

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**DOUGLAS BAGNALL,
ADAM HYDE,
WALKER & BROMWICH
INTERTIDAL
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY ALI BRAMWELL**

Douglas Bagnall, Adam Hyde, Walker & Bromwich ***Intertidal***

20 December 2008, 3.30pm to 7.30pm

Kamau Taurua/Quarantine Island, Dunedin

Intertidal consisted of two works by artist collaborations that took place on Quarantine Island/Kamau Taurua, the largest island in Otago Harbour, close to the city of Dunedin. Ferried to the Island by Sea Cadets, artists and visitors alike enacted an expedition as ethnographers and storytellers. The island became a ground for their shared experiences; examined and experienced at various points, and in all the spaces in-between. Neil Bromwich and Zoe Walker's work The Cave took place in a rocky cavern on the edge of the water; a littoral zone between time and tide, fact and fiction. Taking as a starting point the Scottish story of Robert the Bruce's epiphanic encounter with a spider that serves to explain the maxim: "If at first you don't succeed, try again", the artists created a platform to generate new histories through the exchange of personal stories. For Discover, Adam Hyde and Douglas Bagnall set out to uncover a new species of seaweed. Drawing on nineteenth-century botanical and ethnographic research methods that involved collecting, carefully observing and illustrating, their work formed questions around the ever-present potential for new knowledge.

Commissioned by Blue Oyster Arts Trust

Project Curators: Caroline McCaw and Rachel Gillies

Ali Bramwell

Intertidal occurred on a small island in Dunedin harbour.¹ There were four artists involved, engaged in two components that, at first glance, were quite distinct. New Zealanders Douglas Bagnall and Adam Hyde collaborated as did UK based artists Walker & Bromwich. Both projects, with otherwise divergent intentions and starting points, intersected primarily through the ways in which they were structured as guided experiences for the intrepid art explorer. The experience of *Intertidal* was framed as a journey with the island cast as destination. From the outset there was a tinge of the epic and attendant romanticism, reviving ghosts of an old Imperial idea of venturing forth in the name of scientific and cultural exploration. As participating artist Neil Bromwich observed later, the character of the day was set against "the long slow process of arrival."²

On the afternoon of Saturday December 20, 2008 approximately 80 people negotiated the winding unsealed Hatchery Road that leads from the Otago Peninsula

settlement of Portobello to the harbour. At the waterfront they gathered on the jetty to be ferried across to Quarantine Island. Armed with woolly hats (and in many cases whiskey), insouciantly ignoring the steady drizzle already beginning to track the collars of their coats, they were a seasoned group of adventurers feeling mutually pleased with their own intrepid qualities. On landing, arrivals were greeted with hot tea and biscuits before being sent off to negotiate the small but steeply contoured island on foot. Armed with a map and information sheet that briefly discussed the nature and mobility of stories followed by a short description of each project and some background information about the island's history as a quarantine station, the audience were free to navigate the island. If the day's poor weather and the notion of an intrepid expedition of discovery were mutually compatible, then the task of getting to each scene of encounter/art work could only add to the possibility of visitors casting themselves in an heroic light. Both components were set at sea level with no way of avoiding a steep and muddy climb up and over the highest peaks and negotiating the site

became a series of approaches, an arrival in stages.

There was an emphasis on new knowledge in the way the projects were framed; setting out to discover new histories, new species, an eureka moment, the epiphany. The emphasis on the discovery or creation of new knowledge does not erase the traces of the past. The map provided gave some background to what people were looking at as they walked. A ruined chimney, for example, was apparently all that remained of the old quarantine hospital building, opened in 1872 and used for sixty-odd years before being closed and abandoned in 1924. Many people spent time inspecting the building remains and pausing to read the names on headstones in the small cemetery, wondering aloud: what must it have been like for the people who died in the quarantine hospital? To land after a long sea voyage only to be stopped by illness, within sight of your final destination but never to arrive? The partially understood history made its mark on the emotional tone of the experience, adding pathos and increasing a desire to hear the many untold stories relating to the island's past. The time the audience spent traveling together (and waiting) was a structurally embedded part of the event, with any idea of arrival repeatedly deferred. Both works operated in different but not unrelated ways with dynamics of how shared knowledge is created, collected and recorded, working with disciplinary histories and methodologies from natural sciences and applied anthropology, or ethnology respectively. The projects exemplify a methodology that collects data and examines a series of unique moments as a way of gaining insight into a wider system or network.

