Virgin in a Condom and Te Papa: 25 Years On

Mark Stocker

One of Aotearoa New Zealand’s greatest art controversies was caused by a disproportionately tiny 105-millimeter-high assemblage by Tania Kovats, Virgin in a Condom (1992) (see Figure 1). It featured in the British Council touring exhibition Pictura Britannica: Art from Britain, held at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), Wellington, from 1 March to 26 April 1998, opening just fifteen days after the museum itself. Thirty-three thousand people signed a Catholic Communications Office petition demanding the Virgin’s removal. Thousands of phone calls, many abusive, bombarded Te Papa’s Enquiry Centre. The display case was vandalized twice and a nearby visitor host assaulted. The controversy was repeatedly televised, culminating in a TV3 debate. Column meters of press coverage included a Sunday Star-Times (Auckland) article and 250 letters in Wellington newspapers alone. The BBC World Service Focus on Faith made the controversy its lead item (Stocker 2021: 81–82). Hence, critic Justin Paton warned in his New Zealand Listener article: “Yes, this is another article devoted to a certain religious statue sheathed in a certain birth-control device, but do not change the channel yet” (Paton 1998: 42).

Figure 1. Tania Kovats, Virgin in a Condom, 1992, resin and latex condom, 105 mm × 40 mm × 30 mm (edition of 12). Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London (photo courtesy of Alex Hartley).
Virgin in a Condom and Te Papa: 25 Years On

The exhibition’s curator, Bernice Murphy, aimed at conveying “thoughtfulness and toughness … en-textured [sic] by the social change which has taken place especially during the Thatcher years” (S.G. 1997). _Pictura Britannica_ was originally intended for the modern and contemporary art venue, City Gallery Wellington. Building maintenance forced that venue’s closure, however, till late March 1998, enabling Te Papa to step in. The British Council initially considered the available spaces within Te Papa unsuitable for an “art” show and expressed concern about its possible presentation and reception there. Murphy and Ian Wedde, Concept Leader Visual Art and Culture, overcame this resistance, the latter believing that “the exhibition would give credible … substance to an important moment in contemporary art that a national museum … should be expected to show its audiences” (Wedde 2021). Approval finally came three months before its opening. However intellectually laudable, Wedde’s ideals were at odds with the overwhelmingly nationalist and populist character of the rest of Te Papa and its new, semi-permanent exhibitions and other attractions. Victoria University of Wellington art historian and former National Art Gallery director Jenny Harper was accordingly unimpressed by _Pictura Britannica’s_ “unlikely environment … both intellectually and aesthetically.” She complained: “The space itself was physically unimpressive and the lighting poor,” compromised by “the bright lights of Time Warp, one of the new museum’s money-making … high-tech events flashing below” (Harper 1998a: 22).

“Tiny, Delicate and Unexceptional”

Surprisingly little has been published about the work itself. For Harper, its conceptual strength came from “two … disparate items … combined in a simple yet potent way. It cogently represents what for some is a contentious mixture of sex and religion, but … remains tiny, delicate and unexceptional” (Harper 1998a: 23). Kovats combined two readymade objects, a mass-produced resin Virgin Mary votive figure and a latex condom. As both fulfilled utterly opposing functions—sacred and profane, the life-giving and the contraceptive, and to hostile critics, the pure and the sullied—their fusion was dynamite. It was sometimes compared with Andreas Serrano’s _Piss Christ_ (1987), a photograph of a plastic crucifix immersed in a tank of his urine (Stocker 2021: 84). Yet Serrano’s approach was more aestheticized than Kovats’s momentary inspiration, and his title looked vulgar, confrontational, and potentially blasphemous. _Virgin in a Condom_ is more neutral, banal, and unexceptional, perhaps conveying a more subtle and insidious power.

When Te Papa later pressed Kovats to provide an artist’s statement, she explained:

The work … was made … when I was thinking about … the Virgin Mary as the most significant female archetype in Western culture. [It] is intended to prompt very serious reflection of … questions that affect Catholics and non-Catholics alike: sexual politics, contraception, abortion, and sexual identity [that] affect us all. It is important to emphasize that the condom is a symbol of protection, literally a life-saver in the current climate of HIV awareness … “Virgin in a Condom” is a cultural object—an artwork, not an object of veneration with religious intent. Its context is the art gallery or museum (Kovats 1998).

