

# THE 10 PREDICA- MENTS OF MAUI: NOTES ON TRICKSTERS

Natalie Robertson

A mover and groover, the Trickster is a god of the crossroads. You might come across this ruler of travellers, the road-opener, on the highway or you could bump into this deity of contradictions and opportunities on a dusty country road. Maybe you'll stumble upon the ruler of primordial light and of the daytime sun as it travels across the sky in the town square. A messenger in transit between this world and the next, either above or below, the Trickster can be the anarchist who challenges governance and societal structure, looking sometimes like a rebel without a cause, yet may be the defender of deeply held cultural values. As a wandering figure that is always on the move with an insatiable appetite or desire, a rebel without a pause, it is impossible to present a singular characterisation, for the Trickster appears in most cultures across the world.

Weaving between the polar positions of the culturally specific 'no two Tricksters are alike' and the mythic archetype 'one Trickster fits all', this essay blatantly thives for selfish ends, retrieving connections between Trickster stories from 'magic realism' literature of South America and the art practice of Francis Alÿs, a

Bookmark from Francis Alÿs, *The Prophet and the Fly*, published Turner, Madrid, 2003

Belgian artist living in Mexico City. Taking Aljés' notes entitled *10 Predicaments* from his book *The Prophet and The Fly*<sup>1</sup> (2003) as a model it is reconfigured here it as a manifesto for Tricksters the world over.

#### 10 Predicaments for Tricksters

1. Shift your shape into the form of animals
2. Change into a woman to marry with the chief's son
3. Change back again after having children
4. Follow your mother to the underworld assuming the form of a bird
5. Send your detachable penis for a swim to have sex with a princess
6. Cross borders willy nilly
7. Break the rules of the game
8. Seduce someone, anyone
9. Trespass
10. Eat all that you can

I am a descendant of Maui Tikitiki a Taranga, Maui of a Thousand Tricks, Maui from way back when, from mai ra no, from the dim dark mists of time, and I live on a fish, Te Ika a Maui, Maui's fish.<sup>2</sup> My tribal group live within view of Nukutaimemeha, Maui's waka, his canoe, as it lies in petrified form, way, way up on the side of a very big mountain, Hikurangi – big for round these parts anyway, biggest non-volcanic mountain on the fish, and in the words of the great chief Te Kani-a-Takirau “*Ehara tenei i te maunga neke*”, this is a mountain that does not move. Unlike other mountains I have known, our Hikurangi maunga isn't prone to running off in pursuit of distant lovers like Putauaki, who left Tarawera for Whakaari.

As descendants of Maui, Ngati Porou, the East Coast tribe I belong to, were once known as the Maui Nation, in reference to their long occupation of Aotearoa. Now of course us Natis are not the only descendants of Maui, but our oral histories go back to a time before the so-called Great Migration, before a time when ancestors like Kahutia-te-rangi arrived here on the backs of whales, to a time when the very land itself was a fish in the ocean. In this pivotal story of discovery Maui fished up the land Te Ika a Maui, the North Island of New Zealand, using his grandmother's jawbone as a hook. The fighting started immediately. Maui's brothers were instructed to leave the fish alone until he was able to bring back a tohunga, a priest, for this was clearly a very

#### *Tricksters*<sup>27</sup>

*Abenaki mythology ... Azeban*  
*Akan mythology ... Kwaku Ananse*  
*American folklore ... Brer Rabbit and Aunt Nancy, a corruption of Anansi (Ananse)*  
*Asbanti mythology ... Ananse*  
*Australian Aboriginal mythology ... Bamapana*  
*Aztec mythology ... Tezcatlipoca*  
*Basque mythology ... San Martin Txiki*  
*Brazilian folklore ... Saci-Pererê*  
*Celtic mythology ... Fairy, Puck*  
*Chinese mythology ... Nezha, Sun Wukong (the Monkey King)*  
*Chippewa mythology ... Nanabozho*  
*Judeo-Christian ... Jacob*  
*Crow mythology ... Awakkule, Mannegishi*  
*French folklore ... Reynard the Fox*  
*Fijian mythology ... Ndauthina*  
*German folklore ... Till Eulenspiegel*  
*Greek mythology ... Eris, Prometheus, Hephaestus, Hermes Trismegistus,*  
*Haida mythology ... Nankil'slas (Raven spirit), (Coyote)*  
*Hawaiian mythology ... Kappa, Maui*  
*Hopi and Zuni mythology ... Kokopelli*  
*Indonesian folklore ... Kantjil*  
*Inuit mythology ... Amaguq*  
*Japanese mythology ... Kitsune, Susanoo*  
*IXū mythology ... Mantis*  
*Lakota mythology ... Iktomi*  
*Navajo mythology ... Tonenili*  
*Nootka mythology ... Chulyen, Guguyuni*  
*Norse mythology ... Loki*  
*Northwest Caucasian mythology ... Sosruko*  
*Ojibwe mythology ... Nanabush*  
*Polynesian mythology ... Iwa, Kaulu, Maui, Ono, Pekoi*  
*Tibetan folklore ... Agu Tonpa*  
*Ute mythology ... Cin-an-ev*  
*Vodun ... Ti Malice, Baron Samedi*  
*Yoruba mythology ... Eshu*

