

The Politics of Temporary Public Art in Wellington: One Day Sculpture A Case Study

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This paper will examine the loose amalgam of object-based practices that have as their focus a dynamic negotiation of the public sphere with a very particular reference to the specificity of place, time and participation. Using as a case study the *One Day Sculpture* series that has recently taken place across five cities in New Zealand, it will examine not simply why artists are increasingly enamored with the particularities of locales and communities, but how such work can steer a course between an engagement with place and the economic imperatives of event culture. Taking one of the cities, Wellington, where ten of the commissions took place, as the focus of this paper, we will examine the institutional support mechanisms that underpinned this project and evaluate how a consortium of agencies from local council, to federal government and private patronage could be drawn together to contribute to a university-based research initiative. It will also profile an inclusive model for university-based fine art research that sought to bring together curators from across the contemporary sector in New Zealand to work collectively to develop new knowledge in the commissioning process and at the same time contribute to new academic research in the field of temporary public art.

One Day Sculpture was a nationwide series of temporary, place-based public artworks. Taking duration and place as its starting point, *One Day Sculpture* stretched the format of the scattered-site exhibition over time and space. The series offered the opportunity to engage with 20 newly commissioned artworks by national and international artists for one day only, one after the other, as a cumulative series across New Zealand over one year. The series was produced in partnership with arts institutions and curators in Auckland, Wellington, New Plymouth, Christchurch and Dunedin from June 2008 to June 2009. *One Day Sculpture* was characterised by a diversity of artistic approaches from publicly-sited installations of 24-hour duration to nomadic interventions across the city at moments during one day.

The series was conceived in conjunction with UK based curator Claire Doherty through conversations and discussions with artists and curators across NZ in the context of a proliferation of international biennial exhibitions for which place is the motivating factor. The idea was to rethink conventional curatorial approaches to commissioning through a collaborative provisional project which would allow for a diversity of responses from artists, institutions and potential publics.

In contrast to conventional curatorial formats which customarily contextualise temporary works within the framework of a six-eight week exhibition bound to a particular (often urban) location, the parameters of *One Day Sculpture* (that each work must occur during its own single 24-hour period) aimed to offer the opportunity for artists and curators to work on projects which would occur autonomously, but within an overarching framework over a longer period of time.

Responding to the specifics of location within their own calendar day, each of the 20 *One Day* projects had the capacity to engage very different communities and to operate through a diversity of media and sites. The selection of artists reflected co-directors Claire Doherty and David Cross' interest in challenging conventional associations of public sculpture (permanently sited, monumental, commemorative) and proposing different definitions (critical, spatial, performative, interventionist). Emphasis was also placed on research visits, with artists encouraged and supported to spend significant periods of time engaging with the assorted social and cultural fabrics of the city or region they would be working in. Some time later they returned to realize the work.¹

The series began as a proposition emanating not from a gallery or museum but from a university-based fine arts research initiative, Litmus at Massey University Wellington. Litmus was conceived as a means to develop and test a range of strategies for the making, presentation and discussion of contemporary art beyond conventional gallery spaces. Through a series of temporary public and non-gallery based art works stretching over four years, Litmus had developed a focus on temporary object-based practices that sought to intervene or respond to the specifics of sites from the Great Hall at Massey University, to the Litmus project space itself. The space was less a gallery than a large generic office that offered commissioned artists an opportunity to work beyond the parameters of a purpose built or purpose converted space. *One Day Sculpture* offered up the possibility of a more focused and extensive engagement with the public sphere allowing for Litmus to move beyond the university into an examination of the public sphere as a viable site for artistic production.

The development of *One Day Sculpture* in late 2006 coincided with a new Wellington City Council initiative that aimed to support the development of public art practice in the city. The council's Public Art Policy established a structure whereby a panel of experts was formed to encourage the development of projects that used exterior sites and engaged with the history and social meaning of public space. Notably, the panel aims were to:

- Support temporary artistic practices
- Engage with specific cultures and communities that are collaborative in nature
- Develop relationships with a variety of organisations or industries;
- Consider possibilities for lectures, conferences, symposia and forums that generate debate about art in the built environment; and,
- Bring international art practitioners to Wellington.

Such an enlightened policy was significant to the series not simply because it expanded conventional definitions of sculpture to include temporary place-based work and emphasized the necessity of education and international dialogue but because the council backed up this policy with a significant war chest of funding that could be applied for by organizations whose objectives matched those of the councils. By underwriting a significant sum of money to *One Day Sculpture* for both the commissioning of ten Wellington projects and for the development of an international symposium, the council created the crucial base funding beyond the university support that could then be used to leverage further funding from other agencies. Significantly, the council agreed to fund international artists, a category for which it is notoriously difficult to secure funding. International agencies such as the Goethe Institute and SEACEX in Spain - on the back of significant Wellington-based funding - came on board to cover travel and associated costs but would not (because of their charters) fund the production costs of new work. Without this council support the international component of the series would have been severely diminished.