She downplayed any phallic and fetishist connotations, which would have provoked public anger and disgust. While the work aimed to “prompt very serious reflection” of the issues Kovats raised, how it did so was not obvious. Although the condom clearly symbolized protection in the HIV/AIDS era, she said nothing about its primary contraceptive function. Both aspects would have offended the Catholic Church’s stance on condoms (and indeed any contraception), but would have made her explanation more robust. Political commentator Chris Trotter perceptively observed:

Draping a statue of the Madonna in a contraceptive sheath is an act so rich in symbolism that it takes the breath away. The explosive reaction of the Catholic community bears witness to its artistic power … Virgin in a Condom did not become one of the “icons of late 20th century art” by being polite or advocating safe sex. It won its … notoriety because it attacked head-on, and with calculating impiety, the Catholic Church’s teachings on female sexuality. It is a bold bid to reclaim Mary’s holy fertility from the immaculate conceptions of the Church: to protect her from the patriarchal ambitions of God and man alike. The rage of the faithful is, therefore, perfectly understandable. They know blasphemy when they see it (Trotter 1998).
Once the exhibition became public knowledge, largely through a preview on the primetime TV1 program *Holmes* three days before the opening, there were repeated calls for the withdrawal of *Virgin in a Condom*. From within Te Papa, Wedde resisted these, and Chief Executive Cheryll Sotheran unflinchingly backed him. Wedde still regrets nothing, and believes the work was “integral to the curatorial and artistic integrity of the exhibition … [it] read[s] as legitimate commentar[y] on the identity and gender politics of certain religious icons as interpreted by artists with the right to self-expression—I did not support the censorship of those views or the art works expressing them” (Wedde 2021). He wanted as comprehensive an exhibition as possible; exclusions were made through size, irrelevant for the tiny *Virgin*. The timeframe meant that *Pictura Britannica* failed to undergo Te Papa’s focus-group approval process run by audience engagement facilitators, which might have identified it as a problematic exhibit.

The furor was cheerfully stoked by the media (Figure 2). Their coverage largely favored Te Papa standing up to its critics, though they reprimanded the museum for failing to anticipate the outcry and causing offense (*Evening Post* 1998). Te Papa’s senior management was threatened with violence and received abusive and threatening phone calls; a police-monitored security system was installed in Sotheran’s residence. A guard was permanently stationed beside the *Virgin* after its display case was vandalized. As the police had predicted, the Enquiry Centre received a bomb scare, which turned out to be a hoax. A constant crowd of mostly Catholic demonstrators gathered outside the museum, with frequent calls for prayer (Figure 3). At one point a container truck pulled up in their midst, revealing a living tableau of the Last Supper, complete with a topless woman as Jesus Christ (McCarthy 2018: 19).

![Tom Scott, Cartoon, The Dominion, 11 March 1998. Courtesy Tom Scott.](image-url)
Fifteen To One

Te Papa’s corporate records contain 15 boxes of letters from the public condemning *Pictura Britannica* and just one of support. They provide invaluable insights into New Zealanders’ beliefs—about religion, morality, the function of a national museum, and occasionally about contemporary art. The correspondence is often repetitive, but poignantly reveals the views of hundreds of literate, sincere, engaged, and sometimes enraged people. Contrary to Wedde’s claim, they did not come from “a very specific religious community” (Wedde 2021), but included many Christian denominations, Muslims, Hindus, agnostics, and even atheists. Objectors often stressed that they were not Catholics or even churchgoers, yet their moral values were offended. With few exceptions, defenders steadfastly upheld their sense of the enlightened secular present and seemed outraged by their opponents.

Perhaps the most celebrated “anti,” Cardinal Tom Williams, claimed: “Justification for the exhibit will undoubtedly be claimed on the grounds of artistic merit or freedom of expression” but this “would be rejected were the figure to be the Prophet Muhammed or Princess Te Puia [sic]. Civility, decency and sensitivity to the beliefs of minority groups would prevail. It is strange that seemingly only Catholics are excluded from such consideration” (Williams 1998). Legal academic Bill Hodge echoed him, claiming that Te Papa had “deliberately chosen to exclude and insult a clearly defined minority. Such an attack on Catholic doctrine … may have a place but not in NZ’s national museum” (Hodge 1998). William’s Māori double-standards argument was often repeated, but rarely was this used as an excuse for Māori-bashing. Indeed, one correspondent noted Te Papa’s “enormous and proper respect … paid to our unique Maori culture, while denying this to Christianity” (Shroff 1998).
A sense of betrayal was widely felt. Wellingtonian Amanda Sutherland told Sotheran:

I have spent the past month telling people how proud I am that this great nation ... has such a magnificent building to house our national treasures. You cannot imagine the ... disappointment I felt when informed that you had chosen to ignore repeated requests to remove from exhibition the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in such a desecrated state ... "Our Place". I think not. (Sutherland 1998)

The fifteen days between the museum's triumphant opening and that of Pictura Britannica exacerbated this feeling, abruptly ending the honeymoon.

Protests came from the South Auckland Muslim Association, Faith in Action, and the Ethnic Council of Wellington. Particularly outspoken was columnist K. Gurunathan, who lambasted “[a]n elite group [who] have set themselves up as cultural gods and guardians of the ... public space ... They have issued licences to the artists to use the publicly funded space as a high ground from which to piss on the sacred values of Christians” (Gurunathan 1998). Politicians across party lines objected in varying tones, notably Geoff Braybrooke, who tried to move a parliamentary censure motion, and four New Zealand First Māori MPs. Labour MP Paul Swain asserted: “Te Papa would not show an exhibition that portrayed ... pornography, violence against women or a display that paid homage to Adolf Hitler. I am also certain that an exhibition which involved a great Maori leader or chief with a condom would not be acceptable to the museum” (Swain 1998).