sacred and important fish and the right incantations, prayers and blessings must be undertaken. But while he was gone Maui's brothers disobeyed him and cut into it, claiming portions. The fish writhed and heaved, forming the mountains and valleys of the land. The significance of Maui to Ngati Porou is apparent in the carved meetinghouse called *Maui Tikitiki a Taranga* from 1885 that formerly stood at Tokomaru Bay and Hikuwai.<sup>3</sup> You can get to Tokomaru Bay on State Highway 35, heading up from Gisborne on the East Cape, or by heading around the top from the Cape.

If you're not from this neighbourhood that might all need some explanation. Maui is known across the Pacific as a central figure, an ancestor, described as a demi-god and culture hero by ethnographers and widely acknowledged as a Trickster. These Maui stories are passed on from elders, through books and now on the internet and they morph and change as stories with many authors do. In Aotearoa, New Zealand, Maui Tikitiki a Taranga is Maui who is the topknot of Taranga, his mother. He was cast aside as an premature baby, wrapped in his tresses of mother's hair and placed in the sea foam. Taranga no doubt thought that would be the end of her offspring, but the denizens of the ocean took care of him and gave him to his ancestors on a distant island to raise him. Maui was given special gifts from the ocean and the sea, gifts of shapeshifting and transformation. As a young man he returned to the village of his parents where in due course he was acknowledged as his mother Taranga's youngest son. Much, much later, after annoying his brothers immensely (they were all called Maui too – Maui-taha, Maui-roto, Maui-pae, and Maui-waho), Maui undertook one of his many famous feats and with the help of the magical powers vested in him by his ancestors, he fished up new lands.

Here, in Aotearoa, we live now on one of those lands, known to the Western world as the North Island of New Zealand. To Maori, it is known as Te Ika a Maui, the fish of Maui. So if you look at a map of New Zealand and turn it upside down, you will see a fish, with the head, Te Upoko o Te Ika a Maui, at the top, where the city of Wellington is now and the tail is the area known as Northland, or Te Hiku o te Ika, and the fins are Te

Pakau o te Ika a Maui. To some, the South Island is Te Waka a Maui, Maui's canoe. On the fin known as the East Cape you will see a mountain called Hikurangi, and this is where my people say Maui's canoe came to rest as he hauled in his big catch – some call it our Mt Ararat, equating Maui's canoe with Noah's Ark. Such events are of great importance in the world view these traditions express. The tribal traditions that cite descent from or a relationship with Maui provide a basis for settlement in New Zealand. Descent from Maui is one starting point for tribal tenure of the land. Whakapapa, which can be translated as ancestry, also means to create a layered foundation. Maori trace their ancestry back to the celestial realm and Maui is the ancestor who moves between the celestial and earthly realms.

Maui really got around, that wily adventurer. A real change agent that one – didn't need a travel agent or passport to be a border-crosser in those days. No customs to get through, just the locals, and, well, there were ways and means to get around them. He wasn't remembered as Maui of Thousand Tricks for nothin'! And boy, could he play a trick or two! Renowned for his ingenuity and creativity, Maui is credited with fishing up the Hawaiian Islands, as well as Te Ika a Maui, snaring the sun to create longer daylight hours, borrowing the intellectual property of his grandmother Muri-ranga-whenua who gave him her jawbone and the tip about using a barbed fishing hook, inventing fish traps, and stealing fire for humans to use. And on days when he wasn't tricking Mahuika, the Goddess of Fire, or taking revenge on Tuna the eel, he would amuse himself with a minor trick such as turning his brother-in-law Irawaru into a dog. Fire thieves and fire chiefs, many of our Trickster ancestors stole fire; Coyote did it, Prometheus did it, and many of the Tricksters the world over snare or harness the sun as Maui did most famously from Haleakela on the island named for him, in the chain of the Hawaiian Isles.

As the old stories of Maui and his wife Hina can attest, his phallus was legendary, but here's where our modern stories don't do him justice. You see, while the early missionaries and anthropologists were busy collecting Maori stories, some of them were also busy telling us that we were wrong to believe such things and

that any mention of sexuality should surely be sanitised away. Maui really lost out and much of the function of the stories has been diminished to safe versions for children. However, for the record, it was said that his spectacular penis was long and bent to the left, and that he was an ugly short little fella, and cheeky, most unlike the contemporary representations of Maui as large, muscular and heroic.

