

Protest in Aotearoa

Louise Menzies,
Alex Monteith
& Amy Howden-Chapman

The following conversation took place between Alex Monteith, Louise Menzies and Amy Howden-Chapman in late August 2014 at Alex's house in Piha, west of Auckland. From the living room where they were sitting they could see Piha Beach, where the previous November around 2,000 protesters had gathered, including Alex and Louise. The protest at Piha was one of 35 across West Coast beaches that same day, organised by Greenpeace New Zealand in opposition to deep sea drilling by the Texan oil company Anadarko.

Three practicing artists, Alex, Louise and Amy discuss the intersection of activism and the arts, the changing nature of protest culture, and the shifting legal landscape around protest in Aotearoa New Zealand. Framing the opposition to oil drilling in Aotearoa alongside other regional environmental issues, the discussion touches on how localised protest might relate to a wider movement to prevent catastrophic climate change.

Amy Howden-Chapman

I was interested that there were artists involved in this local protest action against Anadarko's deep sea drilling that has consequences for climate change in general. I wasn't in the country at the time, could you fill me in?

Alex Monteith

The protest flotilla at Whaingaroa Raglan (where Anadarko was to begin drilling) sat within a larger Greenpeace protest campaign that happened in Piha, as well as other places along the coast. Their plan was to include many of New Zealand's main beaches in a rolling protest, and to be highly visible on the foreshores.

Louise Menzies

And West Coast beaches down the whole country were included. Bethells Beach, Karekare and then all the way to Raglan and Taranaki.

AM

Greenpeace is interesting to me because the campaigns they do are important, but I've tended to help by making an artwork beside or around where there's an ecological issue that Greenpeace is focused on. There's another organisation – Kiwis Against Seabed Mining (KASM) – and another whole set of protests that are happening against black sand mining for iron ore, but with Greenpeace they sometimes just need support so I end up doing photography. I shot the photograph that went into the *Herald* and the national papers for Greenpeace's distribution. And then I was shocked then to see it re-used in the opposite way, in support of right-wingers, supporting deep sea drilling, saying that the risks were overblown.

I think we need to support visible conversations about what's happening in the environment. And that's when it doesn't matter if it's Greenpeace or KASM or whoever. It's interesting to be there and just putting your support in. But Greenpeace – because they're global campaigners – they can't protest our seabed

mining because it's a local issue. That makes it more important that artists and communities are making visible actions of their own. Greenpeace decides as a global organisation what their campaigns are and deep sea drilling is a global campaign – so they care what's happening in the North Sea, what's happening in Antarctica.

LM

So for example the recent protests in the Arctic – with the Arctic 30.

AM

There was also the Lucy Lawless action occupying – jumping on one of the boats that was about to go service vessels prospecting for deep sea oil in Antarctica. Greenpeace is really good at what they do, they know how to mobilise people and be visible and capture a voice. It's really hard for smaller organisations to achieve the same profile, but black sand mining is the one that's come up next. Those two protests – deep sea drilling and black sand mining – both happened quite close together here.

LM

There was exchange between those groups, and mutual support. People were going along to both protests. The other thing about this particular day of the West Coast action that we're talking about, 25 November 2013 – it was supporting the former Green Party co-leader Jeanette Fitzsimons and Greenpeace New Zealand Chief Executive Bunny McDiarmid, who were trying to have a protest dialogue on the sea with the Anadarko drilling vessel from aboard Greenpeace's boat the *VS Vega*.

AHC

Which is one of the boats that was in the flotilla for the 1973 anti-nuclear protests at Mururoa Atoll right?

LM

And the same boat that participated in the work that Local Time made about the 500 metre law earlier that year.¹

AM

So for the November protest at Raglan, Greenpeace was there with six protest vessels, to witness and wait for Anadarko, and ideally to block what was going on, but because of that 500 metre law that got brought in a few years earlier...

LM

... by the current government in direct support of companies undertaking prospecting, and drilling...

AM

It protects all prospecting and all their service vessels, so no protest at sea can impede their progression. Protestors can't go within 500 metres of a vessel that's doing the work of mining, once it's been approved at the resource consent end – they have this legal protection put in place.