Objections predictably came from many church leaders, Anglican and Catholic alike. After mentioning his “many years on the Council on HIV/AIDS,” Peter Atkins, former Bishop of Waipu, stressed: “Those of us who were Christian on that Council worked ... in the community to help people respect the condom as an important factor in controlling the spread of disease. Your exhibition of this so-called work of art has trivialized this medical aid and will make the task of education even harder” (Atkins 1998). One of the few artists hostile to Virgin in a Condom was Bill Sutton:

I am disgusted at the attitude of the chief executive ... in justifying the continued display of an object she now knows to be grossly offensive to many New Zealanders, regardless of their religion. It has no artistic merit whatsoever, but is cheap propaganda engendered not by artists but by theorists who, like cuckoos, lay their eggs in the nests of others. (Sutton 1998)

“We Are Lucky To See It”

Te Papa’s supporters repeatedly upheld the principle of free speech and artistic license. If “disgust” was the operative word of the protesters, then “freedom” and opposition to “censorship” were the rejoinders. Art collector Jenny Gibbs asserted: “There is a small minority who preach peace and practise violence and intolerance. The idea that we should permit a diversity of views seems a foreign notion to them” (Gibbs 1998). Her friend, Rudi Fuchs, Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, asserted: “The Museum is about seeing [with] different eyes conflicting things so that they can be compared” (Fuchs 1998). Robert Leonard, director of Artspace, agreed: “People do not visit museums simply to have their prejudices validated ... Pictura Britannica is a fantastic art exhibition and we are very lucky to see it in this country” (Leonard 1998). Author Keri Hulme denounced “the noisy ‘christian’ clowns making a spectacle of themselves.” In New Zealand, she claimed, “the vast majority of people are either atheist or agnostic or uncommitted to any religion;” she admired Sotheran for “not buckling under bizarre attacks from a tiny group of people” (Hulme 1998).

Jonathan Kirkpatrick, Dean of Dunedin, was one of relatively few churchmen defending Te Papa. He told Sotheran: “There is a battery of theological thought and expression ... regarding the offensive nature of the Christian Gospel and the sweet sugary images which have for centuries masked the true radical nature of what the real Virgin Mary was” (Kirkpatrick 1998). Theologian George Armstrong concurred in his article entitled “Jesus was a rebel, Mary a solo mum”: “Christianity was born of offence and blasphemy, as defined by the established order and religion of Jesus’s and Mary’s day. If the Bible paints such a picture, the current pious protest is an unchristian gesture of a politically rude kind” (Armstrong 1998).
Labour MP Tim Barnett was the only politician to write in staunch support of Te Papa:

Of course, the protesters have a package of other hates, including abortion, homosexuality and sex education, all of which are quite capable of driving them to un-Christian levels of negative emotion. I suspect that many of them would find the bicultural commitments of ... Te Papa equally threatening. Te Papa can probably never hope to be much of a place for them and do its job for the wider community! (Barnett 1998)

The protesters were repeatedly identified as a “small minority,” “vitriolic,” “blinkered,” “ridiculous,” “rightist,” etcetera. A liberal belief in the “freedom of ideas” went along with firm support for the arts establishment and Sotheran’s position in its hierarchy (Stocker 2021: 94–95). What she said went, and what her critics condemned as her “mulish obstinacy” (Whiteford 1998), her supporters admired as courage. The latter were obviously more sensitive to the pressures that she and her colleagues faced, which their opponents would have considered self-inflicted and avoidable.

“Sheepish and Apologetic”

This author believes that Te Papa acquitted itself poorly in the controversy. There were mitigating factors: threats of violence were and are entirely foreign to its culture, and Sotheran, Wedde, and Brewer unswervingly refused to capitulate here. What, however, dismayed Harper and Paton was the failure to debate with protesters and robustly defend the Virgin in a Condom, contextualizing it in contemporary art. Although Harper praised Te Papa for not withdrawing it, the museum had failed to adequately explain why it had stuck to its guns: “Other than enlisting [Kovats] who has had to speak for herself, they have so far only argued simply that Te Papa is a place which must function as a site of cultural debate.” Tellingly, within the organization, “[n]o-one with responsibility for the visual arts … has written or spoken publicly in more than sheepish or apologetic tones” about it. Harper asked: “Why not argue publicly and passionately about the importance of art because it can say things in ways which crystallise our moment in history … in ways that articulate our deepest fears and beliefs?” (Harper 1998b).