You would think he lived to be 120 for all the stories he left behind, before he made his fatal mistake. Maui figured that humans should be like the moon and only die temporarily, to be able to return to Te Ao Marama, the world of light, after a brief sojourn in the world of darkness. He didn't beat death, despite his attempt to kill Hine Nui Te Po, the Goddess of Death, in Rarohenga, the underworld. The interesting thing is that he didn't just die between the thighs of the Goddess as the modern stories tell us, no, not Maui. He had taken his companions, the birds, with him to accomplish his feat, and took their advice to take to form of a worm or lizard, thus allowing him to wriggle unnoticed into the vagina of Hine Nui Te Po. As he made his way in through the Te Paepae o Tiki and into her vagina, his companion, Piwakawaka, or Tiwaiwaka, the fantail, fell about laughing at the sight of Maui, and so woke Hine up. Now according to some sources, it was her arousal, her awaking to a wriggling inside her vagina that made her genitals (Mokakati) 'come' thus creating powerful contractions that crushed Maui to death.<sup>4</sup> And so, even the greatest Trickster of the Pacific was unable to return to the place from which all humans are born. So, to borrow again from Alÿs' framework, here is a suggestion for Maui's 10 Predicaments:

1. Descend to the underworld to find your mother
2. Steal fire from an old lady, taking all her fingernails
3. Invent a barbed hook and spear
4. Change into a bird (and back again)
5. Turn your brother-in-law into a dog
6. Take your wife's face as your own
7. Tattoo your face
8. Fish up a new land with Grandmother's jawbone
9. Seek immortality
10. ...

## THE TRICKSTER MANIFESTO

**TRICKSTER IS UNSETTLER AND UPSETTER  
BORDER-CROSSER AND BROADCASTER  
FREEDOM FIGHTER, GRAFFITI WRITER**

**TRANSGENDER, CROSSDRESSER  
SHAPESHIFTER, TRANSFORMER, TRANSGRESSOR**

**MONEYMAKER AND BOOTYSHAKER  
GREAT IMITATOR, THE DECEIVER**

**HELLRAISER AND PEACEMAKER  
FIRE CHIEF AND FIRE THIEF**

**PLAYER, BREAKER, DANCER, FAKER**

**CREATOR AND BRICOLEUR  
GAMBLER AND ENTREPRENEUR**

**TRICKSTER IS ALWAYS ON THE MOVE**

Butt, Danny; McGregor, Hemi; Robertson, Natalie, *The Trickster Manifesto*, for Trickster (UnSettler) IntraNation Block 2, Banff, 2004

Anyway, enough of his stories, you'll find them if you look – it's his ways of living I'm interested in. You might be wondering, if you've read this far, what's a story like that doing in a place like this? Well, Maui, as you know, has much in common with Tricksters worldwide, and especially with his mates Coyote and Raven over there on the Great Turtle, the land known as North America. (As an aside, I'm not sure if you've noticed a theme emerging? Our British ancestors seemed to have named lands new to them with a startling pragmatism: North Island, South Island, East Cape, North America, Central America, South America.) Where was I? Oh yeah, in my opinion, these Tricksters demonstrate the kind of attitude that I think contemporary artists can learn from. Maui of a Thousand Tricks, Maui Tikitiki a Taranga, ancestor, 'demi-god' of the Pacific, shapeshifter and change agent provides us with an example of the artist who challenges the norms of his culture; demonstrating inquisitiveness, curiosity and enquiry through his actions, he tests the boundaries of his world, all qualities associated with innovative creative practice.

OK, so maybe we won't be fishing up new lands and slowing down the sun, and we probably won't be actually be achieving immortality, but maybe we can bring to light new ways of seeing the world around us, pointing out when the emperor has no clothes, or, through a constant traversing, cross metaphorical borders, weaving stories with no central moral focus. The thing is many of the Trickster stories from around the world defy Western storytelling conventions, slipping between a narrative here and a folktale there, to sometimes appear to make no point at all. Maybe that's what this story will be, a slippery little creature that gets away on me, just like the phallic story of the Trickster who detaches his penis and sends it off for a swim to have sex with the young woman swimming in the river. Oh, I get so easily distracted... maybe Maui's report card would have said the same: must pay attention in class. Though you really should check out the Elsdon Best account of Maui and the eels.

It is Grandfather Coyote who says "Whatever you do, I am going to do something else", a clear indication of the contrary nature of Tricksters and their purpose

in mythology. Coyotes are one of the most well-known Trickster figures in the legends of most Native American tribes of the North American continent, while other Tricksters are Raven, Bear, Hare or Rabbit, Bluejay, Mink, Nanabozho, and Whiskey Jack (whose real name can only be spoken in the winter months). The animal Tricksters are also found in Africa, such as Anansi the spider; shape-shifting Foxes are found in South America, China and Japan, such as Kitsune and, in Europe, there is Reynardine the Fox. As with Maui, the Trickster also takes human form – in Europe there is Puck, Loki (Norse), Mercury, Hermes, and, in Africa, Legba, and Eshu. Now, you will remember this guy: Brer Rabbit in Black [African] American lore, who is reconfigured in reduced form, to Bugs Bunny. And, of course, you know Roadrunner and his antagonist – yep, Coyote. Beep beep!

In the voice of arch-trickster Coyote, we hear the spirit of Tricksters the world over, a deliberate contrariness: "If you go this way, I'll go that". Tricksters are independent spirits that slip out from under domination and control, shaping and determining their own direction. Rather than peripheral quirky characters that occupy the margins, Tricksters are central to the world-view of many indigenous peoples with their actions frequently enhancing life for humans as well as stirring things up a bit.

