

Image Credit: Ryan Sandilands



# Teach: Educator Resources

We hold you close

by Katie West

Take your students on a virtual excursion of Katie West's exhibition *We hold you close* at PICA by engaging with the free online learning resources below:

- Watch: [Interview with Katie West](#)  
[Artist Tour with Katie West - Video courtesy of Perth Festival](#)
- Listen: [Audio tour of \*We hold you close\*](#)
- Make: [Activities inspired by the exhibition](#)
- Think: [Secondary student worksheet](#)



Image Credit: Bo Wong

Katie West is of the Yindjibarndi people of the Pilbara tablelands in Western Australia and lives and works in York on Nyoongar Ballardong boodja. In her exhibition *We hold you close* at PICA (Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts) she invites us to listen and connect to each other and the world around us. Listening is much more than just recognising and responding to sounds and voices. It is a social and political process. Listening creates a responsibility: to change who gets to speak and who gets to listen, and to challenge power and privilege.<sup>1</sup>

Katie West explores listening and connection in different ways. Textiles are presented alongside video and sound in an interactive installation that invites you to participate. *We hold you close* has been made collaboratively. Curated by Eloise Sweetman, it features a musical composition by Simon Charles, sound recordings by Josten Myburgh, and musicians Djuna Lee and Jameson Feakes playing the contrabass and mandocello.

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<sup>1</sup> Leah Bassel, 'Why a Politics of Listening?,' *The politics of listening* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2017), 1-15.



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A meeting space has been created in the gallery where, over a cup of tea, visitors can make hand-twisted string from recycled fabric to add to a colourful textile structure. Working together provides visitors with an opportunity to slow down, talk with each other, and take in the world around them.

String is a metaphor for connection. Made from separate strands twisted together to form a single strand, string joins things together. It is a simple, beautiful tool that has been used to make and repair countless objects by about all human societies.<sup>2</sup>

The textile structure in *We hold you close* is inspired by traditional practices of making baskets from woven strings of natural fibres. Katie West sees art as a way of making new knowledge and connections, and as a process of cultural renewal. She explores her Yindjibarndi identity inherited from her mother, and the disruption of cultural ties they both experienced as adopted children. Instead of using plants, she uses fabric to create baskets. She explains this as a way of adapting:

**“I’m away from Country - I don’t know if it is appropriate to use certain plants. I am making with the resources that I do have. It’s about adapting the practice, and cultural continuity of the craft”.<sup>3</sup>**

*We hold you close* features fabrics which have been naturally dyed using plants by Katie West’s family and friends. She invited them to join her for a workshop and to walk along the Gogulgar Bilya (Avon River) collecting plants. They avoided picking anything, focusing on weeds and plants that had blown onto the ground, or that would be maintained by the council. They made dye bundles and placed them into pots of bubbling water on an open fire, passing the time while they waited together by eating lunch, and drinking cups of tea.

The act of walking is an important part of Katie West’s artwork. The rhythm of walking is calming and helps people to focus. Katie West has explored walking as a form of meditation in a previous

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<sup>2</sup>Sabrina Gschwandtner, ‘A Brief History of String,’ *Cabinet Magazin* (2006): 38-41.

<sup>3</sup>Katie West, phone interview, February 2022.

work titled *Decolonist*.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on her breath while collecting plants, she meditated on releasing the traumas of colonisation and imagining a new Australian reality.

Sound is used in *We hold you close* to create a calming atmosphere. Sounds from the process of making the artwork have been fed back into the artwork. Simon Charles' composition is inspired by the motion of making string by rubbing strands across the thigh and twisting them tight. String instruments (mandocello and contrabass) are played in patterns layered over each other. The soundscape by Josten Myburgh is made of the sounds of fire, rain, making, and walking recorded during the natural dyeing workshop.

*We hold you close* draws our attention to the slow pace of making things by hand. Whether it is through craft, playing an instrument, or gardening, slowing down can help us to grow closer to others and our surroundings. The slow pace of making things by hand is more sustainable than manufacturing enormous quantities of products in factories at an ever-increasing pace. The carbon emissions from this mass-production contribute to dangerous climate change which threatens ecosystems and livelihoods.