For Bagnall and Hyde field research, direct observation, and taxonomic classification underpinned their response to the island. They asked the audience to help to collect, examine, and classify samples of seaweed, looking for evidence of previously undiscovered species. Harking back to the imperatives of 19th-century exploration brings to mind the idea of traversing supposedly virginal territory in the tradition of the great white colonial explorer. Also activated is the related notion of invasive species destroying or altering an ecosystem. The artists had provided drawing boards and a variety of tools for the participants as well as white sample trays, which contained different seaweed collected earlier in the day. The participants were encouraged to continue the search for new species by collecting more seaweed specimens from along the shoreline and by engaging in observational

drawing of the collected samples, a methodology that is fundamental to botanical taxonomy.

Despite the difficulty of managing audience shyness, damp paper and damp places to sit, the opportunity to draw provided a reason to slow down and observe carefully. Using the activity of drawing encouraged the audience to focus attention in a specific way and to foster a different kind of looking. The focus of looking was putatively on closely observing the individual plants but implicit in the process is a more holistic observation of place. In addition to collecting seaweed, Bagnall and Hyde collected and photographed the drawings and recorded observations; a process that is also consistent with the taxonomic orientation of the work, where the material produced by the audience is another form of raw data to be classified.

On the other side of the island, Walker & Bromwich staged a scene of encounter in a cave.³ After walking down a precarious pathway, individuals were guided, one at a time, into an antechamber in the rock face to come face to face with a woman dressed in a spider suit. The spider began each encounter with a rendition of the story of Robert The Bruce overcoming his self-doubt and discouragement in the face of repeated military defeat at the hands of the English. The story was given as the origin of the maxim 'if you don't succeed, try, try again.' The fact that the encouragement was specifically about the will of the Scots to persevere in the face of English Imperialist activity holds multiple layers of irony when transplanted to Otago.⁴ A story based on an epiphany was offered up by the spider, offered explicitly in expectation of receiving a similar tale of epiphany in return from each visitor. At the end of her story it was the visitor's turn to speak.

Exchanging 'epiphanic' stories in a cave while being encouraged to wrap up in Tartan car rugs, recalled intimate camp fire experiences though this was of the ersatz and provisional kind. The presence of two cameras in the cave shifted the tone of the proceedings significantly. The strong lighting used also created a sense of drama and unreality, which effectively abstracted and attenuated the promise of an authentic human moment. Despite our (societal) growing tolerance, or gradual desensitization, to being videoed socially, two cameras pointed at close range are still difficult to ignore, as is the awareness that what is occurring here is not a private moment of shared confidences, after all. Setting up a controlled relation of exchange with one person at a time (in a kind of serial

monogamy) made each encounter predominately about defining personal subjectivity. The artists asked people to relate personally significant experiences, but by restricting the audience visits to one person at a time they also prevented their visitors from hearing or considering each others personal stories as a shared experience with the artists in that staged environment (There were a few exceptions very late in the day as, under time pressure to accommodate everyone before the last boat left, the last people waiting were invited to enter in two small groups). It should also be noted that there was a minor eruption of spontaneous tale-telling that occurred on the fringes of this work, as people considered and compared what their own epiphanic stories might be before and after their meeting with Walker & Bromich. In the process, the responsibility for mediating ongoing conversation was interestingly shifted away from a direct encounter with the artists. Here any expectation of the work as a dialogical process for community building around creating and sharing stories is reflected back to audience as a catalytic dynamic. Any final documentation of the process will presumably also occur as a sequential collection of individual experiences that provide a possibility of gleaning insights about wider networks by considering specific examples. In that event the work of holistic synthesis and assimilation will be deferred once more and required of the audience member viewing the documentation.

The idea of the documentation of a process-based work being developed and edited as a separate work for later publication, raises issues of responsibility and trust in terms of the primary (original) audience. In relational art practices permission to republish is generally assumed as implicit when the documentary methods are in plain view and in this case everyone undoubtedly did know they were being recorded and observed, although there were no possibilities to discuss what might happen next to the collected data. Research protocols about primary research material and ethics relating to protecting individual utterances are subsumed, apparently to a widely held and uncritically accepted assumption of the benefit that 'shared stories' provide in terms of fostering group identity, empowerment and participatory access.

