On the 29th September 2009 a powerful magnitude 8.1 earthquake ruptured the seafloor south of Samoa unleashing a destructive tsunami on Samoa, American Samoa and Niutoputapu in Northern Tonga. The tsunami caused extensive damage including severe casualties and over 190 deaths. In the days that followed, heart-breaking eyewitness accounts of loss circulated in the media as did images of ravaged villages.

Amongst the relief and support efforts that quickly ensued, a number of contemporary Pacific artists responded creatively to the impact of the tsunami. John Vea’s video installation 29.09.2009 Tribute to Samoa, American Samoa, and Tonga (2013) is a creative tribute to the ongoing resilience of Tonga and Samoa and their rebuild efforts following the 2009 tsunami. In the video, which is typically shown projected onto cinderblocks, Vea attempts to build a cinderblock wall on the waters edge of Piha Beach in West Auckland. As the waves crash against the wall, several cinderblocks topple over forcing Vea into a continuous process of rebuilding. Clearly struggling against the power of the surf, he perseveres and constructs a wall that slowly gives way under the rising water and soft black sand.

Over the past two years Vea’s installation has been shown in several exhibitions in a time where the impact of global ecological change has intensified. With each showing Vea’s work has become laden with new political and environmental messages that point to the immediate impact of climate change. Vea’s futile struggles against the ocean become extremely pertinent actions that enact and expose the realities of rising sea levels. His cinderblock wall, like the many sea walls constructed on the coastlines of low-lying atolls in the Pacific, is a symbol of the dangers of climate change. The ephemeral nature of his wall paired with the overwhelming oceanscape is a poignant reminder of the force of the ocean and its ability to destroy. This is heightened by the site-specific nature of Vea’s performance on the iconic black sand of Piha Beach, notorious for its dangerous surf.

Vea’s video installation functions as an ongoing tribute to the resilience of Pacific Island nations battling natural and human-made ecological changes. At the same time, the work serves a greater political purpose in raising our awareness and more importantly prompting a call for action.