

UNDEREXPOSED

Max Bellamy and Emily Hlavac-Green

During June/July 2012 our Dunedin-based independent film crew travelled to Tonga to document a sustainable development project conceived by a team of New Zealand volunteers and academics. Their aims were to install solar systems into five schools to lessen their burden of large electricity bills (allowing resources to be redirected to other educational areas), make solar technologies visible to communities, and help Tongan partners upskill to allow independent installation of solar systems in future.

For a number of reasons that need to be discussed with sensitivity, the aims of both the development projects and documentary have only been partially met. While inherently disappointing, this doesn't devalue the personal lessons that have been learned through our experience.

There are both obstacles and freedoms in positioning creative skill sets in the often businesslike process of documentary filmmaking. Having political and commercial sensitivities reel in an artistic vision can be frustrating. Even without a client, boundaries seem to be ever-present. The objectivity and quiet manner you must keep to be an effective observational documentary camera operator allows an omni-vision and foresight that is difficult to maintain when concerned with daily logistics, meetings and delegating responsibility. Having this perspective highlighted inefficiencies in the development project for us.

Admirable last-minute student leadership and a unified effort by those on the ground in Tonga were crucial in propping up the project. The tyranny of distance was felt, as remote-control project management from New Zealand missed the mark with inconsistencies in communication and support. Superimposed value systems, even on the most basic level and with the very best intentions, were problematic. At times, cultural differences led to friction between the development team and Tongan partners, reinforcing the importance of understanding in more ways than on paper.

There is a complex disjunct between the haste with which we must build renewability and resilience into the fragile infrastructural fabrics that support our societies, on the one hand, and the importance of working methodically in this international context to understand and respect cultural values that are the beating heart of each community.

The documentary project thus far has been a tentative step towards continuing a conversation about the aforementioned complexities, a departure from our original intentions. Our assumptions and preconceptions have been challenged, our outcome has shifted and our roles have been redefined. We are reminded that problem-solving is what makes being a creative professional so stimulating and rewarding. We have been humbled by the spirit and hospitality of the Tongan people during production, and hope that we can find a way to reciprocate. Watch this space.

Max Bellamy is an interdisciplinary artist and filmmaker based in New Zealand. Though most often framing his practice through the lens of a camera, he is also comfortable with sculpture, installation and works on paper. Bellamy's artworks tap social fantasies around (dis)location, expectation and doom. Our saturated image terrain is distilled and repositioned by Bellamy to provide some distance from our intimate relationship with the screen. Max graduated from the Electronic Arts Department of the Dunedin School of Art in 2008, where he went on to teach until 2011. Max has exhibited art throughout New Zealand and has shown films internationally.

Emily Hlavac-Green is a freelance photographer working across creative and commercial areas. Her personal work often has a distinct cinematic aesthetic, and her current projects explore multi-dimensional technology and image veracity. Emily graduated from the Dunedin School of Art in 2009, and now lectures part time in the School of Design.



Figure 1 and 2. Project team and partners at work and rest in Tonga.