

## the urewera mural

*Becoming Gift and the Hau of Disappearance*

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It's midwinter in New Zealand. And at 4 am in the Te Urewera National Park, in the middle of the North Island, it's cold and it's wet. The drizzle drips on the broadleaves that dominate this remote area. As water slides slowly down the leaves, there's only silence as the unrelenting moisture soaks the earth. The two families who live at the small settlement at Lake Waikaremoana are used to silence, and the damp. Many are Ngai Tuhoë people, one of New Zealand's indigenous Maori tribes that settled in the Urewera a millennium ago.

Suddenly, an alarm disrupts the environment. The ringing wakes Aniwaniwa area manager Glenn Mitchell. He recognises it's from the Aniwaniwa Visitor Centre, on the edge of Lake Waikaremoana and just two hundred metres from his home. As he leaps out of bed, pulling on his trousers, he looks out the window and sees a car speeding away, heading west along the only through road in the national park.

Mitchell sees the broken windows of the visitor centre and a 14-square-metre gap where the *Urewera Mural* had been when he locked up the night before. All three panels, each 1.8 metres wide and 2.1 metres high, are gone.

A roadblock is set up in Ruatahuna thirty kilometres away. However, this doesn't deter a speeding yellow sedan that lunges through its gap. Later this car is found abandoned, a burnt-out wreck by the side of the road. Police stop a white van but the driver, Te Kaha, and his passenger, 17-year-old Laurie Davis, say they know nothing about the removal of a Colin McCahon artwork, the *Urewera Mural*. They are waved on, the van uninspected because its back door is jammed.

— Loss

The art world and Pakeha New Zealand were furious at the apparent loss of the *Urewera Mural*.<sup>1</sup> This canvas—forgotten for twenty years in a remote New Zealand visitors centre—was suddenly remembered.

An intense public energy reclaimed the *Urewera Mural* as 'a national treasure', one of 'New Zealand's greatest artworks' and 'arguably the single most important artwork produced in New Zealand this [twentieth] century'. Its artist, Colin McCahon (1919–1987) was bestowed such accolades as 'the pre-eminent modern Australasian painter' and 'outstanding New Zealand artist of the twentieth century' in newspapers at home and across the Tasman.

After the burnt-out getaway car was found, there were fears that the mural might be 'two million bucks of white ash'.<sup>2</sup> Had it been burnt? Was it stashed on a marae?<sup>3</sup> And how did the police—who from the outset believed it was taken by 'Maori militants' as a political act—go about finding this lost icon, this belonging that Pakeha New Zealand was now longing for?<sup>4</sup> For eighteen months the fate of the mural remained a mystery, the artwork in limbo. In July 1997, two men were arrested including Te Kaha even though the mural was still at large. The media, captivated by the story, followed it closely giving each new angle widespread—national and international—coverage.

— THEFT?

Then, in December 1998, Te Kaha and Tame Iti returned, re-presented, the mural to staff at Auckland City Art Gallery. Te Kaha claimed that he had never stolen the mural, for his intent was always to return it. Instead it was taken to show 'what it feels like to have your treasures taken off you forcibly. And to deprive you [Pakeha] of your, what you consider to be treasure, taonga.'<sup>5</sup> That is, the mural had been confiscated as retaliation against Pakeha authority in response to the appropriation of Maori land since colonisation. He added:

And I went out there, knowing full well the compensation I was going to seek was according to New Zealand law, illegal. OK? And it could get me locked up. But I thought, 'No, we can do this.' And to this day I maintain, 'Yes, I took that painting ... I didn't steal it.' You have a look, I challenge anyone to go and have a read in the dictionary, and you have a look at what the definition of the word 'steal' is, or 'theft'. You'll come to the same conclusion that me and my lawyer did, and that is 'with intention to permanently deprive' is the definition of the word 'theft' or 'steal'.<sup>6</sup>

Some New Zealand commentators support this argument using 'heist'<sup>7</sup> and 'act of terrorism'<sup>8</sup> to describe the event (the latter expression referring to the resulting media furor).

However, I prefer to use the term ‘cultural activism’ to describe the mural’s removal, because it acted as a catalyst to refocus the spotlight on specific Maori land claim issues. The *Urewera Mural* was targeted because it was portrayed as an object of white cultural value with significant representations for Pakeha. Te Kaha’s intention was for Pakeha to lose something of value and to experience how Maori have felt since colonisation when their land, their cultural value, was taken.

#### — PERFORMANCE

Stephen Muecke writes that ‘cultural activism can have the same result as political activism, but it doesn’t look the same ... It is a tactical “bringing out” of culture as a valuable and scarce “statement”’.<sup>9</sup> I suggest cultural activism is, thus, ‘performative’ political activism; for when protestors dress up and ‘perform’ their protest, a media identity is created that is beyond the political message, and so more memorable. Both activisms can be spectacles through their dramatic executions with the resulting ‘excess semiosis’ maximising public impact and debate. This was certainly the case in the staging of the mural’s disappearance. The dramatic removal, its rich cast of characters and the mystery surrounding the mural’s location inspired media coverage until well after the mural’s return and enabled the activists to position the Ngai Tahu land protest on New Zealand’s centre stage.

In the late 1960s new urban Maori, forced into the cities by economic necessity, started leveraging contemporary media to promote their issues. Influenced by airplay given to the global wave of colourful protest movements that included the anti-racist movement, women’s liberation rallies and environmental activism, they saw how extreme tactics could be used to generate media coverage and challenge governments into a response. In 1970 Nga Tamatoa—The Young Warriors—aggressively used demonstrations, petitions and media tactics to attack ‘racism and cultural imperialism’ against Maori.<sup>10</sup>

However, a Maori tradition of events involving objects of white cultural significance goes back much further. In July 1844 and again in January 1845, Maori chief Hone Heke chopped down the British flagpole to protest the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi between the British Crown and Maori. Later in the nineteenth century, Maori prophets Rua Kenana and Te Kooti also attacked cultural icons of the British Crown to garner widespread social attention.

