III

Heritage as political discourse
In May 2011, the exhibition *Port Vila Mi Lavem Yu* (Port Vila I Love You) opened at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. The culmination of a three-year research project the exhibition was curated by Haidy Geismar (NYU/UCL) and Eric Wittersheim (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris) in collaboration with the Hon. Ralph Regenvanu (Member of Parliament for Port Vila, and current Minister of Lands and Natural Resources) and Viviane Obed (formerly of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre’s Young People’s Project) with contributions from numerous other local assistants and anthropologists.

Urban life in Melanesia has attracted scholarly attention for some time with anthropologists and others examining the intersections of church, new social movements, land rights, urban settlements, gender relations, money, tourism and globalization (e.g. Brookfield 1973; Gewertz and Errington 1999; Goddard 2005; Rawlings 1999) and their impact on traditional lifeways. In turn, museums have also been trying to collect and document the new artefacts and aesthetics of Melanesian urban life. O’Hanlon’s book and exhibition, *Paradise: Portraying the New Guinea Highlands* (held at the Museum of Mankind, see O’Hanlon 1993; Clifford 1997) explored the Wahgi recycling of consumer goods to produce war shields in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Large exhibitions in the 1990s at the Chicago Field Museum and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam collected and exhibited the aesthetics of imported (largely Chinese manufactured) commodities by presenting urban marketplaces in their exhibition halls (both of which were criticized for lack of connection to Pacific Islanders, despite their contemporary focus, see Kahn 1995, 2000). By expanding the usual exhibition conventions of timeless
and exotic ritual cultures in Melanesia, these projects, notwithstanding their limitations, presented the roles that globalization, commodity consumption and urbanization play in the aesthetic life of Melanesians, and exhibited urbanization in largely positive ways as a process of cultural intermingling, innovation and creativity. Indeed, it is certainly true that for many Pacific Islanders, patterns of circular migration ensure that both town and village are vital parts of everyday life, as is the consumption of global commodities, which have had a powerful presence in the region since the start of colonialism, but especially since the Second World War (see Foster 2002; Lindstrom and White 1994; Schneider 2012). Yet for many, living in urban Melanesia is an experience tainted with ambivalence. People come to town seeking to earn money, desiring to participate in a sense of global modernity, but they also quickly become aware of the losses (of language, traditional practice and intergenerational knowledge) that this can incur. Towns such as Honiara and Port Moresby have become synonymous with ethnic tension, and the large numbers of unemployed youth provoke a public discourse around out-of-control teenagers, gangs and violence.

Our exhibition wanted to both explore the aesthetics of urban life in Vanuatu and provide a space for ni-Vanuatu to present their celebrations and ambivalences about life in town. We built on the collaborative research process developed by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, VCC (Taylor and Thieberger 2009) and used extensively by Geismar in a number of other museum projects (Geismar 2003; Geismar, Herle and Longga 2007) in which the process of making a collection and developing a display was open to local interlocutors who would have the opportunity to create objects, texts and display strategies to convey their particular experiences of town. With funding from Le Fonds Pacifique of the French Overseas Ministry, and the support of two private collectors, we were able to commission six contemporary ni-Vanuatu artists to create new pieces specifically engaging with the theme of ‘Life in Town’. In discussion with these artists and our local curators, we divided the exhibition into a number of themes that directed the collection of a host of other items: contemporary photography, everyday consumables, personal possessions. The final exhibition was divided into sections focused on: Port Vila’s ‘history’ (comprised of historical images from the archives of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre); the urban kava bar or ‘nakamal’ (an installation of a kava bar which was also the screening room for a specially produced film by Eric Wittersheim, Man Vila); ‘home’ (an installation evoking a domestic interior in an urban settlement, which contained locally collected clothing including a policeman’s uniform, a school uniform, local t-shirts and calico, a bible, posters and photographs taken by a youth photography project organized by Wan Smol Bag theatre company); and the ‘marketplace’ (an installation of a local
handicrafts market and the interior of a trade store selling good predominantly imported from China), around which were interspersed contemporary artworks and artist's commentaries.

