

Toi i te Ara

Art in the Street

*Indigenous Street Art, Te Reo Activism
& Kaupapa Maori Pedagogy*

Research foundation for street-based activism connected to te reo Maori, Maori data sovereignty, and art pedagogy.
A companion document to Te Pa Tuwatawata.

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Origins of the Scene

The modern graffiti and street art scene in Aotearoa has deep roots in Auckland and Wellington, catalysed by two key media moments: the American graffiti documentary *Style Wars* airing on NZ television in 1984, and the book *Subway Art* by Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper. These inspired young people — particularly Māori and Pasifika youth — to take up spray cans. A crucial early influence was the Polynesian diaspora circuit: Samoan and Tongan youth travelling to California brought back LA gang-style tagging that evolved into a distinctively Auckland street form called 'straits.'

[Te Ara — Public and Street Art](#)

TMD — The Most Dedicated

The most influential crew in Aotearoa's history. Founded in 1997 by Phat1 (Charles Williams) and Adict from an Auckland Council-funded project where young taggers were mentored to paint two large-scale walls along the West Auckland rail corridor. TMD grew to over 35 members across Aotearoa, Australia, and Germany. Crucially, many founders are Māori and Pasifika.

Member	Iwi / Heritage	Practice
ADICT	Ngāpuhi	Core founder
EXIST	Tainui	Core member
HASER (Kairau Bradley)	Ngāpuhi	Large-scale murals
LADY DIVA (Janine Williams)	Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Whātua ki Kaipara	Murals, Bird Gang series
PHAT1 (Charles Williams)	Ngāpuhi, Ngāi Tuhoe, Ngāti Kahungunu	Co-founder, Bird Gang
RAMS	Ngāpuhi	Core member

[Watch This Space — TMD at the Dowse \(2021\)](#)

Key Artists

Askew One (Elliot O'Donnell)

NZ's best-known street artist. Co-defined the term 'post-graffiti Pacific.' His large-scale murals use stylised slogans citing Colin McCahon as an influence: 'A lot of our key artists have always centered around graphic use of type and words. It's part of the New Zealand painting tradition.'

Elliot Francis Stewart (DEUS)

Tāmaki Makaurau-based TMD member. Bold colour palettes depicting intimate, serene scenes enriched with detail. Works at the Coastal Arts Trail (Whanganui), Flare Street Art Festival (Ōtautahi), and across Aotearoa.

Tessa Harris

Played a fundamental role establishing Māori street art and public mahi toi in Tāmaki Makaurau, including work at Te Komititanga and Silo Park.

Caine Taihia (Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei)

Created 11 graffiti designs for construction hoardings in central Auckland under the title Ka Tū Te Mana o Waihorotiu — connecting the city to the invisible Waihorotiu Stream and its mana and mauri.

Poi Ngawati (Waikato Tainui)

Created Te Huinga Tai – The gathering of tides on Auckland's Airedale Street steps — a modern Māori stylised pūhoro design in violet purple and teal.

The Visual Language of Aotearoa Street Art

Motif	Meaning / Use
Koru	Unfurling fern frond; new life, growth, renewal; central to Tino Rangatiratanga flag
Pūhoro	Traditional curvilinear patterns; speed/status; now in contemporary mural form
Whakairo elements	Stylised carvings incorporated into mural backgrounds
Tekoteko angles	Figures posed with head angle of carved tekoteko; centering Māori assertiveness
Native birds	Kōtuku, tūī, kererū used as narrative vehicles and identity symbols
Black, red, white	The dominant activist palette — from the Tino Rangatiratanga flag
Bold graphic type	Via Colin McCahon's word-based painting tradition; text as image

SECTION 2 — TE REO MAORI ACTIVIST VISUAL CULTURE

The Tino Rangatiratanga Flag

Designed in 1989 by Hiraina Marsden, Jan Dobson Smith, and Linda Munn for a Te Kawariki competition. Launched 1990, recognised by Cabinet as the preferred Māori flag in 2009.

