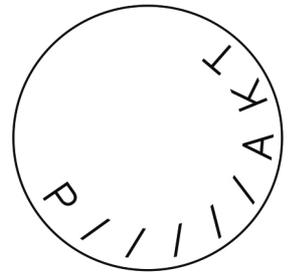


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PLATFORM FOR
CONTEMPORARY ART

<http://www.nzonscreen.com/title/poi-e-1983>

By Fantasizing

April 3rd 1984

“No dressing gowns.”

“Um... okay...”

“So it’s definitely not four star. That’s how you can tell. No dressing gowns. A four star would have dressing gowns.”

The room shrank a little. Sharon lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. Seemingly satisfied that he’d made a good point, he lay down next to her and raised his wrists to the air to take off his cufflinks. He carefully placed each one on the bedside table. As he leaned away from her the mattress buckled, and she rolled involuntarily towards him. The metal of the cufflinks clinked against the glass of the bedside table. He smelled slightly sour and heavily yeasty—a mixture of day-old sweat and a night out drinking. She felt fucking ridiculous.

February 16th 1990

“Fuck.”

Jo picked up the keys and unlocked the door, looking up at the room number as she did. 356. It didn't matter. The room number never actually matters. She walked quickly across to the windows and drew the curtains against the streetlights and the night.

The batteries were running low in her Walkman but she needed it. The tape was already inside. She curled up in the foetal position on the carpet at the foot of the bed and pressed her thumb hard into the play button.

“Let each breath guide you to a better place. Breathe in... hold it... hold it... breathe out... breathe in... hold it... hold it... breathe out...”

1984

The room was noisy with his breathing and the hum of the fridge and someone yelling out on the street. The yelling worried her, made her tense up just in case it was a fight and shit got bad, like when the cops told her off on the main street of Shannon that time. She had been getting some chips and all these people were just standing around outside the fish and chip shop while the guy was yelling and pushing a woman across the bonnet of a car. She didn't even think before running out and charging at him.

"It's his missus."

"Oi—lady, it's his missus."

The cops told her she shouldn't have done it, that he could have seriously hurt her as he flailed about trying to throw her off. One of them wrote "Domestic" in his little notebook, then closed it.

The hotel room bedspread was smooth, satiny, slippery under her skin. Sharon sensed him pressing closer in to her. She rolled away from him and onto her side, then climbed gracelessly on top of him. He looked a little surprised, then pleased with himself, like he'd won a raffle. She looked away from his smug face to his stomach, held taut by his belt inside a white cotton shirt. He watched her intently. She ignored his eyes on her face and hands as she unbuckled his belt. He lifted himself up so she could pull down his trousers and his underwear.

As she flicked her hair over her bare shoulder, she glimpsed a twinkle in her own eye reflected in the mirror behind her. For a split second she was caught off guard, momentarily confused into thinking someone other than the two of them was in the room. Rocking her hips back and forth, she smiled encouragingly, staring into his eyes without seeing him. She felt increasingly betrayed by the twinkle. It was as if it were lying to spite her.

1990

“End of side A.”

Jo massaged her forehead with the tips of her fingers. The ear buds hung loosely in her ears as the tape clicked off.

Her briefcase beckoned, but so did a glass, or a few glasses, of wine. The relaxation tape had barely scratched the surface. There was a bottle of Chardonnay in the fridge and the wine raced down her throat, cold and oaky. She could barely taste it. It was like she'd been playing spaces for hours and all she could think about was shooting alien ships, except that species was work, and the alien ships... she couldn't complete the metaphor because there were no metaphors that could make sense of something like this. Everything about Sesqui had to be glaringly literal.

She still had work to do. She always had work to do. She walked to the vast mirror across from the bed and smiled joylessly at her reflection. Her skin was sallow. She wasn't surprised. Two weeks of fluorescent lights and AstroTurf was killing her tan. She blew herself a kiss in the glass, then drew a lopsided heart in the steam that formed. Silently she chanted to herself in a singsong: “it's their civic duty they must come, it's their civic duty they must come, it's their civic duty they must come...”

1984

“I’d like two Irish coffees, and a chocolate mousse with extra whipped cream. And... and... what else do you want?”

He walked back out of the bathroom, wet from the shower, a towel around his waist.

“A steak. Well done.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. He said nothing.

“And a steak. Well done. Make that two. Two steaks. One with mashed potato, one with chips. Room 356. Ta.”

She pulled the sheet up to her chin as she studied his torso. The paunch of his stomach hung over the towel, his nipples drooped loose amongst the hair on his chest, pointing down like comic-strip arrows. He turned the television on, then fiddled with the buttons to get a channel. *Coronation Street*. He left the sound off. Deidre was yelling soundlessly at Emily, her face contorted behind her massive glasses.

“Smoke?”

“Yes, please.”

