

HUM

Dear Ella

by daniel ward

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Ella Sutherland, *Argot* (installation view),  
7-30 August 2023, Künstlerhaus Bethanien,  
Berlin. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer,  
Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.

*The poet and musician daniel ward has written a letter to Sydney-based, Aotearoa New Zealand-born artist Ella Sutherland. Meeting while Ella was undertaking the Creative New Zealand Berlin Visual Arts Residency at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in the twelve months from October 2022, Sutherland and ward seized the opportunity of this publication to visit the archival collection Sutherland had been exploring while making her residency exhibition, Argot. Reflecting on their shared experiences as newcomers to the city, and the technologies and histories referenced in the exhibition, ward's letter continues the commitment to queer storytelling deep within Sutherland's practice.*

dear Ella,

thank you again for agreeing to visit the queer archive at the Schwules Museum together on Wednesday. although brief, it was helpful to view some of the lesbian periodicals that you have been researching for your exhibition, *Argot*, at Künstlerhaus Bethanien. before you arrived i had a chance to watch people walk around the museum and chatter in its small rear café. a gorgeous mixture of queer tourists, art workers and eager volunteers provided a familiar ecosystem of lanyard-donned community types. upstairs, the archive room was small, tidy and disciplined. entering the archive and approaching its materials, i noticed the similarity to entering your own exhibition. in both rooms, at first, i was overwhelmed by all of the objects in their neat, grand order. i tend to behave within these semi-formal settings (libraries, galleries, museums) with a particular self-consciousness. perhaps there's

something to say about their mannered seduction, also. each time i pulled out a book, as each time i arrived to a new work within the gallery, i found myself careful and attentive; receptive but cautious and polite, as if to adopt the personality of the bookshelves or walls themselves. however, once given the distance and time required to land in either space, there was, of course, a wonderful opportunity for confidence and inquiry.

my visit to see both your exhibition and studio last week was extremely generative. it was a Thursday and Sinead O'Connor had just died, so i listened to *Universal Mother* on my way to you as the afternoon filled with light rain. i prefer to arrive at an exhibition starved, having eaten only cigarettes and a small glass bottle of coke that you watched me hurry down before entering the gallery. we spoke briefly in the doorway about your time here in Berlin and it's a nice coincidence that we had arrived at a similar point, having now both spent nearly a year in Germany. you spoke about the value of arriving to a private studio space in a new city but we also spoke about the way residencies and applications to inhabit them can feel so uncertain, sporadic, untethered. this lottery that we hope may soon ignite into a project or body of work. there is a strange instability in this way of operating that may lead to just as much despair as it does inspiration. it was a delight to see how an opportunity like this could be taken with such enthusiasm and considered, precise direction.

what i noticed first, ascending the stairs to your exhibition in the upper-floor gallery, were the four poster-sized canvases resting face-up atop the short, heavy plinths. the sculptural characteristics of the paintings were heightened immediately as i arrived first to their edges. the placement of the canvases mirrored the tossed movement of the painted orange and white A4 sheets littered across them. i found the hard-edge painting style surprisingly evocative, the colours booming and clerical. as we circled the paintings i noticed the blurring of black-and-white-scanned bodies printed on the upward-facing surfaces of the plinths, their simple forms almost completely covered by the bright stationery canvases. questions about what was hidden underneath soon arose, followed by questions about why these forms were hidden. were they even figures at all? later—seeing the full images revealed both during your de-install and across the

