

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**PAOLA PIVI
I WISH I AM FISH
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY DYLAN HORROCKS**

Paola Pivi
I Wish Was I Am Fish
21 March 2009
Auckland International Airport

Eighty goldfish touched down in a chartered Whisper Jet at Auckland International Airport at 5pm on Saturday 21 March. Each transported in their own glass bowl and allocated their own seat, the goldfish were flown over the Tasman from Australia to New Zealand creating a remarkable filmic event capturing the tilt of water during take off and the luminous light of high altitude skies. The video of their flight was screened at Freyberg Square in Auckland from 9pm that evening.

Commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery
Project Curator: Natasha Conland

Dylan Horrocks

It hit the news a few days before, with just the sort of write-up you expect from the *Sunday Herald*:

Is it art – or have we been caught hook, line and sinker? An Italian artist is flying goldfish to New Zealand on a private plane for 100 people to look at. A film of the flight and the landing will then be played in a central city park for mass consumption. The fish – which can be bought for as little as \$7 each in Auckland pet shops – will have their own bowls and seats. Aside from the pilots and flight crew, the only other passengers will be Italian artist Paola Pivi and her assistants. The exhibition – titled *I Wish I Am Fish* – might be seen as codswallop by some. Others are divided over whether it qualifies as art or is a publicity stunt.¹

The *Herald* put the question to art critic Hamish Keith, whose response carefully avoided an answer: “It could

cross that [line] in either direction. I don't think it's likely to be great art because it won't last. If it makes people think about something it serves its purpose.”

The highlight of the article, however, was a comment from the mayor of Auckland, John Banks: “I quite like goldfish; I hope they're being treated with respect and dignity. I prefer goldfish to some people.” My drive from home to the airport is directly below the main flight path, and so every now and then a plane flies overhead and I glance up, wondering if that's the one with the fish on board. Apparently, they're flying from Sydney, Australia – about 3 hours' flight through a lovely autumn afternoon. At the edge of the airport, signs warn of low-flying aircraft, and firmly prohibit animals from entering, which makes me laugh.

Only 100 people are allowed in to see the plane on its arrival, for security reasons, it seems. Some of the

guests are in their glad rags, others in jeans and t-shirts. As we file into the hangar, I get busy with my sketchbook, drawing the building, the machinery, the row of empty airplane seats pushed up against the window. Then the Whisper jet, looking small and sleek, is slowly towed inside, bringing a smell of aviation fuel and rubber. Weirdly, the hangar is set up as if for a typical gallery opening, with tables serving champagne and beer and sparkling water, along with bread and dips and other little snacks. The art crowd soon reverts to type, standing around sipping wine and chatting, swapping air kisses and art world gossip with only the occasional glance at the plane itself. A strange air of nervous incongruity underlies the scene.

Eventually, the plane door is opened, and Paola Pivi et al emerge to join the crowd. A TV3 news crew descend on the artist and her 'assistants' (consisting of a few Auckland Art Gallery curators, Pivi's own film crew, and an animal behaviourist whose job is to care for the mental and physical wellbeing of the fish). Then, after a short delay, we are finally allowed on board, in small groups of 15 at a time. Inside the plane, all noise of the airport and the art chatter is gone. It's quiet and dark, and strangely peaceful. It's also cramped (as passenger planes always are), a long narrow aisle with low ceiling and two seats on either side. And then, as my eyes adjust to the gloom, I look down and there they are: a single goldfish on each seat, suspended in a round bowl of water, most of them hardly moving – hovering still, facing the front of the plane, as if in a kind of trance. "It must be stink, being a goldfish," someone behind me says quietly. But who knows?

As we walk slowly down the aisle, swinging our heads left and right to gaze at each fish in turn (there are 87, one for every seat), the whole experience is strangely calming and hypnotic. Like stepping into a dream. The fish are so utterly incongruous, the light dim and all sound muted – I begin to feel like I'm in some alien environment, as if the plane has come from an alternative universe where fish do this all the time, and things are – well – *different*. I start to imagine they're visiting dignitaries, popping in from that other world for an hour or two before lifting off to resume their journey across realities. I feel an urge to communicate with them somehow, to show them we're friendly and respectful – perhaps by whistling the tune from *Close Encounters* or something. But the fish, of course, say nothing.

Coming back out into the light and the noise of the hangar,

my sense of dreamlike dislocation grows. I find a quiet corner to sketch and write notes, mostly to avoid talking with anyone. I really hadn't expected it to be so... so weird. It's like an altered state of consciousness. Then someone introduces me to Paola Pivi, and I make a vague attempt at conversation. But she seems even more reluctant to discuss the plane and the fish than I am. When I ask where they're flying from, she merely smiles and says nothing. Not wanting to break the spell. I begin to think she isn't doing this for us at all; this is something private, between her and the fish. I feel like I'm gate crashing someone else's dream...

Before long, I'm drawn back to the plane, climbing on board again, alone, while everyone else enjoys the wine and the socialising. The fish are still there, though some have now begun to swim again, coming out of their stupor. The TV3 news crew are interviewing the animal behaviourist on camera, and I hang around to listen. He explains that they oxygenated the water before the flight, just to make sure the fish were comfortable. And he describes how the fish would angle themselves down when the plane was taking off, modifying their position to stay parallel with the ground. I love this image – such an elegant adaptation to finding themselves in an alien environment. When I ask one of the crew how was the flight, she smiles: "Quiet."