Questions and implications around the ethics of documenting public and relational practices have relevance beyond the scope of this one project. *Intertidal* consisted of an opportunity for participation and conversation through two different works located on the foreshore of Quarantine Island. At first glance the project is framed in a fairly straightforward way. The

title, as a play on the littoral zone with its concomitant evocation of Littoral practices (and by extension Relational practices more generally), sets up an expectation that the work will have audience engagement and co-encounter as a primary structure. The curators were obviously engaging the island's intertidal zone but were also apparently activating a metaphorical loading around littoral states. This engagement includes emerging conventions of use around the notion in relation to art practices, which have previously been received into New Zealand art by practitioners such as Bruce Barber.⁵

For a site responsive work there is a base assumption that the work will deal with local conditions. The nature of this particular experience does have to be understood through its relation to the physical specifics of the site, Quarantine Island, where negotiating the topography of the island (steep muddy descents, grassy slopes, roaming donkeys etc) as well as the remaining tangible evidence of the past (in the form of ruins and gravestones) were all very much present in how the projects were experienced. When work is dealing with a specific physical location, performing an archeology of site through historic research is the most obvious way to begin to address the notion of context, location or place, an approach not immediately visible in this project. There were other ways of framing 'where' the work was positioned in operation, including other ways of understanding history. By resisting the romantic lure of literally mining and overwriting the ruins, the works could be seen as more focused on history as a contemporary construction of shared knowledge, where more conventional ideas of scientific fact finding and oral histories are combined with personal epiphany, nostalgia, rumor, folk tales, invention, error and fiction. For practices that are built on logics of encounter the notion of 'site' is shifted and expanded to include the moment/s of encounter with the audience. The participatory structure becomes the primary location of the work and other ideas about the importance of location are more secondary.

In this event, where the audience is a primary focus, the audience's experience is the start-point of all discussion on the effectiveness of the work. Understanding who the audience is likely to be is essential. The implications of overlapping these differing ways of understanding and dealing with site are less straightforward than they first appear.

Locating the project on the island defined the potential audience immediately. It was clear that the nature of the journey would require a physical commitment from the audience to attend, with the isolated location and elaborate travel arrangements making an idea of casual foot traffic a nonsense. Publicly sited relational projects are often constructed on a logic of chance encounters with 'innocent' or unguarded audience members (also known as non-arts audiences). However while this project was staged in a public environment it was inescapably institutionally framed as art. There was a broader than usual advertising and marketing drive for *Intertidal*, so there were people attending albeit a small minority from outside the reach of usual arts networks. However this audience also attended with a preexisting expectation about encountering something called 'Art'. This creates a very different dynamic than an audience who will not automatically understand any encounter with the artist-in-public to be 'art' per se.

There appeared to be a certain amount of slippage (which took the form of pugnacious refusals by a percentage of the audience to engage with the work, the more marked after the effort taken to get there) between the expectations of the artists about their audience and the audience's expectations of the event that falls into this dynamic. Yet this slippage was also a generative aspect of *Intertidal* that was in reaction, the refusals causing a surge of conversation and debate on the fringes of the works and afterward where they are still continuing. Key questions that arise from this are: How do you effectively facilitate access when dealing primarily with an initiated audience? And do the oft cited benefits of how participatory work facilitates access apply when the notion of access has been so markedly reconfigured?

1 All of its names, official and otherwise carry histories of use with them, Kamau Taurua, Quarantine Island, St Martin's Island. Does this matter for the story that follows? Yes it does, but mostly as the un-introduced family member sitting in the corner of the room. Before the gold rush and the colonial settlement of Dunedin and Otago the island was known as Kamau Taurua by Kai Tahu (local Maori), which means roughly 'the place to set nets.' The name also has an older more poetic interpretation that alludes to a place in time. The island gained the function of Quarantine Station in 1863 and was renamed with great imaginative flair 'Quarantine Island.' Officially the island now bears both names as the name Kamau Taurua was restored in the 1990s. Unofficially the island is locally still widely known as St Martin's Island.

2 Bromwich made this observation during a panel discussion held the day after the event at Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

3 This particular cave is rumored to have a history of being used for personal encounters. When the island was in use as a quarantine station the unmarried staff were separated and chaperoned. The men had quarters on neighboring Goat Island and the women in the married quarters with the respectable couples. There were few options for unchaperoned meetings and various romantic activities and it's rumored that this cave on the shore may have provided privacy and shelter for trysting pairs. For the men the cost of the meeting was a swim through the night from the next island so any secret meeting involved both determination and physical courage.