The Trickster also represents the realm of sexuality, of gender variability, of androgyny. You'll note that so far I've resisted any gender specificity with regard to the Trickster. The vast majority of Tricksters are categorised as male but that's not to say there weren't female tricksters; it's just that those stories are less visible in the public arena. However, that says more about the limitations of the English language and its insistent gender binary than it does about the stories themselves. Many of the Tricksters morph conveniently between male and female depending on the goal to be achieved. Often the European collectors of the North American and Pacific stories characterised the Trickster as hypersexualised, but the question has to be asked if this was in reaction to Victorian and colonial mores of the day.

In his book *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (1998) Lewis Hyde said "trickster

shifts patterns in relation to one another, and by that redefines the patterns themselves”.<sup>5</sup> What I’m interested in is Trickster ways of moving the goal posts, the boundary markers. There are also of course spiritual metaphors that can be drawn out from each of the components of Trickster stories, which were structured at different levels of accessibility. In a sweat lodge in Canada, I was told that certain stories would be told while the children were awake, another level again to give teenagers guidance and other stories again for adult consumption.

Ok, it’s time for a check, check... Let’s consult a list, the list... Where am I up to?

Journeys are central to stories of discovery and in particular the myriad of Trickster stories the world over. Coyote Trickster tales usually begin with “One day, Coyote was out walking”, or maybe it is Raven or Nanabozho who is taking a stroll. Many of these excursions are not the epic journeys of the hero, but are more quotidian perambulations. In the Pacific, the journey often takes place on the ocean, unsurprisingly, given the small islands and big water out there. Although the most famously recalled of Maui’s expeditions are more in line with the culture hero, there are many other adventures that are more of your neighbourhood jaunt. The Trickster character is often in the role of observing something about his or her surroundings that doesn’t add up so decides to investigate. Perhaps Trickster is driven by an insatiable appetite fuelled by greed or lust to pursue a selfish desire and takes to the road, the sea or the air to satiate his wants. And, sometimes, it is just curiosity that motivates Tricksters to elastically test out the world around them.

Since Lewis Hyde has already asked the question that I ask myself, I’m going to steal his fire: “The term ‘art’ covers a lot of ground; what portion of that ground intersects with what tricksters do?”<sup>6</sup> This korero, this conversation, tests the question and proposes an interactive ground for Trickster discourse, Trickster consciousness, and Trickster narratives to play in and out of.

What has all this got to do with a Belgian artist living in Mexico City? Let’s return momentarily to

Francis Alj’s, *Matrix 145* (or 1-866-FREE MATRIX), 2001<sup>28</sup>

If you think the answer is in the wind, press 1

If you think the answer is in the ashes, press 2

If you believe art is impotent, press 1

If you believe art is pertinent, press 2

If you wonder how they can dance while our house is burning, press 1

If you wonder how we can feast while others are starving, press 2

If you think Good can exist without Evil, press 1

If you think Good needs Evil to be, press 1

If you always side with the Indians, press 1

If you always side with the cowboys, press 2

If you want to be the protagonist, press 1

If you want to be the antagonist, press 2

If you think everything has changed, press 1

If you think something should change, press 2

If you think nothing will change, press 3

If you wonder where it all began, press 1

If you wonder where it will all end, press 2

Sometimes doing something leads to nothing.

Sometimes, doing nothing leads to something. (Alj’s)

where we started: a country road, a highway, a town square, perhaps the Zócalo in the centre of Mexico City. This enormous square was the ceremonial heart of Mexico-Tenochtitlan culture, once devoted to the Aztec gods Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl, and, in this story, one of the places Alÿs walks going to and from his studio, many of his works deriving from his observations and encounters there.

At first glance, the Francis Alÿs exhibition (*to be continued*) 1992- at Artspace (October 2005) appeared to be some kind of po-mo art trickery. The main gallery was bare. The adjunct gallery had one architectural drawing in oblique view of the central district of Mexico City, focussing on the Zócalo with one word, Bottle, written in pencil, below the church<sup>7</sup>. There was a projector and slide carousel but no slides. In the small gallery room was a projection<sup>8</sup> that filled the back wall. An empty plastic bottle scuttles across the Zócalo, apparently under its own steam, assisted by the occasional kick from people who encounter it crossing their path. Possessed with a spirit, the bottle lurches as it bounces blown by wind then comes to a halt only to be kicked by someone else. The climactic moment of the video comes right at the end as the bottle careens closer towards the traffic at the edge of the square where certain 'death' awaits it as it is destined to be squashed. Suddenly, the viewing is disrupted as the camera smacks up against something and the camera now tilts and nose-dives. It is only then that I read the title on the wall, drawing from Prelinger<sup>9</sup>: "If you are a typical spectator, what you're really waiting for is the accident to happen", which confirms that, indeed, I am characteristic as a spectator, as I KNEW an accident was going to happen. However, because my sympathies were with the bottle, the accident that did happen was unexpected and elicited the fairly predictable response of laughing at someone else's misfortune.

