

# Sriwhana Spong

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Sriwhana Spong  
This Tree is Mine!  
2022  
Istanbul Biennial  
Photo: Sahir Ugur Eren







Michael Lett

Sriwhana Spong  
Purple Raincoat (for Vasiliki)  
2016  
Silk dyed in Coca-Cola and Grape Fanta  
3500 x 3500mm  
Installation view, *the body and its outside*  
Michael Lett, 2021



Sriwhana Spong  
Purple Raincoat (for Vasiliki)  
2016  
Silk dyed in Coca-Cola and Grape Fanta  
3500 x 3500mm  
Installation view, *the body and its outside*  
Michael Lett, 2021





Sriwhana Spong  
Instrument H (Monster Chicken), 2021  
bronze, dimensions variable  
as performed at *trust & confusion*  
Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong.



Sriwhana Spong  
Instrument H (Monster Chicken), 2021  
bronze, dimensions variable  
as performed at *trust & confusion*  
Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong.





Sriwhana Spong  
*The painter-tailor*  
2019-2021  
(installation view)  
The 10th Walters Prize 2021  
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



Sriwhana Spong  
*Naga 1*  
2021  
found coat-tails on canvas  
2000 x 4000mm





Sriwhana Spong  
*Instrument C (Frances)*  
2017  
aluminium, leaves, cord, shoelaces  
930 x 635 x 5mm  
SS5349-01



Sriwhana Spong  
*Instrument B (Vivian)*  
2016  
wood, acrylic, rubber, aluminium  
780 x 474 x 402mm





Sriwhana Spong  
*The painter-tailor*  
2019-2021  
(installation view)  
The 10th Walters Prize 2021  
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki





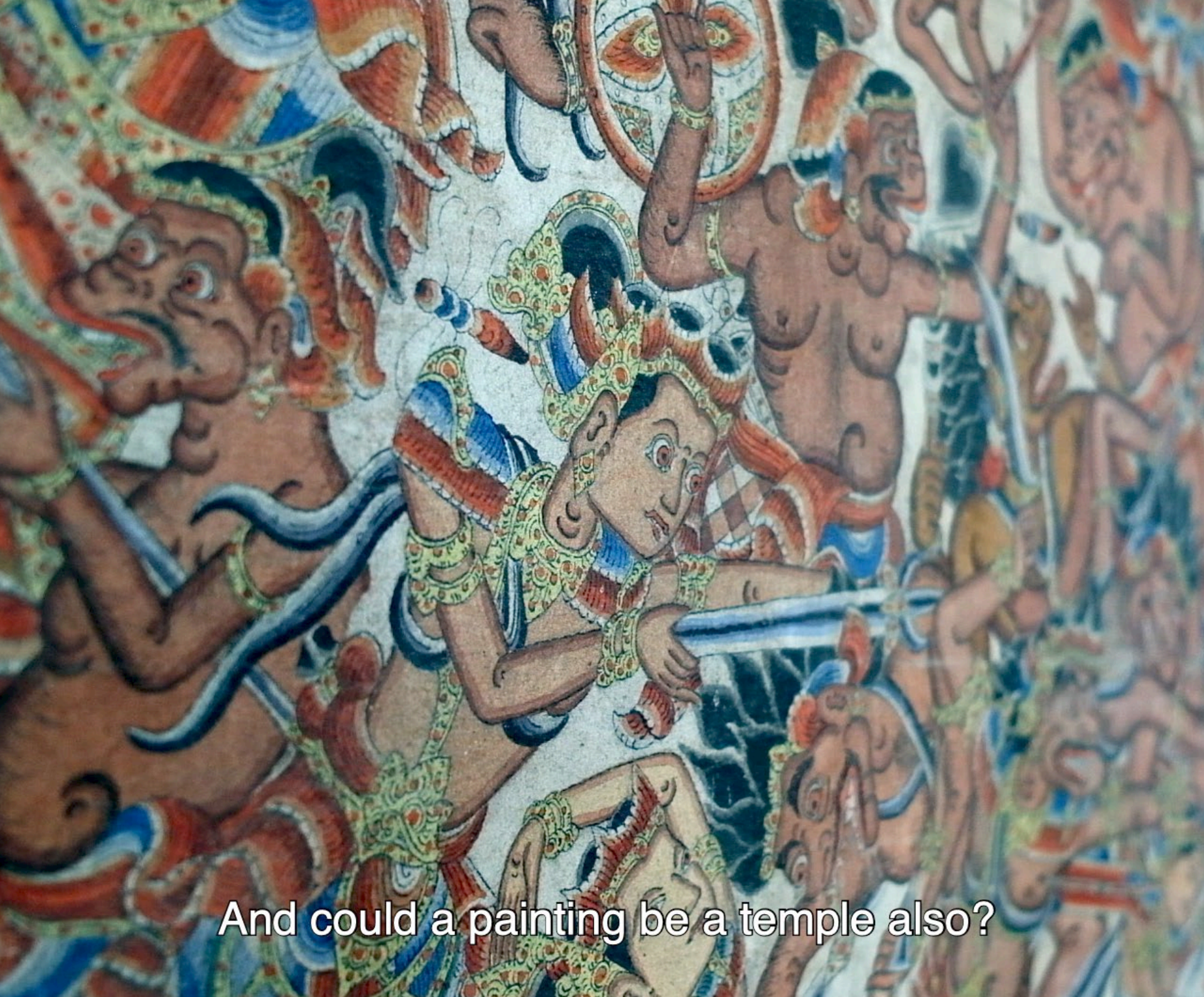


Sriwhana Spong  
*Instrument E (Tina)*  
2019  
bronze, aluminium, wax  
SS5807-01



Sriwhana Spong  
*Instrument F (Alice W)*  
2019  
glass, rope, felt  
1760 x 460 x 460mm  
SS5814-01





And could a painting be a temple also?











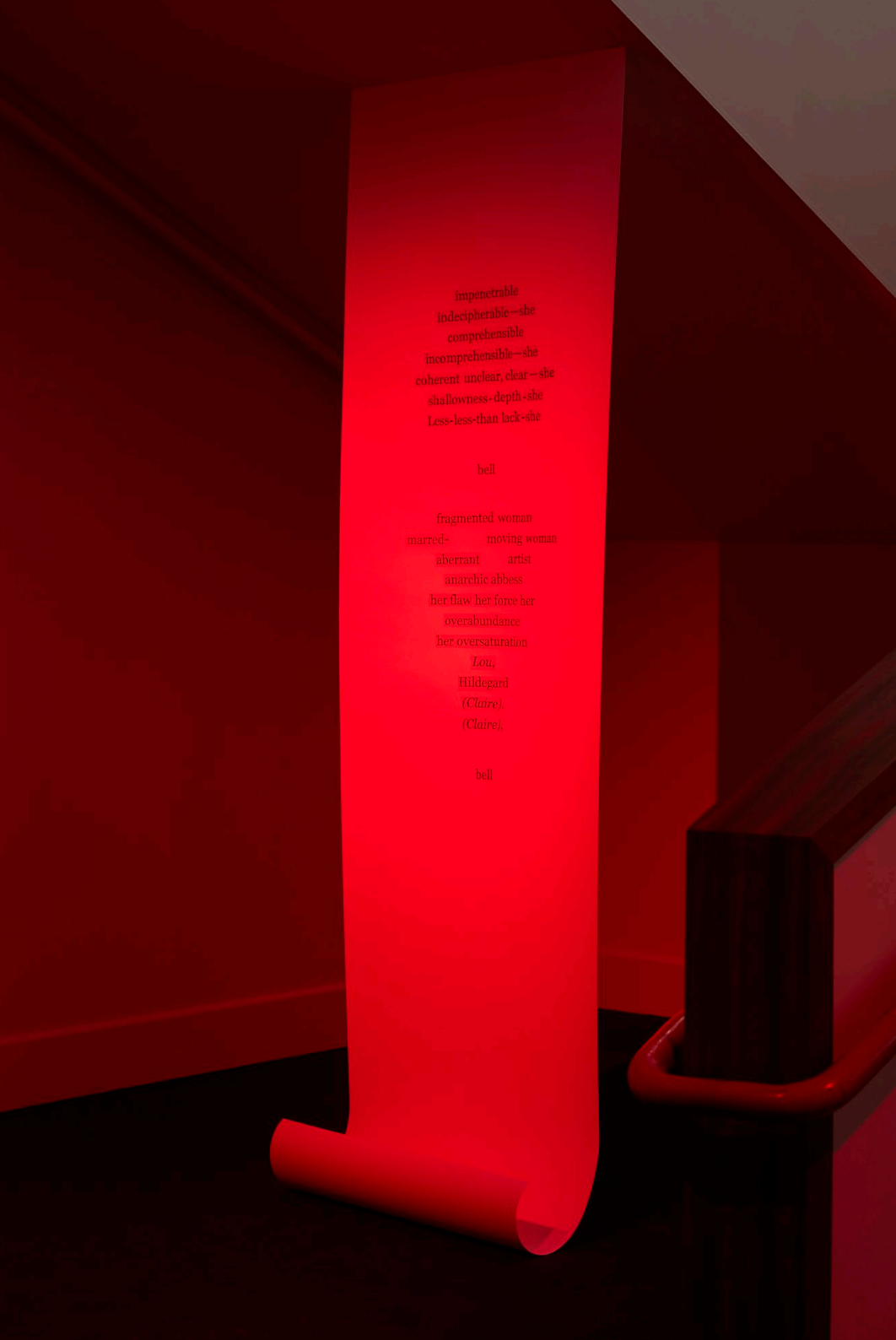


Sriwhana Spong  
*Naga II*  
2021  
found coat-tails on canvas  
2000 x 4000mm





Sriwhana Spong  
*having-seen-snake*  
2016  
16mm transferred to HD video  
13:45 min  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett



Sriwhana Spong  
*Bad Review*  
2018

paper photocopies, glue, paper  
scroll: 750 x 2500mm; 3 x (594 x 841mm approx.)  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett





Sriwhana Spong  
*Scaurin Ranzgia (night tongue)*  
2018

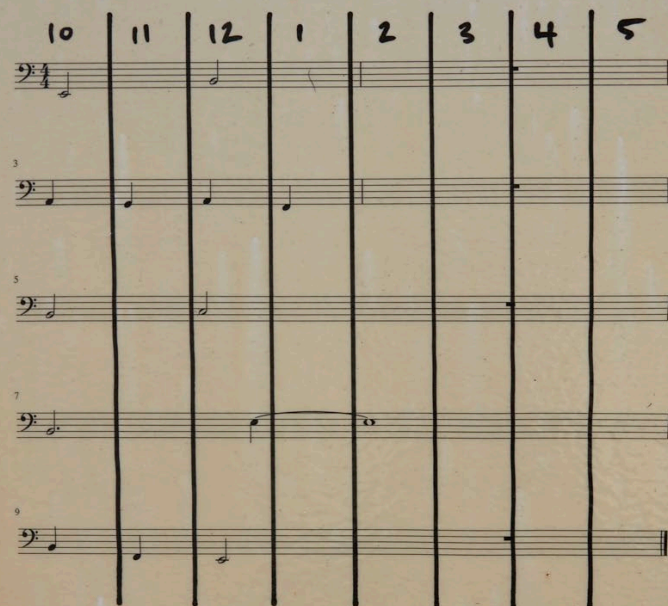
paraffin wax, equestrian rope, foam, steel, lacquer  
1800 x 800 x 410mm

Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett



Sriwhana Spong  
*Oirclamisil (ear cartilage) #1-4; Lou*  
2017-8  
paraffin wax, wood, clay  
3 x (650 x 580 x 45mm approx.); 2 (545 x 650 x 40mm approx.)  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett





