

**SANTIAGO SIERRA**  
***DESTROYED WORD***



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Produced by:

Baltic Arts Center, Visby, Sweden

CAC Brétigny, France

Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, Australia

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James McCarthy and Bruce E. Phillips, Te Tuhi

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te tuhi

# FOREWORD

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PRESENT AND FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS OF TE TUHI

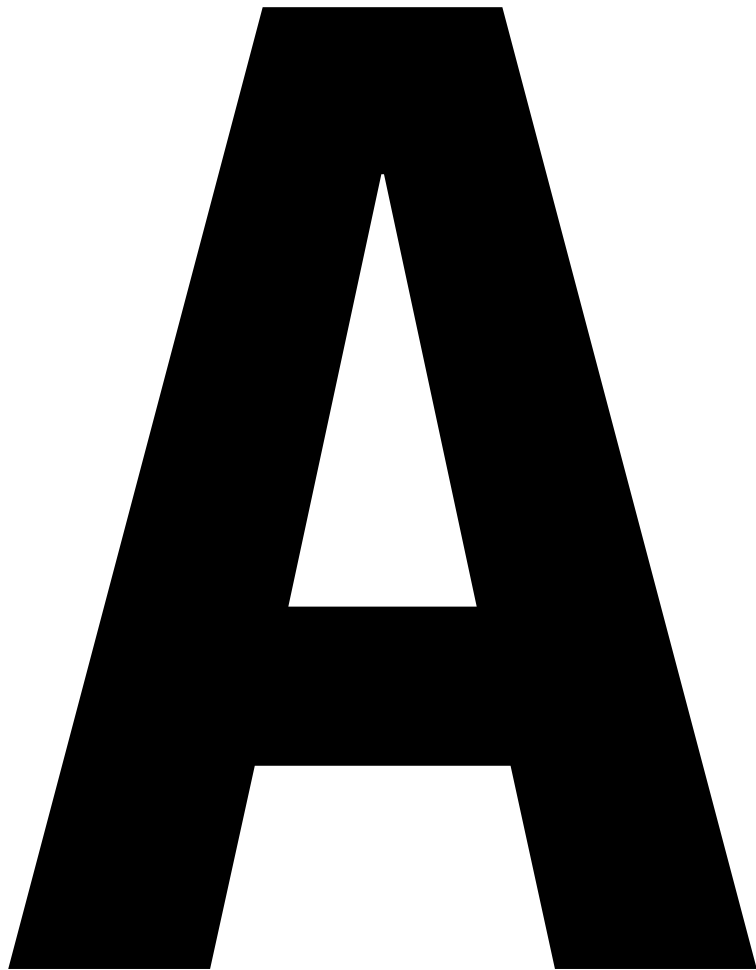
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*Destroyed Word* by internationally renowned Spanish artist Santiago Sierra was exhibited at Te Tuhi in 2013 and is the artist's first major work to be presented in New Zealand. Throughout his practice, Sierra has investigated systems of social, political and economic power that assert their dominance through exploitation and marginalisation. He is most famously known for his works of the late 1990s where he paid underprivileged people to undertake mundane or humiliating tasks. Sierra based these works on the logic of business practices that employ the poor for menial labour with little remuneration. In doing so, he re-enacted the logic of such exploitative economies within an art gallery context — a powerful but intentionally problematic artistic gesture that resisted the simplistic morals of activism and implicated the subject, audience and the artist himself.

Sierra's *Destroyed Word* continues this line of enquiry and is part of a body of work that includes works such as *Submission* (2006–07), *NO Global Tour* (2009–12) and *Burned Word* (2012) that feature singular giant words constructed or positioned in specific locations that resonate with the harsh economic realities of capitalism. *Destroyed Word* is the largest and most ambitious work from this series. The work consists of a ten-channel video installation that features the spectacular destruction of the word KAPITALISM. Te Tuhi was one of nine commissioning partners around the world that contributed to *Destroyed Word* by erecting and destroying a giant three-metre-high letter. Each letter was constructed out of a primary product or material significant to the economy of each location. The letters were destroyed in Australia, Austria, France, Germany, Iceland, India, Papua New Guinea, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden. Each letter stands in reference to specific local contexts of economic and political power relations. Each letter has its own significance and story of its making — this publication focuses specifically on the creation of the letter A that Te Tuhi produced and its socio-political significance. As a whole, Sierra's outsourced KAPITALISM draws on the far-reaching implications of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

Te Tuhi was the second in the world and the only New Zealand venue for *Destroyed Word* on its international tour. Te Tuhi would like to acknowledge the technical expertise of Regan Gentry, camera work of Ian Powell, audio editing by Guy Nicoll, and all of the shooters, who shall remain anonymous.



