

Building a Weight

In 1991, a new National Government passed a budget for a new nation. We remember it as the Mother of All Budgets. Though coloured by history, the sobriquet isn't some post-hoc pejorative. In January that year, Saddam Hussein had warned that US-led intervention in Kuwait would result in 'the mother of all battles'.¹ Ruth Richardson, architect and avatar of the 1991 tax and spending proposal, riffed on Hussein's translated phrasing – which was enjoying a brief vogue in Western media – to give us the title. The Mother of All Budgets was a radical proposition, promising deeply unpopular consequences for much of the country. And in the face of prevailing wisdom to perform politically ugly things as quietly as possible, Richardson was happy to let the country know exactly how radical her budget was.

There's a hum, or maybe it's a hiss. An indeterminate acoustic wobble. Aural scenery for a workshop or secondary-school IT room. A few seconds pass and lights snap on, filling the image. Tim Wagg's *1991*, 2016, begins inside a 3D printer – plates, rivets, brushed metal.² The hiss is joined by an awkward orchestra of syncopated clicks, whirs, and low drones – the machine music of the printer's arm jerking to life. White filament like ghost ink spells repeating glyphs across the print bed: erratic, automatic writing building into form. Then a sudden flash of earth: ferns, a clutch of primrose, soft-veined greywacke, weeds emerging from wet-grey soil. The image lasts less than a second before Wagg brings us back to the scribbling arm of the printer. Just a spark of

Jumping a Breakwater

In 1991, Warner Bros took a gamble on a killer whale. The studio harboured fresh ambitions to vie with Disney for the family-film market, preparing a slate of five films for what would become Warner Bros Family Entertainment.³ Four were adaptations or extensions of existing material: live-action takes on *Dennis the Menace* and *The Secret Garden*, an animated *Batman* adventure, and another go around at *The Nutcracker*. Only one, the story of an Oregon orphan who frees a captive killer whale, was an original property. It took a long time to get *Free Willy* on this slate, the script had been fostered through a carousel of writers and producers since the mid-80s. And though it was finally ready for production, many in the Warner Bros hierarchy saw it as a weak point in the studio's new initiative.⁴

The first and only orca to attain global celebrity was caught off the coast of Iceland in 1979. A decade after his death, Susan Orlean would reflect that Keiko was 'probably the only whale that anybody could name'.⁵ He spent his early captive years in Iceland and Canada, called Siggí, and then Kago. Keiko, a feminine Japanese name, was assigned on arrival at Reino Aventura, a Mexico City aquarium, in 1985. Keiko had already been performing for human audiences for some years, developing the tell-tale skin lesions that mark stress and discomfort in orca. Despite the pain – which moves between aquaria did nothing to abate – he was attractive and popular in his new home. Keiko's first screen role came soon after, appearing in an episode of the hit telenovela, *Quinceañera*.⁶ Other

subliminal botany hiding between the clean lines of the clicking machine. But it's no glitch. From the first, everything about *1991* is filled with purpose and attention, every image and edit saturated with intent.

The hiss drops, replaced by a voice from an older Aotearoa – a deep register with clipped consonants that ricochet up the walls of the throat to clap out like grape shot. It's hard to describe Ruth Richardson's tone without resorting to inevitable gendered adjectives – an urge enkindled by media willingness to do so, both in the 1990s and today. Like Jenny Shipley and Helen Clark in turn – successors of a kind – Richardson speaks with a familiar clipped, curtly confident, and faintly regional accent. Forceful yet detached, her voice plays over the image of Wagg's scribbling printer, filling the space of the work – a past voice cutting corners into the present.

Richardson starts with a description of her 'most quintessential New Zealand upbringing'.⁷ Rural, farming family, parents in local National Party politics. But just as these quiet, conservative colours are starting to take shape, a pivot: 'I'm a radical. I'm a natural disrupter.'⁸ She invokes Joseph Schumpeter, describing the Austrian economist as her first economic influence. He strikes an awkward figure among the milksheds of Taranaki, but that's what Richardson brought to politics in Aotearoa: an unwieldy marriage of rural realism and imported economic theory. It was that wedding that enabled her to emerge in the early 1990s as an agent of change, an agent – as she crimps from Schumpeter again and again throughout *1991* – of 'creative destruction'.⁹

The Mother of All Budgets was a continuation and extension of a transformation already underway when Jim Bolger's National Party took power – an economic revolution of deregulation and the retreat of state support and control from everyday life, begun in 1984 under the Fourth Labour Government.