Sriwhana Spong  
*Cum vox sanguinis (Govett-Brewster)*  
2018  
paper, honey  
dimensions variable  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett



Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish*  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett





Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish*  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett





Opening performance by the Coolies (Stefan Neville, Tina Pihema, Sijonel Timu)  
Instrument B (Vivian) (2016), aluminium bars, wood, Perspex, rubber, felt, brass.  
470 x 760 x 260mm; Instrument C (Claire) (2017), aluminium bell plate, foliage,  
rope, wood. 930 x 635 x 5mm; Instrument D (Vera) (2018), aluminium, steel,  
lacquer, plastic. 590 x 1570 x 320mm  
a hook but no fish  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett





Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish [performance]*  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett





Sriwhana Spong  
*Sigil Design (Rothschild's mynah) #9-24*  
2017-ongoing  
Indian yellow tartrazine pigment, water, honey, saffron, gum Arabic,  
painted wooden frames  
16 x (1800 x 750mm)  
Installation view  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, May 2018  
Photograph Samuel Hartnett





Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish*  
Installation view  
Pump House Gallery, January 2018





Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish*  
2017

16mm transferred to HD, HD video  
24:50min

Installation view  
Pump House Gallery, London, January 2018





The porousness of H's body

Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish [film still]*  
2017  
16mm transferred to HD, HD video  
24:50min





Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish [film still]*  
2017  
16mm transferred to HD, HD video  
24:50min





Sriwhana Spong  
*I used to weave crowns (for Dwight)*  
silk dyed in Fanta and grape Fanta  
4050 x 3500mm  
Installation view  
Michael Lett, January 2017



Sriwhana Spong  
*having-seen-snake*  
Installation view  
Michael Lett, January 2017





Sriwhana Spong  
*Design for Horse Bit #1*  
2017  
steel, shoe polish, beeswax  
770 x 740mm  
Installation view  
Michael Lett, January 2017









Sriwhana Spong  
*Oceanic Feeling*  
Installation view  
Institute of Contemporary Art Singapore, August 2016



Sriwhana Spong  
*Oceanic Feeling [performance]*  
Im Wintergarten, daadgalerie, Berlin, 2016





Sriwhana Spong  
*Im Wintergarten [performance]*  
Choreographed and performed by Benjamin Ord accompanied by  
Michael-John Harper  
*Im Wintergarten*, daadgalerie, Berlin, 2016

115 VOLTS

DANGER  
ELECTRICITY



Sriwhana Spong  
*The Fourth Notebook*  
Installation view  
Carriageworks, Sydney, 2015





Sriwhana Spong  
*The Stranger's House*  
Installation view

Taking form with Agathe Gothe-Snape, Art Gallery NSW, July 2013





Sriwhana Spong  
*The Purple Blotter*  
Installation view  
Michael Lett, March 2012





Sriwhana Spong  
*The Purple Blotter*  
Installation view  
Michael Lett, March 2012

## Sriwhana Spong

Born 1979 in Auckland, New Zealand  
Lives and works in London, United Kingdom

Sriwhana Spong is an artist of New Zealand and Indonesian descent currently living and working in London. She is interested in the fertile margins and the rich edges where things meet, working across various mediums such as sculpture, film, writing, performance, dance, and sound.

Her materials are often inspired by the everyday materials used in Balinese offerings—assemblages that are not made to last and that incorporate formal patterns with informal additions of what is close at hand. Her large silk banners dyed in Fanta, Coca-cola, and tea function more than unalloyed reproaches of global homogeneity through colonisation and capitalism, but also consider the power of collective experience by acknowledging these consumed substances' effect as being at once toxic and joyous. Her ever-expanding 'personal orchestra', an ongoing series of instruments, explores the writing of place, history, and the body through sound.

The formal and informal also meet in her sculptures and films where experiential knowledge, autobiography, and fiction are entangled with carefully researched materials and forms that reflect their particular cultural contexts and sources. Here Spong also draws on the writings of female medieval mystics, attempting to translate their 'mystic style'—a preference for experiential knowledge over institutionalised knowledge, autobiography, fiction, close observation, and the everyday—into films and sculptures that explore the relationship of the body to language, how it is written, and how it exceeds and escapes this inscribing.

## EDUCATION

2017-2020  
Doctorate of Fine Arts, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

2013-2015  
Master of Fine Art, Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam

1998-2001  
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

## AWARDS

2012  
Walters Prize Finalist, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland  
2005  
Winner Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award

## RESIDENCIES

2016  
Gasworks, London  
Neu Kirche, Pittsburgh

2015  
DAAD, Berlin  
Megalo Print Studio, Canberra

2008  
ISCP, New York

2007  
Artspace, Sydney

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2023  
Luzpomphia, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)

2022

17th Istanbul Biennial  
Legacies | CIRCUIT Artist Film Commissions, Artspace, Auckland (group)

2021

The Poem is a Temple, Western Front, Vancouver (solo)  
RIA Live Art Commissions, The Roberts Institute of Art, London (group)  
Ural Industrial Biennial (group)  
Enterrar los pies en el paisaje, Museo Cabañas, Guadalajara, and Baja California Sur Museum of Art (group)  
The 10th Walters Prize, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland (group)  
Trust and Confusion, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (group)



2020

1,2,3,4, The Glucksman, University College Cork, Cork (group)  
Honestly Speaking: The Word, the Body and the Internet, Auckland Art Gallery  
Toi o Tāmaki, Auckland (group)  
State of Motion, Asian Film Archive, Singapore (group)  
In Her Image, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin (group)

2019

castle-crystal, Edinburgh Arts Festival, Edinburgh (solo)  
Ida-Ida, Spike Island, Bristol (solo)  
Deep Sounding, daadgalleries, Berlin (group)  
How to Live Together, St Paul St, Auckland (group)

2018

a hook but no fish, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth; Pump House  
Gallery, London (solo)  
Regarding Fear and Hope, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne (group)  
Jan Knap / Sriwhana Spong, Gesso Artspace, Vienna (group)  
Can Tame Anything, The Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt (group)  
Great Movements of Feeling, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne (group)  
If These Stones Could Sing, KADIST, San Francisco (group)

2017

having-seen-snake, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)  
The Score, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne (group)  
The Plum Tree, Headlands Sculpture on the Golf, Auckland (solo)

2016

Oceanic feeling with Maria Taniguchi, ICA Singapore; Govett Brewster (solo)  
Mother's Tongue, Neu Kirche, Pittsburg (solo)  
Im Wintergarten, DAAD Gallery, Berlin (solo)  
FOURNUS, Gythio, Greece (group)  
Inhabiting Space, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington (group)

2015

24 Frames per Second, Carriageworks, Sydney (group)  
High Rise, Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam (group)  
Sights and Sounds, The Jewish Museum, New York (group)

2014

If I had it I would give it to you, Upominki, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (group)

Fin, Utopian Slumps, Melbourne (group)

2013

Taking form, with Agatha Gothe-Snape, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney,  
Australia (group)  
Video Arte Australia y Nueva Zelanda, Matucana 100, Santiago, Chile (group)  
Zizhiqu-Autonomous Regions Guandong Times Museum, Guangzhou (group)  
Between Being and Doing, Utopian Slumps, Melbourne (group)

2012

Lethe-wards Neuer Kunstverein Wien, Vienna (solo)  
Actions and Remains Terrace Sculpture Commission, Auckland Art Gallery,  
Auckland (solo)  
The Walters Prize, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland (group)  
18th Biennale of Sydney: all our relations, Cocatoo Island, Sydney, Australia (solo)  
Sriwhana Spong, Neuer Kunstverein, Vienna (solo)  
The Purple Blotter, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)  
Raiding the Archives, Bangkok Experimental Film Festival 6, Thai Film Archive,  
Bangkok (film screening)  
All Our Relations 18th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney (group)

2011

Rencontres Internationales, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (film screening)  
Prospect, New Zealand Art Now, City Gallery, Wellington (group)  
Christian Jankowski, Richard Maloy, Sriwhana Spong, Sue Crockford Gallery,  
Auckland (group)  
Collecting Contemporary, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa,  
Wellington (group)  
Fanta Silver and Song, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, Australia (solo)  
Toi Aotearoa Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland (group)

2010

Dancing Celestial, Physics Room, Christchurch (solo)  
Scene Shifts, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden (group)  
Exhibitions, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland (group)  
Discreet Objects, Utopian Slumps, Melbourne, Australia (group)  
Lethe-wards, Arts Statements, Art Basel (solo)  
Channeling Mr B, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)

2009

Torn and Untroubled Y3k, Melbourne (solo)  
New World Records, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia (group)

For Keeps, Sampling Recent Acquisitions 2006-2009, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland (group)  
Tactical Support: Curator's Choice, Tracy Williams Ltd, New York (group)

2008

Myth and Practice, The NZ Film Archive, Wellington (solo)  
Solar Midnight, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
Backdrop, Newcall, Auckland (solo)  
Moving Light, with Jonathan Jones, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth (two-person)  
Open Studios International Studio and Curatorial Programme, New York (group)  
Limbo Land, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (group)  
Ethnographies of the Future, BRIC Rotunda Gallery, New York (group)  
Group Show, 1301PE, Los Angeles (group)

2007

Beetlejuice, Artspace, Sydney (solo)  
Regarding Fear and Hope, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia (group)  
Twone, in collaboration with Kate Newby, Physics Room, Christchurch (two-person)  
Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf, Te Tuhi, Auckland (group)  
Turbulence 3<sup>RD</sup> Auckland Triennale, Artspace, Auckland (solo presentation)

2006

Don't Misbehave, SCAPE Biennale, Christchurch (solo presentation)  
Satellite, Shanghai, China (group)  
Candlestick Park, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
A Tale of Two Cities, Busan Biennale, Korea (solo presentation)  
Twin Oak Drive, 2x2 Contemporary Projects, City Gallery, Wellington (group)  
Local Transit, Artspace, Auckland (group)  
Single Currency, VCA, Melbourne, Australia (group)  
Earthly Delight, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (group)  
An Unlikely Return to the Legend of Origins, Sparwasser HQ, Berlin (group)

2005

Cultural Futures, St Paul St Gallery, Auckland (group)  
Muttnik, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
Waikato Contemporary Art Award, Hamilton (group)  
World Famous in New Zealand, CCAS, Canberra, Australia (group)

2004

C'est La Vie ma Cherie, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (solo)  
Break Shift, Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (group)

Somersault, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (group)  
ACP Video Show, Scott Donovan Gallery, Sydney (group)

## COLLECTIONS

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki  
Chartwell Collection  
Musuem of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa  
Adam Art Gallery  
Queensland Art Gallery  
Kadist Art Foundation

## PROGRAMME SCREENINGS

2020

Nameless. echoes, spectres, hisses, A.I and XING, online  
Spheres: An Online Video Project, Christchurch Art Gallery, Christchurch

2018

Atonal, Berlin

2014

At the still point of the turning world, a salon event curated by Gina Buenfeld, Camden Arts Centre, Shibaura House, Tokyo  
Art Basel Hong Kong Film Program

2012

Artists Film International, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Italy;  
Whitechapel, London; Ballroom Marfa, Marfa  
Raiding the Archives, Bangkok Experimental Film Festival 6, Film Archive, Bangkok

2011

Rencontres Internationales, Centre Pompidou, Paris

2007

Lost and Found, City Gallery, Wellington

2006

Happy Believers, Werkleitz Biennale, Halle, Germany  
Staring into Space, Trafo Space, Budapest  
The Peninsula, Singapore History Museum, Singapore

2005

Viewfinder, The Film Archive, Auckland City Library  
Squared, Wellington City Art Gallery, Wellington

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2020

Caterina Riva, "Sriwhana Spong: A Re-Enchantment of the world," *sofar*, 28 October, 2020 <https://so-far.online/weekly/sriwhana-spong-a-reenchantment-of->



[www.ocula.com/magazine/conversations/sriwhana-spong/](http://www.ocula.com/magazine/conversations/sriwhana-spong/)

Lucinda Benett, "Secret Languages, Strangers' Houses, Snakes: On Sriwhana Spong," *The Pantograph Punch*, June 2018 <https://pantograph-punch.com/post/sriwhana-spong>

Louise Lever, "Feminist Hieroglyphics: I write from my Stomach," *Contemporary Hum*, May 2018 [www.contemporaryhum.com/sriwhana-spong-conversation](http://www.contemporaryhum.com/sriwhana-spong-conversation)

Tom Hastings, "Sriwhana Spong: a hook but no fish," *studio international*, September, 2018. [www.studiointernational.com/index.php/sriwhana-spong-a-hook-but-no-fish-review](http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/sriwhana-spong-a-hook-but-no-fish-review)

2016

Susan Gibb, *Dogs in space, witches of dumaguete*, ICA, Singapore

2015

Michael FitzGerald, Susan Gibb, Sriwhana Spong, *A Cruel Repose*, High Rise Catalogue, Piet Zwart Institute

2013

Anneke Jaspers, *Taking Form*, Contemporary Projects Catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Michael Fitzgerald, "Sriwhana Spong's Choreography of the Camera," *Art & Australia* 50 2013, 446-453.

