

*[A lyrical essay
about shapeshifting]*

Ema Tavola

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the re-alignment

Time has been moving so slowly. Minutes in the day, night-time, days into weeks. This global pause has been felt in every second of every day since the country went into lockdown.

Like a return to formal employment after a maternal leave of absence, it takes time to re-adjust to different emotional and intellectual demands. The functional productivity of each day as “normal” is redefined.





[We are new kinds of vulnerable]

My independent gallery, Vunilagi Vou, has had to relocate from a commercial premise to a privately-owned site as a result of Covid-19 and the impending recession. The decision was made swiftly, from the gut. Reducing overheads would enable something new to grow —holding out for revenue to trickle back in would be our/my demise. Change was coming, needed and non-negotiable.

The new site/form, Vunilagi Vou 2.0, will reopen on 10 October 2020 —Fiji Day.¹ The opening exhibition of the new space will be Vunilagi Vou's tenth exhibition. The day is significant... the shift is significant.

Vunilagi in Fijian language commonly refers to the horizon, but can be broken down as *vu-* meaning trunk, as in the trunk of a tree, and *-lagi* being the abbreviated version of *lomalagi*, meaning heaven. *Ni* serves to connect the two, so *vunilagi* is that which holds up the heavens. *Vou* means new.²

¹ Fiji Day commemorates both the day Fiji was ceded to Britain in 1874, and Fiji's independence from British Colonial rule in 1970.

² Kaliopate Tavola, Facebook Messenger correspondence, 8 February 2019.



The horizon, the sunset and sunrise are nostalgic clichés of outsider perspectives of the Pacific region. We participate in these clichés; to an extent, we're economically dependent on the paradise perception.

My father Kaliopate Tavola was born and raised on the volcanic island of Dravuni, in the province of Kadavu, southern Fiji, surrounded by the Great Astrolabe Reef. In recent years, he has become my collaborator, sometimes co-curator and co-blogger. Throughout this time, I have been brought closer to the *vanua* (whenua), and the idea of *Vunilagi Vou*, as a name and concept, emerged from stories shared about horizon lines, dreaming, transits and returns. I interpret the *vunilagi* as a space of infinite potential, a space of dreaming and transformation; it is a connection between the known and the unknown, the tangible and intangible, darkness and light. As the vision for a new professional platform to work from, the name Vunilagi Vou reflects the potential of contemporary Pacific art and approaches to connect communities, enabling histories, social narratives and relationships to be revealed and renewed.



Vunilagi Vou opened in May 2019 in Ōtāhuhu, South Auckland, structured as a gallery, retail space and consultancy inhabiting two adjoining shops in a nameless arcade on Great South Road. As a start-up venture, there was little to no data to demonstrate the commercial potential of such a business. The terrain of standing firmly with an agenda of decolonisation, economic empowerment and *talanoa* through exhibition making, events and advocacy is uncharted territory, filled with exceptions and few documented rules. The concept of *business* built on grant money is in itself a precarious proposition, but the kaupapa is strong.



I work with artists whose work offers a window into Pacific worlds. My lens is loving, primal, probing... conscious. I believe firmly that Pacific art is activated by Pacific minds; it becomes part of us, when we speak to it, and it speaks to us. Creating ways for art made by Pacific artists to be accessed and valued by Pacific audiences has underpinned my career and my craft since the very beginning. It is my service and my accountability, my sightline and my battleground.



the ritual: art + audience

I love making exhibitions. They are an extension and manifestation of my visual arts practice; exhibitions are my politics and my activism. They are time-crafted illustrated narratives, loaded with stories that map people and places. When activated, exhibitions have the potential to shift thinking and effect change.

The {art school—dealer gallery—public galleries—commissions} economy still feels steeped in the values of privilege and colonial power, reinforcing tired inequalities that the diversity agenda is desperately trying to consolidate. The vibration of that art world doesn't hit right out here; there is another ecology here. It has different values and struggles, different intercultural dynamics and complex notions of home, belonging and presence. In spaces where Pākehā visibility is limited, Pākehā norms are fractured and decentralised. My work as a curator shapeshifts between worlds: exhibitions bring people colliding together, but not for the spectacle or data and definitely not for the KPIs.³

³ Key Performance Indicators, such as those introduced in 2016 to measure diversity efforts for Creative New Zealand's long-term investment clients, following the release of their Diversity in the Arts Policy (2015).