In prefacing the centrality of council support to the project, it is important to consider that this support was not for an art exhibition per se but for a university research project that clearly sought to position Massey University as a new entity for the commissioning and disseminating of contemporary artworks. The university, an institution which is primarily engaged in research activity in addition to teaching, is in a unique position to test new modes of working collectively. Partly because Litmus is not an institution within the publicly funded gallery system, it occupies a unique space in contemporary practice allowing it to take on an umbrella status that significantly enhances collaborative modes of working. The history of institutional co-operation in New Zealand is especially limited. Exhibitions such as *Prospect* in Wellington and the *Auckland Triennial* have straddled different galleries in an attempt to establish trans-institutional collaboration but these have been piecemeal, partisan in focus, and always highly contingent. By signaling collaboration as a fundamental focus, from artist-run spaces through to major museums and across the five major cities of the country, *One Day Sculpture* sought, not only to

allow participants to see how other curators and institutions work, and to enable them to see their own practices within a context, but to model how they might combine this knowledge to enhance the quality of commissioning. This multi-curatorial mode was also intended to enhance institutional engagement with new forms of public practice, in both curatorial and practice-based modes. Each curator worked within a different institutional structure with varying levels of administrative and financial support.

Although it might be argued that the more successful projects were a result of significant institutional support in which the curator was able to negotiate partnerships, production, volunteer support, and access to an assortment of resources this was not always the case. The artist-run space, Enjoy, for example, successfully realized an ambitious project by Welsh artist Bedwyr Williams. His *Le 'Welsh' Man's 24Hr* was a formidable endurance performance art work in real time; 24 paintings in 24 hours in 24 locations. Inspired by 24 Heures du Mans, the world's oldest endurance car race, Williams' project tested the ideas embedded in his own artistic quest, and the premise of *One Day Sculpture* itself. Working with a customised race car with sponsorship logos and a purpose built drying rack on the roof, Williams sought to put a new spin on durational performance art, challenging his ability to work fast, and to endure under any conditions, over a 24 hour period. In the pressure of applying an artistic/ anthropological observation to site and time, Williams explored new ways in which to push his body to extreme physical and psychological limits, an ordeal magnified by the work taking place in 18 hours of torrential rain. Along the way he encountered a range of characters including the president of the Wellington Welsh society whose lounge room provided the artist with respite from the weather and a perfect setting for the painting of her portrait.²

While a successful project in terms of enhancing the possible terrain of temporary sculpture, the limited resources of this space severely tested their ability to both fund and promote the project. Enjoy had never before been able to bring an international artist to Wellington and fund a new commission and while a wonderful opportunity, the commission challenged the small team of curator and volunteers who struggled to secure the necessary production and promotional budgets.

New Zealand artist, Bekah Carran, has long been interested in the strangeness of archives. For her, they are repositories of complexity that are too often unfairly maligned as warehouses of dull, empirical, and ultimately dusty, papers. In her research for *I Remember Golden Light* in the library archive, she discovered remarkable collections of ephemera which straddled the domestic, pop culture and the absurdly obscure, gathered in many cases by unremarkable New Zealanders over the course of their lifetimes. These collections, identified by the library as culturally significant, represent in the eyes of the selectors the diversity of the nation's identity and history.

Carran took this material as her starting point to develop her own archive, constructing a special temporary annexe to the National Library on the building's forecourt. This annexe was located next to the main entrance and from a distance seemed to be architecturally sympathetic to its surroundings. Modernist in shape, the annexe was clad in what appeared to be faux-marble. However on closer inspection the façade's material was actually far less salubrious: a cheap cardboard used in ring-bound stationery folders. The ersatz modernist aesthetic was continued inside where a small reception area led into the archive itself. Consisting of bench tables and chairs, the room was lined in cheap brown paper which smelt of fresh stationery on the first day of school.³

Carren's fantastical play on the library/archive experience was enhanced by the temporary nature of the work. The National Library annexe appeared out of nowhere and for one day offered regular users, passers-by and intentional arts attenders the chance to re-think and participate in a different version of the nation's library.

It might appear that Litmus' position was simply a critique of permanent public sculpture. However Litmus' interests lie in the development of innovative and speculative art projects that exist beyond the gallery. We would argue against a binary position, rather, supporting the articulation and validation of both permanent and temporary forms. A key example of this imbrication was Billy Apple's project, *Less is Moore*. Commissioned by Victoria University's Adam Art Gallery this work negotiated between historical and contemporary, permanent and temporary modes of sculpture practice with great dexterity.