2012

Sriwhana Spong, "Beach Study" *Landfall* 223 Autumn, 2012, 88-97.

Natasha Conland, *Made Active: the Chartwell Show* Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland.

2011

Sofia Curman and Caroline Elgh (eds.) *Scene Shifts* (Latvia: Livonia Print) *Discipline* 1 (Winter 2011) [page work]

2010

Jan Bryant, Sarah Hopkinson, Sriwhana Spong, *Nijinsky* (Auckland: Clouds, Michael Lett Publishing)

Maud Page, *Unnerved The New Zealand Project* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery).

2008

Dylan Rainforth, "Filmic Vibrations: The Contemporary Legacy of Len Lye" *Art & Australia* 46: 3.

Natasha Conland, "New Work Sriwhana Spong" *Artworld* 5.

Consuelo Cavaniglia, *Moving Light* (Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre).

Sue Gardiner, "Video Calls the Shots" *Art News New Zealand* Autumn, 96.

2007

Brian Butler, *Speculation* (Zurich, Auckland: JRP Ringier, Venice Project).

Kah Bee Chow, David Levinson, Sriwhana Spong, *Twone* (catalogue).

Laura Preston, "Seven Days" *Turbulence Third Auckland Triennial* (catalogue).

2006

Laura Preston, "Daytrip" in *Don't Misbehave: SCAPE Biennale* (catalogue).

Emma Bugden, "Living in a World of Echoes" in *2x2 Contemporary Projects* (catalogue)

2005

Rose Hoare, "Being Balinese," *Metro*, October, 86.

Virginia Were, "Where Night Falls" *Art News New Zealand*, Summer, 46-47.

Tessa Laird, "Love Letters in the Sand," *NZ Listener*, August 6-12, 48.

Jenny Ling, "Cultural Stray Collars Mutt" *NZ Herald*, March 16, B7.

# Fertile, spooky, and discordant

*Sriwhana Spong's multi-disciplinary approach to art draws on medieval mysticism, dance, dress and Balinese instruments. As Megan Dunn reports, she also has a finely tuned 'dogma radar'.*

These are the facts: in 2017 artist Sriwhana Spong travelled to the ruins of Disibodenberg monastery in Germany. She had three days to film her new work. "I didn't know what to expect but I quickly realised the site had become a place of pilgrimage." Busloads of women arrived each day. Like Spong, they were there to wander the grounds of the monastery where Hildegard von Bingen – a 12th-century Benedictine abbess, a visionary mystic and composer – had lived for nearly 40 years.

On Sunday a priest walked across the frame, interrupting Spong's carefully composed shot. He was conducting a choir in the ruins. Spong had taken her sister along as her assistant and another day a group of four women from Japan asked her what Spong was filming. Her sister replied, "She's making a film about Hildegard." The women were excited. Spong's sister later said, "I think they're expecting a really big documentary."

Spong's 25-minute film *a hook but no fish* (2017) is not a documentary. It is, instead, a piece of mysticism in and of itself. Hildegard, like the other nuns at Disibodenberg, was enclosed in a small cell or 'tomb' in a confined area away from the monks. *a hook but no fish* begins with the clipped sound of footsteps across concrete, followed by the strike of a match; a deep-set stone window comes into view. The window onto the world is just a horizontal line like the slot of a letterbox. The footsteps on the soundtrack quickly move outside where the forest is presented in its lushness, alive with birdsong, but the cloistered tone has been set.

"Are you a mystic?" I ask.

Spong had just returned to London, after completing her two-month residency at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. The Govett-Brewster is the second venue for her exhibition also titled *a hook but no fish*, which first opened at the Pump House Gallery in Battersea in January 2018.

"No. The more I look into these so-called medieval mystic writers, the less I actually know what a mystic is," she says.

Spong's interest in Hildegard grew out of her research at the Warburg Institute Library in London and her video *This Creature* (2016), about the Christian mystic Margery Kempe, widely considered the author of the first autobiography in English. The video features in an upcoming group show at the Dowse Art Museum.

*a hook but no fish*, Spong's first solo museum exhibition in New Zealand, has been expanded at the Govett-Brewster.

Downstairs, *a hook but no fish* is projected alongside her earlier film *having-seen-snake* (2016). On the mezzanine is *Scaurin Ranzgia (night tongue)* (2018), a series of cryptic sculptures of horse bridles embedded in wax; the looped bridles resemble signs or half-formed letters. A gate, *Design for a Horse Bit #2* (2018) fences off her elegant watercolour series *Sigil Design (Rothschild's mynah)* (2017); a sigil is a symbol said to possess magical power and the series is named after an endangered Balinese bird. *Cum Vox Sanguinis* (2018) is a musical score attached to the gallery wall with honey that determines when one of the three instruments on display – including *Instrument C (Claire)* – will be struck during open hours by the gallery invigilator. The score is based on one of Hildegard's hymns.

"Do you have faith?" I ask.

"Well, I was raised in the Pentecostal Church, so I've been given a first-hand experience of the controlling power of language and also how quickly it can be broken up, or subverted, and that is exactly what the female mystic writers do."

"Have you ever spoken in tongues?"

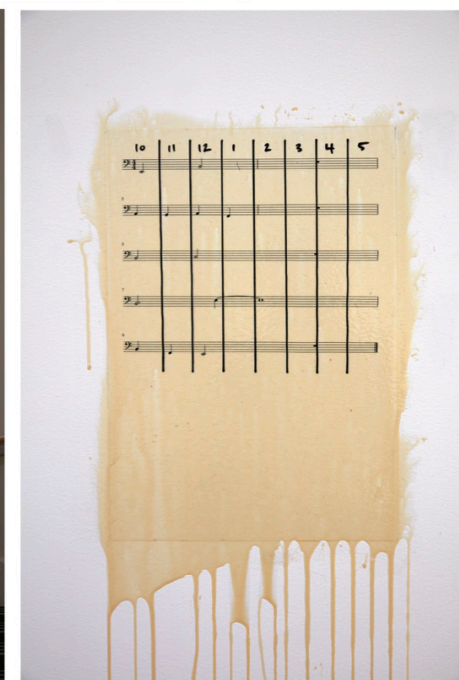
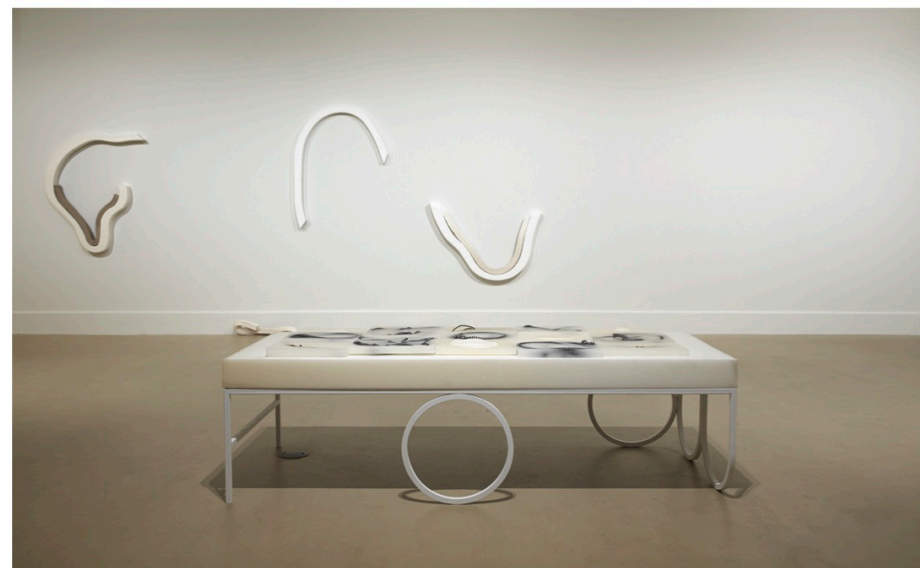
"No, my mother does though and I remember asking her how to do it. I could never do it. My 'faith' wasn't strong enough. But I'm fascinated by it."

The phrase 'speaking in tongues' comes from First Corinthians in the New Testament: 'If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.' It's sometimes known as glossolalia, a phenomenon in which speakers go into a trance state and communicate in unknown 'divine' languages.

Glossolalia is also a useful analogy for understanding Spong's multi-disciplinary approach to art.

"My method – often rather frustratingly – has been to wait until I chime with something," she recently told the show's curator, Tendai John Mutambu, in an online interview.

Her exhibition at the Govett-Brewster also includes *Bad review* (2018). Just before Spong's opening in New Plymouth, a critic published a review of her Pump House



Exhibition views, Sriwhana Spong, *a hook but no fish* at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 12 May–22 July, 2018.

Top: *Scaurin Ranzgia (night tongue)*, 2018, (foreground), paraffin wax, equestrian rope, foam, steel, lacquer, 1800 x 800 x 410mm, (back wall): *Oirclamsid (ear cartilage) #1–4*, Lou, 2017–18, paraffin wax, wood, clay, Dimensions variable. Above, left: *Design for a Horse Bit #2*, 2018, steel, lacquer, 2000 x 1940 x 30mm; *Sigil Design (Rothschild's mynah)*, #9–#24, 2017 – ongoing, Indian yellow tartrazine pigment, water, honey, saffron, gum Arabic, painted wooden frames 16 x (1800 x 750mm). Above, right: *Cum vox sanguinis* (detail), 2018, paper, honey, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photos: Sam Hartnett



exhibition accusing the works of impenetrability and shallowness. Spong cut and pasted his 'bad review' into a fragmented poem and presented it hanging from the gallery stairwell like a scroll. The work is lit bright red.

"I have a dogma radar that quivers at any suggestion of morality or dogma," Spong says. She was talking about religion, but the critic's review might be considered dogmatic too.

Spong's film *a hook but no fish* is inspired by the Lingua Ignota (Latin for "unknown language") a language first described by Hildegard. This language has a 23-letter alphabet and exists as a glossary of over 1000 nouns but has no verbs or adjectives. Historians can only speculate on its use. And Spong's film speculates too.