The ‘performance’ surrounding the saga of the mural’s disappearance recalls this tradition of political activism rather than that of classic art thefts. When you consider ‘traditional’ heists, the artworks have frequently been found in places of transit: lockers, suitcases, railway stations or hotel rooms.<sup>11</sup> The police, in these cases have invariably been directed to a site, whereupon the artwork is recovered unharmed. However, with the *Urewera Mural*, the artwork was hidden—not in a place of transit—but somewhere far more permanent. It

was buried in the land itself, in the Urewera. And this is where it remained for over a year while the nation fumed and then tried to mourn. When it was recovered, it wasn’t by the police but by one of New Zealand’s wealthiest women, art collector Jenny Gibbs.

#### Unlikely liaison leads to return of painting

Auckland: An unlikely friendship between a Pakeha millionaire and two Maori radicals sealed the return of the stolen \$1.12 million Colin McCahon painting at the weekend.

Art collector Jenny Gibbs, who lives in a palatial home in Auckland’s exclusive Paritai Drive, said she squeezed her eyes tightly shut and put her hands over her face as she was driven to a secret location on Saturday. The *Urewera Mural* was then put in the back of her car and immediately taken to Auckland City Art Gallery.<sup>12</sup>

Gibbs says she became involved after Te Kaha and Tame Iti approached her for help, knocking on the door of her multimillion dollar mansion one morning. This ‘unlikely liaison’ was another angle that journalists couldn’t resist especially when the friendship between the activists and Gibbs continued.

The event—the artist, the artwork, the activists and accomplice, the action, the extras—can be read as a cross-cultural performance and a significant moment for the new hybrid New Zealand. The activists themselves were vivid characters: in particular Te Kaha’s accomplice, Tame Iti, who has been a highly distinctive figure in Maori protests since the gestation of Nga Tamatoa.<sup>13</sup> He wears a moko, a full facial Maori tattoo and his protests usually receive intense media coverage for their ‘unique staging’. (In 1995, for example, Tame Iti used an official Waitangi Day celebration to bare his buttocks at the governor general.) The point is that the vanishing of the *Urewera Mural* was in every sense an aesthetic disappearance—an aesthetic object removed in an aesthetic performance.

#### — MOTIVATION

Te Kaha said another motivation was to raise the issue of Maori compensation for colonial land expropriations:

I decided that I would get together a little group of people, an ope taua. Some people would call it a war party but it’s not. In actual fact it’s a compensation party because ope taua is not after blood. We are just going out to get compensation. Another word for ‘compensation’ is utu. Now compensation can come in the form of intellectually you understand how I feel, so I do an action to you which makes you aware of how I’ve been feeling. Or I can take something that belongs to you, or I can go and do something that will affect you, which will satisfy me in some small measure.<sup>14</sup>

The clear implications are that the mural's disappearance was a response to past actions by Pakeha that removed Ngai Tuhoe's and Maori heritage—that is their ancestral land. In the 1920s, Ngai Tuhoe lost 56,000 acres of tribal land with 65 per cent of this still owned by the New Zealand Conservation Department.<sup>15</sup> However, one key difference between Te Kaha's temporary appropriation of the mural and the confiscation of Maori land is that white settlers had no intention of returning what they had taken. Another is that New Zealand settlers had significant exchange value for their newly owned land—including an exponentially inflated resale value such as the case when the Crown sold tribal land for eight thousand times the price they had 'paid' Ngati Whatua tribe in 1896.<sup>16</sup> The Maori activists, on the other hand, had no use or exchange potential for the artwork.

#### — LAND AS CULTURAL VALUE

My word is simple. Save the land and the people.

Te Kooti<sup>17</sup>

The cultural value that Maori and Pakeha give to land is significantly different and central to Maori protest. Just as the *Urewera Mural* is not just 'any artwork' for Pakeha, so is land not just 'any piece of dirt' for Maori. It is a specific place, the home of a tribe representing for each tribal member the past, future and present that is their cultural identity.

It was the removal of the mural that was of most importance, not the possession of the artefact. For the absence of the mural refocused attention on Maori land rights, under threat again since the 1980s when new government legislation allowed the transfer of New Zealand's state-owned assets into private ownership.<sup>18</sup> These assets included state-owned land, fisheries and forestries, many at the time under Maori claim and still accessed by Maori through a shared government understanding linked to the Treaty of Waitangi. Once sold, the government vanquished any rights of ownership and thereby cut traditional Maori links to their lands and assets.

This was a key factor in a new wave of Maori protest that was connected to both land and culture and to the right to belonging through cultural recognition. The government formed Petrocorp to privatise New Zealand oil and gas production. The Taranaki Maori tribes challenged. The government introduced the Fisheries Act—to sell off New Zealand fishing rights. Maori coastal tribes challenged. The government sold off New Zealand Forestries. The tribes protested. Most Maori protest and court cases were unsupported by the government. When the Tainui tribe, in order to retain their coal licences in the future, challenged and won their case against Coalcorp (the private enterprise that took over New Zealand's coal mines), the government accused judges of 'usurping the ultimate constitutional

authority of the elected government'.<sup>19</sup> When a local government compulsorily acquires your (recently regained) ancestral land for a sewerage disposal unit, their reverse claim asked the question linked to all these actions: What sort of respect is given to indigenous 'belonging'?<sup>20</sup>

At the centre of this storm of protest was the definition of Maori sovereignty or *te tino rangatiratanga o te iwi Maori*, misinterpreted by New Zealand's colonial governments since the signing of the 1840 treaty between the colonised and the colonisers. Pakeha translated *te tino rangatiratanga* simply as 'sovereignty' but its definition for Maori is far more extensive and includes the 'absolute authority of the Maori people collectively over their lives and their resources'.<sup>21</sup> That is—in Pakeha terms—economic, political, spiritual and cultural autonomy. Although Maori recognised the sovereignty of Queen Victoria when signing the 1840 Treaty, they believed reciprocal recognition of their own sovereignty and the Maori way of life 'would continue and be guaranteed'.<sup>22</sup> This, as history shows, was not the case and so in 1997 Maori were still requesting *te tino rangatiratanga* and the return of their land.