Colour	Symbolism
Black (Mangu)	Te pō — realm of night and potential
Red (Whero)	Te whaiao — the world of light entering
White koru (Mā)	Te ao mārama — full light; unfurling fern frond, signifying new life

Protest Visual Genres

From the 2024 Hikoī mō Te Tiriti (42,000+ marchers — the largest march to Parliament in NZ history), placard culture combined serious te reo Māori phrases with witty bilingual wordplay and large, bold, legible typography. Described as 'an art form' with 'the ability to communicate huge kōrero with immediacy, compel curiosity, and ask questions.'

[Scoop — Signs of the Hikoī \(2024\)](#)

Tame Iti — 'I Will Not Speak Maori'

2022 nationwide billboard and silk-screen poster campaign co-created with Delaney Davidson. The phrase re-weaponises what Iti was forced to write as a child (punishment for speaking te reo at school). Visual treatment: bold typographic propaganda posters echoing Soviet-era monumental graphic design — deliberately infiltrating institutional visual language. Deployed in galleries, projected onto Te Papa walls, installed on Wellington waterfront, and placed as posters across Aotearoa.

"Making the message into monumental and corporate language, echoing Tāme's work with Billy Apple. Playing with the ideas of tapu and noa, the clichés of white and black and the sanctified idea of law."

— Delaney Davidson. delaneydavidson.com

Hohepa Thompson — Everyday Language Activism

Ōtaki artist who placed te reo stickers ('Rāpihi' on bins) around the community as everyday language activism. When a neighbouring shop called te reo 'graffiti,' Thompson publicly called out the racism and created an exhibition. A direct model for sticker activism for te reo revitalisation.

Wahine Maori Activist Art — Key Visual Elements

Element	Meaning
Black, red, white	Te pō / te whaiao / te ao mārama — activist palette across all contexts
Pou	Structural images of authority and presence
Tekoteko head angles	In figurative work; Māori assertiveness
Raukura	White feathers on red and black backgrounds — Taranaki rohe activism
Whakairo stylisation	In contemporary canvas and mural work

Element	Meaning
Shadows / knowing eyes	Depth of knowledge held within
Flags and knots on pou	Subtle, embedded activism in details

SECTION 3 — INDIGENOUS STREET-BASED ACTIVISM GLOBALLY

Richard Bell (Australia — Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman)

Self-described 'activist masquerading as an artist.' Co-founded proppaNOW (2003). Visual conventions: blunt messages in bright colours; archival photographs of activists embedded within Aboriginal-looking motifs, 'hiding a strong statement in plain view'; appropriation of cultural forms; collaboration with Emory Douglas (Black Panther Party). Key phrase: 'You don't need permission to make it happen.'

Zapatista Mural Art (EZLN, Mexico)

The EZLN developed one of the most coherent traditions of community mural activism globally. Community-painted murals on rough wood and concrete in autonomous communities (caracoles). Key principles: anonymity (the community is the author, not the individual); text integrated into image; flat bold colour; collective production; feminist imagery. The aesthetic: 'unglamorous, persistent, slow, steady' — art as community affirmation, not spectacle.

Symbol / Device	Meaning
Caracol (snail)	Slow, steady progress toward autonomy
Masked figure (ski mask)	Anonymity as equaliser — anyone could be the Zapatista
Corn / milpa	Subsistence, Indigenous agriculture, community life
Short declarative text	'Here the people command and the government obeys'
Flat bold colour	Strong black outlines, limited palette, high contrast

Idle No More (Canada / Indigenous North America, 2012–)

Visual conventions: sacred circle / medicine wheel (four directions, four colours); water as central motif ('water is life' / Nibi imagery); eagle feathers and traditional regalia. Christi Belcourt (Anishinaabe) and Isaac Murdoch produced banner art for mass demonstrations, sending them to water protection actions across North America for free.

Standing Rock / NoDAPL (2016-2017)

'Water is Life' / Mni Wiconi as the key slogan. 'Protector' framing — shared with Ihumātao and Mauna Kea. Photography-based protest art amplified globally via social media. Bold colour — black, earth tones, blues; high contrast for sticker and poster reproduction. Te Papa notes that the Ihumātao poster situates itself within this international 'protector' discourse.