What sets Richardson apart in the story of New Zealand's neoliberal drift isn't so much her ideology, or the fervour with which she prosecuted it, but the specific threads she set herself to unpick. Unlike her predecessors, she was free to take up the tools developed by Roger Douglas *et al.* and apply them to welfare and employment relations – ground Labour had held sacrosanct.¹⁰

The budget is remembered especially for its radical benefit cuts. Richardson's repeated rationale was that an abundance of state support had dissolved the labour market into a puddle of lethargy – employment was unattractive, and social mobility had stagnated into dependency and decadence.¹¹

small roles followed. By 1991, when Warner Bros. was casting *Free Willy*, the orbit of acting orcas held few bodies. Keiko was cast, a budget set, and the film went into production.

A split second later, the water explodes as Willy rockets upward right in front of Jesse, sailing like a huge black-and-white bird of the breakwater. As he passes Jesse, the boy reaches out and touches the orca's glistening side. With a huge splash, Willy smashes down into the water on the other side of the breakwater. He is free. Jesse raises a triumphant fist into the air and tears of joy run down his cheeks.¹²

Against studio expectations, *Free Willy* was massive success. It made an image and an icon of Keiko, albeit as Willy – another adoptive name. His stylised shape graced the many merchandise tie-ins of the period – clothing and accessories, plush toys, fast-food packaging.¹³ The success led to two theatrical sequels, a short-lived television series, and a straight-to-DVD reboot in 2010. Not one of these franchise extensions featured Keiko. After the first film, Warner Bros felt comfortable enough with a mix of CG and model-work to eschew a real orca.¹⁴

When *Free Willy* was done with Free Willy, Keiko went back to Reino Aventura. The fictional story of an orca freed from captivity ends with the real story of an orca taken back to his cage. Keiko, by now far too large for his pool, went back to working in front of aquarium audiences. The lesions got worse.

At the end of *Free Willy*, the filmmakers placed a free-to-call number for anyone interested in the welfare of captive orcas. The response was overwhelming. Warner Bros were flooded with calls and letters. PETA and the Humane Society lobbied Congress. In 1995, the studio established the Free Willy-Keiko Foundation, in partnership with billionaire cell-phone entrepreneur, Craig McCaw, with the aim to repeat the emancipating arc of their cinema fantasy. Out of these efforts, a truly international fundraising campaign began to move Keiko out of Mexico and into a facility where he could be rehabilitated and

Alongside the Employment Contracts Act, passed that same year, the budget was to usher in a new age of individualism and individual responsibility in Aotearoa.

This wasn't just mechanics, it wasn't even just policy. The reforms of 1991 were the spear-tip of an uncompromising ideology of individualism borne on the unyielding pressure of its own momentum – peeling away trust in collectivism like two thumbs in the skin of a mandarin, shedding the rind to expose the flesh of the free individual. More than a suite of benefit cuts, they mark an epistemological shift, a pivot-point in how we understand what a society is, and what our responsibilities are within one. Richardson understood this, then and now. She tells Wagg a quarter of a century later, that the reforms were 'a matter of philosophical choice, that the real champion was the idea, the idea of a liberated economy, liberated society.'¹⁵ She knew that this budget was something truly extraordinary – the dawn of the 1990s as the dawn our liberation, the move to our total and unmediated individual freedom.

As *1991* progresses, Wagg's camera opens out beyond the printer and its immediate environment. The earthen pulse from the film's first seconds is revealed as a corner of Richardson's garden. Longer exposures show tight floral clusters, their colours dulled under the slate of an overcast sky. The camera lingers on still shots of clipped trees and hedges – stunted limbs afforded a moment to shiver in front of the lens. Wagg never commits to an expansive view of the garden, just these close moments that bristle with a kind of claustrophobic control. Back on the print bed, the filament form is building into a thick rectangle with tapered sides.

There's only one moment in *1991* where Richardson's comments slip away from personal if partisan advocacy and into some questionable historicising: 'Fortunately for New Zealand, the public understood for enough electoral cycles, three or four, that this is what had to be done for us to make the big break from what was.'¹⁶ In truth, the majority of Aotearoa felt they'd been deceived by successive radical governments who had broken promises, generating chaos and uncertainty.¹⁷

The dream of total freedom, total independence and autonomy from state systems of control – embodied in the reforms of 1991 – has a way of revealing itself as fantasy. Early signs of an economic upturn following the reforms quickly turned sour. From 1991 to 1994, unemployment soared to a record high, the mean disposable income of welfare-dependent households dropped by a quarter, child poverty almost doubled.¹⁸

The limitless space of total freedom has very real limits. Inevitably, the adverse underbelly of the

eventually, hopefully, released into the open ocean. The foundation's director would later celebrate how Keiko became 'a symbol, a powerful symbol, of trying to do something right by whales'.¹⁹

It can be difficult to envision what a monument of logistics international fundraising was in the pre-internet era. There were large donations from the studio and McCaw, of course, but much of the US \$7.2 million raised for Keiko's new facility in Oregon came from pocket change, bake sales, and school car washes – individual cheques and cash mailed across continents.²⁰

The years of fundraising, then rehabilitation, proved controversial for the now-famous killer whale. The exuberance which followed the release of Free Willy was cooling, and coverage turned to questioning the cost and efficacy of rehabilitating a captive orca.²¹ Politicians and pundits were starting to chaff at this expensive gamble – a conservative member of the Norwegian parliament went so far as to facetiously suggest that Keiko should be killed, and his meat given as foreign aid to Africa.²² No one had done this kind of rehabilitation before, it hadn't even been attempted. The bonds forged between humans and captive animals may be problematic, but they hold tight.