covers of the archived periodicals from which they came—this decision to obscure our view as an audience becomes more potent. as we discussed, what we see are remnants of the magazine *Die Freundin* (*The Girlfriend*), one of the many publications housed at the Schwules Museum archive. you spoke of its activity from the early 1920s as one of the most central (and first) lesbian periodicals in Berlin, until its eventual suppression and then closure in 1933 amidst the turbulent crescendo of Nazi persecutions. the publication, although always presenting a risk to its customers and distributors, became increasingly difficult to access due to the introduction of Gesetz zur Bewahrung der Jugend vor Schund und Schmutzschriften (Law to Protect Youth from Trashy and Dirty Writings) in late 1926.<sup>[01]</sup> the stamps that would be placed on such materials, along with the measures to suppress their accessibility, would later be replaced by street burnings. what is so interesting to observe across the later years of the magazine is the increase in self-consciousness throughout the publication. it is sad to see the elegant poses of nude women slowly fade into polite subtlety from month to month across the issues' covers. we see, as if in a flipbook, the fear of persecution entangling a heavy conservatism within a vibrant queer subculture. the magazine was as much a centre for visual exploration as it was for fiction, poetry, political criticism and emerging scientific research. beyond this, it housed an array of personals, and advertisements for queer events, bars and support services. in many ways it seemed to operate as a central social space for many lesbians and queer people in Berlin at the time. *Still Life with Back Issues* (2023) highlights how easily such connections can be lost, just as the prints are covered simply by a few sheets of administrative still-life on canvas.



Ella Sutherland, *Argot* (installation view), 7-30 August 2023, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



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Ella Sutherland, *Still Life with Back Issues* (detail), 2023, acrylic on canvas in artist's frames, pigment print on plinth; 4 parts, 82 x 67 cm (painting, framed); 110 x 95 cm (print). Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Ella Sutherland.

for the first twenty minutes we spent in the gallery, i mostly ignored the walls, swirling about, neck cocked downward, inquisitive. but the sunshine peeked through the street-facing windows and you ushered me towards the prints on the wall. here, deep-green lettering hung suspended in gridded metal framing: three prints are stacked behind one grid while the other print slouches across the top of a second structure. the frame appears to reference those found at newspaper stands, or perhaps even the kind of thing that sits above the desk of a shared office space, reserved for pegged birthday cards, draped lanyards, small cardboard pamphlets or printed affirmations. the poetry, although disjointed and partially shielded by its metal home, is perhaps the most intimate addition to the show. the framing itself even demands a particular closeness. i found myself only centimetres from the paper just to peer over a tight bar, where i discovered the word “through.” what a joy it is to see the poem operate so physically, ensuring the sculptural decisions of the work demand a slow and considered engagement. at first glance, the text operates similarly to the aisles of the queer archive. as a fellow novice to the German language, the archive inadvertently presents foreign words as a collection of symbols and figures of distorted meaning. like your printed poem, we are given an opportunity to explore

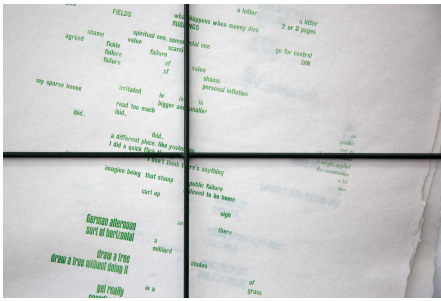
rarer tangents of meaning beyond language's primary objective in communication. as the title suggests—*A letter, a litter* (2023)—you deliver us a spirited hint towards language's potential. the scattered shape of the poem offers room for inquiry or perhaps even reverie between or within the words themselves. in these structures there is a jagged exploration of rhythm, as different fonts and sizes direct the melody of the verse sporadically. thematically, although it oscillates between a lounging, speculative narrator and snippets of found text and annotation, it holds a curious disposition throughout.

i am envious of your time spent with the letterpress and appreciate the photographs you sent through of the rich green and tarnished silver machinery. certainly one of the benefits of working in older cities is the widened access to different technologies. using this machine seems like a logical expansion beyond some of the printing methods used in your previous exhibitions (*The Heralds* [2021], *Various Breaks at Irregular Intervals* [2018]), however continues a related dialogue on inefficiency. the letterpress embarks on a longer journey than, say, the laser printer may. to select each letter as its own object of astonishment. in the poem the letter “e” appears ninety-six times, with “g” more reserved at twenty-two. “j”, “x” and “z” are the only letters to appear just once, but ensure that each letter of the alphabet is represented at least somewhere across the paper. i'm sure you knew this; how could one not try each of the twenty-six tiny ideas. these solitary wands of meaning we cast into an oceanic form. again, the pace inherent in both the methodology and the technology has informed the pace of the work itself. the letterpress allows for seamless reproduction and, here in Germany, became the first way of doing so. however, the inefficiency of this device is where its poetry is housed. you do not provide any more than four reproductions and here they hang as minute, intimate propaganda: to skate the margin of possibility without falling in. an edging of sorts. treading so close with the unruly potential of printing's imprudence. how thrilling. when working in publishing, as we have both done in varying capacities, one can at times feel bombarded by certain fears of reproduction. there is a haunting guilt that arrives with this potential for excess, as unsold books, i'm sure, have at times filled both of our bedrooms

or studios or offices. comparatively, it must indeed be a haven to hide within restraint, specificity and patience as this work does.