LM

This new law makes it a really serious crime to take any type of direct action at sea. They changed the law so you could have kind of military intervention to get people out of the way, and then impound their boats.

1 Alex is one member of Local Time, a collective of artists, academics and writers based in Auckland / Tāmaki Makaurau. The group (other current members are Danny Butt, Jon Bywater and Natalie Robertson) share a concern for local and Pacific issues, often in non-urban sites, and move between individual and collective initiatives.

AM

Imagine what a personal risk it is to have a boat out there; and some of the protests that have been really important to us here in New Zealand lately have been done by people whose livelihood is fishing – and then that’s lost. The Petrobras protest in 2012 was the one that caused this 500 metre law to come in. And then Anadarko’s prospecting with the massive *Bob Douglas* – that’s the name of the ship – this huge thing. It’s so physically big it’s really hard for smaller boats to be around or near the turbulent water that it makes. But protesters took the boats to the 500 metre limit – Greenpeace was taking photographs. Jeanette Fitzsimons actually took one of the major risks by going on the *VS Vega*, and within the 500 metre zone, and handing over a letter a child had written saying that they didn’t want the mining to happen and the risks to New Zealand ecology. And I think because Fitzsimons was a former Parliamentarian... she’s such a well-known public figure that she wasn’t prosecuted. And so the *Vega* crew was uniquely able to do that – to be in breach of law and to deliver that letter.

LM

As well as delivering the letter, the *Vega* stayed within or near the 500 metre zone of the drilling ship for several weeks, intentionally sailing to get in the way of this vessel when it could.

AM

They managed to slightly impede progress for a period of time. The other useful thing about the *Vega* being there was it drew a lot of media attention, and got this 500 metre law – that had passed without much public debate at all and hardly any consultation – back in the public discussion.

AHC

Was the 2013 Local Time project for the Auckland Triennial about the 500 metre law? Was that work made around the time it passed?

AM

Just after – so we were reacting to it. The law was effective from 28 February 2014. If that law had been in place during the 1970s anti-nuclear protest, for example, that would have all been illegal.

LM

I also think about the amount of pride that New Zealanders take in some of the historical protest action that was carried out during the nuclear testing at Mururoa. That it's not possible under the conditions now to make a similar gesture about things happening in our own waters is disturbing.

AM

One thing that Local Time wanted to do was to respond to things that were current to do with local bodies of water. The legislation change had just occurred, between the Petrobras protest and the Auckland Triennial opening. It was going to affect every protest from that point forward; it would be an invisible legal problem. We thought it might be interesting to look at the law change itself as a reason to protest.

I went down and met Daniel Mears, who owns the *Vega*, along with two or three other people. He's been on a lot of important protests, including the early anti-nuclear protests and, he's a Greenpeace supporter on and off. But he's also the Auckland Harbourmaster. So he's in a normal role protecting the road rules of the harbour [laughter]. He was really supportive about the idea of doing something – he was about to undertake his own actions under the 500 metre law. So

we asked him if he might be willing to sail the *Vega* for the purposes of thinking through this legal issue. We knocked up all these flags with various ways of referring to the 500 metre law. We re-wrote protester Elvis Teddy's words, 'This is not a protest. I'm fishing', against Petrobras when they were prospecting in the East Cape region of New Zealand. Elvis Teddy was a Ngāti Porou fisherman who used a technicality in maritime law around fishing to just get in the way of the vessel and block it. It was really gutsy.

Then we flew those flags off our inflatable boats, including my boat *Mahi Kai*, plus sailed the *Vega* with some of her historic anti-nuclear flags, and we just sailed to various points in the Auckland Harbour.

AHC

I'm doing my own research at the moment about the New Zealand Nuclear Free movement, and I think it's interesting how there were so many artists involved. One of the questions I'm asking is why aren't more artists involved in a climate justice movement? And then just taking a step back and asking how artists might best be useful to these kinds of movements.

Greenpeace are very canny in how they produce images – which they've been doing all along – they were distributing images in the Nuclear Free movement. I'm considering if artists have a particular role, or have special skills that they are able to bring.