Paton (1998) wittily characterized the debate as “the tribalisation of the public, the plague of me-me-me self-righteousness, religious reaction, bad ol’ Kiwi anti-intellectualism, and an ongoing crisis about who and what art is for,” which had been “spectacularly fused by the opening of ‘our’ new museum.” The interpretations one could give to the Virgin were “unruly, slippery, gleefully volatile,” and it was the museum’s duty to “keep these meanings live and crackling.” But these were sadly obscured by its ideology: “There are these target markets and interest groups, you see, and there is this new museum that claims to represent them. All of them. That was the promise embedded in Te Papa’s Brand—Our Place—‘where all our stories can be told.’ But obviously no museum could conceivably represent all the people all the time, and “obstinate, eagerly offended [and] over-literalist” though they were, the protesters “have zeroed in on the contradictions on which Te Papa was built.” While “Te Papa’s commanders-in-chief [rightly] left the sculpture on view and also asserted artists’ right to free speech,” this emphasized “the extent to which Kovats has taken heat that the museum itself ought to have absorbed.” Instead of saying “Strong work. Chew on it!” and then intelligently aiding digestion, Te Papa had resorted to clichéd “institutional assertions about freedom of expression” and assumed a “spurious neutrality.” So, tragically, “the power of bureaucracy replaces the power of art” (Paton 1998: 42–43).

A Public Forum?

Probably unknown to Paton, the situation was compounded by Te Papa’s ultimate failure to fulfil its stated aim “to be a public forum” for cultural debate (McCarthy 2018: 21). The museum tentatively moved in the exhibition’s first week to do so, enabling concerned parties to articulate their views. Williams later claimed that on 10 March, the Catholic bishops immediately accepted such an offer. Te Papa then engaged Colin McKenzie, of Conflict Management New Zealand, to facilitate the forum. On 15 March, the Sunday
Star-Times reported that Sotheran “would consider holding a public forum on the issue next week” (Sunday Star-Times 1998). However, a board decision three days later explicitly ruled this out. Despite this, leaders of the lay movement Catholic Action complained on 6 April that Te Papa “has persisted in informing protestors and the media that it is making genuine attempts to organise such an ‘open forum.’ They accused the board of “stalling on making a decision knowing full-well that much of the Christian community goes on ‘retreat’ over Easter [10–13 April] and the Exhibition completes its run on 26 April” (Society for the Promotion of Community Standards 2009). Indeed, Williams was only told on 1 April that no forum would be held. At Wellington’s Sacred Heart Cathedral, a week later, he told the congregation that “the Board did not carry out its undertaking” (Shaw 1998). His colleague, Peter Cullinane, Bishop of Palmerston North, added: “Our sense of powerlessness and frustration was heightened when the agreed debate was delayed for more than three weeks” (Cullinane 1998).

Te Papa did not challenge Williams or Cullinane. Yet circumstances nonetheless mitigate its apparent bad faith. Tensions were high in mid-March: a prayer vigil on 14 March involved some 1000 protesters and an Evening Post poll of 4473 people revealed that a resounding 80.5 percent believed that offending works should be removed from display (Lane 1998). A rattled board chairman, Sir Ronald Trotter, desperately asked: “But where do you start making judgements about what should be exhibited or not?” (Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune 1998). Both the format and appropriate participants for any forum were, moreover, in the hard basket. McKenzie told Pat Stuart, Director of Strategic Planning: “There are no easy answers to the question about who should be involved” (McKenzie 1998). Stuart then admitted: “Te Papa has struggled to find a way to establish dialogue with all interested stakeholders in an environment in which the many views generated can be heard fairly and rationally. It would appear that this is not possible” (Stuart 1998a). With the gravity of the situation and fears of a public forum misfiring, bureaucratic stalling evidently prevailed. A compromise of sorts nonetheless materialized. Williams informed his congregation that “the board had told the church last Thursday [2 April] that it had arranged a two-a-side debate on TV3 … on Easter Monday” (Shaw 1998). This occurred with only the participants present, and proved an anti-climax, leaving host John Campbell decidedly frustrated (Stocker 2021: 108).

A Change of Character

What Pictura Britannica, and particularly the Virgin in a Condom, unintentionally achieved was to change Te Papa’s character. Occurring so early in its history, the controversy strangled at birth some of the experimental and edgy aspirations that it had aimed to foster. The often-repeated ideal of the national museum as a “safe place for ‘unsafe’ ideas” was rapidly replaced by a more risk-averse regime (Stocker 2021: 110). When this author told Wedde that Te Papa had “won the battle but lost the war,” he conceded: “There is some truth in this. It is worth noting … that the museum’s most controversial exhibition, Parade, which drew the ire and scorn of many in the art establishment, was subsequently revised along more conventional display lines” (Wedde 2021).

It went further than that. In April 1998, Stuart responded to a question about Pictura Britannica having influenced Te Papa’s future choices of exhibitions: “Te Papa’s focus is to be a forum for the nation and it will continue to represent the cultural and social diversity of New Zealand” (Stuart 1998b). Nothing was now said about internationally sourced exhibitions. Confirming this, Harper observed in 2005 that the heat generated by Pictura Britannica “seems to have had a profound and lasting effect of the programming of this museum. No major group exhibition of contemporary art, either from here or abroad, has featured in its programme since” (Harper 2005: 232). This situation still holds good today.
Correspondence of Mark Stocker with Tania Kovats, Peter Cullinane, and Ken Gorbey, 2021

