

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**BEDWYR WILLIAMS
LE 'WELSH' MAN'S 24 HOUR
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY DAVID CROSS**

Bedwyr Williams

Le 'Welsh' Man's 24 Hour

12 February 2009, 00.00 to 24.00

Around Wellington, beginning and ending next to Enjoy, Swan Lane, Off Cuba Street

Feeling that every one of the 24 hours should count, Bedwyr Williams' One Day Sculpture staged an intrepid union of motor-sports and art. After a lengthy research period trawling the streets of Wellington to map out his one-man marathon, Williams undertook an epic mobile reproduction of his encounters and experiences of life in Wellington. Le Welsh Man's 24 Hour took the form of an art gumball rally around Wellington, a rally where the artist was the only contestant. Requiring exceptional endurance, during this event the artist completed 24 paintings in 24 hours traveling from location to location in a used station wagon. Starting from Wellington City's Mount Victoria Lookout, painterly subjects included a telegraph mast, seen from afar; a Security Guard in Wellington's Central Business District; a Wind Turbine at sunrise, Brooklyn; the Lions' Enclosure at Wellington Zoo; a Greek Orthodox Community Church in Petone; a Pie Shop/public toilet in Petone; Rongotai's Airport Control Tower; the Massey Memorial at the Northern end of Miramar Peninsula; Sunset at Wahine Park, Breaker Bay; and a Self-portrait painted inside a car parked outside Enjoy Public Art Gallery on Swan Lane, off Cuba St.

**Commissioned by Enjoy Public Art Gallery
Project Curator: Siv Fjaerestad**

David Cross

It may not have had quite the palpable excitement of the real Le Mans 24-hour countdown, but the key elements were all there: digital clock, revving race car covered with sponsors' logos, and a soundtrack straining through the budget speakers of the Team Bedwyr Williams Subaru. Granted, there was not a scantily clad sponsor's ambassador in sight and the lighting in the car park next to Enjoy gallery was rudimentary at best, but the start of Bedwyr Williams' 24-hour rally was certainly suitably theatrical. In still conditions at midnight on February 12, Williams effortlessly guided the stock car past the parking meter, dodged a drunken bar patron, gave way to oncoming traffic, and began a quest that was to challenge the very limits of extreme sport endurance.

It was quite a sight. Williams dressed in flamboyant painting attire of smock, Rembrandt era floppy hat, and an

ample moustache that doubled as a crash protector, weaving through the tight streets of Wellington followed by the official support car and assorted hangers on. The sense of excitement and absurdity that the audience felt as we wove up the hill towards Mount Victoria was tempered however by an overwhelming sensation of the enormity of the endeavour that lay ahead. 24 paintings in 24 selected sites over 24 hours seemed a compelling idea on paper but the manifestation of this was always going to test the artist's highly developed sense of humour. Little did we realise on top of Mount Victoria in balmy conditions without so much as a breath of wind, that in a few short hours Wellington's notorious weather would push the artist to the very heart of performance art darkness.

The initial signs however were all good. Williams got off to a cracking start with a deftly handled midnight landscape of Wellington employing searing yellow highlights on the requisite black field. Morale was high and even a persistent

moustache malfunction was not enough to put the artist off his game. In less than thirty minutes, he had completed the acrylic canvas and decided it was 'not shit', held it up for the cameras, stored it to dry on the customised race car roof rack, and we were off to the next site. The second site at the Watusi Bar was one of only a handful of indoor locations in the schedule and provided a very convivial location for the support crew and audience. Largely empty, this Wellington bohemian haunt had something of the feel of van Gogh's iconic *Night Café*. With intense concentration, Williams rendered the slightly seedy bar area in an expressionistic style that proved very popular with the few patrons who got to view it. Two down, and the artist appeared to be enjoying himself.

Around 4am a portent of what was to come revealed itself in the form of a slightly chill wind. After painting the moon, largely, it should be noted, from memory as the sky had well and truly clouded over, a lone security guard prowling the exterior of Te Papa, and the local skate park, the artist headed off in the early morning to the top of Brooklyn Hill intent on capturing Wellington's lone wind turbine. It was here, high above Wellington, that the heavens really opened up and the act of plein-air painting took on sublime proportions. Sheets of horizontal rain began to lash the vicinity and visibility was reduced to almost absurdly negligible levels. The support team tried to protect the artist with an umbrella but its effect was minimal. What started out as a painting of a well-known landmark quickly descended into a watery mess. The sight of the artist battling to hold onto his paintbrush brought to mind JM Turner's famous anecdote of being strapped to the mast of a steamboat in a storm in order to completely grasp the experience of a vessel buffeted by the elements. Such a commitment to researching his subject matter however did not extend to Turner actually painting the picture in a storm. As it became clear after forty minutes that this was no passing shower, Williams' attempt to depict the sublime was replaced by a battle simply to avoid drowning in it.

