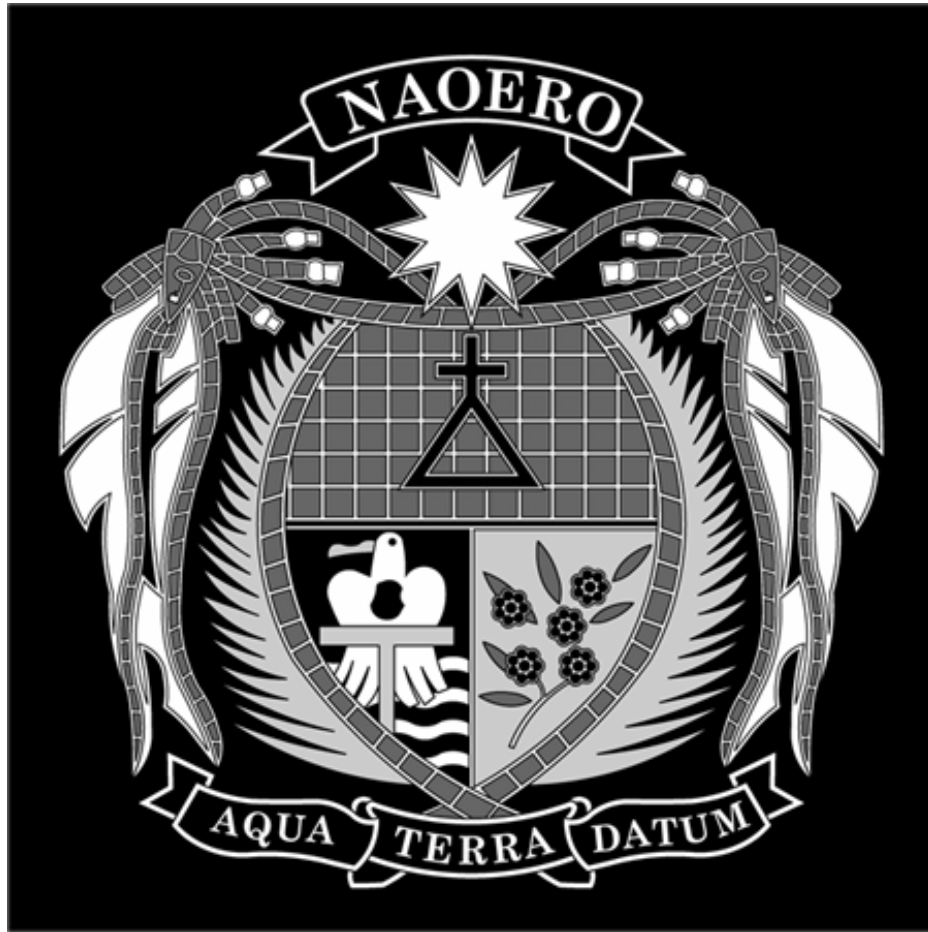


**THE NAURU ELEGIES**



## **A Portrait in Sound and Hypsographic Architecture**

Artist Statement for The Experimenta Biennial, Australia 2010

By

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## Part 1: Architecture

### Nauru Elegies: A Hypsographic Script of an Island by Annie K. Kwon

What narratives can be read in a hypsographic land formation? Hypsography is simply the topographical form of the Earth above mean sea level. In the case of the South Pacific republic of Nauru, the world's smallest island nation at 24km<sup>2</sup>, located in one of the most remote locations on the planet, there are recognizable patterns on its surface that are telling of historical scripts that can be tracked through its geological layers. Most striking is the skeletal geological covering of towering limestone pinnacles that makes up ninety percent of the island's surface. It is the landscape of erasure, the residue of land matter which was once abundantly covered in phosphate that was the base for a lush tropical landscape, now it is almost completely stripped. The zoomed out vista from the aerial approach would deem Nauru by geographical location and visage as a utopia. Thomas More's 1516 book, *Of the Best State of a Republic, and of the New Island Utopia*, is about an imaginary island country, Utopia, a Greek pun for "no place" that is governed by a socio-political system of perfection and non-existence that is an accusation in the mirror of the status quo. *Vís a vís* its critique, what is the form of utopia in the 21st century?