Following the publication of this author’s article on the theme, “Virgin in a Condom: Te Papa’s Baptism by Fire” in Tuhinga, Te Papa’s research journal, in 2021, I corresponded with several surviving key players. Partly this was intended as a courtesy, acknowledging their help in what turned out to be a lengthy project, but also to provide a right of reply if they felt this was necessary. Here, I am publishing emails from the artist Tania Kovats; the Most Reverend Peter Cullinane, former Bishop of Palmerston North, who played a central role in fronting the response from his fellow Catholic Church leaders when Cardinal Tom Williams was in Rome at the height of the controversy; and finally, from within the institution, Ken Gorbey, who in 1998 was nearing the end of his fifteen-year stint as Director of Museum Projects, encompassing the National Museum of New Zealand, the Museum of New Zealand, and Te Papa itself. Readers must obviously draw their own conclusions, but this author believes that from the first two responses, there was not necessarily an ideological chasm between them, and perhaps even a degree of mutual respect. A very real sense of pain, anger, and abuse comes over powerfully from Kovats, while Cullinane puts in a plea for dignity and respect for people and their beliefs. Both regret the divisiveness, hurt, and anger that the controversy created. From a Te Papa perspective, Ken Gorbey recalls the frustrations of his senior role when, due to internal politics, he was unable to influence the course of events and the ensuing controversy. His reading of what he saw as the institutional mistakes made in 1998 influenced his subsequent role as Project Director and Deputy President of the Jewish Museum Berlin. Finally, he reiterates his vision of “the very culture of the place” and the failure of Pictura Britannica to conform to it.

Tania Kovats

Mark Stocker, email to Tania Kovats, 18 August 2021:
Dear Tania,

I hope you found the article satisfactory. The launch of [Tuhinga] took place last Friday and was a very nice occasion, a chance for me to catch up with former colleagues at Te Papa—including Charlotte Davy, head of art. She told me about her meeting with you and what you had to say about the controversy—thank goodness you were in another country, the Internet was in its comparative infancy and there was no such thing as social media. If you have any comments, or corrections that you wish to make, don’t hesitate to contact me. But I would quite understand it if you wish to put this aspect of the past, untypical of your wider oeuvre, behind you. One little thing that interests me—I’ve seen more than one date given to the work, but the usual one is 1994—though Wikipedia says 1992. Could you kindly clarify this? Even if it is the earlier date, this would post-date by a couple of years your time at the Royal College [of Art, London]. Part of me is slightly disappointed by this because it would be fascinating counterfactual art history if it had been from then. One envisages a ‘hard case’ YBA [Young British Artist] student when they saw it saying to you ‘F… Tania! You’ve really nailed it there!’ (I hope you don’t mind my slight levity!) And this would also be consistent with it being the work of a young artist, still wishing to shock—which I definitely feel is not you. Such a thing has no place in a scholarly article, of course.

A couple of interesting points seem to have eluded most people in the debate:
– your Virgin is a Lourdes type one, not a Biblical Virgin—this is of course quite important as this ends up saying much more about Catholicism and its interpretations of her than the original article.
– nobody bothered to look at Fatima which lends credence to what you stated about your use of Marian iconography, and how wishing to shock was not, and probably never was, your intention.1 I look forward to hearing back from you about these and any other points …

Best wishes,
Mark
Dear Mark,

It has taken me a little while to respond to you and your incredibly thorough article addressing the Virgin in a Condom work. I don't tend to look back and find it challenging to do so. Artworks don't speak. I love that any sculptural object is a dumb thing that takes up space in the world but doesn't have a voice. Artworks can point to things, sometimes things we don't want to see.

Artworks are containers for the things we feel, experience, think and say. We project these things onto them. Your article is an impressive survey of things said, projected, and written at the time, and all the struggles embedded in that dialogue.

I am not sure my voice was welcome in the dialogue. Or that I would have had the capacity at that young age to know what to say to the levels of hatred the work inspired. It does not make for easy reading to see these compiled or the inferences of the how this controversy had longer term impacts.

My personal relationship with the Virgin Mary is that she genuinely was a sanctuary for me as a young woman, a safe space when I didn't have one. The unconditional love of a mother offered me much needed symbolic archetypal protection. But the Catholic Church was not a safe space. The 'use' of the Virgin Mary as a tool of control was unacceptable to me. I didn't want or need the control of my identity or sexuality that was part of the church's doctrines and teachings, that all privileged patriarchy. Women were not allowed determination over their own bodies and fertility. People were dying of HIV and Aids because of Catholic prohibition of the use of condoms. Sexuality was defined in such narrow acceptable paradigms that set up endless torture for anyone that did not conform to those paradigms. And I had some of my anger at all this confirmed by the nature of some of the responses to that work, the violence of it, the outrage of 'righteousness', assumptions made about the work, me, and the people that stood up for art. I had many personal internal battles with feelings of guilt and shame about this work that were irrational projections and transference, elements I had to overcome. This was never a work that was a 'clever idea'. I don't make works that are clever ideas. If they have any intelligence in them, it's because of how they intersect with some sort of perception and honour a creative truth, whatever that might mean.

