

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

JAVIER TÉLLEZ
INTERMISSION
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY JOHN DI STEFANO

Javier Téllez
Intermission

22 March 2009, 11am to 2pm

**Everybody's Theatre, 72 Tasman Street, Opunake,
Taranaki**

A live lion prowled the stalls of a 1920s movie theatre during a continuous screening of MGM's famous opening credits. The context, a windswept New Zealand coastal town on an autumn Sunday afternoon. Gwelfa Burgess, the 'oldest working usherette in New Zealand', led the audience to experience the thrill of seeing celluloid dreams come to life. Intermission was an homage to cinema as a fading medium. With the arrival of home video and the resulting decrease of audience numbers, movie theatres such as Everybody's Theatre risked closure. In Taranaki, thanks to the initiative of octogenarian projectionists, 'the oldest usherette in NZ', and many cinema enthusiasts some of these establishments have been kept alive. As in previous works such as One Flew over the Void (2005), Javier Téllez created a 'living sculpture' that relied on unorthodox collaborations of participants and the public.

*Commissioned by Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Project Curator: Mercedes Vicente*

John Di Stefano

On any other Sunday morning, the quiet town of Opunake (population: 1500) in the remote western part of rural Taranaki, New Zealand, would normally be deserted, but not today. People of all ages find their place in an ever-growing queue that is forming in front of the local cinema, *Everybody's Theatre*, on the town's only main street. There is a feeling of anticipation, curiosity and excitement, and I am informed that "the lions are in town" by a group of kids who are lined up, eager to enter the theatre. Indeed, live lions arrived a couple of days earlier in an unmarked van, *incognito*, and had been housed just next to the small locally-owned cinema, a quaint but rundown 1920s building still in operation today. The local community has been mobilized by the expectation of seeing something extraordinary that would certainly not repeat itself again in Opunake – an event that promises to become the stuff of legend.

Upon entering the movie theatre, we notice that the entire ground floor is vacant except for a small cluster of theatre seats in the centre of the space, facing the movie screen. Oddly, the theatre is rather sterile and looks like it has been gutted; the floor is made of concrete, and a high, cage-like chain-link fence surrounds the seats. The space is dramatically lit with spotlights and has the uncanny sense of being something like a circus tent. A film crew records us as we enter, and there are other cameras pointed to the other side of the fence. Some of the audience are invited to move to the balcony area where they have an elevated view of the ground floor. We are met by an usherette (Gwelfa Burgess—the oldest working usherette in New Zealand) who invites us to our seats, and then asks us to "stand up for the king" as the house lights go down and a vintage film clip of "God Save the King" played by the Buckingham Palace Guard band, is projected on the movie

screen. An air of colonial nostalgia and a by-gone sense of sovereignty fills the cinema. After the anthem is finished, we are invited to be seated. The lights stay low, a moving spotlight is illuminated and a side door opens. We hear the oddly gentle utterances of a lion outside—halfway between a roar and a purr—and then “the king” enters the theatre accompanied by his handler. The place is silent and the spotlight follows the lion as he moves around the “cage” where the audience is seated, often coming right up to the fenced area that begins to feel more and more precarious. We stare at the lion, only inches away, and he looks back at us through the chain-link. The screen lights up again and the well-known MGM film studio opening credits with roaring lion fills the theatre. The lion looks up to the image of his likeness on the screen and utters an acknowledgment. The handler cajoles the lion around the cage where he lingers for a while continuing to observe the audience with an intense curiosity. There is an undercurrent of suspense, and after a few more minutes, the lion leaves through the door from which he entered. As we are led out of the theatre, some of the people waiting to go in ask: “what did you see?” Someone responds: “A lion.”