This was the environment in which the activists took the artwork. They wanted to force an acknowledgment of their own loss. Pakeha New Zealand, in a state of shock, saw the 'theft' of the mural as petty retribution and was largely unable to analyse this motivation.

#### — COLIN MCCAHON

Just as controversial government legislation was the background for the *Urewera Mural*'s disappearance, so was it also the backdrop for Colin McCahon when, in 1974, he accepted the commission by the Urewera National Park Board to create an artwork for the new Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre. Protest from urbanised Maori had forced the Pakeha-dominated government to instigate a pragmatic policy shift to confront a potentially divisive and volatile situation. As a result the monocultural state shifted from its 'singular universal framework' to a bi-cultural framework. Maori culture was made part of school curricula, official documents were written in both English and Maori, the Waitangi Treaty was returned to the national agenda, and Maori oral history and tribal knowledge was given authority in land claim cases.<sup>23</sup>

This defining new social and cultural shift was outside the frame as McCahon created *Urewera Mural*. The work's layering of references to land and belonging reflect the new government policy that sought to 'liberate the [Waitangi] treaty from the colonial mentality'.<sup>24</sup> Architect John Scott had recommended the theme for McCahon's commission to be 'the mystery of Man in the Urewera' and McCahon used this phrase to refer to Ngai Tuhoe, the Maori tribe who today are still the main people of this region.<sup>25</sup>

Stephen Muecke describes the politicisation of landscape in his essay 'A Landscape of Variability' and here defines cultural representation in this context as:

... the 'wide brown land' gathered and bought into the orbit of perception: framed as a landscape painting or photograph ... The cultural representation of a country has, no doubt, an aesthetic dimension, but the beauty thus created also has a political force.<sup>26</sup>

The *Urewera Mural* as 'cultural representation' is not only landscape in style but also in meaning. Tracing the mural's themes from inside its frame to the greater outside one can see how they participate as a political force both from a Maori and Pakeha 'orbit of perception'.

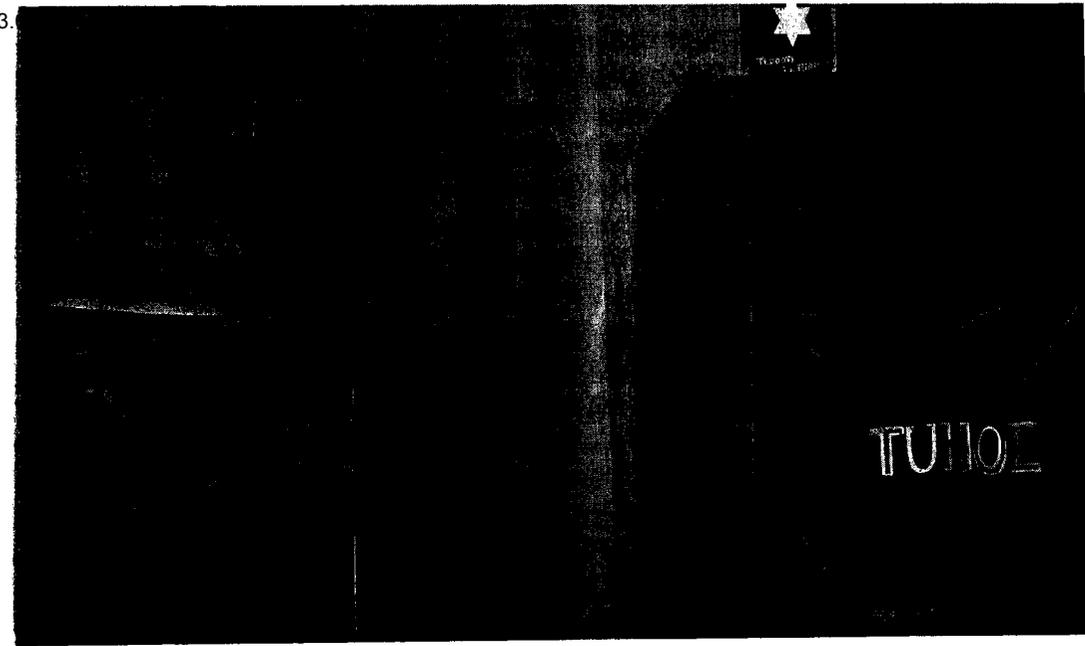
#### — INSIDE THE MURAL

The mural is a large triptych, framed by the reaches of its paint rather than the border of a traditional outer frame. A large wall is needed to mount the mural in order for spectators to achieve perspective on this visually compelling work, its background plastered with McCahon's signature greens and browns, the colours of New Zealand recognisable to anyone who has driven through its rural countryside. This muddy colour scheme gives the impression of a dark rich earth and foliage merging into one, a joining of two parts that might be read as the two co-habiting peoples of New Zealand.

A tree trunk, comprising merging shades of fawn, moves up the central panel before branching across and seemingly 'pushing' the painting's top frame upwards and outwards. The words 'tane' and 'atua' span the trunk's base as McCahon uses Maori legend to substantiate Maori 'ownership' of the landscape. Tane is the god of the forests and Tane atua, the place where his spirit resides.<sup>27</sup>

The top half of the left panel takes words from a Maori poem. *Maungapohatau* signifies the sacred mountain of the Tuhoe ancestors and *Ko Tuhoe Te Iwi* translates as the Tuhoe people. In naming primary human ancestors and past ancestors of Ngai Tuhoe, McCahon summons their spirits from outside the frame. Maori prophets Te Kooti (1830–1893) and Rua Kenana (1869–1937) are acknowledged here also, both leaders of the Tuhoe people following visions from God revealing Tuhoe as the chosen people and the Urewera as the Promised Land.<sup>28</sup>

This use of text is a common motif in many of McCahon's works, a literal strategy where he 'splices' words from an external 'real' context and displaces them into his art. McCahon's choice of literal 'text', Maori subject matter and subsequent performative signification have been central to the mural's cross-cultural controversy since its gestation. After McCahon completed his commission, the Urewera National Park Board requested changes. McCahon rejected these because he felt they over-glorified Tuhoe.<sup>29</sup> Eventually a compromise was reached with some alterations to the artwork, but at one point McCahon threatened to forget the commission and sell the painting on the dealer market.