I note that you haven't chosen to reflect on how the Catholic Church occupies a very different space to the time of the original making of the work. The Catholic Church has been exposed and shamed in recent times for the systemic protection and tolerance it provided for the sexual abuse of significant numbers of those in its care. In addition to the profound damage and trauma inflicted on so many, there is a wider crisis of faith still being absorbed in the Catholic Church, now it has been widely exposed for its hypocrisy, sexual violence, and devasting misuse of power and trust. Loss of faith can be a devastating loss and crisis for an individual and a community.

I am forever grateful and respectful for the protection various individuals, curators and museums offered my work and myself at this difficult time. It meant I didn't have to lose my faith in art. It was gratifying on my last visit to New Zealand to meet some of these individuals and thank them personally.

I remember the shock and horror and admiration I simultaneously felt when Sinead O'Connor ripped up an image of the Pope on live TV in 1992 directing us all to 'fight the real enemy'. I also remember the hatred and misogyny she endured consequently, and her vulnerability when she didn't appear to have equivalent structures around her as a line of defence. I love that she is no longer vilified for what she did, but rather celebrated as an early exposuer of abuses of power in the Catholic Church.

I am not punk. I never set out to shock or offend. I just try to speak a truth, my truth whatever that is. And have made peace with the idea that my truth shocked others and attracted so much hatred and upset. I have no regrets about that work.

My work currently addresses environmental issues, and how abuses of power and hypocrisy have devastated our planet. I try to find ways for art to communicate the importance of understanding things both in our conscious and unconscious mind. These extractive environmental practices are abusive, socially, spiritually, and ecologically; these things intersect. I don't anthropomorphise the planet, but it is our mother, our host. The Virgin Mary is still very present in my frame of thought. 'She' needs protection. Misogyny is
present everywhere in all this. I value the platforms I have to celebrate female subjective experience. I try to encourage tolerance, be kind, and do no harm.

I don’t think I have changed.

My language is sculptural objects.

So probably won’t use any more words here.

regards

Tania

Mark Stocker to Tania Kovats, 24 August 2021:
Dear Tania,

This is a terrific reply and one which I believe adds significantly to scholarship on the subject. I deliberately decided not to open the can of worms about the Catholic Church and sex abuse. This was certainly not because I believe it should be exonerated—I certainly don’t—but a bit like Charlie Hebdo is something that emerged later. I was much more concerned with the Realpolitik and context of the period ending April 1998. I am also glad I didn’t suggest it was a ‘clever idea’ in the article, in view of what you say here. Perhaps I was applying too much of the Mark Stocker and too little Tania Kovats to think that way. All I know is that I personally have many brainwaves and thought it could just have been one such—but clearly not. Yes re Sinead O’Connor—I wonder what happened to her—tearing up JP II was an astonishing piece of performance art in retrospect. I am glad you believe that NZ individuals rallied round you because the impression I was left with … was that you were abandoned by Te Papa (who was a bit of a Pontius Pilate) and not wishing to mount a defence of your work, leant on you to supply an artist’s statement. Clearly it wasn’t as callous and irresponsible as that, and they were good to you personally. Another story that didn’t make its way into the article was Cheryll [Sotheran]’s kindness towards Sue Superville [Manager Enquiry Centre] and her heroic colleagues manning the phones. Twenty-three years on, things have somewhat mellowed and it does in retrospect seem something of a storm in a teacup …

All good wishes,

Mark

Peter Cullinane

Mark Stocker, e-mail to Peter Cullinane, 8 August 2021:
Dear Bishop Peter,

This has just been published. I hope you find it interesting.

All good wishes,

Mark (Stocker)

Peter Cullinane to Mark Stocker, 22 August 2021:
Dear Mark,

Thank you for your thoughtfulness in sending me a copy of your published work on ‘Virgin in a Condom: Te Papa’s baptism by fire’. I did set out to reply after a fairly hurried read, but then decided it deserved a more careful read; hence the delay—but so rewarding. First up, I want sincerely to congratulate you on a job well done. As evidence of the worthwhileness of historical research, I think you have served that purpose very well.

Paton and others were justified in decrying the tribalism (is this what today we call ‘culture wars’?). It is just the opposite of good dialogue and reasoned argument, which supporters of the exhibits say was the agenda. Those who claim art is self-validating and independent of every other standard put themselves out of reach of argument; others put themselves out of reach by their fundamentalism and personal prejudice. More to the point is the question of what art can be used for, which is implied by Sotheran’s defence of the exhibit as inviting ‘tolerance’ and as a way of challenging an ‘encapsulation of Catholic issues’. I have no problem with that in principle: in all its forms art has been used for political purposes as much as for
religious purposes. Catholic leaders have discredited Catholic teaching whenever they have spoken as if condoms themselves were somehow wrong. More accurately speaking, the Church's objection is to the contracepting of marriage. Outside of that context it is a matter of whether their use helps or harms—all matters for legitimate debate.