Paulo Freire — Conscientizacao and Street Art

Freire commissioned artists to create 'coded pictures' — visual materials as pedagogical prompts to trigger literacy and political consciousness simultaneously. He argued any artwork could be used as a 'problem-posing' tool. Applied to street art: murals and stickers function as 'public textbooks.' The key principle: art as street curriculum making injustice visibly present, prompting spontaneous dialogue without requiring institutions or teachers.

"To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation."

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)

Key Freirean design principle: Don't 'deposit' a message into a community without consultation (the 'banking pedagogy' trap). Design for questions, not just declarations. Te Kotahitanga (2001–2013), the highly successful kaupapa Māori educational programme, was explicitly grounded in Freire's philosophy.

Diego Rivera — Muralism as Public Pedagogy

Rivera's mural programme at the Secretaria de Educacion Publica (SEP), Mexico City, 1920s: 'The people as heroes' — Rivera initiated 'the true novelty of Mexican painting by making the people the heroes of mural painting.' Art should be public and political — art confined to galleries serves only the elite. Revolutionary iconography: armed workers, raised fists, historical liberation figures. Functional setting — murals in education ministries, hospitals, universities: art embedded where people live and learn.

Kaupapa Maori Art Education

Whatu pedagogy (Unitec, Toi Ako): Whatu (finger weft-twining) theorised as Māori arts pedagogy — not just practice or product but a set of ideas and theory. 'I do not teach Kahukura to whatu. She watches, she talks, she sings. The pedagogy at work here is not teaching. It is education.' — Hinekura Smith. Ako and tuakana-teina: reciprocal learning relationships — teacher is also learner; shift from individual meritocracy to collective benefit.

Three criteria for Māori pedagogy (Penetito):

Criterion	Application to Street Art
A sense of belonging to place	Art rooted in the whenua where it is made
Relationship of cohabitators with environment	Art about the relationships between people and land
Embodying ways of knowing and being	Art that embodies matauranga — a conscious union of mind and spirit

SECTION 5 — STICKER ACTIVISM: TECHNICAL CONVENTIONS

Standard Sizes

Format	Dimensions	Notes
A6 / postcard	105 × 148 mm	Most common small sticker; pocket-sized hand distribution
A5	148 × 210 mm	Lamp posts, utility boxes
Circle (small)	75–100 mm diam.	Badge size; laptop, bag, helmet
Circle (medium)	100–150 mm diam.	Good street sticker; visible without being oversized
Rectangle die-cut	90 × 55 mm	Bulk printing; low cost; high density distribution
Rectangle wide	200 × 100 mm	Text + image; readable at 2–3 metres
Vinyl die-cut	Custom shape	Most durable; contour-cut following image shape
Wheatpaste small	A4 / A3	Cheapest mass format; 3–10 cents/sheet
Wheatpaste medium	A2 (420×594mm)	Standard political poster size
Wheatpaste large	A1 (24×36")	High-visibility wall-scale paste-up

Design Principles for Street Stickers and Wheatpaste

Principle	Detail
Legibility	1-inch letters readable from 10 feet. Bold, thick letterforms essential. Minimum 2-3 inches text height for outdoor use.
Contrast	Black on white, white on black, white on red, black on yellow. Blues and blacks most UV-resistant outdoors.
Simplicity	'Go big, go simple.' Avoid gradients, halftones, complex shading — these reduce contrast and fail at small sizes.
Wheatpaste	Black and white primary palette. Huge headline + strong central image + URL/QR. Apply paste underneath and over the top.
Weather resistance	Vinyl standard for weather resistance. UV-blocking lamination extends outdoor lifespan. Round corners reduce edge-peeling.
Colour strategy	Max 3 colours. Tino Rangatiratanga palette (red/black/white) reads immediately as Maori activist context.

Production Cost Reference

Format	Cost Guidance
A4/A3 B&W; photocopy	3–10 cents/sheet — cheapest mass format
Vinyl die-cut stickers	~\$0.30–\$0.80 each in bulk for simple designs
Wheatpaste flour-water paste	Essentially free — flour + water + bucket

SECTION 6 — KEY TE REO PHRASES FOR MAORI STREET PROTEST

All phrases below are drawn from documented real protest contexts — land marches, hikoi, occupations, language petitions, and data sovereignty activism.