Ambiguously the montage reassembles borrowed signifiers, disseminating them into a new setting so that the signifiers become 'remotivated within the system of the new frame'.<sup>30</sup> The choice of words and their ambiguity still causes friction between Maori and Pakeha readings.

The most controversial is the highly suggestive text in both side panels that proclaims Maori ownership of the Urewera. The right panel has the loudest statement and here, stamped in boldest and biggest letters is the text:

Tuhoe  
Urewera  
The land

This use of 'the land' indicates Tuhoe as a third party to a first party 'other'. Gregory O'Brien argues that this acts as a public sign 'reminiscent of the classic [Pakeha] farm-gate notice with its hand-painted imperative to "KEEP OUT" or "SHUT THE GATE"'.<sup>31</sup> Its English language suggests an English-speaking intruder is being told to stay away which might be interpreted as Pakeha who are challenging Tuhoe sovereignty.

Inside the frame is the Urewera, historically Tuhoe land. Outside are the challengers to Tuhoe sovereignty, aka Pakeha who appropriated and confiscated this land. The mural's imperative confronts the intruders and these implications still spill from the edges of the unframed canvas, into the landscape it represents and greater New Zealand. The mural itself acts as a catalyst of cross-cultural exchange between Maori and Pakeha, affirming its significance as the specific artwork that was taken by the activists.

Colin McCahon, *Urewera Mural*, 1975. Crown Copyright, Department of Conservation, New Zealand

#### — AMBIGUOUS MESSAGING

It is not the text of the mural alone that has been controversial, but also the motivation and identity of its Pakeha artist, Colin McCahon. Integral to the mural's representation is McCahon's identity as a white New Zealander, at first ignorant of Maori but later referencing their culture in his art during the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>32</sup> Using Maori material, he created artefacts of immense cultural value, although as a Pakeha artist he was arguably appropriating Maori themes for his own gain.

McCahon's messaging, in parallel with 1970s bi-cultural government policy, was often confusing. Even the mural's overall themes are ambiguous, 'belonging' to neither Maori or Pakeha, nor wholly definable as Maoritanga nor Pakeha culture.<sup>33</sup> Gordon Brown, author of McCahon's definitive biography, cautions critics who believe McCahon's use of Maori materials indicates a 'strong empathy' for indigenous issues. He writes that McCahon was a pragmatic artist who demonstrated 'the independence to seek out what best suited his own artistic purpose ... His approach was Western, free thinking, occasionally fallible.'<sup>34</sup> Brown also suggests that McCahon consciously reworked Maori 'images and ideas into viable symbols, even if their use upset what was established "correctness"'.<sup>35</sup>

One Pakeha art critic, Neil Rowe, argues the exact opposite and uses highly romanticised language to describe the mural when he writes how:

... in this smoulderingly beautiful painting McCahon depicts the brooding majesty of the Urewera country and also the inseparable bond between the people and the land which is the very essence of Maoritanga and which should be the heritage of all New Zealanders.<sup>36</sup>

Rowe's position from which he determines 'the essence of Maoritanga' is questionable. As perhaps is mine. For as Pakeha, we must be careful of our centre of reference when using the term 'all New Zealanders' and ensure it is not only our own Pakeha culture's coding of bi-culturalism. In contrast to Rowe, many Maori certainly do not read the mural's subject matter as bi-cultural but see it as pragmatic cultural appropriation. Here, Maori artist Ngahiraka Mason challenges any notion of McCahon as a voice for Tuhoe and Maori:

When I first saw the painting [*Urewera Mural*] in real life, it didn't have much impact on me and I wondered, you know, I thought, 'Oh yes, OK, that's McCahon's painting'. It doesn't speak to me in the same way that a waiata (Maori song) about the land would speak to me. It doesn't pinpoint, for me, where the kiwis run, you know what I mean? Actually the [McCahon's] landscape is so denuded of forestation that it seems kind of weird, you know, because it doesn't look like people belong to this place. When you have somebody else that speaks for you, it's really hard to assert your own idea of who you are.<sup>37</sup>

This is not an isolated view among Maori. Pou Temara, Senior Lecturer in Maori Studies at Victoria University, says the mural represents nothing of his cultural landscape. He writes that the 'primal sense of belonging and affinity with the land cannot be illustrated by McCahon's Te Urewera which is devoid of those elements which are meaningful to me'.<sup>38</sup> While Pakeha critics suggest that McCahon does indeed capture this, the above quotations suggest that Maori see something quite different in the mural. Contradictory interpretations frame interpretations of the mural as cultural representation and reiterate the problems and misunderstanding that occur when one culture extends its own value system into speaking on behalf of another.

#### — THE MURAL: COMMODITY OR GIFT?

*Taonga* is the Maori word for a precious object or gift and this term was publicly appropriated to describe the artwork's value across both cultures. However, the categorisation of the mural as commodity or gift, *taonga* or artefact is central to its cultural controversy. For Maori did not accept the mural as *taonga* or gift when it was first presented in 1976 at the opening of the new Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre. In fact, the mural and the visitors centre were more reminders of what had been taken from Maori in the Urewera.

A commodity is generally accepted as that which can be purchased or has exchange value. A gift, however, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: 'Something, the possession of which is transferred to another without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent'.<sup>39</sup> John Frow suggests that other definitions give far more ambiguity to a gift's status and are more centrally linked to a question of 'mutual obligation'. It is this question of 'the return on and of the gift'<sup>40</sup> that supports the notion that the mural's recent journey is linked to its becoming *taonga*. McCahon was paid NZ\$4000 upon completion of the *Urewera Mural* and it was gifted in a sense, along with the visitors centre, by the New Zealand government to its citizens. National parks by definition are for all citizens, and the Te Urewera National Park is magnificent land to be given. The park contains the largest stand of native forest in the North Island and covers over 200,000 fertile and beautiful acres.