Now, I planned to talk about a few things at Artspace as part of the public programme during the Francis Alÿs show. The invitation to speak came about after making an off-hand claim to Brian Butler about my interest in South and Central American literature known as magical realism and its connection to Maori ways of storytelling, and how that might inform a reading of

Alÿs' work. Of interest to me were two key elements of the show – the first being the slapstick suspense of the video work with an empty plastic bottle and its self-possessed journey across the plaza; the other was the list work (*As Long as I'm Walking*, 1992<sup>10</sup>) with its long list of phrases that followed the starter statement "As long as I'm walking" with phrases such as "I'm not choosing". The content of much of Alÿs' work, which includes a book called *Walking Distance from the Studio*<sup>11</sup>, corresponds with the Situationist concept of the *dérive*, an aimless (in the conventional sense of aim) wandering, that responds to the psycho-geography of the city, that, in turn, resonates with Trickster's border-crossing ways.

*Walking, by nature, defies borders. The walk as it progresses makes use of many subterfuges.*<sup>12</sup>

The stories in Alÿs' books seem to be about perpetual motion or at least movement, small-scale or large. The stories weave in odd directions, the mundane and obvious pointed out in a way never noticed before, revealing a childlike analysis of the immediate surroundings. Through the observations of the town square, the crossroads, the travellers and travailleurs, the binaries and dualism are undermined by a counter-dualism. In the empty plastic bottle video, the bottle is the hero, always on the move, with the artist-pursuer being the fall guy (literally). The punchline is the self-effacing of the artist, who, it seems, had the accident on the way, tripping and falling over, after perhaps bumping into a lamppost. This self-mocking is often at the heart of Trickster tales, re-telling their misadventures. Suzanne Lundquist explains further:

Through the adventures of Trickster, the contingent nature of human experience is established and invitations to appropriate behaviour are made. However, because of the comic rather than tragic intention of Trickster discourse, survival in an often hostile world is made possible.<sup>13</sup>

So, like the trickster as sacred clown, the artist presents here as the fool, subject to his own misfortunes and jokes, slapstick and comedic. Whether it is the unravelling thread of a knitted sweater in Stockholm, Sweden, *Fairy Tales* (1998), or the trail of dripping paint through the city, the joke is positioned at the expense

Her fingers of fire. A particular stream. A faked accident. Anger. Subterranean fires.  
 First scorched earth action. Escape, various birds. Rain. Shelter in the earth, stones and trees.  
 Assert control over Mahuika's destructive power.

of the artist. But Alÿs sometimes turns this around, the artist becoming the joke teller. Through drawings and paintings, Alÿs recounts his friend and art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina strolling along a pathway in deep thought when a dog crosses his path. He stumbles over it and trips as its tail catches around his leg. This simplest of accidents led to a sheer obsession resulting in numerous sketches, paintings and collected quotes that relate to such falls, all under the banner of *The Last Clown* (1995). This poking fun at a friend and retelling the story in a number of different translations of the event seems to be transforming the mundane into the extraordinary, the banal into magic. It is this series of drawings of the art critic that bear the tongue-in-cheek title (in my opinion) *The Prophet*. Catalogue essayist Michèle Thériault describes a being, the saltambique, as one whose activities have commonalities with Alÿs' strategies:

The *saltambique* is both a clown, and by virtue of profession, a nomadic being. One who slips from one stage to another, playing upon his identity while knowing how to take full advantage of the accidental and the extemporaneous. His field of operation lies between humour and derision. He would be well advised to master the art of juggling.<sup>14</sup>

Francis Alÿs, *As Long as I'm Walking*, 1992

One component of *The Last Clown* is a 'source' photograph of Alÿs falling on the path in Hyde Park, which reveals the shifting sense of identity deployed, the artist taking the place of his friend, recreating the accident. The saltambique also shares characteristics with nomadic Trickster and has much in common with an 'out walking' Trickster character who morphs his identity to suit various encounters. In the manner of the clown, or perhaps the jester, Trickster stories remind us to laugh at our fallibilities and human weaknesses, particularly those of the flesh. It is in humour that a confluence between Trickster and Alÿs emerges.

Francis Alÿs, *Study for The Last Clown*, 1995

I now want to attempt a longbow draw between the literary genre of magical realism, or perhaps 'dual spatiality' as Canadian critic Robert Wilson has reframed it, and Alÿs' work. Firstly though, here's an explanation of this relatively new Westerner term that refers to what indigenous peoples were telling in stories all along.