He flicked one out of the packet. Benson & Hedges, gold, like the ones models and actresses smoke. She leaned forward for him to light it, avoiding eye contact as she inhaled. He was so much older, but obviously rich, and fuck, she’d missed her ride back out to Stokes where they were all staying at the marae behind the church, so he was just going to have to do for now. She could have done worse, and she had, plenty of times. Well, a few times, at least.

“Where are you from?”

“Me? Newcastle, originally, but I’ve been in New Zealand since the sixties. Came out on a boat, would you believe. Everyone said I was going the wrong way.”

“Newcastle, England, not Newcastle, Australia?”

“Yes, I’m English. A Northerner.”

“I thought you sounded posh like someone from England.”

“Northerners aren’t posh.”

“All English people are posh.”

Sharon could see the programme reflected in the mirror. In the mirror Deidre and Mike lived in a parallel back-to-front but otherwise identical reality. Deidre looked worried, but she had that kind of face, even back-to-front. Worried and posh, like all English people.

“And you’re from Pātea?”

“Ngutuwera. But we moved to Pātea for work.”

“Nutu... where-a?”

“It’s near Waitotara. But we, my family, moved.”

“For work? In Pātea?”

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“At the freezing works.”

“Ah, yes, the freezing works.”

She pulled her hair into a low side ponytail and twisted it tight.

“So you were at the freezing works, of course, and now you’re with the Māori Club. Someone was telling me about this. A real triumph in the face of adversity for you lot, this whole thing.”

Sharon stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray on the bedside table. She’d only smoked half of it. The indulgence of it made her so happy she almost took another one, but the food arrived before she could. The steak smelt good. She wished she’d ordered lobster too. They probably didn’t have lobster. Maybe oysters. Or something expensive that came on one of those silver platters with a lid.

1990

There was a banal landscape painting on the wall next to the bathroom door. Oil on canvas. An estuary with flax in flower in the foreground and the suggestion of water and ducks beyond. A grey sky. Clouds.

From her angle, lying upside down off the edge of the bed, Jo was fairly certain the painting wasn't hung straight. She was also a bit drunk. She tried to straighten it up with her foot, but she missed and caught her pantyhose on the edge of the doorframe. A ladder raced up to her thigh and there was a bit of blood. She felt nothing, which was good. It was what she'd been aiming for.

She rolled over and dialled his room number. The phone rang and rang. She was about to hang up when someone answered, but it was just the front desk. The girl on the desk asked her if she wanted to leave him a message, but she didn't. She'd only called him out of obligation. There was nothing left to say. At the end of all of this he'd still have his job and she probably wouldn't. That's how these things went. She didn't know if she cared or not.

The contents of her briefcase were strewn across the table in the corner of the room. She got up to pour herself another glass of wine, then stood over the paperwork: lists of numbers that were too low no matter how she skewed them. She assumed she was meant to skew them. Her role in the event itself had always been a little unclear. "Jo's here to do some analysis," they'd say. "Jo will be looking at the numbers." Yesterday she heard him saying "Jo is the link between our small part in the early stages and the end result." He'd seen the numbers. Everyone had. Everyone wanted to maximise their own success in the face of unfathomable failure. She'd heard him talking up the TVC over lunch. "And we didn't use any special effects. We wanted to keep it authentic. The actors were ordinary kids from schools all over the country, just ordinary kids."

That bloody ad. He seemed to think Saatchis could change the world—no, he thought they were changing it. Present tense. Maybe he was right. He knew how to make people feel something, that was for sure. The TVC with its happy United-Colours-of-Benetton-style Kiwi kids holding cheery multicultural hands in a cheery multicultural candlelight mountaintop vigil did the trick. A real tearjerker. It sat nicely alongside that (gutsy? bold? amoral?) campaign by the guy in the London office, the one who chucked the Saatchis banner up over the Berlin Wall just after it fell. Saatchis, the social crusaders. The church of Saatchi. The byline for the Saatchi faith could be: "Now here's something you can really believe in."

It was late. TV3's late-night music video show was playing the Top Ten One Hit Wonders. Slinking down into a chair at the table next to the bad numbers, Jo sipped her wine and quietly sung along. "Poi E... tāpeka tia mai... Poi E... o taua aroha... Poi E... pai here tia ra... Poi taku poi e..."

1984

Nobody was saying it, but they all knew they'd been robbed. They'd made the best album, the best single, the best cover art and the best music video that the country had ever seen or heard. They were far and away the best group, which was a pretty dumb-sounding award category anyway. She knew it didn't really matter, that they'd transcend all this bullshit because that's what the awards were anyway: bullshit. Last year Coconut Rough was the Most Promising Act. Some promise—they'd broken up before the year was out, and then they got to support The Police at Western Springs. What eggs.

"Have you met Sting?"

"Yes."

"What do you do anyway? What's your job?"

"I work for an advertising company, but I'm going to work for a much bigger one soon. I'll tell you a secret. Have you heard of Saatchi and Saatchi?"