AM

I think lots of artists don't get involved in movements like that because they don't see art as the realm in which you should make a political statement – they're abstract artists – or others might take the view, well I'll attend in my capacity as a citizen rather than an artist. But I developed an ideology in response to the

historian Te Miringa Hohaia's comment. Te Miringa is from Taranaki, and he's had a lot to do with the development of Local Time's ethos and thinking. I was in conversation with him about a women's surf tour that was coming into the area of Taranaki, where his iwi are based. He said when he was meditating on sports people's profiles – anybody that had a profile and an audience because of that profile – they should use that in service of the protection of the environment. So I made that sideways leap that if you have a platform and you are given a voice that there is some responsibility to consider how you should be using that in the service of the environment. It might be in the capacity of bearing witness, showing up, doing something physical, or actually putting your artwork somehow into the middle of the fray and risking it all getting co-opted. I take that view now. And I go along on all of those levels.

AHC

So as a citizen as well as an artist.

AM

Either one of those – I'm actually not fussy because sometimes you're just needed as a participant or other times I've had the opportunity to use an artwork to help make something a little more visible. With the black sand mining, Dave Rastovich hand paddled himself from Taranaki to Auckland, and he was using his surfing profile to try and get some spotlight on an issue that's otherwise difficult to engage with for a lot of New Zealanders, because they don't know what's at stake with the iron sand.

AHC

What is at stake?

AM

The process is for a big ship to come in and suck about five metres depth of sand and process it on deck – so filter out the iron sand and dump back the tailings. It results in 100% death of the species and microorganisms. So that's a 100% kill rate, but on small things. Also in New Zealand we've signed over the largest amount of ocean territory anywhere in the world to surface mining – mineral mining in that way, and its effects are untested at this stage. But we've signed up for it.

AHC

It must have detrimental effects just up the food chain.

AM

That's the thing, because it gets right into the plankton, the very start of the food chain. Mining at the scale they're proposing... it's just totally unknown what the effects might be. The companies who want to do it have studied a range of things, but no one would know, if 10 or 15 ships came in, what the effects would be. Greenpeace isn't doing any actions around that one because of the global focus – it's really underexposed – it's a local subtlety.

LM

It's similar to the East Coast fracking proposals for me – another regional issue that an international organisation isn't focusing on, so again, it's hard to get enough visibility for the issue. But that's art's role, giving a voice to issues. I think what was interesting about the 500 metre Local Time action is that it did get written up in the paper. So the *Herald* newspaper covered the event, it wasn't just recorded within an art world context, even though that's the genesis of the activity.

AM

I was just thinking about the black sand mining because the way that was brought to public awareness was very manipulative and sneaky. They brought in the first legal case, which set precedent for it happening all over the country, in Patea, South Taranaki, a tiny place which doesn't have a large commercial lobby.

LM

Economically, it's a very depressed town.

AM

They broke in and pressured that area in order to get the legal platform that then just rolled it through all the other areas. And that was really cynical – I hate that stuff.

AHC

I know a lot of other similar cases of environmental injustice, for example in the Central Valley, near Los Angeles where I live, there is terrible air quality, which is contributed to by rubbish incinerators all through that Valley. The local community is largely low income and didn't have the resources or time to fight them being built there (which is partly why it was cited as a good place to build them), whereas you wouldn't stick a rubbish-burning facility in a rich neighborhood like Remuera – there would be too much opposition.

AM

Absolutely. Raglan, Whaingaroa Harbour – that area – the protesters just went absolutely berserk. They were really active against Anadarko and black sand mining because both would affect the key ecologies in that area. Also Raglan has strong fishing lobbies, which put a lot of weight behind a cause. It's funny when some of those lobbies – who aren't always ecologically-leaning in terms of species protection when it comes

to fishing – swing the other way in protection of the environment as they did in Raglan.

AHC

That's interesting, that role that organised labour plays. One of the things that I've been realising with my research into the Nuclear Free movement is that many of those involved came from really strong existing groups – the women's movement, the dockworkers' unions and other peace groups. They were around before or in parallel to the Nuclear Free movement and could be brought into the action quickly and be very effective because they had already established communication channels and memberships.