you wield contrast similarly in your decision to hang the print *Furniture Arrangement* (2023) on the adjacent wall. here we see no letters at all, but rather marks made from the metal furniture blocks used to position the letters on the press. the tool itself is seen here writing its own memoir. the hurried curves of the paper squeezed between strips of thin white framing, chasing itself up the wall. when i came close to the paper i noticed miniature hidden scrawlings on the prints made from dust and scratches caught mummified by pressure and ink atop the blocks, call them hieroglyphs of disruption. among these marks i see the letter “z”, a triangle, a diagram of acuteness, something nearly infinity and many short sharp arrows. these simple metal structures some 600 years ago became the very objects that would replace a whole industry of scribes—their nuance and craft rendered inefficient by a stampede of reproducible symbols and ideas. soon enough our role as publishers would be deemed necessary in order to perform the strange role of administrative grim reaper, guiding the lived history of ideas into the resting place of the page. our collaborations with these long, thin, metal blocks hurled printed matter through the renaissance and into a dusty box in the corner of our bedroom at an incomprehensibly rapid, excessive and unstoppable speed.

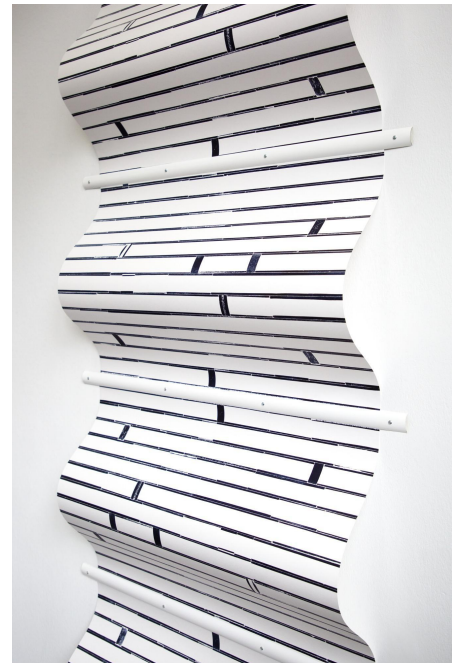




Ella Sutherland, *A letter, a litter* (detail), 2023, letterpress on paper, plastic coated steel; 2 parts, 67 x 43 cm (print); approx. 130 x 150 cm (overall), edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



Ella Sutherland, *A letter, a litter*, 2023, letterpress on paper, plastic coated steel; 2 parts, 67 x 43 cm (print); approx. 130 x 150 cm (overall), edition of 5 + 2 APs. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



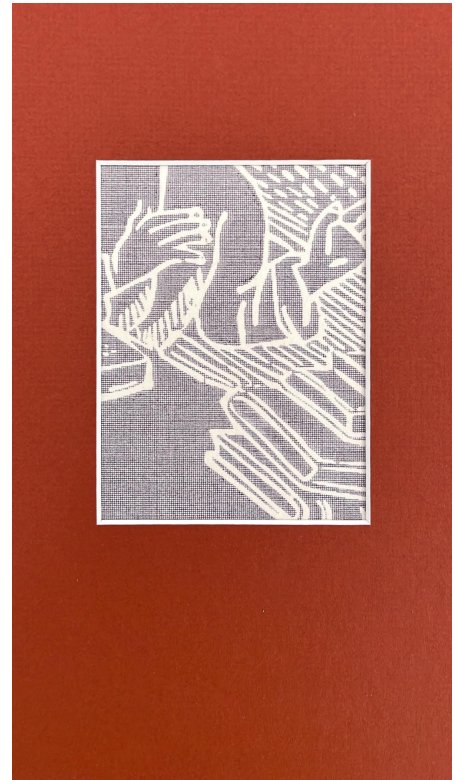
Ella Sutherland, *Furniture Arrangement* (detail), 2023, letterpress on paper, spring steel tape measure; 8 parts, 50 x 70 cm (print); approx. 300 x 80 cm (overall), edition of 12 + 2 APs. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