In subtitles Spong narrates the mysterious life of 'H': A young woman beneath a transparent veil acts as a conduit for Hildegard. (Spong told the fabric-shop assistant, "I need a veil for a time-travelling, mystic, futuristic nun.") The film asks whether the Lingua Ignota was a prophetic language, predicting an apocalyptic future in which all animals have become extinct, outlasted by tools and technology.

Spong's imagery is fertile (a field of fallen apples), spooky (dirt writhing with worms) and discordant (iPhone footage of herons on an urban dumpster). The soundtrack by musician Claire Duncan is an intense build of church bells and feminine whispers. The film sparks adjectives – her colour gels cast frames in sudden bolts of blue, Fanta-stained oranges and fallow yellows. This suspenseful work utilises horror tropes: non-linear sounds, under-exposure, abrupt colour changes.

"The colour gels are totally a throwback to *Suspiria*," Spong says. I should have known she'd be a fan of *Suspiria*, the cult Italian supernatural horror film about a ballet dancer. Spong trained as a ballet dancer from the age of seven until 16, and ballet is a recurring theme in her work.

"Why did you stop?"

"I had the arms but not the turn out," Spong says,

"What's the turnout?"

"The flexibility that you need in the hip socket to turn the legs out. I had terrible, terrible turnout."

But her art career has had good turnout. In 2012 her exhibition *Fanta Silver and Song*, was shortlisted for the Walters Prize. The work included the films *Costume for a Mourner* (2010) and *Lethe-wards* (2010), both of which reimagined a Sergei Diaghilev ballet originally performed by the Ballets Russes. The ballet costumes were designed by Matisse, but only photographs of the performance remain. Spong's *Costume for a Mourner* recreated the dance from the original score and was performed by Benjamin Ord, who wore a liturgical robe Spong created in homage to Matisse's originals.

"Ballet has its own rigour and dogma. In some ways it runs parallel to Pentecostalism."

Raised in Balmoral, Auckland, near the KFC on the corner ("I was obsessed with KFC") Spong attended a Pentecostal school. Her father is Balinese, so she grew up with his

Hindu practice on the periphery. On an earlier trip to Bali, she recalls her sister leaving out a plate of French fries as a daily offering "so the spirits know we're here". After Spong graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts in 2001 her early works like the Super 8 film *Muttnik* (2005) riffed on translating Balinese daily offerings into an everyday New Zealand context.

In 2014 she undertook her masters at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam. A turning point arrived after she designed a set of capes for the graduating year ahead of her. Costumes represent "a moment of transformation," she says. "It's a shift, you become the character, you enter this space. As a performer you're in charge of the energy that is created in that space."

The Govett-Brewster exhibition is also the first assembly of Spong's evolving Gamelan orchestra. Gamelan is an indigenous Balinese orchestra that consists of percussive instruments tuned to and by each specific village. Spong's instruments include *Instrument B (Vivian)* (2016), a metallophone, and *Instrument C (Claire)* (2018), a bell plate, which are tonally matched to the painted dresses *HZ Dress B* and *HZ Dress C* (2016-18). Her new work includes *Costume for Instrument D (Vera)*, a silk dress dyed in Coca-Cola



Above: Sriwhana Spong in performance, *Tasseography of a Rat's Nest* (extended), 2018. Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photo: Samuel Hartnett

Opposite: *Instrument D (Vera)*, 2018, aluminium, steel, lacquer, plastic

Right: *Costume for Instrument D (Vera)*, 2018 silk dyed in Coca-Cola, vegetable oil, 1650 x 540 x 140mm

(Spong has also previously exhibited fabrics dyed in Fanta), and *Instrument D (Vera)* (2018), a set of chimes made from aluminium French fries. Each instrument in Spong's orchestra is named after someone key to her. "I wanted this moment when these instruments moved from being silent to speaking," she says.

Spong invited Auckland band *The Coolies* to play for the opening. "At one point Stefan (from *The Coolies*) picked up the chimes on wheels and just started banging them on the ground. For about 20 seconds I was worried about all the aluminium French fries spinning off into the space. But I think it was a striking moment of transition – from quiet sculpture to activated instrument."

Later Spong performed an extended version of her earlier work *Tasseography of a Rat's Nest* (2018). A tasseography is a divination or fortune-telling method usually used to "read tea leaves". Dressed in a unitard painted with fish scales, Spong spread a semi-circle of French fries on the gallery floor. "The chips have become this personal reference, a marking of place."

So what does the future divine? In 2019: a solo exhibition at Spike Island in Bristol.





Art

25.06.2018

## Secret Languages, Stranger's Houses, Snakes: On Sriwhana Spong

By Lucinda Bennett

What could a medieval female mystic have to offer a contemporary artist?

Sriwhana Spong has seen a snake, befriended a rat, cast a spell for a critically endangered bird. She has engaged with all manner of living creatures in her work and yet her latest exhibition is titled for a lack of animal: *a hook but no fish*.

For me, this is a foreboding title, for where is the fish? Or even more worrisome in plural, where are the fish? Are there no more fish in the river, the lake, the ocean, the world? What we do know is that there is a hook, presumably a fish hook and so violently barbed. I cannot help but think of this sinister little Margaret Atwood poem:

*You fit into me  
like a hook into an eye  
a fish hook  
an open eye*

This remembering of Atwood, a writer best known for her dystopian fiction, turns out to be eerily appropriate when I read the exhibition text to discover the story behind Spong's title. At the heart of *a hook but no fish* is a secret language received by a 12th century German abbess and mystic during a divine vision. Hildegard von Bingen's Lingua Ignota (Latin for 'unknown language') has a known glossary of around 1000 words, remarkably few of which name living creatures. Meanwhile, there is an

abundance of words for tools and manufactured objects. The curious nature of these inclusions and omissions prompted Spong to speculate that von Bingen's language may have been devised for a future in which tools and technology have outlived the animals they were designed to capture, a world where we have the means with which to catch a fish, if only there were any.

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*a hook but no fish* is a big deal for Spong. This is her first solo museum exhibition in Aotearoa, and it comes to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery fresh from an initial showing at London's Pump House Gallery and with several new additions created during Spong's two-month residency in New Plymouth. An artist of New Zealand and Balinese heritage, Spong graduated from Auckland University's Elam School of Fine Arts in 2001 and has exhibited regularly both at home and abroad ever since. Notable amongst her many accolades is her nomination for the prestigious Walters Prize in 2012 for her ethereal exhibition *Fanta Silver and Song*, originally shown at Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, in 2011. The show included silk costumes dyed with soft-drink and a delicately moving geometric sculpture shown alongside *Costume for a Mourner* (2010), a masterful filmic work reimagining Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes performance of a lost ballet, drawing information and inspiration from the static fragments that are the only surviving documents of the work: a Stravinsky score, grainy photographs of the dancers and images of the costumes created by Henri Matisse.



Sriwhana Spong, *Costume for a Mourner*, 2010, choreographed and danced by Benjamin Ord, high-definition digital video, duration 8 min 22 sec. Image courtesy the artist and Michael Lett.

This attempt to summarise just one of Spong's exhibitions may provide some clue as to the scope of research and material complexities typical of her work. It may also illustrate the difficulty of writing broadly about her practice, for there are very few fora with word counts generous enough to accommodate the many stories wreathed into her work, let alone the way these are told through materials, or the way we respond to them. This essay, then, is an attempt to unpack some of these layers by focusing on works from her recent Govett-Brewster exhibition, drawing pearls from the artist talk Spong gave with curator Tendai John Mutambu at its opening weekend. It is also informed by my own personal correspondence with the artist after she had left New Plymouth, heading home to London where she works between her light-filled studio and the reading room at The Warburg Institute Library.

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She has this wonderful ability to take an idea  
and run with it, but never in the direction you  
expect



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Following her Walters Prize nomination, Spong spent two years in Rotterdam completing her MFA at the prestigious Piet Zwart Institute – known to New Zealanders for having played host to a strong lineage of our artists, including Ruth Buchanan, Marnie Slater and Liz Allen. A pivotal moment came during this time when she was asked an incisive question by supervisor Jan Verwoert: *What authorises your making?* The question was posed after observing the difference between the very serious way Spong approached her work in the studio, and the excited way she approached a project of making bespoke graduation robes for each of the students in the year above. What judgments, he asked, was she bringing to her studio practice that she had perhaps put aside to enjoy the making of these robes? *What authorises your making?*



Sriwhana Spong and Tendai John Mutambu in conversation inside a hook but no fish at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photography by Sam Hartnett.

The question became an ongoing interrogation for Spong, one that has perhaps been answered through her interest in the lives and writings of female mystics such as von Bingen. She is specifically interested in the way these women worked with their own experiential knowledge – necessarily, for that was all they had, given their exclusion from other forms (von Bingen, for example, never went to school and so was never taught to write – even her *Lingua* had to be transcribed by men). This strategic way of thinking and working manifests in their writings, which Spong sees ultimately as texts of survival. Over email, she tells me:

They incorporate linguistic techniques that enable them to write without the charge of heresy, but in doing so they create incredibly new and radical forms that, to me, still resonate today, and still offer up ways of thinking about the body and its relationship to what surrounds it.

Theirs are texts that blend fiction and biography, that incorporate wild swings between elation and doubt reflective of their bodily religious experiences, their visions and raptures. I can't help but think that in many ways, they are texts that function very similarly to Spong's work – or rather, her work mirrors their style, swirling personal encounters together with fragments from history, mythology, fiction and tradition.

a hook but no fish, 2018. Installation shot at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photography by Sam Hartnett.



This heady mingling of ideas is the truest pleasure in Spong's work. She has this wonderful ability to take an idea and run with it, but never in the direction you expect. It's this ability that makes her practice so immensely difficult to quantify, for she will often keep hold of one idea for a while, leaving it simmering in the background while she tends to something new, eventually mixing them together into the same pot to create a more complex flavour. There seems to be a kind of flickering internal logic to Spong's selection of ideas, but it is a logic that, as a viewer, you can only really follow with your feelings. When I suggest that she could be considered something of a collector – of relationships and references that will be interpreted as objects and performances, rather than of readymade objects themselves – Spong isn't so sure.

It's about chiming with something. An encounter with something that makes you curious, and allowing yourself to follow that curiosity, no matter how silly it may seem at the time. I don't think I collect things, it's more about resonating with things, allowing things to leave an imprint, an imprint that you feel led to try and understand.

One such encounter that left an indelible imprint was with a garter snake she almost stepped on during an aimless stroll through a Pittsburgh graveyard in 2016. Her own instinctive reaction to this other body – time slowed, colours pinged, language fell away – was the catalyst for *having-seen-snake* (2017), a haunting film best described in three parts.



having-seen-snake, 2016 (film still). 16mm transferred to HD video 13:45 min.

The first is a series of not-quite-still shots of bodies overlaid with nature, the shots becoming increasingly abstracted, becoming technicolour through use of a three-colour-separation filming process, the ambient noise rising to a roar as the film progresses. The second part is lusciously tactile and even more abstract: an expanse of film is hand-painted so when the work is viewed, a long line of shimmering colour rushes by like the glistening, flowing body of a snake. Long hisses fill your ears, sometimes sounding more like a gentle human shush than a menacing snake. These first two parts attempt to convey the feeling of Spong's encounter, to restage the heightened state of *having-seen-snake* – a title pinched from something the acclaimed short-story writer George Saunders said in an interview while describing his aversion to realist writing:

It's kind of like, if you see a snake and it scares the shit out of you, typing, 'Suddenly I saw a snake' doesn't get it – has nothing to do with what you felt in that instant. How to use or exploit or get at that (having-seen-snake) energy? The energy of what you actually felt in that instant? That's the question.