In Maori culture, I suggest that three key Maori words linked to the concept of gift form a significant triad. These are *taonga*, *hau* and *mana*. A gift or *taonga* is given and accepted. Yet, when that *taonga* is passed on again to a third party, the recipient must return its own thank-you gift to the second giver. This return is called the *hau* of the gift and Maori define this as the actual force or energy of the thing gifted that compels the recipient to make a return.<sup>41</sup> In traditional Maori culture, the concept of economic profit is inappropriate and a return must be passed up the line towards the original giver. As Maori elder Tamati Ranaipiri once explained (in an often quoted example), 'if this second *taonga* was kept for myself I might become ill' even die'.<sup>42</sup> So, rather than a straight reciprocal transaction, a flow can

be seen happening *and* a system operating whereby interest is paid on whatever was given initially. This conditional return connected to the gift contradicts the definition above of something given 'without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent'. And maybe this is a key to where cross-cultural misunderstanding began between Maori and Pakeha, for the circumstances in which New Zealand government came to own such a bounty in order to bestow such a 'gift' is another of New Zealand's contradictions. No bounties were returned when Maori gave up their taonga, their land, freely or otherwise to the colonial government. In the Urewera this was once Tuhoe land and whilst Tuhoe now own just 15 per cent of their original land, the manner of its removal is not forgotten.

The Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre is a place for visitors to the national park—a group consisting mainly of Pakeha travellers and foreigners. But the irony cannot be mistaken—that is, the *Urewera Mural* issues the imperative 'Keep Off our (Tuhoe) Land' whilst residing in a place that invites visitors to explore further.

Derrida writes that the gift is an impossibility. For there to be a gift, he says 'there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt'.<sup>43</sup> National parks and visitors centres must be defined as impossible gifts, as they are, indeed, a return for something previous taken. So, if the visitors centre is as the return or bounty for receipt of the initial gift of land, then the indebtedness in New Zealand is still clearly on the part of Pakeha. For what sort of return is a visitors centre and artwork in exchange for the cultural value of a tribe that was represented in their land? According to Chris Gregory, 'In giving objects to another "a man gives", in addition, "himself", and he does so because he owes himself—himself and his possessions—to others'.<sup>44</sup>

A taonga is taonga because it has mana, that is, sovereign power or prestige. And mana, I argue, is the third important factor in the triad linked to 'gift' for Maori. Frow writes that an 'increase in mana [comes] through long association with high ranking families (*rangatira*)', and it is this history and its significance that makes it taonga, travelling with it when given as a gift.<sup>45</sup> It is *only* through this lineage of ownership by rangatira that an artefact gains mana and can become taonga. (In the nineteenth century, Maori wars were often fought solely for the mana contained by an object.) So, the value of taonga comes from the cumulative social and cosmological identities of past owners and, as we know, the mural had—until its disappearance—only one home.<sup>46</sup> Understanding this makes it clear why the mural could not be categorically classified as taonga by Pakeha or Maori, for it had not been imbued with mana. That is, the mural had no association with Maori sovereignty—high ranking families or otherwise, nor had it a history of ownership. Lastly it is arguable whether the mural could even be classified as gift if the recipients (Maori in the Urewera) denied its acceptance.

Linking back to the activists, granting of mana is not limited to an object and can also be 'claimed tribally by one person through a series of actions, which all convey multivalent

meanings to a watching Maori audience'.<sup>47</sup> So, perhaps the disappearance of the mural can also be interpreted as a contemporary attempt by Tame Iti and Te Kaha to build their own legendary status in the tradition of past Maori leaders such as Te Kooti and Rua Kenana. Just as historical and social narratives acknowledge these figures, so too have Tame Iti and Te Kaha created their own myth through a narrative style of 'cultural activism', copying the non-violent tradition of past leaders while incorporating new philosophical frameworks.

Although the primary objective of the activists was to refocus public awareness on Maori land rights and compensation, there was a more culturally significant result. When the activists took the mural, it had been gathering dust for twenty years tacked up on the walls of a remote New Zealand visitors centre, only noticed by park wardens as they typed up hut permits for visiting trampers. It was out of cultural circulation. The story of its removal and return reconnected it within the bi-cultural framework of the larger social and political world. After its return, the mural's status had shifted from being valued only by Pakeha to holding cultural importance as taonga within both communities.

#### — BECOMING TAONGA

It was never appropriate for Pakeha to attribute the mural with taonga value on behalf of Maori as such valuations can rarely cross the cultural gap between indigenous and western value systems. The artwork was never seen as something special by Maori.

Extensive anthropological scholarship on the performance of exchange in indigenous cultures largely focuses on comparing commodity exchange to gift exchange using terms such as inalienable wealth and alienable wealth. However, whether it's *tabua* (whale teeth) or kula shells in Papua New Guinea, Nicholas Thomas writes that the mana or status of these objects is inherently unstable and it is only the recipient, who through association, can make the gift sacred or tapu.<sup>48</sup> The mural's cultural value for Pakeha was largely connected in the western sense to its creator, Colin McCahon. Yet, as mentioned above, for important Maori artefacts and traditional taonga, it is the recipient, not the producer, who is principal in determining the signification of an object as gift.

Contrast this to the permanently stable meaning of tribal land for Maori. Prior to invasion, land was outside the sphere of gift and commodity exchange for Maori; it was the place to live, it was identity.<sup>49</sup> However, when white people came with their new objects and conflicting cultural values, land was forced away from its permanent collective ownership and into a paradigm of exchange that Maori had only experienced with commodities or artefacts. When these inequitable transactions took place, ancient tribal land became another *transaction commodity*, without mana, without association.<sup>50</sup> This 'commodity status' is what I argue the mural had before it disappeared in 1997. However, upon its return, as a result of its journey, the mural's status shifted from simply 'painting' to precious cultural artefact.

Ironically the Maori activists had 'gifted' something back to Pakeha by removing the mural and then returning it to circulation. This re-presentation to the public facilitated the mural's becoming taonga for both Maori and Pakeha.