Magic Realism (an oxymoronic term) is a narrative style common across the Americas and the Pacific where the binaries of nature and culture are not in opposition to each other and emerge from a time when humans did not see themselves as distinctly separate from animals. Spatially different time frames coalesce and human, animal and supernatural characters coexist and share empirically impossible corporeal dimensions.<sup>15</sup>

In her essay “Binarisms and duality: magic realism and postcolonialism” (1993), Suzanne Baker explains the term:

Since the 1950s and 1960s the concept of magic realism has increasingly been associated with Latin American fiction. It is important, however, to distinguish between magic realism in art and magic realism in literature. While Roh ... [German art critic Franz Roh used it to describe the work of post-Expressionist artists in the mid-1920s] coined the term in the context of the art world, to describe a specific way of portraying the mystery inherent in everyday reality without raising questions about that reality, magic realism in literature is ‘writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism.’ Normal, plausible, everyday events co-exist on the same level as supernatural, extraordinary and even fantastic events whose authenticity is never questioned. ... Thus the central concept of magic realism in literature is its insistence on the co-existence of the magic and the real. Despite the presence of fantastic events, however, it is always linked with the ‘real’ world, grounded in recognisable reality through social, historical and political references.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the power to transform into animals, to move between spiritual realms is ingrained in many customary stories from South and Central America, the Pacific and Australia. The stories are often critiques of the political context of the community or country<sup>17</sup>. This narrative mode became embraced in the Western world with the success of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, from which, unsurprisingly, the gypsy magician Melquiades is referenced in Aljys’ *The Prophet and the Fly*<sup>18</sup>. Another story that has now become famous beyond its originating cultural context is *The Whale Rider*. This is a traditional narrative of cross-species transformation in which Kahutia-te-rangi, the Whale Rider, becomes Paikea, which is the Maori species

name for Humpback whales.

Ngati Porou, the East Coast tribe who acknowledge their descent from Paikea, the Whale Rider, tell the traditional story somewhat differently to the familiar film version of Witi Ihimaera’s 1987 novel *The Whale Rider*, directed by Niki Caro (2003). In the traditional telling of the story, it is the critical element of transformation of Kahutia-te-Rangi that is the central premise of the narrative. In an attempt to kill all his half-brothers, the jealous Ruatapu capsized their waka (canoe) so Kahutia-te-Rangi was chased through the ocean. Kahutia-te-rangi’s mauri spears (spiritual entities, guardians)<sup>19</sup> flew across the ocean before him and he voyaged on the back of the whale to arrive safely in Aotearoa, landing first at Ahuahu, now known as Mercury Island. Whangara, on the East Coast, was his final landing place and the island there is in the form of a whale. This is all a ‘given’ in our storytelling, that he travelled on a whale, in a sense becoming that whale, which now is an island, Te Ana o Paikea, and a sacred place. Within this knowledge system, humans did not have dominion over animals but fitted within the greater schema of the natural world. The slippage between the empirical and the apparently supernatural suggests an understanding that spiritual energy (mauri) could move from the animate to the inanimate, though perhaps not back again.

The popular Ngati Porou song *Paikea* describes the story<sup>20</sup>:

Uia mai koia, whakahuatia ake;  
Ko wai te whare nei e?  
Ko Te Kani!  
Ko wai te tekoteko kei runga?  
Ko Paikea! Ko Paikea!

Whakakau Paikea. Hei!  
Whakakau he tipua. Hei!  
Whakakau he taniwha. Hei!  
Ka ūu a Paikea ki Ahuahu. Pakia!

Kei te whitia koe  
ko Kahutia-te-rangi. Aue!  
Me ai to ure o ki te tamahine  
a Te Whironui. Aue!  
Nāna i noho Te Roto-o-tahe.  
Aue! Aue!  
He koruru koe, koro e.

Ask and you will be told;  
 What is the name of this house?  
 It is Te Kani!  
 Who is the carved figure above?  
 It is Paikea! It is Paikea!

Paikea emerges. Hey!  
 A wizard emerges. Hey!  
 A deep-water prodigy is wading ashore. Hey!  
 Paikea lands at Ahuahu. Slap!

Your identity is entwined  
 with Kahutia-te-rangi. Amazing!  
 You did embrace the daughter  
 of Te Whironui.<sup>21</sup> Amazing!  
 Who settled at Roto-o-tahe.

Alas! Alas!  
 You are now a figurehead, old one.

Francis Alÿs, *The Ambassador*, 49th Biennale, Venice, 2001

The transformation into animals, particularly into birds, was a favourite trick of Maui. Maui's transformation into the kereru, the wood pigeon, with its iridescent green and blue feathers, provided him the disguise necessary to gain him access to the underworld where his mother went daily. Alÿs, too, it seems, enjoys the idea, one he put into practice by sending Mr Peacock, a real bird, as his representative to the 2001 Venice Biennale to attend the opening festivities. Mr Peacock, given the title *The Ambassador*, was assigned his own room and keeper, which allowed Alÿs to remain out of the spotlight and thus perform a social subterfuge by creating a 'live' performative work that didn't require his presence.<sup>22</sup> *The Ambassador*, as embodied by Mr Peacock, slips out from underneath the domination and control of a sycophantic art world. In the theatre the peacock is bad luck, with the feathers representing the evil eye. As Venice is, perhaps, the great proscenium of the art world, Alÿs might be sending in a bad luck charm in a gesture that acknowledges and prods at the hierarchical structure of the art establishment.