Ella Sutherland, *Furniture Arrangement*, 2023, letterpress on paper, spring steel tape measure; 8 parts, 50 x 70 cm (print); approx. 300 x 80 cm (overall), edition of 12 + 2 APs. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



Ella Sutherland, *Death at the Printers*, 2023, biro on paper, hyperinflation issue stamps; 3 parts, 50 x 40 cm framed each. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



Ella Sutherland, *Death at the Printers* (detail), 2023, biro on paper, hyperinflation issue stamps; 3 parts, 50 x 40 cm framed each. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



Ella Sutherland, *Argot* (exhibition preview),  
7 August 2023, Künstlerhaus Bethanien,  
Berlin. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer,  
Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: Galya Feierman.

again, these themes of excess are mirrored by other works within the show. *Death at the Printers* (2023) depicts snippets of reproduced drawings from the French publication *Danse Macabre* (1499); the first known illustration of a printing press. the full image depicts a figure of death collecting the souls of a printer and a bookseller, both of which you have reproduced within frames floating over the burgundy ground of the work. you contrast these biro drawings with neatly displayed hyperinflation-issue stamps from Germany from the early 1920s. here we can see original printed values of 200 Deutsche Marks covered by stamps reading 200,000 or those once costing 5,000 newly valued at two million marks. the presentation of these simple documents so peacefully illustrates the tenacious momentum of human society. **the exhibition suspends itself within the pervasive tension of ideas and technology.** the stamps here contrast the triumph of reproduction with a period in which it failed to keep up with the turbulent economic reality. money was at first overproduced and finally could not be produced fast enough. as fears of shortages increased exponentially, so did the desire to hoard materials and further drive their scarcity. the merciless cycle continues. do you think it is rather natural to fear excess in the same way we fear lack? the exhibition poses this question in its juxtaposition of historical materials. perhaps life is always lived between this balance ... it certainly feels like quite a primal conundrum. what i am grateful for is the opportunity to ponder these questions now within the walls of your exhibition, as there is rarely time to consider it all. most of our lives are spent shifting the cogs, turning the weight of the corkscrew, ordering pages, scanning, editing, adjusting. i am thankful for this role art plays; to demand one stands, at least

momentarily, in hope that a question arrives, followed closely by a potential shift in perspective.

during a visit last month to I Never Read, the book fair held during Art Basel, i had a similarly paralysing daydream about excess, surrounded by a room of like-minded, hopeful merchants. in a moment of minor despair i visited, as i do often, the index of Emily Dickinson's *The Complete Poems* and looked under the word "publication." there was one poem, "709":

Publication - is the Auction

Of the Mind of Man

Poverty – be justifying

For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather

From Our Garret go

White – unto the White Creator –

Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –

Then – to Him Who bear

It's Corporeal illustration – sell

The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant

Of the Heavenly Grace –

But reduce no Human Spirit

To Disgrace of Price – [02]

without the industry of publishing, this book would never be in my hands. existing simply as a written document until her death, it is only through its reproduction that we have the opportunity to access her wisdom and song. similarly, it is the only reason we have the opportunity to learn of certain queer histories of Berlin. in this poem, as she so often does, Dickinson grounds us within the lived action of creation. she reminds us how our priorities in art making exist beyond the market of its reproduction, even beyond the product at all. i saw artistic process, of the kind Dickinson described, honoured within *Argot*. your work displays such an enthusiasm for slow, methodical specificity that it reaches towards a “Heavenly Grace” arguably not found within regular publishing or printing. your work playfully balances art making’s material potential for waste and its spiritual potential for meaning.