A closer, forensic, scan would reveal Nauru's turbulent socio-political and economic script. Heterotopia is two spaces that specify a 'real place' and 'unreal place' and the threshold creates the resistance and proximity between the two and is what roots them in what Michel Foucault refers to as 'counter-sites' or 'enacted utopias.' The performance of the island of Nauru is heterotopic. As Foucault states in, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." (*Des Espace Autres*), "There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." Nauru is a counter-site where the ocean is seen through Foucault's mirror as an abstract apparition, but at the same time, the gleaming blue South Pacific is the confrontational expanse that defines the remoteness and estrangement of the land and its people. The ocean is both oppressive and ignored.

The denial of the ocean is understood further in the urban geography. There is one uninterrupted road that loops around the entire island. The “inversion” is seen in architectural patterns as all the houses face inwards towards that worn asphalt road with a fragmented sidewalk. Backs face the ocean and the beaches have become a repository of daily and industrial refuse, engine blocks and washing machines corrode in an accelerated rate in the glaring tropical sun and salty tides. Rust and corral are parasitical and visually seamless.

Quotidian scripts reveal a homogeneous flow of traffic that does not vary between Sunday afternoon, Wednesday morning or Friday night. As J.G. Ballard described a similar incessant loop in his novel, *Cocaine Nights*, “...unfolded in its interminable way, a Möbius strip of arcane procedures that unwound, inverted themselves and returned to their departure points...each embrace a rival physics where motion and inertia reverse themselves.” The loop road is a self-enclosed spine that organizes most of the island’s residences, businesses, traffic and social movement in a “green belt” on the perimeter. It is a continuous, linear narrative that inhibits cross-referencing networks or shortcuts.

Towards the interior, vegetation, daily life, any habitation is pushed out of most of the interior of the island that is now only occupied by the uninhabitable limestone pinnacles. Take one slender pinnacle 2-4 meters tall: it’s color is chalky white with markings at several heights that are traces of the primary and secondary mining levels of the phosphate that once was easily gathered from the land level that used to be above the tops of the pinnacles. Secondary mining required digging between the aggressive landscape. Presently they are cutting down the pinnacles in order to access any left-over phosphate below. Any direct contact with its surface would create lacerations from its sharp surface structure. Ninety percent of the surface of the island is dominated by this impenetrable geological network; the landscape of erasure.

The thin habitable zone of the ‘green belt’ is under intensive global ecological constraints. As water levels rise barometric to climate change, hypsographic territory is pinned against future oceanic erasure on one side and historically strip-mined erasure towards the interior. This pressurized place is both a spatial diagnosis and prognosis. This landscape erasure is also marked by architecture. The monuments of Nauru are industrial structures, towering conduits that efficiently ship out flows of phosphate from the interior of the island to the shore via conveyor belts that rise hundreds of feet in the air from the beach. Container ships are able to park just off the coral shelf in the ocean to receive the batches of phosphate. An efficient system to displace vast quantities of material. Children casually play on and around these mechanistic monuments, unaware that their island is systematically being erased.

Equally intriguing is the medical definition of heterotopia, “the displacement of an organ or other body part to an abnormal location.” The mining of the phosphate that once performed as a fertile geological tissue, can be seen as a material displacement, literally traceable in the architecture and the residual landscape. Learning to read the apparition Foucault’s mirror, is recognizing the “non-place” that in fact informs close reality.

The agency of hypsography literacy is in the practice of prophetic pattern recognition of the landscape. How can one change the script of a landscape? A close, forensic investigation helps understand what was inherited. Rendering hypsographic forms transparent gives an x-ray knowledge into the mechanics of a script so that they may be rewritten and the loop redirected.

Annie K. Kwon  
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## Part 2: Sound Composition

Narratives of Erasure - Nauru as a site of epistemic and systemic disappearance

Artist Statement: The Nauru Elegies

The only good thing about colonialism is that, in order to last, it must show itself to be intransigent, and that, by its intransigence, it prepares its ruin.