It quickly became clear that there was a critical tension between our desires to generate an aesthetic field for the experience of everyday life in Port Vila and our hope to engender a critical commentary about the process of rapid urbanization that the small city has experienced. Out of a total population of just over 250,000, nearly 50,000 live in Vanuatu’s capital, many of them in informal settlements without adequate facilities in makeshift houses (Wittersheim 2011; cf. Goddard 2005 for Papua New Guinea). Port Vila is a place of many paradoxes. It is a town in which nearly every island is represented by a settlement of people who work hard to maintain their local language and cultural traditions, developing new urban rituals around marriage, initiation and reconciliation. Whilst people maintain as much as possible of their cultural traditions in town, lack of access to traditional resources (pigs, yams, ceremonial mats) has resulted in an increased entanglement of money within ceremonial spheres and a growing debate upon the appropriateness of money as bride-wealth or compensation. Port Vila is also where intermarriage between different island communities has resulted in Bislama, the national creole, becoming an increasingly vibrant and dynamic language, often the first language of urban children.

Perhaps the most pressing concern in town is access to land, both to live on and to cultivate gardens upon. The market in Port Vila has expanded to provide international produce such as coriander and red onions, but is increasingly too expensive for local people. Eric Wittersheim’s film, Man Vila, specially made for the exhibition, highlighted the concerns of Tannese settlers in Port Vila who find it increasingly difficult to access the coast for swimming or fishing, as beach-front properties are developed by foreign investors or siloed by local land claims. Similarly, the influx of mass-produced commodities has opened up new sound worlds of reggae and hip-hop, and the cultural space of evangelical Christianity, yet it has also precipitated much local discussion about the effects of pornography and violent films on young people (Lindstrom 2007). The Vanuatu Cultural Centre has for many years focused research on the pressing questions of gender, youth and land, with projects that have, for instance, explored and validated the experience of women, examined young people’s experience of justice in town (Mitchell 2004), or documented the ways in which land ownership was traditionally managed (Simo 2007). Alongside the VCC, Wan Smol Bag – a theatre company focused on social justice and local empowerment – has run a Youth Photography Project over several years, giving cameras to young people living all around Port Vila and asking them to document their own lives. Their images, several of which were
presented in our exhibition, show a world in which life is undoubtedly hard, but in which young people remain focused on family, and try to maintain themselves as active members of their communities.

This ambivalent aesthetic resonated in Honolulu, where the exhibition opened in the art gallery of the East-West Center. Although relatively small in space, the East-West Center gallery is known for its interest in innovative Pacific work, including the first show of contemporary Native Hawaiian art in the exhibition ‘Ho'okū‘e (Resistance)’ in 1997. Honolulu, like Port Vila, has become increasingly too expensive for its native population, many of whom have been pushed to live in informal settlements along the beaches leading out of town, and do not have the prospect of regular employment or access to healthcare. Instead, many indigenous Hawaiians are either marginalized or pressured into performing a version of their traditional culture for tourists. Many of the staple foods of urban ni-Vanuatu – tinned tuna, corned beef, white rice imported from China or Australia – are also staples in Honolulu, and bring with them the associated lifestyle diseases of diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. In both Honolulu and Port Vila the long-standing presence of Asian merchants has contributed profoundly to the daily fabric of economic life, in particular, and has precipitated a very specific dialogue on globalization that intersects with the political and economic interests that emanate from North America, Australia and Europe.

The questions regarding how to present these topical issues, primarily through visual means, and how to engender challenging discussion on the benefits and the troubles of urban development became part of the curatorial strategy of the exhibition itself. Creating both the collection and the display engendered a dialogue about the role of town in contemporary ni-Vanuatu life and raised many provocative questions, as Joseph John, one of the participating artists commented:

Today’s generation is losing their customary identity. The Western system is influencing them and making them have no interest in their traditional ways. We can see many changes in their clothing and other activities. The children of today no longer have much physical activity – they spend all their time in front of a computer, television or mobile phone. The quality of produce in our store has gone down and makes us sick. DVDs show us many bad habits and practices, and today our crime rate is rising, there is less respect for elders, chiefs, teachers and neighbours.... Today we are struggling to find a way to solve all of these problems. We need to find a way to solve these problems before we ruin our paradise nation of the South Pacific, Vanuatu.
In the following photo essay we present several of the artworks made for the exhibition, alongside some installation shots and other objects that were collected that resonate with these themes. We are grateful for the opportunity to memorialize, and catalogue, the exhibition.