Now, I need to make it clear at this point that I'm not conflating Alÿs with the archetype of the Trickster nor with one specific Trickster, but, instead, looking for the crossroads where Alÿs' practice intersects with Trickster consciousness and discourse. Beyond the walking, there are the paintings, videos and performances that exemplify the spirit of playfulness

and gentle provocations of many Trickster stories, in addition to requiring a willing suspension of disbelief, to apply the old literary acorn courtesy of Coleridge:

The term "Suspension of disbelief" was coined by the romanticist Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817):

(...) it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.<sup>23</sup>

I want to cite Alÿs' study paintings of two girls for the painting *The Two Sisters* (1999-2002) as 'evidence' of my willing suspension of disbelief. In one painting, *Study for Two Sisters* (2001), a white girl wearing a shift frock walks away from the viewer's perspective. She has one white arm and one black arm. The other painting, also called *Study for Two Sisters* (2001) inverts this – a black girl walks towards the right of the frame with one white arm. In these studies, through the pairing, Alÿs invites our suspension of disbelief, and proposes a possibility. Perhaps he is also responding to the indigenous story-telling in the literatures of his adopted home: "When catastrophes come upon whole peoples through their misbehaviour, heroes are raised up, often as twins, to cleanse the earth from chaos".<sup>24</sup>

Alÿs' paintings sometimes literally point out when the emperor has no clothes, except the emperor is in this case an ordinary man or woman. Several of his works are pairings, organised in his beautiful book *The Prophet and The Fly*, that show a person at the centre of focus doing something, then paired with the same arrangement but with the person now naked. It has the effect of feeling like you have finally got a pair of those magic X-Ray specs advertised at the back of comics that guarantee you will SEE PEOPLE NAKED.

It must be said that Alÿs' artist's monograph is no ordinary show and tell book. It is exquisitely designed and printed; to hold it is to love it. The paper stock is heavy, and with each turn of the page, the leaf feels like a discrete object, somehow aloof from the others. This sense is heightened by the layout and narrative,

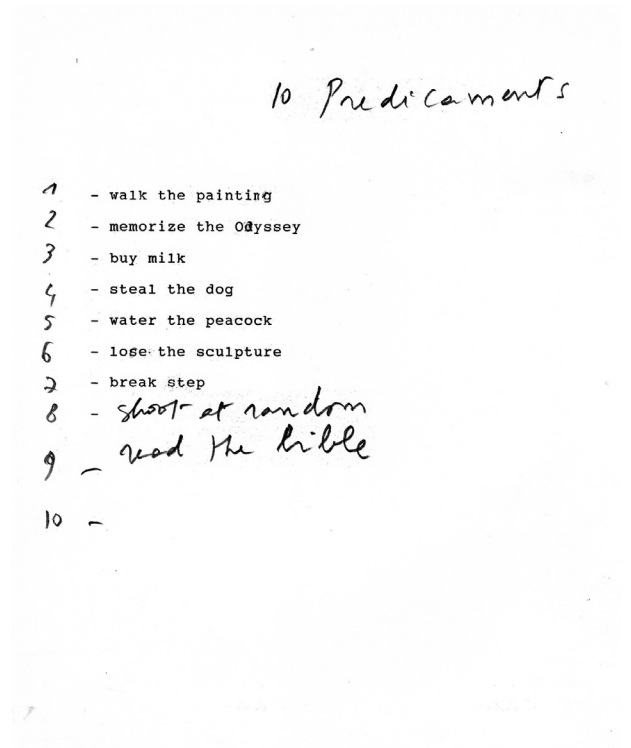
which seems to abruptly depart from one train of thought; and as the page turns, a new story unfolds. The collection of paintings, photographs, newspaper clippings, lyrics, lists etc, coupled with a large font, convey a child's storybook. In the contents page for *The Prophet and The Fly*, an abbreviation of plot line seems to be offered, appearing like an artwork, announcing a narrative outline. This strategy, while clearly reminiscent of children's storybooks, also proposes the surrealism of the every day. Again, the moral lessons of each chapter *The Consequence of Ignorance, Virtues, La Petit Mort, When Faith Moves Mountains, and Redemption* are presented and in this case have biblical overtones. Yet this isn't the crux of matter. In my opinion, it points instead to the reciprocity of action that is the flip side to the fun of being the last clown, of being the divine fool, the grey-haired baby.

Even though Tricksters may undertake to provoke and stir to invent and test boundaries, despite a dogged determination to resist being fenced in, there remains an understanding that all these actions take place in relation to some form of community that is a political and social zone. The consequences of one's actions, which isn't necessarily the same as accountability, are inextricably bound up in many narratives of the Trickster the world over. Whether it is Maui, Trickster, or Alÿs, artist, what we are left with are predicaments. Maui steals his grandmother's jawbone and takes his wife's face as his own; Alÿs suggests we walk the painting, break step and water the peacock<sup>25</sup>. What are the artistic strategies that draw on the Trickster, that discuss and provoke the contemporary social and political context, relevant to the here and now? What are these predicaments in the sphere of art practice and who is in a position to engage?