4 This irony occurs in light of the high numbers of Scottish immigrants who relocated to Otago in the wave of colonial migrations during the 19th-century British Imperial activity in the South Pacific, becoming indistinguishable in practical terms from the English in the eyes of the pre-existing population.

5 See for example: Barber, Bruce, Sentences on Littoral Art, published in "Conceptual Art Online" http://www.imageandtext.org.nz/bruce_sentences.html (accessed Jan 09). Barber acknowledges that the metaphoric attachment of the littoral to art is not his sole invention but he has defined a set of conventions around dialogical practice that he terms Littoral Art.

Ali Bramwell

Ali Bramwell is a practicing artist, independent curator, sometime arts administrator and educator. Research interests include a particular focus on public space and the ethical and political interfaces that art produces and reveals when it is outside the usual gallery contexts. After graduating with an MFA from Otago Polytechnic School of Art in 2001 she has produced a range of exhibitions and public projects both nationally and internationally. Projects include: *Schema* (2005) for Chiemseeart in Bavaria; *Walking with swan* (2006) Sarajevo Winter Festival, Bosnia; *Lotus Field* (2005) for Dawn Light symposium: Gosford Regional Gallery, Australia; and numerous public projects over 10 years in varied public situations in South Korea with Nine Dragon Heads, curated by PARK, Byoung-Uk and KIM, Yi-Sun. Independent curatorial projects include: *Terminus* (2005) in public space: Nelson and Dunedin, NZ; *Beautiful Garbage* (2004) at Pici Gallerie in Seoul, co-curated with Neil Berecny Brown; *Sighing just out of earshot* (2007) at Blue Oyster Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand. In line with a well developed interest in practical policy development in relation to local arts infrastructure, Bramwell is a founding board member for the Dunedin City Council Art in Public Places Committee. Currently lecturing in Art History & Theory for the Otago Polytechnic School of Art.

Zoe Walker and Neil Bromwich

The combined practice of Zoe Walker & Neil Bromwich explores the space between real and imagined locations, drawing on the unique atmosphere of specific geographical locations and populations through a wide variety of media. Recent projects include *Love Canon*, Les Ateliers des Arques, France (2006), *Friendly Frontier*, Habitat, London (2005), *Sci-Fi Hot Tub*, Kielder Forest, Scotland (2003), *How the Universe Sang Itself into Being*, Essex (2004), *In Search of a Small Planet*, The Baltic, Newcastle; TATE, Liverpool (2002), *Portable Paradise*, The Collective Gallery, Edinburgh (2001), and *My Island Home*, Victoria and Albert Museum (2000). Walker and Bromwich live and work in Berwick upon Tweed, England.

Douglas Bagnall

Douglas Bagnall's practice is concerned with the intersections of art and technology. Previous projects include *Cloud Shape Classifier*, Zero One, San Jose; Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington; Ramp Gallery, Hamilton (2006) and the Shanghai International Festival of Art and Science (2007), *Mimetic Television* (2006), *Music Industry Simulator* (2004) and *The Film Making Robot*, shown in Telecom Prospect: New Art New Zealand, as well as the films *The Sea pt 3* (1996) and *Random Geographical Survey* (1998). Douglas Bagnall lives and works in Wellington.

Adam Hyde

Adam Hyde's practice is supported by a history of working in radio, television and web development, as well as his work as a musician and format artist. In 1998 Hyde cofounded the acclaimed audio project radioqualia with Honor Harger. Recent major works include *Silent_TV*, with Tetsuo Kogawa, Rotterdam International Film Festival; The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2006), *Radio Astronomy*, ICC, Tokyo (2005); ISEA2004, Helsinki (2004); *Ars Electronica*, Linz (2004) and *The Frequency Clock*, Sonar, Barcelona (2001); *Video Positive*, Liverpool (2000); EAF, Adelaide (1999); *Ars Electronica*, Linz (1998). Adam Hyde currently lives in Amsterdam.

Reading List

Ben Tufnell, 'Art+Mountains', *Contemporary*, Summer 2007: 81-2.

Dan Fox, 'TV Swansong', *Frieze*, Summer 2002: 68-124.

Duncan McLaren, 'Artists on the Move', *Contemporary*, Summer, 2002: 56-61.

Louise Menzies, 'Looking Up' (Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington, 2006).

Natasha Edwards, 'Panacea', *Contemporary*, October 2005.