Figure 1  Main Road, now Kumul Highway, Port Vila in 1920. Image courtesy of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre archive.

Figure 2  Main Road, Kumul Highway, 1970. Image courtesy of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.
Figure 3  Nakamal Installation, East West Gallery, 2011. Photograph by Haidy Geismar.

Figure 4  Installation of a domestic interior, East West Gallery, 2011. Photograph by Haidy Geismar.
Artist statement: This artwork shows what is happening in Port Vila today. As shown on the picture, some land has been sold to one of the investors while its customary ownership is still under dispute. In Port Vila today investors are buying land and developing it with shops and office rentals. In the picture the land has been sold by a Ni-Vanuatu to an investor; the money has been paid to him in full. Frequently, when disputers are made aware that the land has already been sold by their opponent, conflict arises that at times causes them to be fighting against each other, even though they may be brothers. In the picture the brothers are fighting over the payment while the investor has already develop[ed] the land freely… This artwork also tells us that people are going for money and [are] not thinking of developing their own land for their future generations.
Artist statement: Vanuatu is still one of the civilizations on the planet where man is born rich, thanks to its customary system. In Vanuatu it is the human being who belongs to the earth, but if we detach from it without reflection, we become poor. In other societies, people must buy land. In Vanuatu, 80 per cent of the population lives with the rhythm of nature. Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, is like any other city in the world of 50,000 inhabitants, with its advantages and disadvantages. For example, the market is open daily and there are all sorts of local products such as laplap, a typical dish of Vanuatu cooked with manioc, banana, taro or yam, an ancestral way of cooking.

Kava is a traditional beverage made from the ‘false pepper plant’, it is served every day in the evening at the nakamal or kava bar in all areas in Port Vila. The nakamal is an extraordinary meeting point through which one can get a general idea of the way of life of its inhabitants. Thus the market and nakamals are meeting places for everyday talk. Nevertheless, behind this peaceful touch of paradise, lies a reality that casts a shadow over the future of this city and becomes more and more alarming: Efate is the island of Vanuatu that is selling most land to foreigners. Therefore the landmark with a question mark in my piece indicates a danger with respect to the earth if ni-Vanuatu sell land without thinking wisely. For my work I have chosen the market, Kava and the landmark to address the issue of land that is the real wealth and the future of a human being, city, nation, ni-Vanuatu.
Figure 7  The market, Juliette Pita, 2011. Acrylic paint on canvas.

Artist statement: My original design is mainly based on what we call here in Vanuatu the ‘custom economy’. Custom and cultural practices are always transformed in our traditional lifestyles, and ways of trading become a form of business for cash, especially in Port Vila. Some examples are: women weaving mats and baskets etc. for sale; other arts and crafts (women’s artefact shops); selling kava roots and juice – there are kava bars all over Port Vila; and the selling of food at the Port Vila Market House. The Market House sells the products of women and men from all over the island of Efate. You can see the island of Efate as the background to the picture. It is mainly women who sell things at the market. The Port Vila market is mainly a women’s place.
Figure 8  The Virus in the City, Sero Kuautonga, 2011. Acrylic paint and phone cards on canvas.

Artist statement: Cell phones have been introduced since the beginning of this century in Port Vila and now almost everyone has one. In the beginning, it was considered as a luxury object for only well-paid people living in town. Today it is just like a toy that anybody can access. Whether or not it is necessary for everyone to get one, today everybody is contaminated by the system. Yes, the system that facilitates life for some people, on the other hand brings problem to others. Everywhere in Port Vila today, people walk over empty telephone refill cards. Our environment is polluted by throwing empty cards everywhere and by the exposure of radio waves to people living in town, and by the telecommunication towers built in town to facilitate the network system. women’s place.
Figure 9  Store keeper, Fres Wota, Prisca, 24 July 2009. Wan Smol Bag Youth Photography Project.

Figure 10  Women prepare a meal at their home in Ohlen, Wilma, 16 July 2009. Wan Smol Bag Youth Photography Project.
Figure 11 Efram Iapwatu at his computer, Ohlen Nabanga settlement. Efram is a student at Malapoa College, July 2010. Photograph by Lamont Lindstrom.

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References