Reading between the lines of "If I'm walking, then I'm not..." perhaps the predicament is one of choice and making choices, with the subjective self, the dominant centre of ego being exemplified by the Trickster escapades that "mock foolish obsessive behaviour – gluttony, sexual avarice, gender arrogance, self-centredness, ideological addiction."<sup>26</sup>

So, in a final return to the list of predicaments of Maui, of Tricksters, of Alÿs, somehow the sheer silliness

and implausibility of some of the propositions seem possible, imaginable, in spite of logic. To be able to 'shift your shape into the form of animals' would be really useful. Other suggested predicaments raise moral or ethical concerns (no.5 on Maui's list says "Turn your brother-in-law into a dog"; no. 8 on Alÿs' list proposes "shoot at random") and others again seem grandiose in scale and ridiculous like Alÿs' no.2, "memorise the Odyssey" and Maui's no.10, "attempt immortality". Sounds a lot like art predicaments to me. Trouble is, which ideas to discard, which ones to follow through? I think I'll go for a walk.

Francis Alÿs, *Study for Two Sisters*, 2001Francis Alÿs, *Study for Two Sisters*, 2001

10 Predicaments from Francis Alÿs, *The Prophet and the Fly*, published Turner, Madrid, 2003

## NOTES

- 1 Francis Alÿs, *The Prophet and the Fly*, Turner, Madrid, 2003, p.30
- 2 Dr Ranginui Walker has named Maui, the Trickster of Polynesia, as the first researcher of the Maori culture (public lecture, Auckland University, 9th November 2004)
- 3 Ngarino Ellis, personal email correspondence, 7th November 2005
- 4 Elsdon Best, "Maori Religion and Mythology: Part 2" (originally published 1924, *Dominion Museum Bulletin*, no.11) reprinted without textual alteration, 1995, 2005, Te Papa Press, Wellington, p.378.
- 5 Hyde, Lewis, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, Farrar Strauss, New York, 1998, p.257.
- 6 Ibid, p.252
- 7 *Bottle*. 2003. Pencil on vellum and paper. 70 x 88 cm
- 8 *If you are a spectator what you're really doing is waiting for the accident to happen (Si eres espectador lo que en realidad estas haciendo, es esperar a que el accidente suceda)*. 1997. DVD, running time 09:57
- 9 Francis Alÿs. *The Last Clown*. 2000, p.31. Galerie de l'Uqam, Louise Déry and Michèle Thériault. p.35.
- 10 Francis Alÿs. *As Long as I'm Walking*, 1992. Text on unisel. 120 x 80 cm.
- 11 Francis Alÿs, *Walking Distance from the Studio*, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2004
- 12 Francis Alÿs, *The Prophet and the Fly*, op.cit., p.30
- 13 Suzanne Evertson Lundquist, *Native American Literatures: an Introduction*, 2004, Continuum Books, New York, p.5
- 14 Michèle Thériault, "The Art of Balancing on a Tightrope", essay from the catalogue *Francis Alÿs. The Last Clown*. 2000, p.31. Galerie de l'Uqam, Louise Déry and Michèle Thériault.
- 15 R. Rawdon Wilson, *In Palamedes' Shadow: Explorations in Play, Game and Narrative Theory*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1990, p.204
- 16 Suzanne Baker, *Binarisms and duality: magic realism and postcolonialism* (1993), *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, number 36, 1993 ('Postcolonial Fictions' issue, edited by Michèle Drouart), <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/36/Baker.html>
- 17 See for example *Men of Maize (Hombres de maiz, 1949* by Miguel Angel Asturias considered to be the forerunner of the genre of magical realism, antecedent to books such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.
- 18 Francis Alÿs, *The Prophet and the Fly*, op.cit., p.166.
- 19 I imagine mauri spears to be a bit like Luke Skywalker's light sabre but with the added power of being able to flash across time and space, carrying energy with them.
- 20 <http://folksong.org.nz/paikea/index.html>
- 21 "Me ai tō ure ki": literally "You coupled your penis to". A more delicate phrase was used, "Me awhi o ringa ki": "You took into your arms", when the old chant was converted into an action song for fundraising purposes in 1917. <http://folksong.org.nz/paikea/index.html>
- 22 Alÿs, Francis, *The Prophet and the Fly*, op. cit., pp40-41.
- 23 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension\\_of\\_disbelief](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension_of_disbelief)
- 24 Lundquist, op. cit., p.5
- 25 Alÿs, Francis, *The Prophet and the Fly*, op. cit., p.22.
- 26 Lundquist, S. op. cit., p.5
- 27 <http://ancienthistory.about.com/b/a/246353.htm>
- 28 Alÿs, Francis, *The Prophet and the Fly*, op. cit., p.178



NATALIE ROBERTSON (Ngati Porou / Clan Donnachaidh) is an artist and Senior Lecturer in Art and Design at AUT University, Auckland. She loves her dog, Sam.