The third part comprises an off-screen interview with herpetologist José Padial that plays while the camera roves over specimen jars filled with countless scaly bodies. Padial speaks candidly about his work, expressing his initial reservations with the processes involved in creating a taxonomy – that is, with killing rare creatures so they may be preserved, understanding that this is all in service of their ultimate goal of conservation. He speaks also of how they assign names to new specimens – an act that Spong describes as a way of “pulling the snake into culture.”



*having-seen-snake*, 2016. 16mm transferred to HD video 13:45 min. Installation shot at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photography by Sam Hartnett.

But of course, efforts at preservation are never guaranteed, and while new species are being pulled into culture through naming, others are falling out of existence. The creature Spong had intended to explore during her Pittsburgh residency with Neu Kirche was the critically endangered Rothschild's mynah, endemic to the island of Bali, in part due to twelve of these rare birds being housed in Pittsburgh's National Aviary. In many ways, *having-seen-snake* is about the birds as much as it is about the snake: the film ends with the flirtatious sound of mynahs singing over the screen faded to black, a potent reminder of what is at stake, of what we stand to lose.

“

Her language was a way to articulate her world on her own terms – a radical act for a woman who was never taught to write

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*having-seen-snake* examines the power inherent in naming, making the proposition that to be able to exist fully in culture, one must exist in language. As a language known to only a tiny ring of people, the Lingua Ignota complicates this idea. Instead of functioning as a tool to bring things into culture, Hildegard's language pulled things from the world into her sphere, infusing them with new and personal meaning: these were the things most prominent not in the world, but in her experience of it. Her language was a way to articulate her world on her own terms – a radical act for a woman who was never taught to write. Over email, Spong tells me:

What I am drawn to about Hildegard's Lingua Ignota is that it enacts what Michel de Certeau calls an 'erotics in language.' It breaks apart Latin sentences, creates holes and gaps into which Hildegard inserts her own private glossary. This glossary names the things closest to her, what surrounded her, so it's a great example of public language being shattered and caressed by a private language.



*Oirclamisil (ear cartilage) #1-4; Lou, 2017-18. Paraffin wax, wood, clay. Installation shot at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photography by Sam Hartnett.*

Interestingly, when Spong talks about the Lingua Ignota, she often speaks in metaphors of disease – of Hildegard's language “infecting” the classical high language of Latin, rotting its foundations. I asked her if there was anything inherently grotesque in Hildegard's language, or whether this alignment was perhaps something others had burdened it with. Spong explains:

A woman's body at the time was strongly associated with death and illness, so you have this wonderful image of Hildegard...infecting the high language of Latin when she inserts her own words into it. I like its economy too – it's very practical. By using her own nouns but utilising already existing Latin adjectives, verbs and sentence structure, she does just enough to create a new form – she doesn't just throw the baby out with the bath water, she merely infects an existing structure. There is nothing abject to me in her Lingua specifically, it's about how she used it. The glossary does include words for men's and women's genitalia, which was seen as inappropriate by many commentators – Wilhelm Grimm of the Brothers Grimm was 'disturbed' by it because of Hildegard's gender and role as an abbess.

*Scaurin Ranzgia (night tongue), 2018 (detail). Paraffin wax, equestrian rope, foam, steel, lacquer 1800 x 800 x 410mm. Photography by Sam Hartnett.*





The figure of Hildegard haunts a *hook but no fish*, her spirit evoked across numerous works with words from her *Lingua* regularly employed as titles. Her physical body is conjured especially in the work *Scaurin Ranzgia (night tongue)* (2018), part of an ongoing series that sees Spong making pieces of furniture in homage to figures she admires, using their initials to inform the designs. Spong refers to this particular work as a “bed for Hildegard,” and has used the kind of rope intended for bridling horses to form serpentine letters that have then been embedded within wax tablets, the equestrian rope in particular reading as a potent metaphor for the systems of restraint that Hildegard lived within.

“

I have come to realise that the common thread binding Spong’s works together is more a rope: they are about undermining structures of control, about bodies, materials and words refusing to stay in line

”

Hildegard is explored most thoroughly in the 25-minute film after which the exhibition has been titled, in which we are introduced to Hildegard and all that she has come to symbolise for Spong. The film begins much like *having-seen-snake*, with lingering shots on scenes of nature and rock – the ruins of the monastery where Hildegard spent 39 years of her life. A female figure shrouded in a clear plastic sheet looks away from the camera. Through captions on the screen, she is introduced to us as ‘H,’ the receiver of “a previously unknown language. A fresh way to read and write the world.” We are told that “[t]his language offers an unmaking and a remaking through the body of a woman...H’s language is a secret hoard of caterpillars from which H’s body will metamorphose, opening to call things with a new tongue.” This phrase in particular highlights the transformative potential of creating a new language, of making outside structures that have not been set for you or by you, of making something that *is* for you and by you. Of course, this is precisely what Spong herself does, too. In her artist talk, she explained that she “always think[s] of art history as being the history of male looking, and predominately white male looking.” She goes on to discuss how this is an interesting position to make and think in as a woman artist, because you are always in a sense “breaking and entering into a stranger’s house,” inserting yourself into a structure that is not your own.

*a hook but no fish*, 2017. 16mm transferred to HD, HD video 24:50 min. Installation shot at Govett-



Brewster Art Gallery. Photography by Sam Hartnett.

With this in mind, it’s very easy to see why Spong is so attracted to these female mystics, why her work seems to echo their strategic ways of writing, why they authorise her making. When I idly ask what the most important thing she learned at Piet Zwart was, she tells me it was the discovery that she enjoyed writing, made obvious by the exhibition’s inclusion of Spong’s own texts; calm, poetic pieces with an undercurrent of riot. I’m thinking in particular of *Bad Review* (2018), a new work made in response to a negative review of her Pump House exhibition. In this piece, Spong recycles and reclaims the critic’s words, rearranging them to form a lyrical response that highlights the ‘abject’ qualities the writer couldn’t help but fault: *anarchic abbess / her flaw her force her / overabundance / her oversaturation*. Her sculptural works are the same, apparently elegant and restrained, made of steel, lacquer and rope, but then organic matter is introduced, Coca Cola and grease, honey dripping down walls, wet slabs of clay, foliage and cold KFC chips; materials that will drip, rot, warp or disobey. I have come to realise that the common thread binding Spong’s works together is more a rope: they are about undermining structures of control, about bodies, materials and words refusing to stay in line.

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How does one neither ennoble nor degrade something that’s outside of you?

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*Costume for Instrument D (Vera)*, 2018. Silk dyed in Coca-Cola, vegetable oil, 1650 x 540 x 140mm. Installation shot at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Photography by Sam Hartnett.



Perhaps this is why Spong is so attracted to animals, so interested in excavating her own encounters with them. For in spite of all that humans do to try and control animals, we are still often outsmarted by them, surprised by their ingenuity, their strategy. Spong seems always to approach animals not as something to be controlled but as somebody to be encountered; she never attempts to manipulate their movements or overburden their images with concepts. When speaking about her encounter with the garter snake in the graveyard, or about the rat who made its nest outside her bedroom window and became the inspiration for her performance *Tasseography of a Rat's Nest* (2015), Spong relays this question: "How does one neither ennoble nor degrade something that's outside of you?" Her recognition of the agency of these animals is palpable in her works, which most often centre on her own fathoming of their encounters, encounters that often take place by luck or chance – and what is chance but a failure of control?

★

The final scenes of *a hook but no fish* are so enchanting they feel almost like a dream. They comprise a series of still-camera shots taken in an unremarkable urban environment, primarily in damp, dingy back-alleys lined with garbage. And here, in these most unlikely settings, are herons. Surprisingly large, impossibly elegant coastal birds with graceful necks and thin sharp beaks stepping carefully between Styrofoam box lids and plastic sacks. These are birds who live on fish, filmed hunting amongst human refuse, searching, I imagine, for fish scraps they are more likely to find here than in the ocean – or is this the future in which there are no fish at all?

I can't help but think the fish are still there, they're just hiding. They've come to understand hooks and herons, learned to move strategically or even built their own rivers and oceans, just for themselves.

Sriwhana Spong  
*a hook but no fish*  
 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery  
 12 May – 22 July 2018



Govett-  
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## OCULA CONVERSATION

### Sriwhana Spong in Conversation

Tendai John Mutambu | New Plymouth | 6 July 2018



Sriwhana Spong. Photo: Lina Hermsdorf.

Sriwhana Spong's first solo museum exhibition in New Zealand, *a hook but no fish*, at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery (12 May–22 July 2018) explores a unique language—the *Lingua Ignota* (Latin for 'unknown language')—used by a medieval female German mystic, abbess, composer, and writer

Hildegard von Bingen. Since its first showing earlier this year at [London's](#) Pump House Gallery in Battersea Park, Spong has added new work to her New Zealand show as part of the two months she spent as the 2018 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Aotearoa New Zealand Artist in Residence.



Sriwhana Spong, *a hook but no fish* (2017) (Still). 16 mm transferred to HD, and HD video. 24 min 50 sec. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.

The exhibition in New Zealand includes the film *a hook but no fish*, which was partially shot at the ruins of the monastery near Frankfurt where Hildegard von Bingen lived for almost 40 years. Also included is a musical bell plate influenced by Balinese Gamelan tradition, which is part of a series of instruments that Spong has created through encounter, in relation to a particular place or collaborator. Titled *Instrument C (Claire)* (2018), the bell plate is dedicated to Claire Duncan who worked on the sound for *a hook but no fish* and involves the invigilators of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery who play the instrument according to a score that is derived from *Cum Vox Sanguinis*, a hymn by Hildegard. Spong also presents *Tasseography of a Rat's Nest (extended)* (2018), a performance first created in 2015 during a DAAD residency in Berlin in which the artist observed the construction of a rat's nest on her window ledge, and, tuning into her physical response to it, explored the role of language in how we experience our fears.

In this conversation, Spong speaks to the curator of her New Zealand show, Tendai John Mutambu, about working across film, painting, performance and sculpture to consider the relationship between the body, language and sound, as inspired by the practices of medieval women mystics.





Performance of *Tasseography of a Rat's Nest (extended)* (2018). *Instrument B (Vivian)* (2016). Aluminium bars, wood, Perspex, rubber, felt, brass. 47 x 76 x 26 cm; *Instrument C (Claire)* (2018). Aluminium bell plate, foliage, rope, wood. 93 x 63.5 x 0.5 cm; *Instrument D (Vera)* (2018). Aluminium, steel, lacquer, plastic. 59 x 157 x 32 cm. Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

A conversation has unfolded over the last few years between the work of women mystics and your own. Considering this, I want to begin by situating the origins and the development of this interest by asking how medieval women mystics have informed your practice, as an artist and as a writer?

While doing my Masters at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam in 2014, I was introduced to the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. Her writing came as a shock to me. I hadn't encountered a voice like hers before, and yet it felt familiar. One of my tutors at the time asked what genre Clarice's writing might fall under and I replied, instinctively, 'mystic writing'. This led to an ongoing exploration of medieval mystic texts written by women and their relationship to more contemporary writers—the French feminist thinker Hélène Cixous being a clear example. Through my work, I've been exploring this web of voices and the kind of body proposed by their texts.

In the past you've used the term 'constellation' to characterise this lineage of women and practices that inform your own. It's as if you are building a 'personal pantheon' of women writers and creators across time—Hildegard von Bingen, who is central to your latest exhibition's titular film, being one such character. Can you tell us a bit about how you see her relating to this 'personal pantheon'?