² Sometimes also fucking and fighting.

The *meaning* of Pacific art is defined by Pacific audiences, and the way Pacific art is encountered in "Pacific space". The conversation that art facilitates is carefully held space where views and truths have time to swim with each other. That territory, where curators, gallerists and arts workers swim, listening and talking,² translates, transmits and embeds meaning. Here, *talanoa*—oral (and silent) exchanges, shaped by connections, closeness and context—is sacred.

the garage as shrine

Vunilagi Vou is moving to a garage, in a garden, on a suburban quarter acre piece of settled earth, grass and trees in Manukau, South Auckland. The smell of soil, mangroves and fruiting trees, and the faint murmur of heavy industry and freight trains, present a new environmental context for making exhibitions.

Lockdown brought a deafening silence, a shift in audio perception. Time became plants, rain a forced moment of rest. Sun avoided, then maximised as seasons changed. During Lockdown Level 4, I spent four weeks considering the garage as a site, and its almost twenty-year history of art making and discussion, haircutting, tattooing, parties and photoshoots.



Left Site of Vunilagi Vou 2.0

Above Tongan painter, Samiuela Napa'a painting *Homies* (2004) in the garage.

The [garage] space will be refurbished throughout winter to be ready by the spring. Already, time has taken a new form. Not rush hour and lunchtime breaks, but sunlight and the rhythms of suburbia and home. It's a shift in perception that I didn't know I needed, a return to a rhythm of home-life, whenua-self, art-people balance, stripped of capitalism.

The garage's entrance will be re-oriented; glass doors open the new space to the back of the section, leaning down to the swampy tail end of the Tāmaki Estuary. The re-orientation feels like a necessary disorienting device, to shift perception, trigger [suburban] escapism and re-focus the sightline towards the ecology of water.



home

A gallery is a simple concept: physically, a room with forgiving light, space to move, time-space for *talanoa*, seating for thinking. Vunilagi Vou 2.0, as a gallery, will necessarily share energy with the/my home, a dynamic which will undeniably redefine its terms of engagement, broadening the potential to shift and change the ways art is presented and discussed.

The concept of this space is full of romance. A realignment of the maternal, the cultural and creative bottom lines, and a re-contextualisation of the idea of creative commerce. Home is the cultural power bank. It is, theoretically, safe space in practice.

There is an integrity to domestic maternal life, a robust female energy. Home is where we encounter dreamtime and embed emotional intelligence. It's where we breathe silence with ourselves, where we rest and heal. It's where I am a parent first, and everything else falls into that rhythm.





Vunilagi Vou 2.0 is an evolved business model, a refined exhibition site, a place for gathering and dialogue, for making exhibitions with friends... an environment conducive to ideas.



The home as site redefines social inclusion. It is respite care from tiring inequalities and a political reminder of traditional ownership, whenua and settler consciousness.

In the arcade in Ōtāhuhu, I never knew what the weather was doing, or what the sky looked like: the air was always still. Capitalism can cloud creative intention too, and whilst the commerce that centres Pacific markets is uplifting and commerce is itself a flow of adrenaline-pumped highs and lows, I had created a momentum that would take me down and burn me out, cyclically, depleting my energies completely.





Like the sunrise and the sunset, and the shifting energy field of the *vunilagi*, change is inevitable, wholly confronting, momentarily disorienting, but ultimately nourishing. When Vunilagi Vou 2.0 opens for business on Fiji Day 2020, it will be recalibrated for a more sustainable trajectory. Whilst isolated from both commerce and the wider arts ecology, Vunilagi Vou 2.0 was born from isolation, birthed under the stars, whilst parenting 24/7, finding peace in a garden. I think good things will grow here.



About Ema Tavola

Ema Tavola is an independent artist-curator based in South Auckland. Having established her practice whilst managing Fresh Gallery Ōtara, a local government-funded community art gallery, Tavola's curatorial concerns are grounded in the opportunities for contemporary art to engage grassroots audiences, shift representational politics and archive the Pacific diaspora experience. Tavola has worked in galleries and museums throughout New Zealand and is committed to curating as a mechanism for social inclusion, centralising Pacific ways of seeing and exhibition making as a mode of decolonisation. She opened her independent gallery, Vunilagi Vou in 2019 in Ōtāhuhu, South Auckland.