By inviting people to slow down and make things together by hand, Katie West is encouraging them to think about the power of collective action. *We hold you close* is a generous exhibition which gives us the opportunity to be involved and to connect. It is about the positive potential of people. But it is also a challenging exhibition which encourages us to think about personal responsibility. Katie West is reminding us to use our power to make the world a better place. She describes *We hold you close* as:

**“...a space for reflection on individualism and how we interact. Working collectively is about people stepping in and realising their agency. People often need a lot of instruction – it is a default from being really individualised, because power usually goes to one person. Collective action cannot just be left open. We need to take custodianship for the places we live and to stop switching off from things we don't think are our responsibility.”<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup>Decolonist, West Space , Melbourne, 6 May - 4 Jun 2016, for Next Wave Festival, <https://katiewelarniwest.com/section/443740-Decolonist.html>.

<sup>5</sup>Katie West, phone interview, February 2022.

## Glossary

*We hold you close* by Katie West can be interpreted using different ideas and terms:

### Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism describes attempts to replace the original population of a place with a society of settlers. This includes Australia, Canada, the United States, and South Africa. Australia was declared terra nullius (Latin term - 'land of no one') and occupied by the British. No treaty was made with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Rights to the land were not given away – sovereignty was never ceded.

### Decolonisation

Describes a social justice movement focused on returning Indigenous land and renegotiating power. Indigenous people, knowledge, and methods are put first. Decolonisation builds sustainable relationships between people and the natural environment.

### Materiality

A description of contemporary art that emphasises the materials used to make it. This is instead of focusing on an image of something else. The meaning of the artwork is from symbolic use of materials and processes.

### Relational Aesthetics

A term for art inspired by human relationships and social context. It was created by curator Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s to describe exchanges between artists (as facilitators), and audiences (as participants). The artist gives the audience access to power and the means to change the world.

### Interactive Art

Describes art that relies on the participation of audiences. It is inclusive and includes sculpture which can be touched / played with, or technologies that participants respond to.

### Dérive

Describes a journey through a landscape, often on foot, where participants drop their routines to experience different geographical areas. Put forward by Guy Debord in the 1950s, it is a strategy for transforming society by studying how the environment affects emotions and behaviour.

### Slow Making

Is finding the time to slowly make things and build connections – to ourselves, and to family, food, the places we live, and life. Slow making of arts and craft has a positive effect on wellbeing and mental health.<sup>6</sup> There has been a dramatic rise in the number of people getting involved in crafts over the past 18 months during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

### Craftivism

A term for activism using craft to challenge inequality. These do-it-yourself activities are inspired by sustainability and civil rights. E.g. the Knitting Nannas protesting environmental destruction.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Indian Ocean Craft Triennale, 'About IOTA,' <https://indianoceancrafttriennial.com/about-iota/>

<sup>7</sup>Gina Fairly, 'Crafts sector seek national policy: The uptake in craft and design is not reflected in revised policy,' (2021): <https://www.artshub.com.au/2021/10/15/crafts-sector-see-national-policy/> (accessed Nov 2021).

<sup>8</sup>The Knitting Nannas, 'Saving land, air and water for the kiddies,' <https://knitting-nannas.com/>

## Curriculum Links

### Commentaries and Sustainability

Social, economic, and environmental systems interact to support human life. Katie West uses artmaking to comment upon issues of power and responsibility, social connection, and environmental awareness. She draws attention to the relationships between colonialism, individualism, and climate change. Exhibitions like *We Hold You Close* contribute to sustainability by providing thought-provoking experiences about new ways of interpreting and engaging with the world.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

Contemporary art provides a platform for First Nation voices which explore how people are connected physically and spiritually to Country/Place. Exhibitions like *We Hold You Close* explore the deep-knowledge traditions and holistic world views of First Nation communities, and their strength, resilience, and diversity. This can help students to think about experiences through historical, social, and political lenses and to engage in reconciliation.



Image Credit: Bo Wong

### References

- [1] Leah Bassel, 'Why a Politics of Listening?,' *The politics of listening* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2017), 1-15.
- [2] Sabrina Gschwandtner, 'A Brief History of String,' *Cabinet Magazin* (2006): 38-41.
- [3] Katie West, phone interview, February 2022.
- [4] Decolonist, *West Space*, Melbourne, 6 May - 4 Jun 2016, for Next Wave Festival, <https://katiewelarniwest.com/section/443740-Decolonist.html>
- [3] Katie West, phone interview, February 2022.