Land Rights & Sovereignty

Phrase	Meaning	Context
Toitū te whenua	The land endures forever	Ihumatao, Bastion Point, Waikato contexts
Ko au te whenua, ko te whenua, ko au	I am the land, and the land is me	Bastion Point occupation
Mana whenua	Authority over the land; people who hold mana in a place	Virtually all Maori protest materials
Fletcher, whakahokia mai te whenua	Fletcher, return the land	Ihumatao banners

Treaty & Constitutional Rights

Phrase	Meaning	Context
Toitū Te Tiriti	The Treaty endures / Honour the Treaty	Central slogan of 2024 Hikoi mo Te Tiriti
Tino Rangatiratanga	Full chieftainship / absolute self-determination	All protest contexts from 1840 to present
Mana Motuhake	Self-determination; separate authority; independent mana	Used interchangeably with Tino Rangatiratanga
Ka whawhai tonu matou	We will fight on forever (ake, ake, ake)	Waikato war cry; affirms ongoing resistance
Kotahitanga	Unity; collective solidarity	Core value of 2024 hikoi; banners, posters, chants

Language Rights

Phrase	Meaning	Context
Ko te reo te mauri o te mana Maori	The language is the life force of the mana of Maori	Sir James Henare, 1988
Ka ngaro te reo, ka ngaro tatou	If the language is lost, we will be lost (like the moa)	Language petitions, Waitangi Tribunal
Akona te reo Maori	Learn the Maori language	Protest posters from the 1970s
He waka eke noa	We are all in this together	Wellington Women's March 2017; 2024 hikoi

Data Sovereignty

Phrase	Meaning	Source
Raraunga hei taonga	Data as treasure	Te Mana Raraunga core framing
Rangatiratanga o te raraunga	Sovereignty over data	Direct parallel to Tino Rangatiratanga
Ko a matou raraunga, ko matou ano	Our data, ourselves	Data as extension of identity and mana
Kaitiakitanga raraunga	Data guardianship / stewardship	Responsible Maori data governance
Tino rangatiratanga i roto i te ao hangarau	Self-determination in the digital world	For Maori technology sovereignty activism

SECTION 7 — CROSS-CUTTING DESIGN OBSERVATIONS

What Works for Street Stickers in This Context

Principle	Detail
Black + red + white only	The Tino Rangatiratanga palette. Immediately legible as Maori activist context. UV-resistant black base; red as urgency/fire; white as clarity.
Macron-correct te reo	The macron itself is an activist statement. Its presence asserts linguistic sovereignty.
Single central image + phrase	Koru, pou, waka, taiaha, taniwha, hand-over-whenua — clean silhouette forms at sticker scale.
Bold sans-serif or stencil type	No thin fonts. No decorative scripts. Type that reproduces cleanly at 20mm height.
Bilingual design	Te reo large / English small, or te reo only for audience-aware distribution.
Round corners	On all sticker formats — reduces edge peeling and extends outdoor life.
Vinyl substrate	For any sticker intended for long-term outdoor placement.

Motifs with Strong Activist Lineage

Motif	Activist Associations
Koru	New life; language revitalisation; Tino Rangatiratanga flag centre
Taiaha / patu	Self-determination; protection of land; warrior tradition of resistance
Waka	Collective action; 'He waka eke noa'; journey to Parliament (hikoi)
Taniwha	Guardianship of waterways; spiritual authority over land and water
Maunga silhouette	'Ko [maunga] ko au'; mountain as ancestor; land sovereignty
Cupped hands over whenua	Land protection (Ihumatao poster); kaitiakitanga
Tino Rangatiratanga koru	Sovereignty; independence; universal Maori protest signifier
Binary / data motif (0s+1s as koru)	Maori data sovereignty; 'raraunga hei taonga'
Eye within whakairo	'Seeing the world through te ao Maori'; resistance through knowledge

Drawing from Freire and Rivera: the image should pose a problem, not just make a statement. Stickers that create dissonance between official reality and lived reality are more politically active than stickers that celebrate. The best Māori activist art — from Tāme Iti's billboard reversals to Hohepa Thompson's 'Rāpihi' bin stickers — creates a cognitive interruption in the viewer's everyday reading of public space. Art that asks 'Why?' is more powerful than art that says 'Look at this.'

Sources

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