Park ranger Glenn Mitchell comments on this shift in status saying the mural '(was) pretty much a Pakeha painting before it was taken but they (Tuhoe) do feel some ownership towards it now and realise it means something to them'.<sup>51</sup> This 'something', I suggest, is connected to the new mana emanating from the work and the new narrative it now contains. Judith Binney writes that in these stories 'is the knowledge of the past, which lies in front, woven onto the warp of the future that is unknown. The narratives transmit moral truths even as they are reworked in the hands of each and every narrator for their times.'<sup>52</sup>

#### DEFACEMENT

Immediately following its disappearance, literally overnight, the painting was elevated to the status of a cultural icon with McCahon's estate representative, Martin Brown, suggesting that all New Zealanders should feel violated by the loss: 'I would describe the theft as an act of cultural sacrilege. It's a shocking thing and any New Zealander with any sensitivity would think likewise.'<sup>53</sup> In categorising the removal as sacrilege he implied the mural's cultural status was that of a sacred icon. However, I argue it only became this *because* of its removal.

Michael Taussig describes sacrilege as occurring when an object is elevated to the sacred through defacement invoking the suitably Hegelian notion of the 'labour of the negative'.<sup>54</sup> Contemporary western culture, Taussig argues, has evolved so that an object or place only becomes sacred when its current being is defaced, altered or shifted.<sup>55</sup> He gives examples suggesting that 'when the human body, a nation's flag, money, or a public statue is *defaced*, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself'.<sup>56</sup>

Using Taussig's thesis, I argue that the negative act of the non-consensual removal of this artwork not only re-valued it culturally and fiscally but elevated its status beyond 'important artwork' and into the realm of the contemporary sacred. The artist wasn't venerated in the same way, but the mural, when recovered in August 1998, was welcomed by the general public of New Zealand like a prodigal son. It was a rebirth, of a sort. Although the mural was never physically damaged, it was desecrated both by the surprise appropriation and violent re-framing, which occurred from the act itself and by the subsequent media and public frenzy. In being 'defaced' and removed from its static background, it was re-recognised and elevated by public and art critics to the status of a sacred object.

So is the *Urewera Mural* now actually taonga? When it was removed in June 1997, its status shifted overnight from a (almost forgotten) commodified display item to an object in circulation. The gift value of kula, potlatch and the concept of hau are all linked to circula-

tion. As objects gain a story or history they become taonga and attain hau that is passed on when the object is transferred. If we look at the *Urewera Mural* we can see that with its disappearance and return it began a journey and acquired a history within the reference points for Maori cultural value. This new connection shifted it towards the status of taonga for Maori as the power of hau is now imbued. The mural is 'becoming taonga'. By taking the mural the Maori activists 'gifted' the Pakeha community an artefact of cross-cultural value. The mural, which was a commodity, attained mana and is now recognised by both Maori and Pakeha as one of New Zealand's treasures.

*Ko maru kai atu*  
*Ko Maru kai mau*  
*Ka ngohe ngohe*<sup>57</sup>

#### — OF A HYBRID CULTURE

Rather than forcing the mural into belonging to one or other culture, I suggest its stage is the interface of Maori-Pakeha culture—or what Homi Bhabha calls the 'third zone'.<sup>58</sup> Neither Pakeha- nor Maori-centric this zone can be seen to represent New Zealand's new hybrid culture that has resulted from the merging of both these 'ways of life'. It's in this space that new forms have been created and the positive representations of Maori and Pakeha bi-culturalism can be seen. Postcolonial discourse refers to the treatment of cultural hybridity as a 'superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of inbetween-ness, the straddling of two cultures and consequent ability to negotiate the difference'.<sup>59</sup> When referring to New Zealand's contemporary representations of culture I consciously invoke this negotiation and the concept of 'hybridity' that results from 'the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (the *Other*) within a singular universal framework, but then fails producing something new'.<sup>60</sup>

The mural is one of the new forms that have resulted from New Zealand's evolving hybrid culture as seen in the media, on television and in the news, and represented in arts and literature. It's here, in this 'hybrid culture', rather than bi-culture or bi-dualism, that one can assess the mutual sense of 'both/and' in Maori and Pakeha relations and how it 'acknowledges and negotiates not only difference but affinity'.<sup>61</sup> Yet, the mural can be read as a meta-text simultaneously on Maori in New Zealand, on Pakeha and Maori relationships, and on cross-cultural perspective. The ambiguous 'belonging' of the mural to neither 'Maori' nor 'Pakeha' (each professed it as being most meaningful to the other) supports this argument.

One can see that hybridity has resulted in New Zealand, despite 'the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity' by the colonial government.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly this inbetween-ness is reinforced even in the mural's

geographical home in the heart of the Urewera, at the Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre. This is a third space for it presents Maori within the context of the western concept of a visitors centre, while on Maori land yet at the gateway for the visitor. It is on the edge of the new experience that brings visitors to the Urewera. The mural's disappearance in 1997 was used by Maori to show Pakeha how it felt on the other side of the fence. What it is like to have something one values taken.

#### — THE RETURN

Stolen Mural will return to Urewera

The \$2 million *Urewera Mural* will be returned to the Department of Conservation visitor centre from where Maori activists stole it.

(The Minister of Conservation) Dr Nick Smith said: 'The painting is about the Tuhoe people and their association with the land. I think it is appropriate that it is sited at the Visitor's Centre.'<sup>63</sup>

It wasn't until September 2000 that the *Urewera Mural* finally returned to the Urewera.

Spear attack mars McCahon mural return

Television New Zealand is laying a complaint with police after Maori activist Tame Iti attacked a camera with a taiaha.

Tame Iti turned on the cameraman after confronting fellow Tuhoe activist Te Kaha just before the official reinstatement of Colin McCahon's *Urewera Mural* at the Department of Conservation's Aniwanuiwa visitor centre at Lake Waikaremoana.<sup>64</sup>

On the day of the mural's official homecoming to an especially refurbished gallery, Tame Iti and a Tuhoe welcoming party congregated outside the Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre. Others including Geoff Parks waited also, watched by television cameras, anticipating the return of the *Urewera Mural* back to its home where it would be displayed alongside official Tuhoe taonga under the permanent eye of new security cameras.