when i visited the gallery a second time at the end of the week, i spent most of my time with *Two Views of Fanfare at Work* (2023). a pair of metre-wide canvases depict deconstructed shapes and lettering on a rich cream background. the paintings are suggestive of early modernist advertisements or movie posters and i love that you even utilise the German typeface Fanfare, from the 1920s, as the title suggests. the paintings are strikingly precise, so much so that the works house a kind of scrupulous sensuality. i’m reminded of a discussion i saw recently between Harry Dodge and Johanna Hedva at Gropius Bau. Dodge read the following passage from his recent book *My Meteorite*:

I just read an article about a guy who was caught fucking the tailpipe of his car. Most humans I’ve ever known are object-lovers, more or less. (Consider how kids come home with piles of colorful leaves in autumn, dive interestedly into a heap of old buttons, wrestle on the lawn with a large cardboard box.) Is there a clear point of inflection beyond which this conduct is considered libidinal? I’m not at all sure this is something to moralize about; my attraction to objects is always already erotic so the idea that there exists a continuum by which it melds into something categorically sexual, or even tender and devoted, seems to me uncontroversial.<sup>[03]</sup>

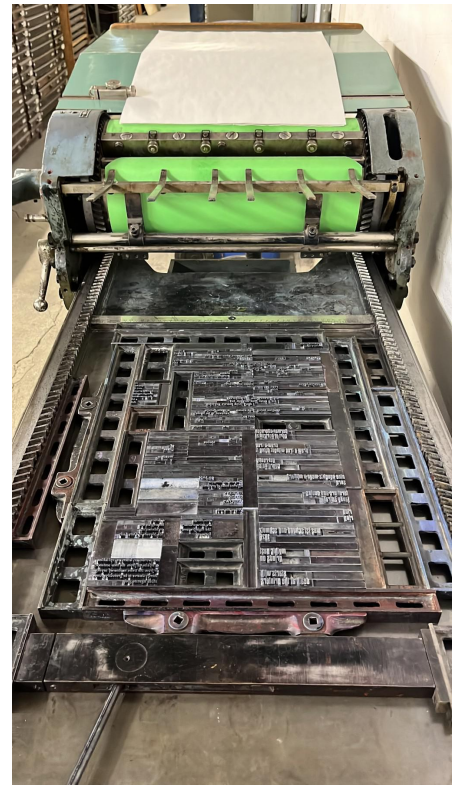
the exactness of your paintings is both alluring and commanding, dominating the whole right-hand flank of the room. in *Two Views of Fanfare at Work*, detached aeroplane propellers float between cartoon construction diagonals. perfect circles tease the angles of edible triangles. the paintings really are closer to signwriting than most contemporary painting i have engaged with. hence, their seduction is unavoidable. i can only assume that the **erotic character of design** that Dodge speaks of is paramount to its success. would you agree? advertising wants to be sexy and here a painting that wants to be an advertisement is no exception. the painting follows a similar aesthetic direction to *Humours of an Election* (2022), which i had the pleasure of seeing at *Rhinestones*. the group exhibition, run by the nomadic gallery collective GLUE, brought such an eclectic mix of very bright art to that enormous arched underground cellar in Mitte. how did you feel about it? i wish we'd had a better chance to discuss the show on the night. i did, however, enjoy our stroll to Bar 3 to celebrate, regardless of our opinions. although i found both the curatorial arrangement and the installation failed to really integrate with the gigantic room, i appreciate the courage of the curators in facilitating exhibitions in new spaces each time. there is something particularly Berlin about the whole operation. it parades the transience of this city as much as it does the housing insecurity. GLUE's website certainly sums it up well, stating they "can rely on [their] network here, because despite the well-known space problems, there are always opportunities."<sup>[04]</sup> i'm sure we can agree that after a certain while it feels all too easy to stumble into these kinds of opportunities. artists here all seem to end up working for each other in one way or another, whether it is a hurried group show or as extras in a short film or simply painting or caring or framing or cooking. collaborations really seem to ignite quickly and ferociously in Berlin, perhaps as a response to its size and its looming impermanence. it is fitting to see that you have had opportunities to engage with archives, practitioners and technology here; this investment feels integral in actualising the kind of work you are interested in.



Ella Sutherland, *Two views of Fanfare at Work*, 2023, acrylic on canvas; 2 parts, 120 x 100 cm each. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photo: David Brandt.



