

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**AMY HOWDEN-CHAPMAN
THE FLOOD, MY CHANTING
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY CHARLOTTE
HUDDLESTON**

Amy Howden–Chapman
The Flood, My Chanting
9 October 2008, 1pm
Central Wellington City

Amy Howden–Chapman’s The Flood, My Chanting used sound, objects and performative action to ask what emotional reactions we should have to the warnings of today about the natural disasters predicted for the future. In this work, a series of antique marine bells were temporarily installed through central Wellington in a circuit curving from the waterfront through the central city and back to the sea. Ringers running between bell stations activated a chain reaction of overlapping sound waves that delineated the part of Wellington’s central city most under threat from future flooding. Customarily bells aboard ships were used for ceremonial purposes, the marking of time, and to communicate a ship’s presence to other vessels and warn of imminent danger. Thus Howden–Chapman’s work looked back to the out-dated tradition of ringing church bells in times of danger in order to raise alarm to inhabitants of surrounding parishes.

Commissioned by City Gallery Wellington
Project Curator: Heather Galbraith

There is a Flood Coming

In Wellington spring time brings changeable weather and lots of wind. Tuesday 7 October brought northerly winds gusting between 120 and 150 kilometres per hour and torrential rain. The corrugated iron lifted off my neighbour’s roof in Lyall Bay and blew down the street, damaging other neighbours’ property and bringing down power lines. Big weather is big news. The television crews arrived moments after the fire brigade and pictures appeared in the national news that night on television.

On the same day an email went around at work, purporting to be from the Wellington City Council, that listed streets and areas affected by slips, trees down, lines down, power outages, road closures, sewerage mains burst, and traffic lights out. It advised workers to head home early. Soon after another email followed. The first email was a

hoax, though not entirely fictitious. It was based on a Wellington City Council email from August 2004 that reported a previous storm which caused significant flood and wind damage. The weather was so bad on Tuesday 7 October 2008 that it seemed plausible that this email was valid. Circulated widely around offices and on blogs, it took some time for the email to be identified as fake.

This layering of storm over storm and damage over damage, while disruptive, strikes a familiar chord, given the frequency with which incidents of storm water overflows and slips occur. The vulnerable places — sites near storm water drains and low lying areas — remain so even as habitation of the city develops. These areas lie unobtrusively, unnoticed until they become places of disruption.

That the second week of October 2008 was also Disaster

Awareness Week simply added another layer of activity and attention to the events recounted above. On Wednesday 8 October, the Wellington City Council unveiled its tsunami and civil defence warning system campaign. During the day helicopter and vehicle-mounted loudspeakers blared a pre-recorded electronic alarm and voice informing residents that ‘This is a test....get ready to get through’.

This is Not a Test

On Thursday 9 October Amy Howden–Chapman’s *One Day Sculpture* project *The Flood, My Chanting* took place in Wellington. Amongst all this weather, warnings and disaster awareness, people witnessing *The Flood, My Chanting* could be forgiven for thinking it was some practical manifestation of Disaster Awareness Week. Rather the work was a separate and coincidental occurrence. For those who were disaster unaware its cacophonous moments may have simply been an arresting part of the already aurally and visually busy urban environment during a bustling lunchtime. In addition to the natural environment, the current worldwide economic downturn or ‘credit crunch’ made it seem like Disaster Awareness Week had an even wider resonance.

Wellington’s notorious weather had an influence on Howden–Chapman’s project too. The ships’ bells, on loan from Museum of Wellington City and Sea, had to be protected from the rain. As objects decommissioned from original use and part of the permanent collection of the Museum they have become heritage objects and in this capacity they are to be protected from the elements. Made to withstand exposure to elements on the open ocean, the bells are now beached, protected and stored in climate controlled conditions. Howden–Chapman’s use of the bells in the project – a temporary return to active duty, albeit landlocked – gives them voice again and references their past use while at the same time suggesting other possible uses.

