structural wonders live within the city archives, not survived by photographs (who would waste camera film on construction?) but in letters, invoices, and building reports. The event of the construction site lives only in print.

Transient by nature, scaffolding's form is simultaneously separate to, and grown from the building, although it is the latter that is commemorated with an opening. The construction site is a place that's dirtied by the earth from which it springs, the building is pristine and separate – whole and stupendous in comparison to the scattered piles of disparate materials from its beginnings. Yet, the scaffolding is not memorialized in engraved metal and the excavators sit idle in lots outside of the city. For nearly a century the signed names of builders went unseen and unknown inside the pillar of Wellington's oldest standing church. Once found, only a handful of names can be traced through city records – the rest are lost to time. Like the scaffolding, the names and labour of these builders are overlooked as hidden figures of civic history: To create heritage sites that remember, the act of forgetting is required.

The only reason that Toomath's Buildings were used for the test installation of Dunstall's banners was because of the complex ecosystem of earthquake safety compliance, heritage building listings, property market downturns, (alleged) arson, and insurance fraud. The choice of moving from the construction site of *Yeah yeah, oh woah oh. Baby, I need to know-oh I* to the empty lot where the derelict-cum-arson demolition site of Toomath's Buildings stood is not lost on me.

Earthquakes, like vandalism, act like ruptures in the ecosystem of public spaces and private property. Ironically, the tension of being labelled 'earthquake-prone' for Toomath Buildings came to a head not with a natural disaster, but from arson, an act of

vandalism brought to the extreme.

“Sometimes I describe buses as whales and in a way this scene was also a whale. What I mean by this is it had mana, and it was beautiful and awe-ing but it didn’t need to be/want to be approached. Buses are whales because they look like whales and they command respect on the road.”

Dunstall’s use of icons belies an interesting relationship with sanctity and access, referring to symbols photographed as ‘whales’ to assign mana to them. In Te Ao Māori, whales not only carry mana but are vectors between abundance and rāhui: one whale beached is a generous gift from Tangaroa but a whole pod washed ashore is a bad omen. Dunstall carried this philosophy from the tapu of the Greek Orthodox church to the noa of the 24 bus route; the sacred and the commonplace are less categorically separate but exist on a spectrum of fluctuating prohibition.



‘Whale at Lyall Bay, July 1912’, Wellington City Archives, On ‘Naxos (we bought our parents bells)’ by Millie Dunstall, 2023.

The visual expressions of the work site are a contradiction, bright orange fleuro is everywhere to draw the eye—for safety reasons—yet the site is enclosed by fences to keep the public out. Banners stamped with company logos cloak these borders to offer

a capitalistic sense of modesty to a space that is irresistible to gawk at. The vandal nature of Dunstall's work rejects the sanctity of private property and her use of images as adornment of these places, with symbols that are personally and culturally sacred, creates a positive iconoclasm.

This 'icon-oclasm' is a disruption to the order of images but one that invites the eye to look upon places that Dunstall feels are overlooked. A spectrum between the iconography of tapu and noa still exists, although the spectrum is less a line that measures and more a downward spiral. This 'icon-noclasm' seen in *YYOWOBINTKO II* is the rejection of an established order, not through the destructive act of removing icons but through the destabilising act of adorning even more images, more icons, until signifiers of the sacred and commonplace become intertwined and disassociated from themselves.

"The temporary fencing returns, before something else is erected there's a moment of peace. A moment of access where I can look clearly through the fence and see the earth."

Yeah yeah, oh woah oh. Baby, I need to know-oh II is now settled within the freshly painted walls of the gallery, clean white concrete blots out natural light and the sounds of the streets barely filter in. The sheer size of the banners creates a spectacle of spatial tension, I like to imagine the tethers are keeping these artworks dormant - for now. Divorced from the sites that spurred its creation, *YYOWOBINTKO II* now asks its viewers the same question as Horace Smith's *Ozymandias*:

"What powerful but unrecorded race/ Once dwelt in that annihilated place?"
(1818).

The Wellington fault line lies dormant below us - *for now*. As we wait with bated breath for the next great rupture of our lives, be it a natural disaster, global event or personal calamity, *YYOWOBINTKO II* reminds us how change can be as beautiful as it is unexpected.

JRH<3

Ngā mihi

*Millie Dunstall
Loretta Riach
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