BRUCE E. PHILLIPS

The .45 Magnum is a truly handsome object. A meticulously engineered weight of stainless steel ergonomically fitted to the hand, it commands a seductive and sublime beauty. When you cock the barrel and squeeze the trigger it feels as if you have magically summoned a bolt of lightning from your finger tip. This extension of the body allows a whole new awareness of an individual's potential influence on the surrounding environment. My opportunity to clasp and fire such a weapon came about through a small-scale test shoot for the letter **A** that features as one of the ten large sculptural letters in Santiago Sierra's *Destroyed Word* (2010–2012).

The experience of rattling off a few rounds and destroying targets was exhilarating — a surprising response for me as an ardent pacifist. Perhaps this is how *real* power corrupts. For what is real power but an ability to have easy-won advantage over one's physical reality or over other life forms? Shooting the .45 was dominance through technological leverage. However, I wonder what such dominance would feel like through the mechanisms of a government or a multinational corporation where power is made manifest through law and capital to control vast populations or to profit from their labour.

Thankfully, as a peaceful and politically stable nation, there is no valid reason to fire a handgun in New Zealand other than for recreation and it is relatively difficult to get hold of them. Police very rarely carry guns — usually only under immediate threat of an armed suspect. When it came time to film the destruction of the **A**, the guns being loaded had been purchased for sport use only, some of them specialised pieces made especially for competition shooting. The gunmen and women requested that their identities remain anonymous and that the location not be disclosed. Suffice to say that it involved a generous group of individuals who were keen to be part of an unusual art experience.

When Te Tuhi was invited to be one of nine partnering art organisations in the production of *Destroyed Word*, there were many options available in terms of material and method of destruction. The instructions were to construct a 3.6-metre-high letter, in the Arial Narrow Bold typeface, out of a material of significance to the location in which it was made, and to film its destruction. I believe Te Tuhi's invitation came early in the development of the work. The Te Tuhi team and I had seen images of an **M** made of concrete and a **T** made of foam, and had heard of plans to make an **I** of human faeces.

Aotearoa New Zealand's history is inextricably bound to global trade. As a former colony of the British Empire, New Zealand's key role was to produce primary products contributing to the Empire's power and wealth. Since the 1970s, New Zealand has had an even wider reach as an exporter of various materials, products and cultural experiences within global capitalism. Given this history, there were a few options that came to mind: lamb, wool, seafood, radiata pine, coal, oil, gas, aluminium, kiwifruit, the All Blacks,



Test shoot with .45 Magnum revolver pistol, May 2012.  
Photo by James McCarthy.

mass-produced Māori trinkets and other tourist products. And what of the method of destruction: dissolve, collapse, steamroll? Adding to our decisions, we knew that each letter would be combined to exhibit a single word but we were not sure what that word would be.

Sierra's assistant Reuben Moss had let slip that it might be the Spanish transliteration CAPITALISMO, and knowing Sierra's back catalogue of transactions and interventions that reveal global capitalism's predilection for exploitation, this word was a likely choice. Yet at the time the word was not confirmed. Only months earlier, Sierra and his team had burned the FUTURE in Spain. They had toured a giant NO around the world. And, a few years back, they had dug a monumental SUMISION into the earth of Mexico. Therefore, the *Destroyed Word* could have been one of many words relevant to Sierra's preoccupations.