Although the City Council demonstrated that it has quite a different warning system in mind, the history and metaphor of bells lent the project a romance and sense of history that brings to mind troubles, disasters and celebrations all marked with the sounding of bells. I was reminded of the need to prepare, not just to ‘get ready to get through’, but to take a longer view; to address the cause not the symptom.

The Flood, My Chanting began 30 minutes later than planned. An expectant, milling crowd had had enough time to settle, losing an edge of expectation and falling into conversations and postures of waiting. The start then was unexpected and the first bell *Favorita Doña Catalina* pealed loudly signalling the beginning of the circuit. At first the bell ringers were a bit awkward with their ringing. They had not yet developed a technique, making the ringing irregular and almost tentative. Soon though they settled into a rhythm and pattern and the alarm sounded more certain.

Howden–Chapman positioned the bells in an open circuit that echoed the curve of the harbour. Mostly on reclaimed land, the circuit arced from the harbour, into the city and back towards the harbour, on terrain less than one metre above current sea level, marking out places at risk of submersion as a result of flooding. Following the circuit and the ringers as they relayed from bell to bell allowed a relatively relaxed walking pace. At times pausing between bells to watch one ringer run past, threading their way through the variously paced lunchtime and afternoon crowds, I would momentarily lose sight of a bell ringer *en route* to the next station. No matter, once they arrived, the bell pealed, its sound surfacing and rising above the city noise to overlap with the previous bell, still tolling. Then one would cease and a runner could be seen weaving in and out of the street traffic, passing and heading off into the distance to the next bell. The purposeful urgency of the running pace set a pleasantly rhythmic counterpoint to the disarrayed pace of the street, while the individual bells’ high and low tones cut through the street noise, reverberating off buildings and raising alarm in an insistent manner.

Howden–Chapman has spoken of a ‘general fiction’ that she wanted to create around the work – that a flood was coming and that it was the role of the ringers to warn the city via a network of bells. This fiction was strengthened by the relative invisibility of many of the bells. Where possible they were attached to existing city structures for guiding traffic and giving information or illumination. The bells merged easily and could conceivably have always been a part of the jumbled signs and fixtures of the city. While they remained quiet, they remained unnoticed, yet they were there, prepared to raise the alarm.

There were a variety of responses, many from people not expecting or forewarned of the project. Some people smiled and seemed to enjoy hearing bells, while others

walked past with their fingers in their ears, the added decibels an unwanted sensory overload. One or two people emerged from office buildings, disturbed from meetings and strategic planning sessions, demanding to know how long it would go on because they just couldn't think through the noise. I saw people leaning out of shop doorways looking for the source, perhaps wondering if it was a fire alarm, deciding whether they should interrupt their shopping to evacuate. Then there were those who either consciously or unconsciously tuned it out. Their aural intake exceeded by the sounds of the city, they were simply unable to process further sonic information and seemed unaware. Some people were curious and asked what it was about. Each bell was allocated a minder and at Howden–Chapman's instruction they were simply to say 'there is a flood coming'. A statement that is both speculative and highly likely.

There is a connection to be made between the way people responded to the project and the way people respond to issues like climate change and its potential affects. There are those who are informed and who know what it is they are experiencing, those who don't know but who want to know more, those who just want it to stop and go away and those who seem oblivious. By this I don't mean to equate those informed about *The Flood, My Chanting* only to those who care about climate change and environmental issues or vice versa. I mean simply to consider the nature of peoples' responses to their surroundings and situation particularly in the face of already overwhelming noise, activity and pressing issues all vying for attention.