After two years of rehab in Oregon, Keiko was uplifted again, this time to an archipelago off the coast of Iceland. The killer whale was set free in the summer of 2002, soon following a pod of wild orca to Norway, tracked via a VHF tag on his dorsal fin.²³ He never integrated with the group on his near-thousand-mile journey. Keiko stayed on the outside, flirting with the company of his own kind, but always alone.

In September, he emerged near a Norwegian village

Mother of All Budgets was borne along a race-class axis. The pain of 90s freedom was felt hardest by Māori and New Zealand's poor, as it always has been.²⁴ One more step in the arc of New Zealand history that has seen the collective cultures of te ao Māori steadily and structurally fragmented to fit within an unwelcome model of individualism.

The combined efforts of Douglas and Richardson – Rogernomics and Ruthanasia – couldn't realise the dream of a liberated economy and liberated society because the idea is a myth, a capital romance. Neoliberal freedoms will always be for some at the expense of many others. The reformers tried to lift us away from old systems of control and support, only to reveal sticky threads of inequity, realigned and freshly formed.

As *1991* moves towards its conclusion, Wagg returns to the inside of the printer, where the hardened filament has built into an off-white monolith. This shape is pitted against the workshop that houses the machine – strips of fluorescent lighting and hardened linoleum floors – and intercut with the overcast details of Richardson's garden. Amid these fragmentary images Wagg slowly reveals an interior space laden with memorabilia. A bookshelf holds the requisite biographies for a politician of Richardson's pedigree: Churchill, Thatcher, Mandela, and Muldoon. Laid across shelves and pinned to walls are totems of her time in power. A copy of the *Mother of All Budgets* rests on a wooden display.

At the apex of this increasingly frenetic montage, Wagg focuses on a set of political cartoons by Tom Scott in Richardson's study. One shows her in a Star Trek uniform, announcing the early indicators that augured a short-lived economic boom. *My work here on Earth is complete. Beam me up, Scotty.* Another shows Richardson as Superman, an immense serif R emblazoned across her chest. Posed like Christopher Reeves, she flies through a newsprint void, one arm tea-cupped on her hip, the other thrust forward. The outstretched arm is clutching a weight, an enormous, Looney-Tunes volume that dominates the image. Instead of *ACME*, the engraved text on its face reads *NEW ZEALAND ECONOMY*. It's immense, but our Kryptonian Richardson holds it up like origami.

The printer is finishing its work. Wagg's cuts accelerate even further, now running back-and-forth between the volume on the print bed and SuperRuth in Scott's cartoon. It's a passage of didactic, heavy-handed editing, a rare moment in *1991* when Wagg seems to openly declare his presence as creator and manipulator of the unfolding images. To what end? The film has offered a kind of confusion. The 3D printer – a technology dripping with the semiotics of techno-futurism – displayed with Wagg's slick, high-definition presentation, conjures an aesthetic closer to a tech start-up's vision board than a meditation on the economic politics of the 1990s. Yet his title keeps us fixed in the past.

seeking human contact. Keiko let children pat him, and crawl over his back. He slowly moved to nearby Taknes Bay, a deep, clear sound in Norway's northern fjords. Keiko was unable to feed on his own, trainers were needed to keep his weight up.

They had to keep him active, too, taking the orca on walks – leading him around the fjords from a small boat a few times a week.²⁵ Keiko lived like this for more than a year, unwell and unable to acculturate to the wild existence everyone had hoped for. Free Willy, in name at least.

When it finally happened, he died quickly. It was only Thursday, the morning before, that anyone had seen the worsening symptoms: lethargy, loss of appetite, irregular respiration. By Friday evening he was gone. Keiko died of pneumonia, at 27, in the numb of a Norwegian fjord. He'd come so very far. From Iceland to Mexico and back again, then on to Norway for this terminal scene.

'This is a long, sad day for us.' A simple sentence offered by the director of the Free-Willy Keiko Foundation to an Associated Press reporter, belying both the depth of the sadness and the length for which it had already been held.²⁶ Although the illness itself was brief, this was grief held in long anticipation, now fully and finally arrived.