The item the museum chose to provoke debate [about] is what, in the judgment of so many, was highly insensitive. I think they invited the criticism that what they did knowing it would seriously offend Catholics (and others), they would not have dared to do at risk of offending Māori or Muslims (though, both Māori and Muslims were also offended.) This in turn invited the charge that it was ultimately a marketing ploy, treating ‘the art’s audience as consumers rather than citizens, as a bunch of target markets rather than as a community’ (Paton).

I don’t believe it was anti-Catholic in the sense of ‘hate speech’. Sadly, the closest we came to hate speech was from some whom you name as ‘die-hard’ Catholics. I know their kind only too well. I felt Sir Ron Trotter was a decent, fair-minded kiwi. I can’t remember our conversation, but all these years later, I imagine he must have thought ‘why all the fuss, just let it die’ …

I think your work has relevance to the contemporary and perennial debate over free speech versus hate speech. For the purposes of legislation, it seems inevitable that we resort to abstractions, just as the terms ‘free speech’ and ‘hate speech’ are abstractions. But, of course, abstractions, being a step removed from concrete reality, cannot address every situation. And so the potential for debate becomes interminable. Which, in turn, shows that legislation is no substitute for moral formation. I sense that only when respect for the innate dignity of persons becomes, as it were, ‘second nature’ for all of us will we know the difference between free speech and hate speech, and a reason for respecting the difference, in all concrete circumstances. And a general respect for persons has some way to go …

Kind regards,
Peter Cullinane

Mark Stocker, e-mail to Peter Cullinane, 22 August 2021:
Dear Bishop Peter,

Thank you very much for this response—which I greatly value. I won't respond in great detail, partly because I agree with so much of it, with the exception of your Church's objection to the contracepting of marriage. I think Te Papa's senior management genuinely underestimated the furore that Virgin in a Condom created. Te Papa was the proverbial possum in the headlights. They would never admit it, but in retrospect had they used their discretion over the exhibits and said thank you but no thank you to this one, no one would have batted an eyelid. The problem was that Cheryll Sotheran (who had received a Catholic school education but reacted against it) was a very dogmatic woman, who shared with George W. Bush the mindset of 'If you're not with us, you're against us'. She was psychologically incapable of picking her battles. Sometimes this could be a source of strength—her fearlessness and her focus on seeing Te Papa progress from zero to 1m+ visitors was remarkable indeed. But here you certainly don't see her at her best. [Therefore, her former colleague Jenny Harper's] eminently sensible suggestion of a compromise by closure or withdrawal of the works over the long Easter weekend was sadly destined to be ignored …

Your (and Justin's) suggestion that Te Papa was using the exhibition as a marketing ploy is surely confirmed by a notorious response that Sir Ron made about the juxtaposition of [Colin] McCahon's Northland Panels alongside a Kelvinator fridge of the same period … something on the lines of ‘I don’t care what the critics say, but if we get funding from the parent company of Kelvinator for product placement, bring it on!’ Te Papa strenuously denied wanting to make money out of a public attracted to the museum because of the controversy, but they would say that, wouldn't they? I agree about not daring to offend Māori or Muslims but Catholics being fair game. A lot of tosh was talked about political correctness and most critics missed the point: you could retain your politically correct credentials and get away with being insulting to/oblivious of the feelings of Christians—especially Catholics ...

In regard to ‘hate speech’, I think you’re absolutely right about the unfortunate diehard Catholics and I agree with you that with the best will in the world, legislation won't cure it.

Best wishes,
Mark
Peter Cullinane, e-mail to Mark Stocker, 25 August 2021:

Thanks Mark. Your comments have prompted me to become a bit more realistic about what was involved …

Peter

Ken Gorbey

Mark Stocker, e-mail to Ken Gorbey, 27 October 2021:
Dear Ken, if I may,

I thought you would be interested to read my recent article on the Virgin in a Condom. I’d welcome any feedback …

Kind regards,
Mark Stocker

Ken Gorbey, e-mail to Mark Stocker, 3 November 2021:
Dear Mark,

Thank you for sending me your article on The Virgin which I have read with interest. Very little of what happened belongs to me at a personal level for I had been side-lined from the management of art exhibitions in the year before opening. Beyond, that is, having to supply the expertise and budget to prepare a not ideal space (like walls, a patched-together lighting system, and tacking sheets of MDF over the carpet because the British Council would not have carpeted floors) for the exhibition.

At the risk of being self-serving in my explanation, this was because of a number of reasons: a battle commenced at that time within a pretty small number of players in the art community about the loss of the old National Art Gallery; the fact that because of my long involvement with the concept I tended to carry and argue for the purity of the Te Papa concept; and that I opposed the whole idea of a programme of temporary shows when the real ‘new show’ in that first year would be 10,000m$^2$ of exhibitory.

I still believe I was right in respect of this last. For example, the Board (and Cheryll) had to have the … blockbuster at opening—it was a social, not museological nor audience, imperative. For A Private View, we brought in great works from an American banker beautifully hung in a garden-like setting—it got 50,000 visitors … Had we delayed 12 months it would have attracted 100k. This was a strategy I employed with some success in Berlin where all temporary and art exhibitions came a year after opening, part of the marketing that had the museum as the place where new happenings enticed return visitation. As a result we never suffered the honeymoon period decline—just kept growing our visitation year on year.