Jean Paul Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* (1956)

In his 1905 book “A Modern Utopia” HG Wells wrote a simple statement based on media and artifice, a simple statement that could reflect on the Kwon-Miller Nauru Elegies Project: “The Utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in one fundamental aspect from the Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world. Those were all perfect and static States, a balance of happiness won for ever against the forces of unrest and disorder that inhere in things... But the Modern Utopia must not be static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state, but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages.

Nowadays we do not resist and overcome the great stream of things, but rather float upon it. We build not citadels, but ships of state...”

When Kwon-Miller productions looked at Nauru, a polyphony of issues faced us. First and foremost: the issue of trying to investigate the layer and layers of an erased island, and how to unveil the remote island at the core of modern life. It proved a difficult task.

Let’s look at Nauru from an epistemological point of view. It’s a kind of dot in a series of connected dots that make up the fabric of Oceanic culture, but it’s also part of the overlapping spheres of influence that define abstractions in geography like Micronesia and Melanesia. The term “Melanesia” simply means “black islands” and it was first coined by Jules Dumont d’Urville in 1832 to define the region in relation to Polynesia and its environs. When you think about the idea of diaspora you can map some of the issues that intrigue Kwon-Miller productions with Nauru. With terms like “semantic web” and “dynamic clustering,” the internet has caught on to some of the epistemological issues that drove various ethnic groups to disperse throughout the Pacific Rim. When people travel, they carry culture with them. The Nauru Elegies is a forensic investigation into how the dynamic and virtual environments of global finance, architecture, and the flow of natural resources shaped and molded the physical environment of Nauru. The intersection of these modes of production, and their aesthetic and physical impact on the island is what concerns the music composition, the installation, and the hypsographic architectural analysis of the Nauru Elegies.

**'As Man stands to Nature, so stands Art to Man.'**

*Richard Wagner, Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (The Artwork of the Future) 1849*

Mapping a surface terrain is a tricky endeavor. Oceanography is the study of all aspects of the huge bodies of water that circumscribe our existence on Earth. In one way or another, one can think of the study of ocean currents, tides, and their interaction with land forms as a way that the planet keeps order, sets itself in time, and keeps a steady pace with the liquid paths that move over the earth’s surface.

With the Nauru Elegies, we wanted to figure out a way to create a portrait of this kind of dynamic interaction – but with a twist. The landscape we mapped out with hypsographic analysis, bar-code studies, and music compositions, rests on the surface of the ocean, but it is made of trade and virtual finance. In the past, Nauru’s connection to the other islands was deeply tied to the water currents that surround it. Today that is no longer the case. If you look at the over 1,800 peoples that make up the fabric of Oceania, Nauru is a piece of tiny driftwood compared to the vast cultures of Papua New Guinea, Australia, and Indonesia, but for us, because of its

relationship to these major landmasses, it is a satellite held firmly in orbit by the gravitational pull of these massive cultures on its event horizon. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Nauru was colonized in succession by Germany (which took many artifacts for anthropological study), Britain, Japan, and Australia. Later on, with the intervention of offshore banking and high end money laundering with the fall of the Soviet Union, Nauru came to reflect what philosophers Deleuze and Guattari called simply “deterritorialization:” with the physical and virtual worlds of geopolitics and high finance overlapping one another with dizzying speed taking the physical island and turning it into a tax and data haven. From this point of view, Nauru is an epistemological mirage at the edge of global financial flows – it represents a Pacific Rim archaeology of colonialism’s relationship with high finance. It’s a perfect prism to view many of the current issues facing our globalized economy and the slow motion collapse of our eco-systems. Nauru’s cultural artifacts were made of many of the sustainable materials of the island: wood, fish teeth, palm leaves, tree bark etc. As such, they have slowly vanished with the passing of time. We hope to create a new virtual space for the uneasy tension between art and artifact on this strange Pacific island to be renewed.

As the poet John Donne (1572-1631 AD) once wrote:

“All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated... As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all: but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness.... No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” In this light, you can think of Nauru as a reverse Utopia, a place at the cross-roads where currents carry like so much drift wood across the ever changing landscape of hyper-modernity.

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