

# WHAT A PERFORMANCE

Engaging in a rigorous practice of email performance, **Brian Fuata** brings the mail art movement firmly into the contemporary moment.

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PHOTOGRAPHY | NICK DE LORENZO

**Brian Fuata's** new work to be presented at Sumer gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland builds on the artist's rigorous email performances through which he disseminates an email to a selected audience.

These email performances were started at a time when the artist was living regionally and wanting to be present with a wider audience. For the artist, they demonstrate an expanded notion of performance, intimacy and relationality.

These emails often appear as installations and prints, the objects acting as artefacts within Fuata's constructed scenes. Fuata's email performances have been staged at the

Performa Biennial where he had the chance to collaborate with artist **Ray Johnson** – the king of correspondence art who has been working in the format since the 1950s. Significantly, Johnson is known for using the term nothings to describe his practice in reaction to the Happenings (the forerunners of performance art) which were a crucial performance aspect of the Fluxus repertoire.

For his performance at Sumer, Fuata will add to a body of work he began as a series titled *Improvisational Apparitions*, or as fans know them, his ghost performances, where the artist would perceive, haunt and use gestural movement and voice as a conjurer

of the unseen. The performances would be timed and begin by the artist clearing space within a room to honour it, all while speaking about the Samoan concept of the Vā.

He would then engage in improvisational performance, speaking a series of phrases gleaned from his research into the indigenous concept of listening to country.

The ghost in Fuata's performances was a humorous, charismatic and poignant spectre, a trickster who began his (after)life in 2012 and culminated with a final apparition at the Asia Pacific Triennial in 2020 where the artist sang *Unchained Melody* one last time.





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These photographs document Fuata's continued instigation of a performative moment.

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Post the ghost performances, Fuata has been focusing on what he terms a “reconstituting of the artist self”. In 2020, Fuata won the ANTI Festival International Prize for Live Art, awarded by ANTI - Contemporary Art Festival in Kuopio, Finland. In his winning performance, Fuata metaphorically became the host for Kuopio City Theatre. He invited peers to guide his practice, presenting a score to a number of collaborators who contributed elements such as sound design and costume to Fuata's actions. Of this work the prize jury stated: “he embodies apparitions, ghosts in our culture – that call up the unspeakable and the wondrous. His performance is delicate and agile – alive with criticality, generosity, energy and love.”

Over the last 20 years Fuata's rigorous artistic project has seen him included in shows at Seoul Museum of Art; Performa Biennial, New York; and locally in the Asia Pacific Triennial and the Sydney Biennale. In 2016, he was curated by **Melanie Oliver** for The Physics Room in Christchurch/Ōtautahi, and this August he returns to his birthplace of Aotearoa for a major presentation at Sumer, which has just started representing him.

Fuata has already begun work for his presentation at Sumer, producing a series of bcc'd and cc'd email performances. Even the photoshoot accompanying this writing has formed part of his practice. Fuata arranged for the shoot to take place at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Warrane/Sydney during opening hours while the general public moved through the space. These photographs document Fuata's continued instigation of a performative moment.

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PREVIOUS PAGE AND RIGHT:  
 Brian Fuata performing within  
 the Art Gallery of New South  
 Wales, Warrane/Sydney.  
 PHOTOS: NICK DE LORENZO.

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Brian Fuata's performance  
*Intermission (seini\_transmit)* at Sumer,  
 Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland takes  
 place from 7 to 10 August 2024.

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## DAN DU BERN

*Director, Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland*

“Sumer has represented **Brian Fuata** since late last year. Brian and I had already been in discussion about the possibility of doing something together for some time. And when discussions arose about the possibility of representation it was an opportunity that we both jumped at.

“As an artist best known for his performance work, it was not necessarily a working relationship that Brian felt would be open to him. And naturally I was thrilled to have the opportunity to build an ongoing working relationship with Brian, to support and promote the practice of an artist of such remarkable and singular talent.

“In August Sumer will present its first gallery showing of his work. We are understandably very excited for this, and to present

his work here in Aotearoa again. Audiences this side of the Tasman do not get to see his work here often enough.

“When I speak with friends – often who happen to be artists – and we want to bestow the single greatest compliment on a work of art, “real art” is the designation that tends to be used. When we say real art, we mean it is work that truly resonates, which moves us; art that is articulate, incisive, creative, brave and uncompromising. Brian’s work is precisely this, real art. And these are characteristics which one also experiences of Brian as a person too: at once playful and serious, fiercely intelligent, unapologetic in his politics, yet with humility and kindness.

“Of course, it’s somewhat challenging to remove the artist from the work when one is

principally known as a performance artist, and their body is their medium!.

“Brian is, to my mind, one of the most significant performance artists working today, anywhere in the world. His work has a wonderful sophistication, elegance and wit; which seems to glide effortlessly between the gallery, theatre and street. It is also work which seems very much of this current moment. It is distinct from the performance art of previous decades.

“Brian’s work is highly respected by many across the visual arts and performance field. His work has been widely exhibited in recent years, including in many key exhibitions and biennales across the Asia Pacific region, as well as further afield with exhibitions in Asia, North America and Europe.”





## PIP WALLIS

Senior Curator, Monash University Museum of Art, Narm/Melbourne

“I got to know and love Brian through his friends and collaborators artists **George Egerton-Warburton** and **Agatha Gothe Snape**. Brian would come to Melbourne to visit and we did a lot of hanging-out and talking in the studios at Gertrude [Contemporary].

“Brian and I first worked together in 2014 when he made a performance and series of works on paper for an exhibition called *Take No Lay Down* that **Brooke Babington** and I co-curated at Slopes Gallery (a year-long gallery space in an old mechanics shop in Melbourne). Very soon after, we worked together at Chisenhale Gallery London in 2015 where Brian made a performance in his ongoing ghost series. It was fascinating to show a work addressing the colonial in the context of empire at a time when conversations about decolonisation were less prevalent in the arts sector of the global north.

“I return again and again to Brian’s email performances and have written and spoken about them often; they are intriguing and endlessly interesting through various lenses including queer theory, media arts, performativity and embodiment.

“Brian’s curiosity for language is voracious. He revels in the fluidity of language and uses it to keep meaning unsettled and shifting, preventing it from being instrumentalised. Brian refuses to make his work answerable to tidy categories of definition, neither regard to subject nor medium. The evasion of palatable forms is a means of resistance that Brian wields masterfully at a time when institutions would happily co-opt more readily synthesised forms of political reflection. He is always intimately entangled with us viewers and simultaneously challenges us in ways we won’t fully absorb until hours, days and weeks after we walk away from the experience.”

OPPOSITE: Brian Fuata, *Bridge*, 2022. Performance. PHOTO: JORDAN MUNNS.

ABOVE: Brian Fuata, *IWMLDFS (or mini bar)*, 2018. Performance at Institute of Modern Art, Meanjin/Brisbane.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SUMER, TAMAKI MAKARAUAU/AUCKLAND.