After much research, milk became the material of choice. Milk is the current economic lifeblood of New Zealand. However, the wealth produced by milk is not without consequences. Milk has a price: the people and land of New Zealand have paid for it and will continue to pay for it — at a price more than double that of other countries. In 2014, milk in New Zealand cost between 2–2.65 New Zealand dollars per litre, but in the United Kingdom it cost as little as 44 pence (0.86 NZD).<sup>1</sup>

The way this imbalance came to be is part of a larger story of corporate monopoly in this small nation and growing disparity between rich and poor. It seems that as the rich get richer the poor take to stealing milk.<sup>2</sup> Just a month before we filmed the destruction of the A, Police caught thieves who had stolen more than 600 two-litre bottles of milk. The Police believed the thieves were stealing to order.<sup>3</sup>

The dairy industry also has grave environmental costs. According to scientists, most pressing is the pollution of natural waterways due to the lack of protective measures to stop excess nitrogen, effluent and erosion from dairy farming leaching into streams and rivers.<sup>4</sup> Some of New Zealand's rivers are now among the most polluted in the world, far beyond the safe levels for human contact.<sup>5</sup> Earning the term 'dirty dairying', this cost to society and the environment is "approximately equal to the export revenue and gross domestic product" — in essence making the dairy industry a false economy if we consider the long-term betterment of the nation.<sup>6</sup>

Dairy farming can also be considered part of the colonial project of land confiscation and primary production for the British Empire. Just over 200 years ago, 80 per cent of New Zealand was covered in native forest. Only about 25 per cent of this native forest survives to the present day.<sup>7</sup> Much of the forest was cleared in the nineteenth century after land was sold by Māori to European settlers or illegitimately confiscated by the Crown. Prior to the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, timber was already the country's first primary industry. Sheep farming producing wool and lamb became the next major industry, playing an important role from the 1850s through into the 1980s. While dairy production started around the same time as wool and lamb sheep farming, dairy was not initially a viable export product, though this changed as refrigeration was invented and the industry grew.<sup>8</sup>

By the turn of the nineteenth century, most dairy factories were cooperatives owned and operated by the farmers themselves, and by the 1920s there were 600 in operation across the country. In the late twentieth century these cooperatives merged, becoming increasingly centralised until, by the 1990s, there were just four main cooperatives operating — two of which merged in 2001 to become the Fonterra Cooperative Group, now the "world's largest global milk processor and dairy exporter".<sup>9</sup> The dairy industry is currently New Zealand's biggest export earner.<sup>10</sup>

This historic contextualisation was just a small amount of the research that the Te Tuhi team and I did in order to settle on milk as the most appropriate material.

Considered from these historical and contemporary perspectives, milk is an interesting target for such a project because of both its colonial and environmental complicity and the industry's business practices that have led to financial success. In the *Destroyed Word* project, milk therefore becomes an appropriately complex symbol of capitalism.

This made deciding on the method of destruction difficult; it could to some extent be considered an unfair attack on the dairy industry. After further conversations with Sierra's assistant Reuben Moss (an expat New Zealander), we clarified the artist's intentions: not to demonise business or the labour of the people that work in certain industries, but to voice frustration with a global system that benefits the few over the many. Moss described the motivation for destroying primary products as comparable to the historical gesture of using bread in protests as a symbol of class inequality, as occurred in Britain (1795), Egypt (1977), Tunisia (1983–84) and in protests associated with the Arab Spring (2011).<sup>11</sup>

With this explained, we then sought to find a method of destruction that would express this frustration. Through friends of ██████'s<sup>12</sup> we had two leads: ██████, who had access to and a licence for detonating explosives; or ██████, who had access to firearms and willing participants. The first option, to use explosives, did not pan out so the firing squad it was to be. However, this turned out to be an even more appropriate option.

██████ mentioned that the shooters often use plastic soft-drink bottles filled with coloured liquid for target practice. The bottles can handle multiple impacts and further, once shot, the bottles have a visceral effect: the liquid pours out as if it is blood spouting from a body. After a few tests and experiments, plasterboard was used for the underlying structure, both for its strong but fallible support and the added visual effect of emitting clouds of white dust when punctured by bullets. With these technical aspects resolved we assembled a film crew and technical team. We were ready to go.

Take note: constructing then destroying a 3.6-metre-tall letter A requires at least 200 litres of milk, four sheets of GIB board, many tubes of glue that will stick on damp surfaces, a film crew, four shooters and 500 rounds of ammunition. Fortunately, 200 litres of milk is well under the legally permitted threshold for dumping close to a natural water source.