In 2016, while on residency at Gasworks in London, I made a film about the Christian mystic Margery Kempe (c. 1373–c. 1440), who is believed to have written the first autobiography in the English language. I spent some time researching at the Warburg Institute Library in London, which consists of four levels, each dedicated to a different area of study. I was working in the 'Orientation' section, dedicated to Western thought's transition from mysticism and magical belief to religion, science and philosophy. This categorisation of 'Orientation' led me to think of mystic writers—like Margery and Hildegard—as cartographers mapping out a territory or path; Lispector does a similar thing. In terms of a 'constellation' of voices or cartographers that influence my work, Hildegard provides a good example of a practice that extends across several mediums and areas of interest.



Sriwhana Spong, *a hook but no fish* (2017) (Still). 16 mm transferred to HD, and HD video. 24 min 50 sec. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.

While Hildegard is perhaps best known for her music, she also had visions she described, interpreted and illustrated, and she dictated books on the human body, the properties of plants and animals and their medicinal uses. Today you might call her a multidisciplinary artist.

I encountered Hildegard through an illustration of one of her visions that depicts her scheme of the Universe and looks like a fiery cosmic egg and also a lot like a vagina. In Hildegard's *Lingua Ignota* (unknown language)—a secret language comprising a glossary of around 1,000 nouns that she claimed to have 'received' by divine inspiration—she includes a word for the vulva (*fragizlanz*), so it doesn't seem too great a stretch to suggest that she had this in mind alongside the grand cosmic scheme of the universe when she directed the drawing of this vision. For me, one of the advantages of being an artist



when looking at material like this is that you can be much more playful with your connections than a historian has to be.



Sriwhana Spong, *a hook but no fish* (2017). 16 mm transferred to HD, HD video. 24 min 50 sec. Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

You mention her *Lingua Ignota* (unknown language). What, for you, is the significance of Hildegard's unknown language and in what ways does it resonate with your thinking around your own place in art, language and theoretical discourse?

Hildegard's *Lingua Ignota* survives as a glossary of nouns that she inserted into Latin, the latter providing verbs, adjectives and grammatical structure. What drew me to the *Lingua Ignota* is that it renames the things around Hildegard—things that were part of her daily experience. It gives us a really intimate view of her environment and what she saw and chose to focus on. Hildegard was therefore inserting her perspective into the official, high language of the period—the language of liturgical ceremony and of science, law and administration that women were excluded from. I see Hildegard's *Lingua Ignota* as both a subversive and a celebratory gesture where the excluded body inserts itself into the very space it is denied entry, and in doing so creates a new form. At the time, women's bodies were perceived as being grotesque and porous—the opposite of the complete, classically-sealed male body. Through the *Lingua Ignota*, the grotesque enters and erodes the fixed classical form. It makes for a

wonderful image, and it's a strategy that I am thinking through in relation to my own work.

I consider 'art history' as largely the history of male looking—and predominantly white male looking. I remember when it dawned on me that I was having to make, think, and act within a structure that was not made *for* me (or *by* me). In 2012, I made *The Stranger's House*, a large theatrical backdrop on which was painted Sidney Nolan's failed design for the original *Ballets Russes* production of *Icare*. The work was for a show in a national gallery that has an incredible collection of contemporary art, predominantly by men. Walking around the galleries was like being in a stranger's house, and I became concerned with how to make in, and for, this space. This led to the idea of breaking and entering the practice of a much lauded male modernist painter and stealing a work, only to re-make it into something of my own.



Sriwhana Spong, *The Stranger's House* (2013). Calico, paint. 44 x 120 cm. Exhibition view: *Taking Form*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (18 July–1 September 2013). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.

While doing my Masters, I designed a set of capes for the graduating year ahead of me. I got real enjoyment from designing these costumes—each one designed especially with the wearer and their practice in mind. I didn't view them as part of my practice, but something extraneous. However, my tutor brought them up during our next studio visit, describing the costumes as actively generating an energy during the graduation ceremony and challenging the seriousness with which I approached what

I saw as 'my practice' in the studio. He then posed a series of questions that have since stayed with me, namely: 'what are the value judgements you bring when deciding what is and is not art? And 'who authorises your art-making?'

And where have your attempts to answer the question of authorisation taken you since?

I'm interested in the emphasis on experiential knowledge by medieval women mystic writers, which came out of their exclusion from official institutions of learning. This favouring of experiential knowledge causes the body and all its variances to emerge and erupt into their texts, aided by the linguistic techniques that philosopher Michel de Certeau articulates in *The Mystic Fable* as composing the mystic style. These texts incorporate different forms, moving from fiction and autobiography to ideas formed through close observation, and are often filled with oxymorons and vertiginous swings from elation to doubt. In thinking about these texts and their relationship to more contemporary writers such as Clarice Lispector, I'm considering how 'discipline' and 'the disciplinary' relate to my own practice. My interest is in how the undisciplined body does the work of un-disciplining the discipline, namely how the excluded body—previously seen as unruly and in need of containment—can un-discipline writing and other mediums by breaking into these texts and discursive spaces.

I'm also drawn to what medieval scholar Caroline Bynum speaks of as a continuity that is expressed through women's stories from the medieval period as opposed to the upheavals of social drama that men's accounts from the same period contain. So, I've been thinking about this idea of continuity in relation to a chorus of women's voices that writes itself and extends across time.



Sriwhana Spong, *a hook but no fish* (2017) (Still). 16 mm transferred to HD, and HD video. 24 min 50 sec. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.

In your latest film *a hook but no fish* (2017) you move, quite dexterously, from documentation of a site visit on 16mm film to iPhone footage and from fiction to (auto)biography. The film itself is set across time and place: from the monastery ruins to a living room, a farmhouse, and scenes of birds in Rotterdam and London. In what ways is moving-image, as a medium, conducive to your way of researching, thinking and presenting ideas?

My method (often rather frustratingly) has been to wait until I chime with something. I then pursue this curiosity through a period of research, and during this time I begin to think through images, and montages—juxtaposing things that might not normally meet. Writing has also become important, both as a process and as a material in my films. *a hook but no fish* is the second time I have incorporated a text I wrote, and its structure reflects the way my writing slips between styles, often weaving together fiction, autobiography and biography. This weaving of fiction and autobiography stems from my experience of growing up in New Zealand estranged from my Indonesian heritage—growing up I felt that this part of me had to be fictionalised and imagined in order to exist, to take up space, to speak.



Sriwhana Spong, *having-seen-snake* (2016). 16mm transferred to HD video. 13 min 45 sec. Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



In what ways do the formal qualities and the structure of the accompanying film *having-seen-snake* (2016) reflect your inspiration for making this work?

While on residency in Pittsburgh, I visited a cemetery, and while looking at some of the tombstones I went into a state of enhanced sensory-awareness. My body went very still and colour and sound became heightened. After what felt like a long time, I looked down to see a garter snake directly in front of me. It was then that language entered the scene and only then, once the distinction was made between 'me' and 'snake', did I panic. I became interested in this strange and unverifiable moment where I had responded instinctively as just one creature (me) to another (snake), and the distinctions that emerged with the re-entry of language and the fear that these distinctions generated.

As part of the exhibitions at the Pump House Gallery and Govett-Brewster, I gave a performance of *Tasseography of a Rat's Nest (extended)* (2018)—a work about an encounter with a rat during a DAAD residency in Berlin in 2015–2016. The day I moved into my apartment, I noticed a rat on the window ledge, and I began to observe it over time. My initial response was to push it off the window ledge—an action I avoided by asking 'what makes me fear you?' I then became interested in how you can look at something like a rat ambivalently, neither ennobling nor degrading it. So, prior to my encounter with the snake, I had already been thinking about the role of language in how we experience things we fear.



Sriwhana Spong, *Tasseography of a Rat's Nest (extended)* (2018). Exhibiton view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.

With *having-seen-snake*, the day after my encounter with the garter snake, I read an interview with the American writer George Saunders in which he perfectly summed up my experience in the cemetery. He called it 'having-seen-snake energy', and this gave me a key towards representing this almost inexpressible experience. I was put in contact with José Padial, a herpetologist at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. José goes to the Amazon twice a year in search of unknown species of amphibians and reptiles. When I met him, he showed me a snake in a jar that he had just 'discovered' and was in the process of naming. I was drawn to this creature and its designation as nameless—as José says in the interview that is part of the film, if something does not have a name, it does not exist in the scientific community. The action of naming is one way this earlier film connects to *a hook but no fish*, which it is shown alongside *having-seen-snake* at the Govett-Brewster, and Hildegard's glossary of a thousand nouns which she used to rename the things around her and, in so doing, allow her to see these objects anew.

*having-seen-snake* is formed through the juxtaposition of two sections: the first is poetic, experiential, affective—it also evokes my experience with the garter snake through painted 16mm film, used deliberately as a reference to the form of the snake through the material's serpentine movement. The film then cuts to a more traditional documentary mode, comprising shots of specimens from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and audio of my interview with José.



Sriwhana Spong, *having-seen-snake* (2016) (Still). 16mm transferred to HD video. 13 min 45 sec. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.

*having-seen-snake* concludes with the sound of the Rothschild's mynah, a bird endemic to Bali, which is nearing extinction. This particular species has figured in your work before and appears in your most recent exhibition in the form of large-scale watercolour paintings. Was it pure coincidence that you happened upon the bird during your residency in Pittsburgh?

The National Aviary in Pittsburgh has a breeding programme for the Rothschild's mynah (or Bali mynah). The bird is endangered due to poaching, and breeding programmes have been set up around the world to try and ensure its survival. I was interested in this creature that could only survive in exile, and so I decided to end the film—about a snake being pulled into existence through the act of naming—with the song of a bird on the brink of extinction.

The ideas of calling up and conjuring up inform the series of sigil drawings in the exhibition. A sigil is an abstract symbol said to have magical powers that represents something you desire to happen and is constructed through combining the letters that make up the thing wished for. In its modern usage, once the final design is reached, you charge the sigil using a private method such as burning it, and the thing you desire will come into being. It's not a practice I engage in personally, but I am interested in the relationship between the terms 'to cast a spell' and 'to spell'—and how both conjure up and bring into being the thing named. With this ongoing series, the idea is that a final sigil design is never reached, giving the work an inchoateness that impedes the final moment of fulfilment.



Sriwhana Spong, *Sigil Design (Rothschild's mynah) #9–#24* (2017–ongoing). Indian yellow tartrazine pigment, water, honey, saffron,

gum Arabic. Approx. 180 x 75 cm; *Design For a Horse Bit #2* (2018). Steel, lacquer. 200 x 194 x 3 cm. Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

*Design For a Horse Bit #2* (2018) has similar origins as a symbol that you have transformed into a design. It also exists as part of an ongoing series ('Design For a Horse Bit', 2017–ongoing). What are its origins?

The design for the gate originates from a medieval manuscript of horse bits. I was attracted to their beauty but also their violence. A bit is a kind of tack, placed in a horse's mouth and used by a rider to communicate with the animal. It's a device used to control and discipline. I settled on translating these bits into gates because, very simply, a gate is used to control access. At the Govett-Brewster, this gate was used to cut off audience access to the sigil paintings.

You've recently made a piece of furniture as an addition to a series of works that bear the initials of people in your life ('MF!VS!TB!', 2015)—members of the personal pantheon we mentioned earlier: women mystics, artists, peers. Could you talk us through the thinking behind this body of work?