From the wind turbine, the underground viewing space in the Lion enclosure at Wellington zoo offered a brief respite. The artist captured this quirky local landmark of fake concrete stalactites framing a glass window behind which an assortment of big cats lay under ledges trying to escape the driving rain. From here it was out into the elements again for a trip across the harbour to Petone. In his research into suitable places to document, Williams was drawn to sites, buildings or locale that were somehow

emblematic of the particularities of Wellington. Buildings like the air traffic control tower located not in the airport but in a suburban street, or the hermit's cave house in Breaker Bay were of interest to the artist because of a their distinctly idiosyncratic alterity. A particular favourite of Williams' was the pie shop in Petone that operated also as a public toilet. This curious mixed economy was a source of wonder for a Welshman whose attempt to paint the building was in large part driven by an urge to unravel the almost uncanny cultural hybridity of this pleasant, but to his mind eccentric, city.

No matter how the artist had thought of the pie shop in his research expeditions, not in his wildest dreams might he have conceived that the end result would look so ambiguously abstract. The painting, when it finally made it to the Subaru's interior drying rack, looked like a watercolour minus the all-important colour. It was a testament to Williams' perseverance and obvious technique that even the basic outline of the scene was retained in the finished product. For the next eight hours of the work this scenario was played out again and again. Carefully chosen sites, largely obscured by driving rain, were treated with a heroic respect by an artist who did the scenes about as much justice as it was humanly possible to do. With almost no audience to speak of looking on throughout the day, Williams still managed to transform the lives of passing drivers. Those unfortunate souls gripping their steering wheels for dear life will likely never forget the sight of a very large man in Baroque attire appearing in strobe-like flashes in-between the frenetic movement of windscreen wipers.

By eight o'clock in the evening the crippling effects of the day began to take hold. Twenty hours of continuous painting across all parts of Wellington, most of them in a half squint, had pushed Williams to a state of near derangement. Without a patch of dry clothing on and a level of fatigue one could only imagine from looking at textbooks on 70s durational body art, it seemed a toss up as to whether he could in fact make it to the finish line. Sitting under a rudimentary tarpaulin in Wahine Park at Breaker Bay looking out at the site of the infamous 1968 ferry disaster, conversation had almost completely evaporated and all involved had started to retreat to states of protective interiority. One support member had gone blue and was told to go home while others had fallen into that cycle of survival whereby all actions were rote and rationally detached. Still Williams kept mixing paint and

staring intently at his subject treating each scene with the integrity the conditions simply did not seem to warrant. Whatever sense of irreverence started him on this course, there was nothing at all frivolous about his realisation of the stated aim. He would do what needed to be done to complete the sculpture even if there was no audience around to witness the nascent self-sacrifice.

After four hours on the miserable Seatoun Peninsula in an assortment of locations, the artist's luck finally changed. A forty-minute drive high above the harbour took us to the Korokoro house of Margot Griffith, President of the Wellington Welsh Society. Unsure that we could go inside to watch the artist paint Margot's portrait, the team waited in what had become misty rain, resigned to our fate as the suffering for art support crew. Almost immediately, Williams appeared and said we could all come in and there in the hallway appeared Margot barking orders for coffee, tea and biscuits for all. Not only was the house warm and inviting, it was a repository of Welsh history with its carefully recreated interior aesthetics and stunning retro carpet. Margot sat on her couch in a regal pose and spoke to Williams in Welsh. For the first time in hours, the artist's laugh transcended a caustic chuckle and it was clear that Margot was bringing him slowly but surely back to life. Whether she had any sense of the project as a whole or even an affinity with contemporary art, Margot wholeheartedly embraced Williams and the rag tag team of helpers. She saw beyond the madness of it all and embraced the simple coming together of two Welsh strangers connecting for all of 35 minutes in her lounge room. This was a most unexpected place to have a pure art moment but in this exchange Williams had succeeded in capturing the elusive yet profound value of dialogical art practice. Through a bizarre conjunction of chance, shared ethnicity and humour, the artist illuminated how art can indeed function to draw people into candid and profound levels of social exchange.