But that is just part of the context in which Virgin arrived, badly planned, not well thought through, standing outside the developing Te Papa brand, and (you draw attention to this) not part of the normal processes of integration into the very culture of the place. To pursue that for a moment. At the time the British show was opening there were other exhibitions throughout the building that had been through a long process of analysis of their ability to serve a museum that was about perceptions of identity, and that had gone through rigorous development processes. Perhaps I know the Māori exhibitions best, for I had a delivery accord with Cliff Whiting [Kaihautū of Te Papa] and acted as secretary to Ngā Kaiwawao. Thereby and therein many things were sorted well before design began …

The British Contemporary show was never accorded this process. I was told it was coming: find the budget; find the workforce … Whatever, it arose and was taken up in a decision that stood outside any established process. Perhaps it was seen to be an answer to the ‘national art gallery’ furore. But it was patched into an integrated opening year offer of a different character, it was something of a misfit, and in a found space that did little to assuage the violence of language that seemed to be part of Te Papa pre-opening. No wonder then that, with no assimilation period and such mixed motives, along with Cheryll's propensity to find/create enemies and not cultivate supporters, the whole concept of forum crashed so spectacularly.

Once again exempling Jewish Museum Berlin—despite the shortness of time, we had established a full programme of paralleling events plus a detailed marketing strategy that had tested and had ready-made responses to those issues and crises we could think of. The British show had none of this. The material for such a review was there in what had been experienced in Australia but we learnt nothing from it and
But the biggest disappointment for me with the British show was that Te Papa so deviated from its brand and core values. It came at opening; if it had come later, say after 12 months, as part of a well-thought through programme, things might have been different. Say strategies in place to address the religious communities’ objections; even omitting the really contentious stuff; or declined the show with thanks.

Has the British Show shaped Te Papa, the question you ask? Alternatively has Te Papa returned to purpose? The initiating 4th Labour government wanted a ‘Pacific Cultural Centre’ as identity statement; the minister in charge [of Internal Affairs and the Arts] Peter Tapsell, said ‘not like the current museum and gallery’. He described them as dull and they were. The national art gallery had powerful supporters—like the Board member who would say to me and his supporters ‘All I need to know is where the door to the National Art Gallery is’. But it is true that the Te Papa concept killed the old Gallery. May it rest in peace for it rarely worked, even with the like of Luit [Bieringa] at its head. Jammed upstairs in a twilight zone it had the occasional exhibition that mattered but for the most was a quiet tomb. I am very prepared to argue that one. I have said it often; had Te Papa been a continuation of the old gallery and museum it would have been a national embarrassment.

Rather we have in Te Papa a national statement that is at its best when it takes the multiple means we have at our disposal to ask questions, not make definitive statements, about us and our nation, in all our diversity (something that really taxed the minds of the incredible group of people that was Ngā Kaiwawao) and as a place where sovereignty could be discussed and disputed … Of course, I am not saying that Te Papa should not host interesting shows from out of the world scene. Its clout as a national institution gives it access to such, and one of these might have been the British show or its likes. Or TV/film themed shows, science and issue shows. Or how about identity through the eyes of the likes of Yinka Shonibare whom I first saw in the British show? But what I am saying is that the Te Papa brand offers best opportunity for our artists, academics and activists to explore, discuss, dispute, the nature of our society now and into the future. That would make of the place a real forum …

Kind regards,
Ken

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I am very grateful to Ian Wedde and the late Sue Superville, who were both pivotal figures at Te Papa at the time of the Virgin in a Condom controversy, for answering numerous questions. My sincere thanks also go to Tania Kovats, Bishop Peter Cullinane, and Ken Gorbey for giving me permission to publish our correspondence.

MARK STOCKER is a semi-retired art historian who taught at the universities of Canterbury and Otago for many years before being Curator Historical International Art at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa from 2014 to 2019. He edited Te Papa’s refereed journal Tuhinga between 2018 and 2021, and has over 250 publications to his credit. His most recent book, When Britain Went Decimal: The Coinage of 1971, was published by Spink and the Royal Mint in 2021. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.
NOTES

1. Kovats's other exhibit, *Fatima* (1992), a cast of the Virgin Mary encased in a block of transparent polyurethane, was "ingenious and reverential" according to Tony Mackle, the then Te Papa Collections Manager Prints and Drawings. He believed that Te Papa "neither made anything of that nor that the Virgin was a major part of [Kovats's] oeuvre." Tony Mackle, email to Mark Stocker, 2 March 2021.


3. A *Private View: Treasures of Impressionism and Beyond* was held at Te Papa from 10 April to 7 June 1998. It was sourced from the collection of Joe Allbruton (1924–2012), Chairman of Riggs Bank from 1981 to 2001. Allbruton was a personal friend of Sir Wallace (Bill) Rowling, Sir Ron Trotter’s predecessor as Chair of the Te Papa Board (information: Ken Gorbey).


6. *Pictura Britannica* had been hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia between 22 August and 30 November 1997.

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