10

11



Production images of the letter A in *Destroyed Word*, filmed at an undisclosed location in New Zealand. Photos by Bruce E. Phillips.

We only had one take; one opportunity when everyone was available; and, due to a small budget and the high cost of dairy, only one chance to purchase the milk. It didn't all go to plan. The accuracy of the shooters was flawless and they came close to levelling the A with 9-millimetre bullets too soon, by completely cutting right through one of its legs. Due to the structure's integrity, however, it remained standing — albeit a little lopsided. To finish the job shotguns had to be brought out. Happily, most people who viewed the artwork thought this sequence was deliberately choreographed to build suspense.<sup>13</sup>

Over the two years it took to produce the entire *Destroyed Word* project there were many other accidental mishaps. To some degree these quirks make the work relatable — an element that is enhanced by the comedic warmth of the people who feature in many of the other letter destructions. There are some beautiful, priceless moments. In Papua New Guinea a young boy wandered into the frame, playing a hoop-rolling game with an old tyre and a pair of sticks, oblivious to the men slugging away with axes at the merciless solid wooden I. Another is the anticlimactic thud of the other I being toppled in India; a man looks indifferently at the camera. And who can't sympathise with the lack of skill and laid-back work ethic that the sledge-hammer-wielding youths seem to have in destroying the A in France?

These idiosyncrasies are part of each letter's story and also reflect Sierra's strategy of internationally dispersing his artistic labour. Not unlike a multinational company in our age of post-Fordism, Sierra outsourced nine of the ten letters in *Destroyed Word*,<sup>14</sup> each created by others with a relative degree of freedom gifted to the partnering organisations. However, while global capitalism relies employing labour forces in countries where it is considerably cheaper, Sierra's outsourcing was a more precarious and collaborative venture. Sierra reports:

It was difficult to find all the partners as the institutions were producing a tenth of a work knowing they would need to share the final piece with nine other institutions. There's also the question of whether a tenth of a work is a work. Some institutions got it straight away and saw that the letters became their own works when they were well tailored to the context. Sometimes when those specifics were impractical and the idea had to change, the interest would wane and things slowed down. In the end it all came together.<sup>15</sup>

As Sierra explains, first there was the trouble of finding organisations that would be sympathetic to the concept and have the means to produce something on this scale. Some institutions want to have exclusive rights to a newly commissioned work, automatically limiting the pool of suitable partners. Perhaps this explains why many of the partnering organisations are medium-size project spaces, commercial galleries or art festivals.

12

Such organisations, by virtue of being small and nimble, are opportunistically innovative or plural in function and can often be more willing to take on risks than large museums. The potential downside of this is limited resources, raising questions around quality control and the possibility of failure. Yet at the same time agreeing to the risk also allowed a great amount of freedom. Each partner assumed some ownership and therefore become more creatively invested.

In terms of the cultural capital to be gained, there is little surprise that Te Tuhi would desire to work with such a seminal figure as Santiago Sierra. But given his (not necessarily accurate) reputation for being uncompromising, there was also some creative risk in embarking on this project. In New Zealand, this perception was promulgated by a commission for One Day Sculpture, curated by Bristol-based Claire Doherty, that turned sour. In protest to this failed commission, Sierra staged the performance work *Person Showing his Penis* (2009) in Wellington — an act that some considered an “unsanctioned guerrilla intervention” according to *Frieze* magazine.<sup>16</sup> For a small organisation like Te Tuhi with a meagre budget and limited human resources, a commission becoming compromised could be a significant problem.<sup>17</sup>