One of my favourite works is *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy* (1923) by the American artist and poet Florine Stettheimer (1871–1944). It is a portrait of Marcel Duchamp and his female alter ego Rose Sélavy, and around the frame's edge are repeated his initials, 'MD'. The first in my series of furniture-type sculptures was a set of tables made using the initials of peers, with the idea being that after the exhibition the sculptures were given to their namesake to become surfaces on which they could make new work. *Scaurin Ranzgia (night tongue)* (2018) is an homage I made for Hildegard as both a bed and a portrait. Hildegard was known to suffer bouts of illness during which she had visions. Her book *Scivias* describes 26 of these visions. I'm interested in contemporary readings of Hildegard's visions as pathological, which is reflective of a tendency in art history to pathologise and read through the lens of biography the creative output of women. Lying on the bed are 14 wax tablets from which embedded horse harnesses emerge like snaking, half-formed letters—a body being written from a material used for bridling, reflective of the style of writing produced by the women mystics that exceeded the structures that served to discipline and silence them.





Sriwhana Spong, *Scaurin Ranzgia (night tongue)* (2018). Paraffin wax, equestrian rope, foam, steel, lacquer. 180 x 80 x 41 cm. Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

Could you also talk us through the instruments you have presented in these exhibitions?

The instruments are part of an ever-expanding personal orchestra inspired by the percussive instruments of Balinese Gamelan. Traditionally, each village in Bali has its own tuning system, so you cannot take an instrument from one village and play it in another, as the pitch is unique to each community. I see my instruments as records of the places I make work in and the people I collaborate with. Each instrument is named after someone. *Instrument C (Claire)* (2018), is named after Claire Duncan who worked on the sound for the film *a hook but no fish*, *Instrument B (Vivian)* (2016) is a keyed metallophone named after Singaporean musician Vivian Wang who set the scale and first played the instrument, and *Instrument D (Vera)* (2018) is named after my friend Vera Mey and consists of a set of chimes made from aluminium-cast French fries. This last work draws on the use of common food items, like fries, by my family in Bali as daily offerings through which everyday substances are transformed into a site of communion and a medium of contact with the sacred.

These instruments are only ever played by invited performers on specific occasions. The bell plate, *Instrument C (Claire)*, is played by museum invigilators according to a score made by forcing two structures onto one another. The score is a notation of *Cum Vox Sanguinis*, a hymn by Hildegard, onto

which the museum's opening hours have been placed to determine when, and how, the bell plate is struck.

The Pump House Gallery, for which *Instrument C (Claire)* was made, is in Battersea Park, which includes a tropical garden of plants from the colonies. For my show in London, I placed foliage from this garden against a bell plate tuned to E2, which distorts the sound whenever it is played, adding rustles and scratches to its sound. Because I could not import these leaves into New Zealand, I reversed the process at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and used foliage from non-indigenous trees from a local park.



Sriwhana Spong, *Instrument B (Vivian)* (2016). Aluminium bars, wood, Perspex, rubber, felt, brass. 47 x 76 x 26 cm; *Instrument C (Claire)* (2018). Aluminium bell plate, foliage, rope, wood. 93 x 63.5 x 0.5 cm; *Instrument D (Vera)* (2018). Aluminium, steel, lacquer, plastic. 59 x 157 x 32 cm. Opening performance by the Coolies (Stefan Neville, Tina Pihema, Sijonel Timu). Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist; Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

There is an accompanying trio of dresses, two of which relate to your interest in synaesthesia. The third and latest one is a silk dress dyed in Coca-Cola and patterned with vegetable oil. What is the thinking behind these costumes?

*Hz Dress B* and *Hz Dress C* were made to accompany *Instrument B (Vivian)* and *Instrument C (Claire)*, respectively. Both costumes were designed by matching the frequency of the notes chosen for each



instrument to a colour that is consonant with that note, using a method developed by the American ethnomusicologist Clint Goss. I'm drawn to these speculative and pseudo-scientific attempts at creating maps and charts based on the experience of synaesthesia: a phenomenon whereby the stimulation of one sensory pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in another. The question is, like my experience in Pittsburgh with the snake or Hildegard's visions: How does one represent such vivid yet unverifiable experiences?



Sriwhana Spong, *HZ Dress C* (2018). Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Pump House Gallery, London (10 January–1 April 2018). Courtesy the artist, Pump House Gallery, London; and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Damian Griffith.

*Costume for Instrument D (Vera)*, uses a common drink to create an intimacy between the audience and the work through recognition and memory—in particular the embodied memory of tasting and drinking as a form of communion. As part of *Oceanic Feeling* at ICA Singapore (with Maria Taniguchi), I presented *Villa America* (2012), a large silk banner dyed in Fanta to create a vibrant shade of orange, and my show at Michael Lett in 2017 included a similar work dyed with grape Fanta and Coke. These works are inspired by American musician and writer, Ian F. Svenonius's essay, 'The bloody latte: Vampirism as mass movement'—a text that tells the history of beverages and their movement as acts of colonial bloodsucking. But the dyed silk banners and dresses function as more than an unalloyed reproach of global homogeneity, colonisation and capitalism. They consider the power of collective experience, acknowledging these consumed substances' effects as being at once toxic and joyous.

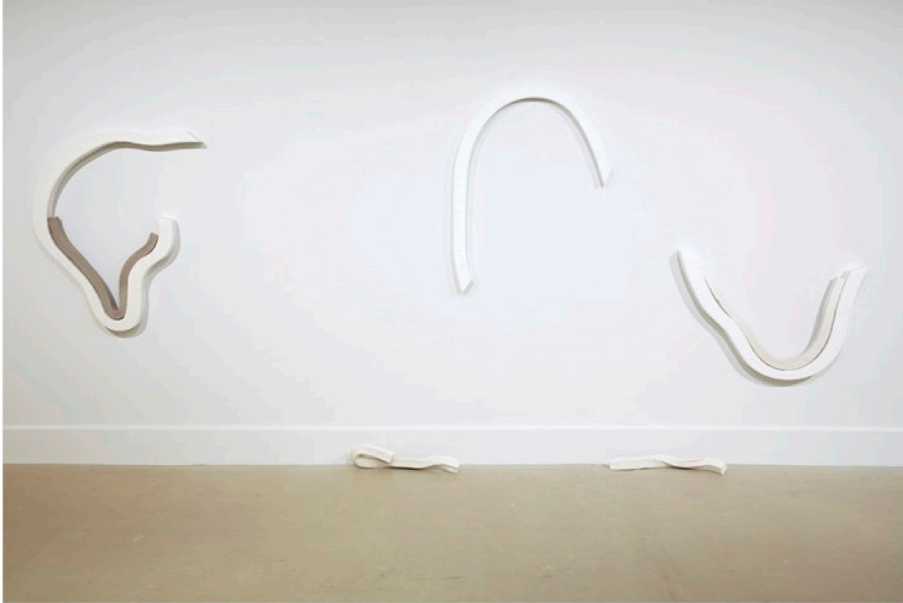


Sriwhana Spong, *Villa America* (2012). Silk dyed in Fanta. 1600 x 463 cm. Exhibition view: *Sriwhana Spong and Maria Taniguchi: Oceanic Feeling*, ICA Singapore (20 August–16 October 2016). Courtesy the artists, Michael Lett, Auckland; ICA Singapore.

On the subject of shifting between toxic and the joyous, you perform, in your most recent exhibition a kind of feminist *détournement* by repurposing a scathing review of your work to create a new poetic text.

In *Bad review* (2018) I take a review written in response to my recent work and respond, in turn, by cutting it up and collaging it back together to create a new body of writing. This gesture echoes the way Hildegard's *Lingua Ignota* was inserted into Latin phrases—cutting into the 'high language' of her time and infecting it with her own glossary. Through this action, Hildegard's private language enacted a disruption of institutional language, which inspired my own reconstitution of a formal art review into my own writing. Collage gives a material quality to the texts, while the iridescent red light, although intangible, suffuses the room and permeates the viewer's psychic space, repeating the use of cinematic gels in both films, *having-seen-snake* and *a hook but no fish*.





Sriwhana Spong, *Oirclamisil (ear cartilage) #1-3; Lou* (2017–18). Paraffin wax, wood, clay. 3 x (65 x 58 x 4.5 cm approx.), 2 x (54.5 x 65 x 4 cm approx.). Exhibition view: *a hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (12 May–22 July 2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland; Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

And, finally, with *Oirclamisil (ear cartilage) #1-4* (2017–2018), what aspects of the work's material transformation interests you most?

The title *Oirclamisil* is derived from Hildegard's word for ear cartilage. A support structure, based on the curvatures of the ear, was made using paraffin wax. Resting on these ledges are lengths of clay, left to air dry during install and the first few weeks of the show (depending on the temperature and humidity levels in the gallery). As the clay dries it shrinks, pulling away from the support structure at various points, at once conforming and resisting, echoing the way language shapes and writes us as subjects who work with and against it to find our own ways of speaking.—[O]

# DOGS IN SPACE, WITCHES OF DUMAGUETE

SS

Pussies and Muttniks

Sriwhana Spong was born in 1979 in Auckland, New Zealand, the first child of a father of Balinese heritage and a New Zealand

mother of British descent. Having met in Indonesia, Spong's father moved to New Zealand to be with her mother. However, when the relationship faltered, he returned to Bali to take up work as a landscape gardener.<sup>13</sup> Spong's mother subsequently married, settling with her family in a house in the suburbs of Auckland.

Using a family photograph taken at Christmas time, Spong once described to me the experience of growing up with mixed heritage in the New Zealand of the 1980s and '90s. In the photograph, her blonde-haired, fair-skinned siblings sit smiling in front of a Christmas tree, while Spong stands slightly further back behind the tree, her head shaved and face blank in a posture of perfected teenage angst. Viewable within the photo are both the connecting familial resemblances and the differences along racial lines, placing Spong both in and out of the frame, and encapsulating her sense of simultaneously having history and a life somewhere out of view.

In acting out these identity concerns, Spong used her mixed heritage as a point of productive tension to fuel her early creative expression. Most explicitly this included her joining a short-lived riot-grrrl inspired band, the Pussies, alongside high-school friends who were of mixed Fijian–Indian, Samoan and Māori descent. The Pussies referenced their cultural status full frontally, using monikers such as 'Symphony'—Spong's pet name within the group—and song titles like 'Half breed'. It was, however, during her study of sculpture at the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts from 1998 to 2001, and her engagement with materials and the multiple meanings and poetic possibilities that they could carry, that Spong found a more nuanced expression for such feelings outside of language.

Acting as one of the triggers for Spong to pursue art in such a way was her repeated encounter with a collection of paintings in

<sup>13</sup> Spong's father had struggled to find work within a New Zealand still grappling with its increasing multiculturalism and the traumatic impact of colonisation on its first people, the Māori.



the home of a family friend. Leaving a particular impression was a work from the series *Teaching aids* (1975) by the acclaimed New Zealand painter, Colin McCahon. From within the darkness of the work's vertical black canvases, McCahon had drawn a cross and numbers in white paint that functioned as mnemonics for the Stations of the Cross, and through their simplicity illustrated his pursuit of a direct and real contact between art and life, and of faith as an active coming to terms.