"No."

"Well..."

"What, what's the secret?"

"You wouldn't know... well, they're an ad agency. I'm going to be working for them soon. A very big ad agency."

She licked the mousse off her fingers, then helped herself to another one of his smokes.

"What do you do, though?"

"I... I make things happen."

"Such as?"

"Events, like the one tonight."

"So... music awards. You made this happen?"

"Yes, well, I was instrumental."

"And do you like it?"

"Yes. Yes, I really do."

"What would be your dream... thing? The best thing you could 'make happen'?"

"A huge national event. Something meaningful. Something that would make people think about who and where and what they are. An event that reminded them all of their civic duty, to the nation as one great big united community, to each other. Something that would instil pride."

Sharon saw her opening.

"Are you thinking of some sort of commemorative thing? A big celebration to mark 200 years after Cook discovered New Zealand, something like that?"

"Yes, but, of course, that boat has sailed, so to speak."

She almost giggled at how easy it was.

"There'll be a big brouhaha in 1990, you know. Cos it will be 150 years since the Treaty—the Treaty of Waitangi—was signed. You could get in on that. Really go to town with it."

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“Yes, of course. That’d be something.”

“It would, wouldn’t it?”

She grinned as she reached over and tugged off his towel.

1990

Having the event at two separate venues five kilometres apart had been the clincher. No one knew where they were meant to go. Never publicising the entertainment schedules, so that the likes of Dave Dobbyn and Crowded House played to empty houses, that had been another genius move. And then there was the ticket price—convincing the key organisers not to make the cost of getting in affordable on the premise that if it was considered cheap then no one would value the experience. She remembered him saying people would pay peanuts and expect monkeys... or words to that effect.

It was as if he had read a guide on how-not-to-create-a-successful-event and followed it to the letter. If she didn't know him as well as she did, or if she thought he had a political bone in his body, she'd think he was a strategically savvy radical, a talented double agent, a revolutionary. As he was none of those things, and he wasn't an idiot either, she'd had to conclude that he'd just made some massive errors of judgment, ones that she might find herself having to take responsibility for in the coming weeks.

Jo was surprised by how much the process had affected her. She had been too young to go to any of the Springbok tour protests, but she watched them on TV. She remembered adults talking about Bastion Point and there was something about a golf course too. She knew that the picture Saatchi and Saatchi were meant to be painting of the condition of national race relations was an overly romantic one at best, a damaging rewrite of history at worst.

With Sesqui it was the blatant falsifying that had gotten to her. The reshaping of a past she was only vaguely familiar with, and the denial of present-day concerns that seemed increasingly relevant. At this stage in the proceedings she found herself yearning for it to fail even more catastrophically than it already had. She looked at her table of paperwork and made a note to herself for the morning. "Give the tickets away on milk cartons. Make the process to get the free tickets overly complicated."

She looked up at her reflection in the mirror, and for a second she could have sworn someone was behind her on the bed, laughing. She turned, then scolded herself for being so easily tricked by her drunk imagination.

The phone rang and it was him. He asked her what she thought of giving out free tickets under the guise of a national competition. They could get the milk company to print the entry forms on all their milk cartons. Everyone who cut the form out of the side of the carton and sent it in would 'win' a free family pass. She absentmindedly wrapped the phone cord around her ankle.

"Would they have to wash the milk off before they sent the form in the post?"

"I think you're missing the point."

"Oh?"

She tried to stand up with the cord still wrapped around her ankle. The phone abruptly disconnected. She stood staring at the handset for a moment. The Number One One Hit Wonder came on. It was *Sierra Leone* by Coconut Rough.

She laughed and laughed and laughed.

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John Nicholson. Defaced banners advertising the failed Sesqui Carnival, ca. 30 March 1990. The Dominion Post Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Pōneke Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Sesqui 1990 was held to celebrate the passing of 150 years since the signing of Aotearoa New Zealand's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi. The Treaty of Waitangi was drawn up by representatives of the British Crown at Waitangi in 1840. In it they promised indigenous New Zealanders (Māori) full sovereignty [*tino rangatiratanga*] over their land. The Treaty was signed by the aforementioned representatives of the Crown and a significant number of Māori *rangatira* [chiefs] in 1840. It was subsequently systematically and persistently dishonoured by the Crown, with devastating effects on Māori.

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Fantasing is an Aotearoa New Zealand-based art collaboration. Combining the cosmic fantasies of Bek Coogan, Claire Harris, Sarah Jane Parton and Gemma Syme, *Fantasing* is an “internet potato” cultivated from the history of feminist artist collectives, and their practice spans music, video works, sculpture, writing and Instagram.

Marnie Slater is an artist who lives in Brussels. During 2015, she is commissioning a series of texts by women, of which this one is the fourth, to be read in parallel to the exhibition programme at P/////AKT, Amsterdam.