Billy Apple is a senior New Zealand artist intimately aware of Wellington City's commitment to public sculpture and of the long-standing partnership between the City Council and the Wellington Sculpture Trust, a charitable organisation which has resulted in permanent sculptures in the city centre, the Botanic Gardens and a 'Meridian Energy Wind Sculpture Walk' on Cobham Drive (the main route between the city and airport). The Trust is dedicated to enhancing the environs of the city and civic pride is at the core of their activities.

Henry Moore's *Bronze Form* (1985-6) was the second sculpture acquired for the city through the efforts of the Wellington Sculpture Trust purchased in 1987, with funds gifted by Fletcher Challenge through Wellington City Council's Arts Bonus Scheme. The scheme allowed developers to win plot easements on building plans in proportion to the value of a commissioned artwork.

For *One Day Sculpture*, Billy Apple placed a portable billboard alongside *Bronze Form* in the Botanic Gardens for 24 hours calling on the City Council, The Sculpture Trust and the people of Wellington to take action. It asked for the removal of the layers of wax and lacquer that have been applied to the sculpture to be removed and included a memo from the Fletcher Challenge noting Moore's wish that his work be allowed to weather naturally. A glossy red signature apple was placed on the plinth of the Moore.

As Christina Barton, the curator of this project, outlines, 'by taking Henry Moore as his subject Apple consciously negotiated the changing history of sculptural practice and located himself within that trajectory, raising vital questions about the role and fate of art in public space'⁴. It also exposed the types of negotiations and compromises inherent in the production and exhibition of artworks, particularly public works.

Several weeks later a public forum was held providing an opportunity for a range of key stakeholders to share their points of view and enter a discussion about the issues raised by Apple. The forum was in effect a town meeting that drew together speakers across a range of vested interest groups from the council to the Wellington Sculpture Trust who lobbied for the purchase, to a team of conservators who were asked to comment on how the work should be maintained. Fundamental to the discussion was the history of the work's location and surface treatment and crucially, what should be done to preserve the integrity of the work.

It is worth considering *Less is Moore* in relation to some of Apple's earlier works. During the early seventies he produced *Subtractions*, a series of cleaning actions in his New York artist project space that he documented in photographs. This was a focus of a survey exhibition at the Adam Art Gallery coinciding with his *One Day Sculpture* project, also curated by Christina Barton. Apple also re-staged a work, *Window cleaning*, (which was first undertaken on 5 June 1971).

Around the same time he developed a body of works called *Censure*, in which he marked in red details of a gallery he found unacceptable. The owners of the gallery were then given the option of correcting the imperfection, leaving his red marks in place, or painting them over without any correction.

Returning to New Zealand, Apple developed this mode of practice with a series of 'Alterations', the most recognized one being an artwork that extended the staircase between levels B and C of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery by approximately half its original width. The work was sold to the gallery as an acquisition for its permanent collection. Apple's art was not so much the staircase, rather the negotiations around paying for it. As Tony Green explains, 'Apple saw that an alteration to a staircase, part of the structure of the building, which affects the sense of the artworks displayed in the gallery, could be designated as an artwork itself, since it provoked such a drama of definition'⁵.

With the *One Day Sculpture* series only recently coming to a close, we are yet to fully get a sense of its enduring legacy. Certainly the interest shown by audiences throughout the series, attendance at public programme events and the symposium held towards the end of the commissions in March this year, suggest that it has shifted the consciousness of art-interested audiences both in New Zealand and internationally. Aside from showcasing work by international artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Rirkrit Tirivanija, and Ivan and Heather Morison for the first time in New Zealand, perhaps a more important achievement was the location of a range of younger and emergent New Zealand artists within this global context. Likewise, the series built new knowledge for curators around the commissioning process, how to work collaboratively with other curators and agencies and how it might be possible to develop new audiences for temporary place-based contemporary art practice. Yet ultimately perhaps, the most significant legacy of *One Day Sculpture* was a new model for university-based research at the forefront of contemporary art practice. The series highlighted the important role that universities can and should play in building consortiums to produce and critically reflect upon the leading currents of advanced cultural production.

¹ For a detailed assessment of the series see Cross, D and Doherty, C *One Day Sculpture: A Curatorial Overview*, in Cross, D and Doherty, C, eds, *One Day Sculpture*, Kerber, Bielefeld, Germany, 2009, pp 130-135

² See Cross, David, 'Wet Weather Painting: A Users Guide', in Cross, D and Doherty, C, eds, *One Day Sculpture*, op cit, pp 130-135

³ Cross, David, *Things I Remember: Things I Never Knew*, ibid, pp151-55

⁴ Barton, Christina, curatorial statement, ibid, p196

⁵ Green, Tony, 'Billy Apple's Art For Sale', *Art New Zealand Number 11*, <http://www.art-newzealand.com/Issues11to20/apple20.htm>