As this official party waited for the special guest, conservation minister Sandra Lee, Te Kaha, Tame Iti's one time cohort, arrived with a protest group. Positioning themselves across the road from the formal gathering, the protestors began waving signs and Te Kaha angrily called out:

We're not here to rain on your parade—Tame Iti already did that. The painting does not celebrate the union of Tuhoe people and the New Zealand people. It doesn't matter who they send here, whether she wears a white face or a brown face. It's the same policy.<sup>65</sup>

His words were drowned out by singing in the official party but Tame Iti, furious at the spectacle, 'picked up a wooden taiaha and smacked Te Kaha over the head with it. Then he whacked the TV3 cameraman.'<sup>66</sup> Of course, this engaging spectacle was reported on national television news adding to the surplus narrative around the *Urewera Mural*.

#### — THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL VALUE

When the mural was returned by the activists, both its cultural and fiscal value had increased significantly. It had become cultural mana for Maori and for Pakeha. Its market value had almost doubled to NZ\$2 million. I suggest that this was because it was now in circulation, having re-entered the cultural economy. While the painting stayed still, fixed on the wall of a visitors centre in a minor national park, it had stopped growing in value. It was a forgotten artefact, gone from cultural consciousness of Pakeha, the *valuers* and Maori, the represented subject. Upon its return, the mural was exhibited at public art galleries throughout New Zealand where tens of thousands of Pakeha paid it homage and official Maori ceremonies welcomed it across the country.

The mural is a piece of material culture with cultural value within an economic framework, and economic value within a cultural framework. As a purely marketable canvas, the mural might be seen as a commodity, something with exchange value due to its financial valuation. I argue that for something to have cultural value it has to be in circulation, remembered, acknowledged. The *Mona Lisa* may be permanently on exhibition at the Louvre but it retains its cultural value because in reality it is still in circulation through its plethora of representations—postcards, photocopies and bastardised copies. Distributed around the world, this reinforces the legend of this famous artwork. In fact, Darian Leader suggests it was the theft of this artwork in 1911 that cemented its revered status today as the world's most famous artwork.<sup>67</sup> In order to be remembered it had to be displaced and with the *Urewera Mural*, we see this same dynamic. When the *Urewera Mural* was removed and literally returned to circulation, its journey through the hands of its many cultural stakeholders increased its mana and cultural value.

Remarkably (and aptly for such a prodigal son) the mural's journey left it undamaged and it was rehung in the Urewera with the increased security befitting such a treasure. In 2000, Tuhoe sanctified the mural's inclusion in its permanent collection of Tuhoe taonga held at the visitors centre, an act acknowledging the mana that the mural had attained and its new status as taonga. While the value of the mural undeniably increased as a result of its journey and 'sacrilisation', it was also its ability to traverse borders, its multiple meanings, readings and signification for both cultures that enhanced its cultural value. More interesting, though, than the passive act of being 'read', the mural has been an active catalyst for protest and interaction at the interface of the cultures.

When an object criss-crosses cultural borders its worth can change radically—especially when, as in this case of the Urewera Mural, the artefact has high aesthetic or spiritual value. Artworks are one representation of cultural value in a society but as with the Urewera Mural, different collective cultural identities can determine different cultural value. When the mural disappeared its whole meaning was reassessed, revalued and in this process its cultural value was not only restored but also enhanced.

The actions of Te Kaha and Tame Iti reiterate both where Maori culture has come from and perhaps also suggest a future direction for the whole culture. Land issues may be the focus of contemporary Maori protest but it is perhaps the act of protest itself that propels the culture ahead. The mural has become a talisman for the process of renewal, a representative and dynamic symbol—taonga. It sits between the cultures as a signifier of cross-cultural difference and a reminder to respect this. It is a precious object through its own 'becoming'.