That night, I go to Freyburg Place, a small square tucked in the middle of the city. It's very dark and very cold, and I sit on a bench with my sketchbook, watching a video loop of the flight projected onto a building above. The camera moves through the plane, pointing down at the fish on their seats, as they fly through the air. The only sign the plane is moving is the water, which washes back and forth with a gentle, steady sway. The square is pretty empty, though now and then people pass through on their way to dinner, or a movie, or wherever. Most look up bewildered. A group of students (some of whom seem to know about the show) lingers for a while, idly watching the video and horsing around. There are at least two couples, plus two more who aren't but may be soon. One guy pulls out a camera phone and gets his picture taken 'with the fish' – thumbs up for the photo. Then they all want in on the picture – one girl jumps on her boyfriend's back, gestures are made, crazy grins appear, and everybody freezes in place while the camera-shy girl gets them all into frame. Behind them, the giant fish gently sway in their bowls.

On Monday, TV3 News retracts its story from the night

before about a planeload of goldfish flying from Sydney to Auckland. Turns out they *hadn't* flown from Sydney at all; the goldfish were from a fish farm in New Zealand, and they'd only flown over Auckland for a few hours before landing again (aviation authorities in New Zealand have rather strict rules about importing goldfish, which even artists must obey). TV3 is rather grumpy about it all, and clearly thinks the line between art and stunt has been crossed in a rather dishonest way.

A couple of days later, Pivi gives a talk in the city about her work. The audience is small and radiates a rather intimidating blend of curiosity and scepticism. Someone asks where the fish had really flown from, but Pivi merely smiles and says "From Sydney." Of course, we all know that's not true, but the smile somehow forbids any further argument. Pivi is inviting us to join her in a game of make-believe, and it would be simply rude to deny her. She shows slides and videos of some of her other work – from an artificial slope of grass, down which visitors rolled (the slope's angle carefully calculated to make you 'dizzy and euphoric') to a Free Tibet Concert (which really was a free concert, in Alaska, raising awareness of the plight of Tibetans under Chinese occupation). Pivi has also released a leopard into an art gallery full of (fake) cappuccino cups, coaxed an alligator to walk through a huge mound of cream, and arranged for 100 Chinese men to stand in the corner of a gallery for hours at a time. All of which prompts someone to ask a slightly puzzled question: "What is your *intention*?" To which Pivi replies with another smile. "I don't have any intention."

Now, writing this, I find myself thinking back to the *Herald* article, where Hamish Keith offered a half-hearted defence of Paola's art: "If it makes people think, then it's served its purpose." But *is* that its purpose? Making us *think*? Was that Pivi's intention? And if so, are we supposed to think about something in particular? I mean, I for one thought about global warming (after all, three hours of aviation fuel leaves quite a carbon footprint). I thought about goldfish (and what John Banks thinks of them). I thought about the strangeness of how people behave at openings.

And I thought about art. About what it's for and how we use it. About artists' statements and theory and critics and explanatory notes on gallery walls. About how we try to *interpret* art, to decipher its intention, its purpose. How we expect it to make us *think*.

And in the end, I thought that none of this really matters. What

matters is the sheer bloody *strangeness* of standing on that plane full of still, silent goldfish – row after row of crazy little visitors from another mysterious world, an imaginary world, a dream.

Paola Pivi

Italian artist Paola Pivi first gained international awareness for her striking and perplexing photographic work of a donkey floating on a small boat at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. The work helped to form a reputation for the artist as someone working with an experimental and playful approach to objects, animals and materials in conjuring a variety of art forms. Pivi's large-scale projects exhibit incongruous aspects of our everyday world, confronting the viewer with unexpected and fantastic situations. Her works place well-known objects in unusual contexts. As the familiar becomes unfamiliar, these unanticipated pairings impart modified meaning and function to Pivi's everyday objects, thus exposing cultural and social conventions. Recently Pivi has had solo projects at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin (Paris, 2006); Portikus (Frankfurt, 2008) and at the Kunsthalle Basel (Basel, 2007).

Dylan Horrocks

Dylan Horrocks was born in 1966 in Auckland, New Zealand and has lived in New Zealand, England, USA and Bougainville. 10 issues of his comic book *Pickle* were published by Black Eye (1992–97) and his graphic novel *Hicksville* was published in 1998, also by Black Eye. *Hicksville* has since been reprinted by Drawn & Quarterly and has been translated into French, Italian and Spanish. Dylan's comics won an Eisner Award in 2002 (Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition) and have been nominated for a number of Ignatz Awards, Harvey Awards and Prix d'Alph'Art (including Best Album and the Critics' Prize). He drew a weekly political strip for the NZ Listener called *Milo's Week* from 1995–97 and regularly draws political cartoons for the NZ Political Review and other magazines. He has also written about comics for magazines in New Zealand and America and has taught cartooning and comics history courses. He regularly lectures on comics to university, polytech and graphics students. He currently lives by the sea near Auckland with his wife and two sons.

Recommended Reading

Anna Mecugni, 'Paola Pivi: Massimo de Carlo', *Art in America* (February 2009)

Adam Szymczyk, Hans Gatt and Geoff Lowe, eds., *Paola Pivi: It Just Keeps Getting Better* (Cologne: Walther Koenig, 2008)

Laura Cherubini, Danilo Eccher, eds., *Paola Pivi* (Italy: Electa, 2004).