



Portrait of RUTH BUCHANAN. Photo by Stephen Wells.

# RUTH BUCHANAN

Where does  
my body belong

BY TIM RILEY WALSH

Ruth Buchanan's works pertain to the Berlin-based artist's interests in how power bears down on and prestructures our perception of the world around us. In particular, she hijacks the visual languages of museums and galleries to trouble our experiences of conventional art spaces, which are typically guided by cerebral logic more than physical sensations. Her past creative outputs include obfuscating room dividers, carpeted plinths, videos screened on tablets held by gallery staff, and exhibition tours led by security guards, all aimed at drawing visitors' awareness to their bodily relationships with their environs.

Ahead of my flight to see Buchanan's 2019–20 project at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in her birthplace, New Plymouth, she describes to me on the phone how frequently our understandings of our surroundings are forcibly polarized and categorized. We are expected "to stay either in our bodies or our minds, and this is how [hegemonic societal structures] make us weak. For me this is exactly what happens in the art world. We have to network these two together," she said. In addition to the work of feminist writer Audre Lorde, Buchanan's practice is indebted to a legacy of institutional critique and poststructuralism via artists such as Hans Haacke. However, these typically conceptual and analytic methods leave no room for intimacy, she claims: "When we meet these [structural] frameworks, my body still feels outside of the system." By embracing lived realities in all their complexities, then, Buchanan attempts to destabilize the categories that essentialize our bodies, identities, and cultures.

Buchanan started with directing her audience's attention toward the physical frameworks that shape how and what they see. Her 2011 commission for London's Tate Modern, *The weather, a building*, is an audio tour that guides visitors to look at the institution's spaces and external features, such as the River Thames, all the while overlooking the art. As art historian Acatia Finbow described, the work "focused not only on how the institution enables and encourages looking . . . but also encouraged participants to think of the museum as a space to be looked at."

Buchanan's examinations of the gaps in institutionalized knowledge evolved into immersive, discordant visual and aural networks. For 2015's *Or, a camera Or, a building Or, a screen* at the Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg, she positioned disruptive elements throughout the exhibition space: a purple curtain that

cut the room diagonally; six powder-coated, purple security fences arranged in a row; and behind these a zigzagging wooden ramp painted in aquamarine blue that led to an existing gallery door. Text was presented in varying ways: on the ramp, a gallery attendant presented visitors with a tablet showing a strobing video featuring words such as "2 DAY BODY," "1 METRE BODY," and "15% BODY"; at the opposite end of the gallery, a floor-to-ceiling banner framed by a neoclassical archway was printed with similar phrases. By design, the scrambled terms engender a jarring experience for visitors relying purely on their rational faculties; the text is as much about its visual form—emphasized by its capitalization and italicization—as its signification. Simultaneously, by intersecting the different terms, the artist appears to draw a direct equation between our biology and units of time and space. Yet, this comparison seems unfair or unreasonable—my experience of the body in which I move about the world feels brittle, liquid, formless, and here it is ruthlessly butchered and structured. The work thus affectively embodies the artist's question: "How is it that we are measured in all these unscrupulous ways in and beside language?"

Multiple videos flashing overlapped phrases such as "15 HOUR BODY" and "100% BODY" were also part of Buchanan's self-described "Bad Visual Systems" (2016) at the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi in Wellington, for which she won the prestigious Walters Prize in 2018. There, a series of custom display boards, and semitranslucent latex and chain curtains intervened in visitors' navigation of the gallery, while her incorporation of works by fellow artists Judith Hopf and Marianne Wex deviated from the traditional logic of solo exhibitions.

Buchanan's commission for Govett-Brewster is arguably her most wholly enveloping project yet. *The scene in which I find myself / Or, where does my body belong* (2019–20) is an exercise in challenging institutional methods of collecting. It makes visible how structural hierarchies influence cultural repositories, and is made all the more complex by the artist's own connections with the institution and its locale. Of Te Āti Awa, Taranaki, and Pākehā descent, she explains: "[I] knew about New Plymouth through my parents' crazy stories. The period that my family lived there was in the 1970s and '80s. It was a significant artistic community and a big part of that was the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery."

With the support of Govett-Brewster's new directors, Aileen Burns and Johan Lundh, Buchanan chose to interrogate the Gallery's history of radicalism—reflected in its founding documents, which permit the deaccessioning of its collection in particular circumstances. Building on her three-month residency at Govett-Brewster in 2015, Buchanan took inspiration from "The Great De-Accession Exhibition," held in 1982 at the Gallery, and filled all five of the museum's spaces with a total of over 270 artworks; nearly all of the artists in the collection were represented by at least one project. Buchanan used categories such as "female" and "Maori," among others focused on the body, themes, and more, to shape the show's hang, with the goal of bringing audiences "face to face with the deployment of language in the process of canonization and other history making." Through these processes, a sense of friction is generated between the rigidity of language and its "absolute inability to describe us or our work," according to the artist. All artwork labels were presented in a free, accompanying booklet, which also includes normally guarded information, such as the person who proposed the acquisition, their reasoning, and how often (or not at all) the works were exhibited. For Buchanan, "the urgent thing was to understand the mechanism that makes collections what they are and how easy it is to make things normalized."

Meeting up for coffee in Govett-Brewster's attached cafe, Buchanan described to me the importance of utilizing her own works within this project. Among the many components were fleshy, blush-hued wall paintings that she made in collaboration with her brother; large, freestanding purple room dividers perforated with holes the diameter of her fists; and display structures that she designed for the collection, including low, carpeted circular plinths the color of a tongue and green vitrines for works on paper. This gesture was one of acknowledging her presence in this process: "I was self-implicating, I wanted to avoid the situation of standing on the outside waving my finger," she explained. Buchanan's analysis of power in the context of art institutions reveals our precarious reality and implication in broader cultural hierarchies. As Buchanan asserted to me as we finished our drinks: "I don't want to be lunch." To avoid this, one might ask the question: where is power now?