Keiko's trainers had watched as the bond between this captive animal and years of human connection and dependency refused to let loose. This, in spite of a dream of total freedom, of the unmediated opportunities of the open ocean. A spokesperson for

Wagg plays this contemporary technology against his historical subject as a mode of contrast, but contrast employed as a tool of affinity rather than difference. His sharp edits are bridges between time and context, markers of an event and its inescapable wake. This final flurry of cutting between cartoon and 3D-printed object is here for Wagg to tell us that the spaces of his artwork have finally intersected. Crispy strings of excess filament partially obscure the text on the printed block, but we already know what it says: *NEW ZEALAND ECONOMY*.

At last, having witnessed its patient construction and listened through Richardson's reminiscences, Wagg reveals the object of his video: a three-dimensional weight carved in white filament, sundered from flat origins into a three-dimensional world. Wagg's object is a facsimile of the pen-drawn equivalent in Scott's cartoon, but it strikes out on its own, wholly different, life: an object detached from the politician who held it, now a burden we carry. Not just of the immediate consequences wrought by the budget of 1991, but of the 'freedoms' encoded in the economic realities of 2016, and of 2022. Wagg's weight is a fetish of the gig economy, of zero-hour contracts, of free lance freedom from sick leave or holiday pay. An economy as an idea wholly unto itself, an economy held aloft and apart from the lives of the people it governs. Free to be shaped and re-shaped, moulded, turned, tuned, lathed, and refined into a pure object, a pure idea.

What is Scott's weight, given new dimensions by Wagg's printer, but a neoliberal economy found in the purest expression of itself? A concept shaped by a freedom with little echoes of Enlightenment liberty, but all the thunder cracks of a new freedom built on a framework of the unattached individual. But the detachment is only ever pure in hypothetical. Richardson's incredible, superhuman strength is essential to lift this weight. For the majority, it will only drag us down. It is a fantasy, blind to the occupants of the gulf it presumes to carve between itself and the world. It's a kind of freedom that only works if you close your eyes to all that's left in its wake, to everyone stuck in its drift, to the tendrils of a real, lived world, that keeps getting a little worse.

the Humane Society reached for a similar sentiment: 'It's a really sad moment for us, but we do believe we gave him a chance to be in the wild.'²⁷

It had never been more than a gamble, really. Dice rolled on the unqualified good of unqualified freedom.

An experiment in extreme individuality on a being who had only ever known a life of reliance. And it had failed. A lifetime of captivity and forced acculturation couldn't be undone by the best of wills and the maw of limitless opportunity—sticky threads stay caught.

There have been no attempts to rehabilitate captive orca since Keiko's death, despite the status of captive marine mammals remaining mostly unchanged since the time of *Free Willy*. The expensive, high-profile failure has acted as a stop on future efforts – captive orca remain exactly that. Keiko has become a kind of totem – a Pruitt-Igoe of the breakwater. The world watched him make that great leap, cast his captivity off into the open ocean, only to see absolute individual freedom reveal itself first as absolute fantasy, and finally as tragedy.

1. Henry Cooke and Luke Malpass, 'Revenge on the "Mother of all Budgets"', *Stuff*, 21 May 2021, available at <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/125190932/revenge-on-the-mother-of-all-budgets>.

2. Tim Wagg, 1991, 2016, digital video, 12:00 min.

3. Anne Thompson, "'Free Willy': Sleeper Hit', *Entertainment Weekly*, 30 July 1993, available at <https://ew.com/article/1993/07/30/free-willy-sleeper-hit/>.

4. As above.

5. Michael Winerip, 'The Whale Who Would Not Be Freed', *New York Times*, 17 September 2013, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/16/booming/the-whale-who-would-not-be-freed.html>.

6. Pedro Damián, *Quinceañera*, 'Episode #1.00', available at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8154072/>.

7. Ruth Richardson in Wagg, 1991.

8. As above.

9. As above.

10. John Carlaw, Marcia Russell, 'Revolution – 4, The New Country', 1996, available at <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/revolution-the-new-country-1996>.

11. Richardson in Wagg, 1991.

12. J H Wiki, 'Free Willy Transcript', available at https://the-jh-movie-collection-official.fandom.com/wiki/Free_Willy/Transcript.

13. Thompson, "'Free Willy'".

14. Winerip, 'The Whale Who Would Not Be Freed'.

15. Richardson in Wagg, 1991.

16. As above.

17. Carlaw and Russell, 'Revolution – 4, The New Country'.

18. As above.

19. Winerip, 'The Whale Who Would Not Be Freed'.

20. Jack Smith, 'Keiko the Killer Whale Dies', NBC News, 13 December 2003, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna3700297>.

21. As above.

22. As above.

23. Winerip, 'The Whale Who Would Not Be Freed'.

24. Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 1997, pp 318–22.

25. Smith, 'Keiko the Killer Whale Dies'.

26. As above.

27. As above.