You two must know each other from being artists, and being involved in the arts community here which is quite small, and in many ways and constantly communicating with itself about random things all the time. I think it's a good group to mobilise – it can be mobilised for some things – like going to openings!

LM

One community can come in and be of support to other communities. I can think of a number of artists who are engaged in political work, and really do get out there and support issues whether they are environmental or otherwise, but perhaps it's just that the general social climate is not as attuned to protest as it was in the 70s and 80s in New Zealand? I think protest culture is different now.

AM

I also think it beggars belief that you could have 50,000 people on some of the hikoi, in recent times, protesting against mining or against asset sales – the Aotearoa is Not for Sale protests – and no movement at the government end. It used to be that a 50,000 strong movement did actually do something.

AHC

I agree that people are more likely to protest if they see it as an effective mechanism. I'm interested in the deep sea drilling issue and how people see it in relation to climate change. I know that Greenpeace are very concerned with direct action against climate change, so it ties into what they choose to support or put forward as their most important issues, but I don't know if deep sea drilling, for example, is something that's best just to think about as a local issue, or if it would be more productive to link those issues with a broader climate justice movement?

LM

So the question you're asking is how the deep sea oil campaign might relate to a broader climate campaign?

AHC

Yeah, was it talked about at the time of the protests as something that was related to climate change?

AM

I think the feeling is that the inherent risks of deep sea drilling – reaching into ever more unfathomable parts of the earth, taking more and more risks to extract oil from those places when everybody knows it's a finite resource – relates to climate change and fossil fuels. Either we back off and leave some of it there, or we keep extracting till it's all gone. And in New Zealand there have been many cases where people go until it runs out – for example whaling and sealing and even moss! I think the relationship is definitely on people's minds.

AHC

I've been thinking about the imagery and language that the Green Party has been using this election,

and I haven't heard them mention climate change at all, though they have been focusing on many things like offshore drilling, and also solutions to climate change, such as more sustainable cities and public transport – they're addressing those issues, but they very rarely make the relationship explicit.

LM

I think it's driving their policy, but they're just not saying it's the reason for each thing they're announcing.

AHC

I'm of the opinion – I'm interested in what you both think – it's important to keep that terminology in the public domain all the time. Talking about climate change as an issue so people can identify it as such and call to account parties that don't talk about it, at all, ever.

LM

There was basically no government response, or really much political response at all, to the new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that came out last year. I think there were a couple of Green Party press releases, but that was it. I think the central government is really slow to deal with those issues in a responsible way, including just talking about them.

AHC

In the US at the moment it seems that the most direct action that is happening around climate change is protesting, one, about fracking and two, about the Keystone XL pipeline. Both concern oil, so an issue like offshore drilling could be perfectly aligned to those types of action but it doesn't seem to be. There's a significant difference in how the Keystone pipeline protest is being framed – as a symbol of stopping climate change in a very direct way – which is criticised

to some degree, with people saying even if you stopped Keystone, oil will still be conveyed, climate change will still be occurring. Though people debate the usefulness of Keystone as a metaphor, it's been a useful issue to build protest action around.

AM

It's interesting to consider climate change as a symptom (or that it's being caused by our consumption of fossil fuels), but I don't know if it's better to aim it at concepts like 'stop climate change', in that broad sense. It seems one level abstracted from our practice of values that are endlessly consumptive. We could be concentrating on the values that underwrite consumption – in that way we're addressing climate change as the thing that shows from that sickness. I think climate change is one of the many effects of our whole approach, excessive consumption.