Upon finishing her studies, Spong quickly achieved recognition within New Zealand for her early film works. These documented temporary sculptures, reminiscent of Balinese ritual forms, which she had assembled and displayed in her family's garden in Auckland to summon a connection to the imagined cultural space of Indonesia. The sculptures were composed of apples, melons, oranges, marigolds, bamboo shoots, cigarettes, bananas, beds of rice and Coca-Cola bottles, all arranged into bloom- and totem-like shapes. Spong documented them using Super-8 film, distorting their context and location by tracing the sculptures' surfaces by hand, and in different lighting conditions. Of one of these early films, *Muttnik* (2005)<sup>14</sup>, the art writer A Cooper (an early nom de plume of Spong's) once riffed:

I was never there on the mountains of infinite bliss in Rishikesh. I was not there for George's birthday where the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi handed him an upside down plastic globe and declared, 'this is the world and it needs changing'. I wasn't present when Harrison let it slip that his one word mantra appears in 'I am the walrus', and I certainly wasn't there for that group photo: 'Now come on everybody. Cosmic smiles ... and all into the lens'. But I've seen the photos, and I imagine

<sup>14</sup> *Muttnik's* title references the American name for the Soviet dog that pioneered space travel, being the first earthbound creature to travel into orbit. Spong's film is set to the Beatles' song 'Dear Prudence', which was written by John Lennon to lure Prudence Farrow, the actress Mia Farrow's sister, out of a deep meditation and back into an open connection with the world while they were in India with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

the rest. The sharp waft of marigolds mixed with dry earth, the screech of monkeys exalting high in the trees, and somewhere the strains of someone strumming 'Dear Prudence'. I read about these histories; I see the faded images, and my mind plays in the gaps. It is in these gaps where all the subjective memories, and mini narratives float. The powerful small stories that make messy those official documentations of past events. In the words of Mr L Cohen, 'There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in'.<sup>15</sup>

Spong's attention to light and its potential to offer illumination pervade her sensitive uses of the chemical properties of film. In *24 hour garden* (2006), her ritual assemblages are documented on Super-8 in a single wide shot over the course of a day. The footage is sped up in the final edit, so that the twenty-four hours is compressed into a mere three minutes, emphasising the Earth's orbit around the sun through the shifting light and shade that animate the sculptural forms, until the darkness of the night fades, pulling the scene into black for the final half of the film.

This approach to light was extended in her film *Halberd head with naga and blades, Indonesia (Java), Eastern Javanese period, Singasari kingdom, ca. second half of the 13th century, copper alloy. Samuel Eilenberg Collection. Gift of Samuel Eilenberg, 1996. 1996.468 a, b* (2008), which she made while on a four-month residency at the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York in 2008. Constructing a simple pinhole camera, Spong exposed a cartridge of Super-8 film to an Indonesian spearhead composed of two blades jutting from the head and tail of a dragon, and held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) collection. Produced while covertly bypassing the museum's 'no filming' policy in a reversed act of cultural theft, and without the mechanisms of the camera to pull focus, the resulting film does not record the form of the

<sup>15</sup> A Cooper, 'Sriwhana Spong', in *Turbulence: 3rd Auckland Triennial*, 2007, viewed 28 June 2016, <<http://aucklandtriennial.com/static/archive/2007/artists/spong.html>>.

artefact, registering only the light from the space surrounding it and the rhythm of the artist's hand winding on the film.

Over the pinhole, adding a layer of affect, Spong placed colour filters of magenta, green and blue that were created by the Italian cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, and which reference the psychological effects of different colours; the way in which they influence the perception of different situations, and how shifting technologies of representation shape the way we frame the world.

#### Actions and remains

It was during Spong's four months in New York that she also started to distance herself from the focus on her Balinese heritage that had unwittingly come to define her practice, and to pigeonhole her work's engagement within a certain institutional discourse. She did this by delving into other aspects of her upbringing that complicated the relation between culture and the self that she had wished to express. Within this, her disciplined pursuit of ballet across her adolescent years, and its lasting imprint on the posture and movement of her body, became a point of interest over the ensuing years. Other points of historical reference for Spong's interest in dance at this time included another object from the Met, a twelfth-century sandstone sculpture from India titled *Dancing celestial deity (Devata)*, featuring a female figure whirling; the Ballets Russes, and its gender-defying faun, Vaslav Nijinsky; and Yvonne Rainer and the Judson Dance Theater collective of the early 1960s, who pioneered everyday movement within a choreographic vernacular. Ongoing in parallel to these sources was her collaboration with the contemporary New Zealand dancer, Benjamin Ord.

Other works evoking dance, two, *Beach study* (2012) and *Learning duets* (2012), were filmed on adjoining beaches in New Zealand that she had frequented as a child and which were of renewed

interest due to the shifted conditions of their public access. For *Learning duets*, Spong invited Benjamin Ord to interpret a text she had composed from two books—*Tender is the night* by F Scott Fitzgerald and *Save me the waltz* by Zelda Fitzgerald. Both books are set in the same seaside location in the South of France where the Fitzgeralds spent a few summers. Spong's text weaves together a site written into being through the two subjectivities of these often warring lovers. Using this text, with the precision of his training, Ord traced an itinerary below the high-tide mark—an unstable boundary that in New Zealand demarcates the foreshore and seabed as sites where the public has right of access in contrast to the dry land above—by matching his steps to the flatness of the sand and to punctuating breaks of jagged rock. Improvising at the end, Ord allowed himself to fall, meeting the waiting rapture of the black volcanic sand and the lapping waves of an open sea. Spong once admitted in conversation to an initial unease about the movement from the conceptual clarity of her initial proposition, to the figurative expressionism of Ord's fall and his unabashed body in repose, with the wet black sand staining his clothes and skin.

It was as part of Spong's contribution to the 18th Biennale of Sydney, *All our relations* (2012), that I first saw *Learning duets* alongside *Beach study*. Both were projected in a vast industrial space on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. These works were complemented by *Villa America* (2012), a large 'backdrop' comprising two curtains made from differently weighted silk in diamond shapes, cut and stitched together to custom-fit the space. Most strikingly, the silk was stained a vibrant orange, with a pigment made from Fanta, the orange-flavoured relative of Coca-Cola, which had been absorbed by the porous, thirsty silk. *Villa America* followed in a line of silk works dyed using beverages, including Coca-Cola and tea. When queried about these works, Spong offered me a short essay by the American musician and writer, Ian F Svenonius, titled 'The bloody latte: Vampirism as mass movement', by way of



explanation. The essay unfolds a history of beverages and their movement as acts of colonial bloodsucking; 'A culture's adopted beverage represents the blood of their vanquished foe'.<sup>16</sup>

For the near three-month duration of the Biennale of Sydney, the silk slowly stretched, eventually pooling at its base in a triumph of gravity over the apparent lightness of the fabric's weight. The following year, in preparation for a group exhibition at the Guangdong Times Museum in China, it was unexpectedly punctured by nails, glued, cut and torn to fit the space for display when the artist was not present. Since its return to Spong, these tatters and stains have come to denote a new surface that is nevertheless indistinguishable from its original materiality and, like the theatre backdrops on which the work was based, shows the accumulated marks of its travel and migration.

A black and white photograph by Spong that shows the aging of another of her works was once used as part of a press kit for an exhibition in Sydney. The photograph features a set of concrete stairs modelled on a stage element from one of Yvonne Rainer's performances, and produced by Spong for an exhibition, *Actions and remains* (2012), at the Auckland Art Gallery. 'Stored' after the exhibition in her family's garden, the concrete had over time drunk up the surrounding wet, so that the sculpture became a host for a thickening cover of moss and fallen leaves.

### Taking form

While Spong and I had been orbiting each other for years, it was not until the eve of both of us leaving our respective homes in New Zealand and Australia for the Netherlands—with Spong moving to undertake an MFA at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam—that

<sup>16</sup> Ian F Svenonius, 'The bloody latte: Vampirism as mass movement', in *The psychic Soviet*, Drag City, 2006, p. 35.





we finally met. It was at the opening of a two-person exhibition, *Taking form*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2013, which brought together work by Spong and the Australian artist Agatha Gothe-Snape. Spong's contribution to the exhibition included the new works *The stranger's house*, a large theatrical canvas backdrop on which was painted, in black gestural strokes, Sidney Nolan's failed design for the original Ballets Russes production of *Icare*; a text score for a choreography to be performed in the gallery's neighbouring Botanic Gardens; and three marble 'brackets' titled *Hair, pastry, tobacco*. Resting within the gentle curves of the latter, and almost camouflaged against the white of the walls, were simple lines of clay. Air-dried in place, each had lifted up ever so slightly from their support, with the body of the clay contracting as the water slowly evaporated. Of these works, the exhibition's curator, Anneke Jasper, has commented, 'Spong calls these objects "utterances", thereby locating them in the realm of language, although they do not resemble Roman text'.<sup>17</sup> Within the context of *Taking form*, these shapes referred loosely to forms of dance notation. For *Oceanic feeling*, these shapes have been re-uttered in wood painted with the paraffin wax used in batik; together their serpentine forms now carry the title, *Mother's tongue* (2016).

### Mother's tongue

It was during her study in Rotterdam, when she invited me to write the text that would accompany her graduation work, that Spong and I commenced working together. The text was structured to move across two years of studio visits. It was interspersed with the artist's own writing from that time—which was invigorated by her growing interest in medieval female mystics—and a poem about

<sup>17</sup> Anneke Jaspers, 'Objects in the field of movement', in *Taking form*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2013, p. 6.



a shipwreck by the writer and fellow student Michael FitzGerald. During these studio visits we spoke often of mother tongues and of pica, a desire to lick lovely surfaces—‘things like concrete, stone, architectural decorations dating from the nineteenth century, balustrades, the elbows of tree branches, new leaves, marble, the rind of an orange, the inside of a mussel shell, the patch of skin where your arm leaves its sleeve’—something which, to continue using Spong’s words, she described as ‘that period before language when the tongue draws the world to it, before words get in-between’.<sup>18</sup>

Following her studies in Rotterdam, Spong was invited to participate in the twelve-month DAAD Berlin Artists-in-Residence programme, during which she started a body of work centred on the technique of *ombak* used in the Balinese gamelan orchestra, through the production of a custom-made metallophone for which she invited the New Zealand composer, Antonia Barnett-McIntosh, to set its scale. *Ombak*, which translates as ‘wave’, refers to the interference beats produced when a pair of instruments tuned slightly apart are played together. This is done to reference the breath or the beating of the heart, where the instrument tuned slightly higher is thought of as the ‘inhale’, and the one slightly lower, the ‘exhale’, as a symbol of being alive.<sup>19</sup>

The set scale of the first metallophone, *Instrument A (Antonia)* (2016), was used by the musician Tim Coster to score the video *Was Saint Ignatius able to tell the difference between palms and Eucalyptus trees* (2016), which documents in a single shot at a time a large linden tree seen from every architectural vantage point at Spong’s Berlin studio. This is intercut with a choreography that alternates between the palm of the artist’s hand and an image of a palm frond, which both turn gently to reveal the multiple faces

of each. Overlaying the images are colour filters, which alternate through various shades of orange and blue in time with the shifting scale of the score, each colour corresponding to the frequency of one of the ten notes in the set scale of *Instrument A (Antonia)*.

For *Oceanic feeling* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Spong has created a new instrument, *Instrument B (Vivian)* (2016), for which the Singaporean musician Vivian Wang has been invited to set the scale and play an improvisation at different times during the exhibition. On two occasions this will occur alongside a performance by Spong titled *Bells for hooves* (2016), in which the artist appears in a painted costume, and plays two cowbells of different tones by raising them from the ground and knocking them together once while on perched toes, until her body’s strain coaxes her back down to rest. Radiating into the space during these moments will be the *ombak* of these instruments, which will wash over and beat between the intonations of Spong’s and Taniguchi’s respective works. And just as each of these waves of sound will settle and dissipate, so too will the tension which holds these works together in this particular constellation across the duration of the exhibition, to be packed up and shipped off to continue their movement through more official and not so official histories. To be soaked, to be stretched, to slide off.

Susan Gibb

<sup>18</sup> Susan Gibb, Michael FitzGerald, Sriwhana Spong, ‘A cruel repose’, in *High-rise*, Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam, 2015, pp. 19–20.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Clay McGraw, *Radical traditions: Reimagining culture in Balinese contemporary music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, p. 168.