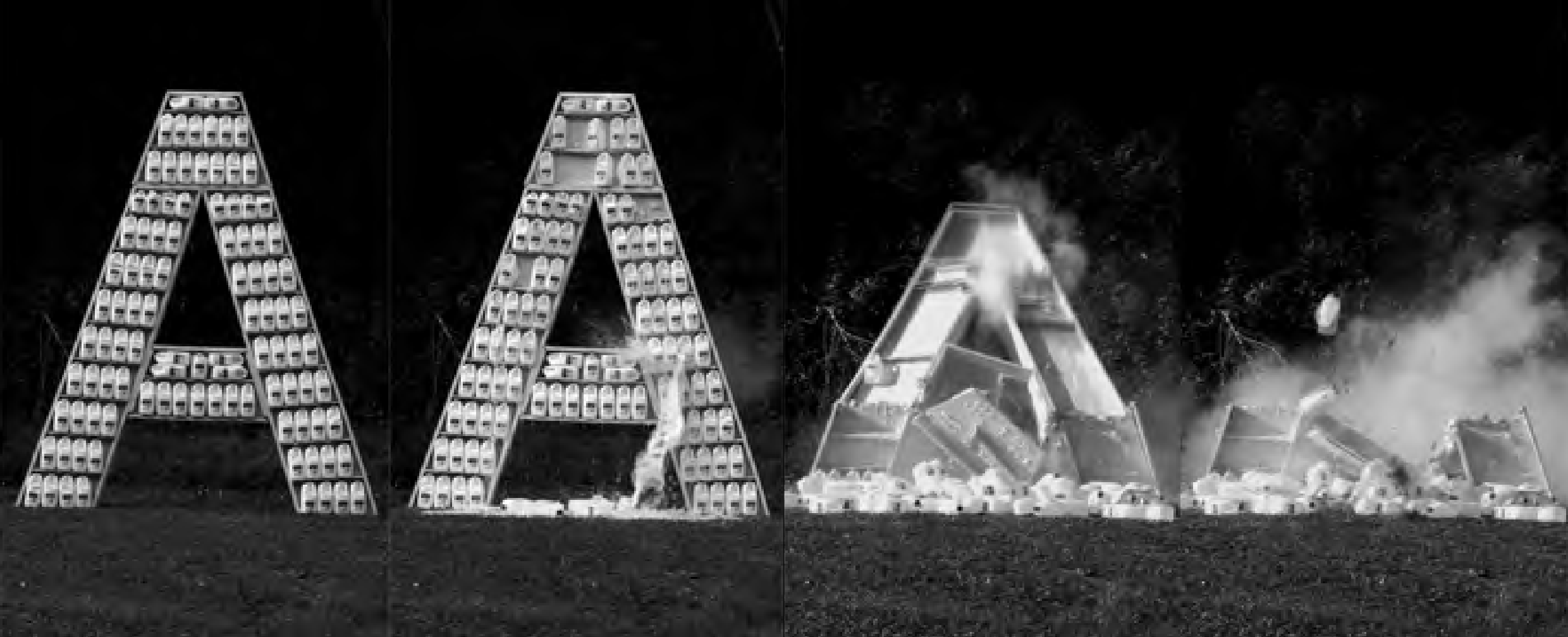
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While Te Tuhi's A can be easily read as a blatant anti-dairy metaphor, this was not the intention. In the finished work — the word KAPITALISM being chopped, sawn, hammered, cut, eaten, set on fire and pushed over letter by letter — it is hard to overlook the obvious significance of a giant effigy of milk being mowed down by bullets. But though *Destroyed Word* may appear as a blind critique of capitalism, its deeper meaning is more complicated.

Sierra has demonstrated incessantly throughout his practice that we are all complicit and part of hegemonic systems. He benefits from participating in the art market while making work that criticises similar systems of exploitation, in a critical mirror of the market. Likewise, while there may not be much 'trickle down' in the New Zealand economy, 'we' as a people are responsible for maintaining a nation state that allows iniquitous business practices to exist.

Furthermore, dairy farming is not necessarily a malevolent, capitalist-driven industry. After all, the dairy industry in New Zealand was born out of the socialist construct of workers' cooperatives, in which farmers share in the profit and the power to direct the company they are part of.<sup>18</sup> The dairy giant also claims to be improving environmental accountability by implementing a programme to bring farms up to required standards.<sup>19</sup> Aside from





Santiago Sierra, *Destroyed Word*, 2010–2012

(film stills showing the letter 'A', New Zealand, 2012).

HD video, 24:08 mins, 200 litres of milk, 500 rounds of ammunition, plasterboard.

Commissioned and produced by Te Tuhi.

Fonterra, alternative cooperative entities such as the Organic Dairy Hub Cooperative and other small companies do exist in New Zealand, encouraging sustainable methods of farming that go against the grain of intensification.