LM

It does make me think about visibility again though, because I think there's quite different visibility available to local issues. The engagement that people can feel with something that's happening, or could happen near to them – a threat like deep sea drilling – I think people understand that there's a connection between that and larger climate change conditions. What's important, and I guess what you are asking, is how they operate together. I'd say it's obvious to most people that these issues are related, but it's how you get people thinking about that. I still think you can mobilise on the local level in a way that can be really helpful in a larger understanding of climate change, even if it's not talking about that directly. Thinking back to banners on the beach on the day of the protest though, there were definitely banners that related to wider climate issues, and to the protection of resources in general. I painted a bird on my banner,

out of the feeling that birds need representation too at these forums. I'm aware of how threatened those coastal birds are, their populations are so slim on these beaches as it is. I'm not sure how effective it was – going back to the currency of images in relation to protest, I think it's hard for a picture of a bird to necessarily do much to change anyone's opinion in a context like that – but how to provide adequate representation for other species has been on my mind.

AHC

Climate change, it encompasses the entire world, and the science considers complex issues. But a lot of the imagery is of melting ice – which of course is happening – but it's images of stuff happening else where, and I think placing those images in a local context is what gets people going. When the effects are recognised as being local. When Superstorm Sandy happened there was a sudden energy around doing something around climate change in New York. But I think it would be nice if we didn't have to wait for a crisis to happen here, or a series of crises, but if people can see what they find precious here – which in many senses is what the protest you were both involved in was doing. It was, one would hope, anchoring this debate into our landscape.

AM

Going back to the structure of the Greenpeace protest. It was all beaches. Getting communities out beach by beach does hint at that the ideology driving the protests: needing that variation from there and that variation from there, that those things are important. Because when you think of trying to set up the protests, is it better to have a centralised one big hit, or is it better to have staunchly local intonations?

Then you think about going on record somewhere,

or doing an action that might actually effect change, right up to direct action and trying to literally block something from happening – and still that’s something that’s been given a legal right to exist. And then you’re back trying to work on the legal end, which Greenpeace and KASM have both done. So how can the visual side complement those existing actions? The legal stuff is pretty unsexy. With the 500 meter work, we were trying to say this law change affects everything from this point on.

AHC

I do think you need a way to visualise those issues, and I do think that that’s what people were effective in doing in the nuclear free movement.

I have one last question. I know there was a lot of hīkoi around the offshore drilling stuff.

AM

The Aotearoa is Not for Sale hīkoi ?

LM

Those were a bit earlier. When the National Government first came to power and announced their economic agenda to begin mining there were huge protests. But they had their strategy all mapped out – they said they were going to mine on Great Barrier Island, which of course Auckland is not going to stand for because that’s where Auckland goes on holiday, so there was a huge protest. As big as for Aotearoa is Not for Sale – I don’t know the figures but by recent standards these were large protests. But it was just all part of National’s plan, because then they said, ‘Oh okay, we’ll just mine down in the South Island’. And everyone was like ‘Oh well okay’. Everyone thought ‘Oh, they’re being moderate now, they’re not going to mine these important natural resources that are close to

the biggest population area, that we feel connected to'. Mining just began again in the Denniston Plateau two weeks ago in Westland. My sister is part of a group called the Coal Action Network, which had been involved in a legal case to try and halt this work.

AHC

I know that Jeanette Fitzsimons is involved, I heard her say 'Keep coal in the hole'.

LM

I love that phrase. Coal Action Network becomes CAN. The group wanted to have this positive acronym. We can change it.

AHC

I feel like in the art world recently it's been really fashionable to make work about protest – which is I admit exactly what I'm doing right now by looking at the Nuclear Free movement. But there's a lot of reproduced banners – I feel like banners are really aestheticised – because they stand for something.

LM

I suppose it's that tension between the symbolic and the practical that you come up against with art and political action all the time. How effective is it to put a political message in a gallery? I think that's an important question. Sometimes it's effective – sometimes it isn't.

AM

I know that's a criticism of art trying to do something like that, because art's audience is comparatively small, as compared to the mass media, but I think of Te Miringa's call that if your platform has any voice, it's probably worth exercising it. That's the view that I've taken. I just see it as work that needs to be done,

but its efficiency is a question. The art world's efficiency might not be enormous compared to mass media outlets, but they can create a potent message. I think there's a question just about what art's role can be in relation to some of these extremely demoralising causes.

So with Petrobras and Anadarko, it feels like we have a victory because they've gone away, but in fact they've gone away because they haven't struck oil, and still our current laws undermine ecological protection.