Ella Sutherland, *Humours of an Election*, 2022, acrylic on linen, 76 x 66 cm, in *RHINESTONES*, 2023 at GLUE, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. Photograph: Jan van der Ploeg.



Documentation of the letterpress studio at Kulturwerk des BBK, Berlin, 2023. Photo: Ella Sutherland.



Documentation of the letterpress studio at Kulturwerk des BBK, Berlin, 2023. Photo: Ella Sutherland.



Documentation of the letterpress studio at Kulturwerk des BBK, Berlin, 2023. Photo: Ella Sutherland.

similarly, at Gropius Bau, Dodge and Hedva continued their conversation to discuss the platonic motivators and outcomes of

art making. the artists championed the importance of sociality in art communities. they were interested in the way in which our daily lives and the people we share them with seep into our work, the way we seep into theirs. and further, how our work translates this lived experience into something else entirely whether we want it to or not. in a startling coincidence, a friend of mine back home had died the second day i came to see *Argot*. first Sinead and now Casper. i had met them at a very formative time in my life, attributing much of my confidence in exploring my own queerness to their guidance and support. i raise this because we spoke at length about the responsibility one feels as a queer person to protect the histories of our friends and elders. your show is a testament to this. there is a pervasive sense of duty that seems inseparable from your work, having consulted archives consistently across your writing and art practice. certainly this intuitive response to research has a long history within queer art, largely shaped by the continual suppression, loss and destruction of both queer material and people alike. there is both a caution and generosity that governs your engagement with historical material, whether it's printing technology or periodicals from the Schwules Museum archive. however, what seems to carry as a central understanding of your work is that these materials are as much the literal history itself as they are symbols for deeper and more complex histories. suggestions of sorts. certainly, there is a lived history that will always go undocumented. this is a reality that the exhibition discusses and a thought i have been circling since the passing of my friend. in many ways, the lived document of our queerness, or let's just say living, is of course this constant flowing movement of people and conversation and collaboration, the swirling ideas that swarm us until we decide to capture one and land it on the page. i'm grateful to have seen so many of yours.

let's do coffee soon.

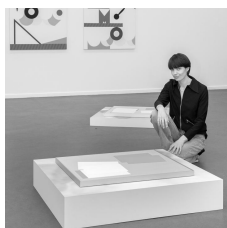
blessings,

daniel

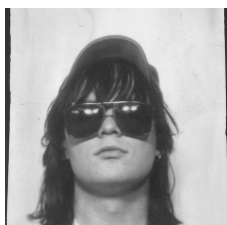
## Footnotes

01. Margaret F. Stieg, “The 1926 German Law to Protect Youth against Trash and Dirt: Moral Protectionism in a Democracy,” *Central European History* 23, no. 1 (1990): 22–56.
02. Emily Dickinson, “709,” in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 348.
03. Harry Dodge, *My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random There Can Be No New Thing* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 149.
04. Ulrike Pennewitz, “About,” GLUE, 14 August 2023, <http://www.glueberlin.com/about.html>

## Biographies



Ella Sutherland (b. 1987, Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa) lives and works in Sydney, Australia. Working across the fields of visual arts and publishing, her practice visually engages with architecture, the written and social spaces of queer communities, and the poetic potential of letterforms. Her work has been shown widely throughout Aotearoa and international venues, including Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; Carriageworks, Sydney; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, Ōtautahi; City Gallery Te Whare Toi, Te Whanganui-tara; Monash University Museum of Art, Naarm; UNSW Galleries, Sydney; 12th Gwangju Biennale and Sumer, Tāmaki Makaurau. She was the recipient of the 2020 Creative New Zealand Berlin Visual Arts Residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, which she is currently undertaking.



daniel ward is a poet and musician. they are the editor at no more poetry, an independent publisher of poetry books and art magazines. their second and most recent poetry collection is titled *eternal delight paralysis*. daniel is currently writing their third book, titled *lavender poems*, generated primarily through automatic writing exercises, rituals and meditation practices. daniel performs predominantly improvised music under the moniker bodies of divine infinite eternal spirit and is the drummer and guitar player for Wet Kiss.