After an exchange of cards and Margot offering anyone within earshot the keys to her ancestral home in Carmarthen, it was all downhill—literally—to the finish line. The penultimate painting of the war memorial was done in only the faintest drizzle and by the time Williams had made it back to the Enjoy car park, 23 hours after the start, the rain had completely stopped. In what seemed like a perverse final irony, the last painting took place inside a humid, wet dog smelling faux racing car while the audience of around twelve stood watch bone dry outside. The concluding choice of subject matter was particularly apt: a self-portrait captured from the passenger-side rear view mirror. With intense concentration

the artist stared closely at himself and tried to transpose the reflection of eyes that could barely look let alone see. Struggling to concentrate, his eyes began to increasingly wander towards the countdown clock projecting from Enjoy. Those confident enough to approach the car remarked how much the picture resembled a Gauguin self-portrait, another European man trying to make sense of himself in the South Pacific.

When the clock digitally clicked into Friday, cheers and applause rang out. Williams gingerly stepped out from the passenger seat, held the canvas up one last time for posterity, and was rewarded with the presentation of the victory wreath and a bottle of cheap and very fizzy champagne. No doubt this feat of endurance that linked painting and performance together was an attempt by the artist to shake out and challenge the key premise of *One Day Sculpture*. Yet in seeking to ride at the very outer edges of what might be understood as sculptural practice, curiously he brought objectness very much to centre stage. The costume, cheap ready stretched canvases, assorted paraphernalia, and 'race' car itself were props that battled for principal signification over the artists performing antics with the final result being a rather uncertain tie. It was as if Williams wanted to ridicule his carefully selected sporting and painting props but found himself over time in a surprisingly keen battle to simply match their charisma. Worn down by the weather and exhausted to a level that disintegrated even the mildest ironic impulse, Williams was forced to confront his carefully cultivated personae and test its mettle.

Perhaps he fancied his chances of conquering the twenty-four hours and in the process turning out a year's worth of painting for good measure. Perhaps the audacity of the premise was security against anyone closely scrutinising the paintings. Perhaps he wanted to know at what point the Welsh-artist-road-trip-down-under shtick might short circuit. Or maybe, in a far-flung country, he used the *One Day Sculpture* parameter as a way of interrogating how duration, place and performativity might activate new and important meanings in his work. The answer most likely is a messy coagulation of all of the above.

staying in the shed all day, both illusions broken quickly by sudden, and Carole Bonhomme, as well as many others with whom I have discussed Maddie's work in addition to those who have written about it previously.

Bedwyr Williams

Bedwyr Williams was born in St Asaph, north Wales in 1974 and spent his formative years in Colwyn Bay. He graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Central St Martins College of Art & Design in 1997, followed by a postgraduate course at Ateliers, Arnhem. He now lives and works in north Wales, in Rhostryfan near Caernarfon. Williams makes and uses videos, photography, performance, drawing, text and occasionally stand up comedy. His practice is autobiographical and is often a response to some long held hang-ups or issues. The work uses characters and narrative. Characters include the Dinghy King, an inflatable tourist shaman who formed his own Cargo Cult to lure holiday-makers back to the crumbling holiday resorts of north Wales. Bedwyr Williams was awarded the prestigious Paul Hamlyn Award for Visual Art in 2004 and in 2005 was one of the artists who represented Wales at the Venice Biennale. In 2006 he was shortlisted for the Beck's Futures Prize, exhibited at the ICA, London.

David Cross

David Cross is the Director of the Litmus Research Initiative and project leader of One Day Sculpture. He is co-editor with Claire Doherty of the forthcoming book of the series to be published by Kerber Verlag. He has exhibited extensively across New Zealand and Australia at venues including the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Perspecta, and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery as well as in Eastern Europe. Forthcoming projects include a new work to be premiered in Zagreb in June 2009. He has written extensively on contemporary art in journals including *Art and Text*, *World Art*, *AAANZ Journal of Art* and *Photofile*. He is director of Research and Associate Professor in Fine Arts at Massey University.

Recommended Reading

Kim Dhillon, 'Bedwyr Williams', *Frieze*, March 2006

Charles Danby, 'Bedwyr Williams', *ID Magazine*, March 2006

Bruce Haines, 'Bedwyr Williams', *Untitled*, Dec 2005

Sarah Kent, 'Tyranny of the Meek', *Time Out*, Jan 2006

'Critics Picks', *Artforum.com*, June 2005

'Basta', Welsh Arts Council, Venice Biennale, 2005

'Tyranny of the Meek', Chapter Arts Cardiff, 2004

Adrian Searle, 'Best young artists', *The Guardian*, October 2004

A Grizedale Arts Project 2003, Grizedale Arts, 2003

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