In this light, the specific resonance the New Zealand letter has due to the context of its making adds to the profound overall nuance of Sierra's *Destroyed Word*. The New Zealand A could be simultaneously understood as a hootin'-tootin'-shootin' celebration of collective wealth; as an emblematic act of subversion against growing inequality and environmental pollution; or as a statement referring to the country's bloody colonial past and the people who continue to profit off pilfered land. Equally, an aluminium L in Iceland has a different reading and significance to the concrete M in Sweden — both are locally produced, inert materials that have had positive impacts upon these countries but also negative social and environmental effects.<sup>20</sup>

The method of destruction and the labour employed for it also adds varying significance — for each location but also in comparison to each other, creating inter-complexities within the work as a whole. There is a striking contrast in the forms of labour displayed. The Papua New Guinea hardwood I, for example, was laboriously axed down by hand. In contrast, power tools were used in both Austria and Germany to cut down letters made of much softer MDF and foam. The I made of excrement in India was unsophisticatedly pushed over on a vacant piece of land, while a K made of brush-wood fencing in Australia was spectacularly burnt down, illuminating a crowd of hundreds.<sup>21</sup>

On a collective scale, *Destroyed Word* stands against a system where speculative, immaterial labour runs rampant over the hard graft of the working class; where the high cost of living is caused by monopolisation; and where corrupt individuals hide behind finance companies and banks which in many countries were bailed out with taxpayers' money during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Rather than demonising particular industries, the work also stands for a desire to end a cycle of exploitation that many at the bottom of the economic ladder are powerless within.

During an artist talk in Auckland in 2013, Sierra shared that he is currently focusing on making artworks that are useful to the public as icons empowering resistance against an era of monstrous capitalism and 'crisis' — a type of propaganda for the people — and that include bold symbols, at once universal but also pertaining to the complexities of specific places.<sup>22</sup>

*Destroyed Word* achieves this goal on many levels. The first thing that struck me was how compelling the sound of destruction is, like a multi-headed monster that is frightening but intensely intriguing. At Te Tuhi, visitors were able to experience the sounds one at a time, by standing directly underneath independent speakers linked to each channel of video, or they could appreciate the zoo-like cacophony by standing further back. The sound joined

16



Santiago Sierra, *Destroyed Word*, 2010–2012  
(installation view Te Tuhi, Auckland).

Ten-channel HD video installation, 24:08 mins.

Commissioned and produced by the artist together with: Baltic Arts Center, Visby, Sweden; CAC Brétigny, France; Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, Australia; INCUBATE Festival, Tilburg, Netherlands; KOW Berlin, Germany; Kunstverein Medienturm, Graz, Austria; Melbourne Arts Festival, Australia; Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland; Te Tuhi, Auckland, New Zealand. Courtesy of Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide. Supported by NGV.

Production Coordinators: Bruce E. Phillips & James McCarthy, Te Tuhi; Paul Greenaway, Greenaway Art Gallery & GAGProjects; Alexander Koch, KOW Berlin.

to the image is especially important as it helps to connect the audience to the labour performed in each scene — creating what critic Mark Amery called “the work’s visual musicality”. He writes:

There’s a beautiful accidental music to the way each of the actions in the work interrelate and yet are so different. There’s a nice tension between typographical order and anarchic destruction. Cinematically it’s all rather gripping: it’s hard to leave until you’ve seen each letter toppled, chopped, burnt or devoured.<sup>23</sup>

**This performative power was apparent at Te Tuhi’s opening where an attentive crowd, packed into the gallery, was transfixed by the 14-metre-long spectacle before them. When the word was destroyed, a roar of applause filled the room. Throughout the five months of the exhibition, visitors of all ages continued to respond to the destruction with applause.**

**This was the first time I had witnessed such an occurrence in an art gallery for a moving-image work. Why did people feel compelled to clap? What are they celebrating? And how is this artwork performing some significance for them? Perhaps the strong reaction is due to the power of the recorded action to achieve a single goal — the satisfaction of destroying capitalism. The audience can virtually attain the same pleasure by witnessing destruction as I had pulling the trigger of the .45 Magnum — maximum destruction with little effort and significant power through advanced agency. Santiago Sierra destroyed capitalism and the people of Auckland agreed through their applause.**

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# te tuhi

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