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1. Pakeha is the name given by Maori to white people and is generally used to describe non-indigenous white New Zealanders. Its literal translation is 'strangers'.
2. Don Farmer, 'Painting Not Cared For', *Wairarapa Times*, 5 June 1997.
3. The marae is literally the courtyard in front of an ancestral Maori meeting place and is a symbol of tribal identity and solidarity. However in contemporary usage it refers to where Maori gather.
4. David Barber, 'Two Charged, but Masterpiece Still Missing', *Auckland Herald*, 26 June 1997.
5. Ian Walker, 'The Paint Job', *Background Briefing*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Radio National, 11 April 1999.
6. Walker.
7. Geoff Parks, curator at Te Papa, Museum of New Zealand, email interview with Isabel McIntosh, 6 July 2001.
8. Mark Williams, 'The Touch of Man: Strange Encounters in the Ureweras', conference paper at 'Terror in the Arts: Changing Views of Political Violence in Literature and the Arts', University of Canterbury, August 2000.
9. Stephen Muecke, 'Cultural Activism, Indigenous Australia, 1972–1994', in Kuan-Hsing Chen (ed.), *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1998, pp. 299–300.
10. *Tamatoa* is the Maori word for warriors and this group, Nga Tamatoa, were a significant influence on young Maori to get involved in Maori protest in the 1970s.
11. Here, I am referring to what might be deemed four of the great art thefts of the past one hundred years and using information from an unpublished essay by Ashley Hay, University of Technology, Sydney, 1996. The four thefts referred to are the theft of Munch's *The Scream* from the National Gallery in Oslo, Norway, 1994—reclaimed after police disguised as art buyers met the conduits in a hotel room; the theft of Picasso's *Weeping Woman* from the National Art Gallery of Victoria in 1986—found in a locker at a Melbourne railway station; the disappearance of William Dobell's *Souvenir* from the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney—then left unharmed in a locker at Sydney's Mitchell Library; and the heist of the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre, Paris in 1911—eventually returned unharmed in a suitcase.
12. New Zealand Press Association (NZPA), 'Unlikely Liaison Leads to Return of Painting', 31 August 1998.
13. Tame Iti was also a foundational member of the Maori Liberation Front in the 1970s. In 1995 he set up the Tuhoe Embassy in the middle of Taneatua, a Urewera township, and gained national attention after issuing eviction notices to Pakeha landowners on traditional Maori land in the area.
14. Walker.
15. There are claims before the Waitangi Tribunal, the government body that addresses land claims issues, but this is an extenuated process sometimes taking decades.
16. Te Roopu Whakamana I te Tiriti o Waitangi/Waitangi Tribunal Orakei Report, 1987, p. 2.
17. Te Kooti in a public address at Otorohanga, 15 April 1891.
18. New Zealand prime minister, David Lange (1984–89), and his finance minister, Roger Douglas, were the instigators of the round of legislation that enabled this.
19. Jane Kelsey, *A Question of Honour? Labour and the Treaty 1984–1989*, Allen and Unwin New Zealand, Wellington, 1990, p. 222.
20. Manganui Claim by Ngati Kahu tribe, 1988.
21. Kelsey, p. 5.
22. Kelsey, p. 5.
23. Kelsey, p. 57.
24. Kelsey, p. 65.
25. *Urewera Mural—Colin McCahon*, Te Urewera National Park promotional material, New Zealand Department of Conservation, July 2000.
26. Stephen Muecke, 'A Landscape of Variability', in Martin Thomas (ed.), *Uncertain Ground: Essays between Art and Nature*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1999, pp. 45–60.
27. In Maori legend, Tane was also one of the children who pushed apart their parents Ranginui and Papatuanuku to form earth and sky. McCahon symbolises this separation using the visual impact of the tree pushing the top of the painting or sky away from the base—an effect that also creates a sense of space within the work.
28. Circa 1906, Rua Kenana established 'New Jerusalem' at Maungapohatau (his birthplace and a remote location in the Urewera) and this became a thriving community until destroyed by Pakeha police in 1916 in another conflict over land ownership.
29. *Urewera Mural—Colin McCahon*.
30. Gregory Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism' in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modernism*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983, pp. 84–5, as quoted by J. Tucker in 'The Parergon in The Draughtsman's Contract' on <[www.uta.edu/huma/enculturation/2\\_1/tucker.html](http://www.uta.edu/huma/enculturation/2_1/tucker.html)>, downloaded 20 July 2001.
31. Gregory O'Brien, 'McCahon: A View from the Urewera', City Gallery promotional material, City Gallery, Wellington, 1999.
32. The catalyst for this shift, perhaps, was the marriage of McCahon's daughter to a Maori man in 1964. This new 'relationship' gave McCahon entry to New Zealand's 'other' culture including the previously unconsidered subject matter of Maori social and political history. McCahon used this rich new subject matter to explore themes he'd been tackling his whole career, including those of place and belonging and the religious concepts of death and salvation. As well as the *Urewera Mural*, other McCahon artworks with Maori social and historical themes include *Parihaka Triptych* (1972), *Confrontation of the Two Prophets: Te Ua and Te Whiti* (1972), *The Shining Cuckoo* (1974) and *A Song for Rua: Prophet* (1979).
33. Maoritanga is a term coined by James Carroll of the Ngati Kahungunu tribe in the late nineteenth century to describe Maori culture and identity expressed through Maori art, craft, language, customs and traditions.
34. Gordon Brown, *Urewera Mural: Colin McCahon*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1998.
35. Gordon Brown, *Urewera Mural*, 1998.
36. Neil Rowe, *Art New Zealand*, vol. 8, Nov–Jan 1977–8, p. 45.
37. Ngahiraka Mason, curator at Auckland City Art Gallery in Walker, 'The NZ Paint Job'.
38. Pou Temara, *Urewera Mural: Colin McCahon*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1998.
39. John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 102.
40. Frow, p. 102.
41. Hau has two meanings in Maori: one being the spiritual energy transmitted with something of value or taonga and the other, an economic connotation that is the bounty; for example, the hau of the forest is its fruit.
42. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, as quoted by John Frow, p. 110.
43. Derrida in Frow, p. 107.
44. Chris Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*, London, Academic Press, 1982, p. 41, as quoted in Frow, p. 125.
45. Frow, p. 113.
46. Frow, p. 114.
47. Judith Binney, 'Songlines for Aotearoa', in Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas and Hilary Eriksen (eds), *Quicksands, Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1999, p. 237.
48. Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991, p. 19.
49. Beyond the identity of 'being Maori' is the more defining connection of one's tribe or hapu and the land from where this tribe comes—or belongs. John Rangihau, a major spokesman for Tuhoe in

- the 1950s, describes belonging to his tribe in the Urewera as fundamental to his identity rather than being Maori.
50. In reality this was often the only option as the only alternative was to lose the land through government-legislated confiscation.
  51. Glenn Mitchell, telephone interview with Isabel McIntosh, 31 August 2001.
  52. Binney, p. 237.
  53. Martin Brown, Martin Brown Gallery, as quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 July 1997.
  54. Michael Taussig, *Defacement, Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1999, p. 1.
  55. Taussig, pp. 1–8.
  56. Taussig, p. 1.
  57. Maori proverb translated as: 'Give as much as you receive and all is for the best'.
  58. Homi Bhabha, *The Locations of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.
  59. Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Post-colonial World: The New Political Economy of Development*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997, p. 158 as quoted by Paul Meredith in 'Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in New Zealand', a research paper presented to Te Oru Rangahau Research and Development Conference, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand, 1998.
  60. Meredith.
  61. Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Tracing Hybridity in Theory' in P. Werbner and T. Mahood: *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-racism*, Zed Books, London, 1997, pp. 257–81 quoted in Meredith.
  62. Meredith.
  63. Louisa Cleave, 'Stolen Mural Will Return to Urewera', *NZ Herald On Line*, 17 March 1999.
  64. Eleanor Black, 'Spear Attack Mars McCahon Mural Return', *Auckland Herald*, 23 September 2000.
  65. 'Brown face' refers to Sandra Lee's cultural background as Maori. Black.
  66. Glenn Mitchell, 31 August 2001.
  67. Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002.