Disrupting the boundaries of sculpture *The Flood, My Chanting* played with form, space, scale and permanence. Physically Howden–Chapman's circuit mapped the terrain of a future waterline. While conforming to the current grid of city streets (albeit one that follows the harbour contour), the temporary line and the action of the runners progressed through the scattered motion of pedestrians and vehicles in a way that gave duration to the circuit. The runners' progression activated sound that created a simultaneously linear – as defined by the route – and amorphous pattern as it permeated the environment and was shaped by its surfaces. As for the project's relationship to the non-physical aspects of the situation – its location in time – it was couched within the events of the week, the history and future of the geographical location, within the lives of the bells themselves and in the lives and minds of the witnesses to it. The physical existence of *The Flood, My Chanting* was fleeting, a two hour period one Thursday afternoon and now, after the event, the

sculpture remains lodged disparately in the imaginations of those who recall it. The work presents a challenge to permanence and to notions of sculpture existing physically in three dimensions as well as to the veracity of memory.

The Flood, My Chanting coalesced with its site and situation – a fluid combination of place, events and relationships in time and space – in unpredictable and serendipitous ways. The work linked the contemporary configuration of the central city to its past and impending future. The disruption of everyday activities in the central city by the introduction of overlapping and penetrating sounds arcing through the streets introduced a new emotional tenor into the extant situation. The ability of the *One Day Sculpture* projects to operate as interruptions is what gives them the potential to, as Claire Doherty has spoken of, 'implicate us in the act of engaging' in ways that cannot be guessed at nor predicted and can only be experienced first-hand or in the retelling.¹

Charlotte Huddleston

¹ Claire Doherty 'In search of a situation' in *Art in the life world*, Breaking Ground research papers, February 2008, p.10.

Amy Howden–Chapman

Amy Howden–Chapman is a Wellington–based artist and writer, born in 1984. She has a Masters degree in Creative Writing, Victoria University (2005) and an Honours degree in Art History, Victoria University (2006). Her work has appeared throughout New Zealand, as well as in Australia and America, including exhibitions such as 'E.P.A. (Environmental Performance Actions)' Exit Art, New York (2008); 'Earth Matters' Auckland City Art Gallery (2008); 'Old Habits Die Hard', Norwich Gallery, UK and Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo, Norway (2005), organised by Sparwasser Gallery, Berlin, Germany. Solo projects include 'Wall Wall', Kiosk (organised by The Physics Room), Christchurch (2007) and 'The Story of Three Sentences', Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington (2004). She is part of performance group Raised By Wolves with artist Biddy Livesey.

Charlotte Huddleston

Charlotte Huddleston is currently Curator, Contemporary Art at The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. In 2008 Huddleston worked with artists Ronnie van Hout and Seung Yul Oh to realise projects for the Sculpture Terrace programme at the Museum. In 2006 she was the curator of the performance series Mostly Harmless at the Govett–Brewster Art Gallery, and editor of the subsequent DVD catalogue. Huddleston is currently working with Te Papa colleague Megan Tamati–Quennell, Curator of Maori and Indigenous Art on a One Day Sculpture project with Californian artist James Luna.

Recommended Reading

Alain Corbin, 'Village Bells: Sound & Meaning in the 19th–Century French Countryside', New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, reviewed by James R. Lehning for the *Journal of Social History*.

Michael Silverblatt interviews Jorie Graham, Wednesday MAY 10, 2000.
[Http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw000511jorie_graham](http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw000511jorie_graham).

Harold Grieses, 'The Plastic Arts: Writing in Response to Amy Howden–Chapman's Re–Enactment', *John Dory*, April 2007.

'After leaving the wilderness', A Raised by Wolves publication, produced Melbourne, 2007.

Amy Howden–Chapman, 'Fifteen adventures in the world of people', *Sport* 34, Winter 2006.

Raised By Wolves, New Art Land Commission.
[Http://tvnzondemand.co.nz/content/new_artland/ondemand_video_skin?tab=&sb=date-descending&e=new_artland_s1_ep5#ep_new_artland_s1_e](http://tvnzondemand.co.nz/content/new_artland/ondemand_video_skin?tab=&sb=date-descending&e=new_artland_s1_ep5#ep_new_artland_s1_e), p. 5.

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