Because of the unpredictability of the live lions, each performance, lasting 10 to 15 minutes, is different. During one sitting, the lion picks up the scent of a small, sleeping baby in the arms of his father seated at the edge of the chain-linked fence. The lion is motionless and stares intensely at the child only a few feet away. Is his fixed curiosity one of imminent attack, or of protection? The tension is palpable. Indeed, there is an emergent Colosseum-like sense of “being fed to the lions” for the audience in the balcony watching from a distant and safer vantage point. The distinction is blurred between the image of a lion that we are very familiar with, and the actual experience of being confronted with a real live lion. The audience seated on the ground floor soon becomes aware that they are just as much part of the spectacle as is the lion. It is in the tension between actual, real lion, and preconceived image of “lion”—much of which we have acquired through film—that a powerful undertow of the work emerges. Fluid moments like this—between distance and proximity, real and imagined, predator and prey—begin to unveil the parameters of Téllez’ ‘spectatorial’ event. The constant oscillation that Téllez manages to invoke, appears and disappears continually during the performance. The artist plays on the audience’s expectations of the performative event through his use of the circus-like

elements of the cage, spotlights, lion-handler, etc. The artist orchestrates these elements together in potentially volatile yet utterly compelling ways that oddly and magically interface man and beast, and in so doing makes a commentary on the cinema as a space and apparatus of illusion by mining the schism between the familiarity of the lion’s iconographic representation, and the unfamiliarity (even uncanniness) of the real object in the midst. Prior expectations that the audience may have had of a lion performing something *for* them within the realm of entertainment, is here displaced and reconfigured by the artist who offers the participants something altogether more tangible and unpredictable with elements of danger, and thus more real.

When referring to his earlier work *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* (2007), in which the artist invited a group of blind people to touch a live elephant, Téllez stated that he conceives cinema as a tool for the creation of new relations between people and spaces.¹ As part of the work, the artist produced a film which records the performative encounter between six blind people and the elephant, foregrounding the visceral senses of touch, smell, and sound experienced by the participants. In addition to the use of live, non-domestic animals in both *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* and *Intermission*, these two works seem to explore related terrains in regards to the fascination of a tangible encounter between the familiar and the unknown. The space for such encounters in Western culture has traditionally been the Big-top. Images of the carnivalesque in Fellini’s films come to mind, but when I ask the artist about his filmic references, he cites Pasolini, rather than Fellini, as an influence. Indeed, Téllez’ sensibilities are much more attuned to Pasolini’s radical, politicised and socially motivated notions of film rather than Fellini’s more nostalgically oriented *mise-en-scène*. Téllez uses non-professional actors—something Pasolini was well known for—“because their lack of representational skills makes the evidence of the real more visible.”² This “lack of representational skills” allows the artist to play within and between the documentation of “fictional rehearsals” as constitutive of these works. We might thus understand *Intermission* as a constructed event that uses real people, a work that oscillates between the realms of fiction and reality in a particular way. Taking his cues from various filmic vocabularies, Téllez creates a meta-cinematic event with *Intermission* where real, non-fictional and non-professional actors (the audience, the lion) encounter each

other within an architecture designed for cinematic representations and made porous by the performative event.

It is perhaps important to mention here that Téllez' grandfather was the owner of a cinema in a small town in his native Venezuela—not unlike *Everybody's Theatre*—and that the artist was brought up with that childhood experience and legacy. This is tempered by the fact that both of Téllez' parents were psychiatrists and that he was also surrounded by mental health patients in his formative years—autobiographical influences that emerge in the artist's work in subtle yet nevertheless significant ways.

But there is more to *Intermission* than Téllez' interest in the cinematic parameters of the “real”. Another work which informs *Intermission* is his 2002, *El León de Caracas* (The Lion of Caracas), a video work, which records the performative event, staged by the artist, where a taxidermic lion is paraded, procession-like, through one of Caracas' shanty towns by policemen. Here, the localization of the lion within Caracas' slums gives us another glimpse into Téllez' affinity with some of Pasolini's political motivated work. The soundtrack of *El León de Caracas* is the *Popule Meus* (1801) written by the Venezuelan composer José Angel Lamas, and is reminiscent of Pasolini's use of Bach's St. Matthew Passion in *Accattone* (1961). Here Bach's music functioned to instil a quasi-religious respect for the subject of Pasolini's film, the sub-proletarian of post-war Italy. In *El León de Caracas*, the nationalistic overtones of Lamas' music along with Téllez' frontal framing of the children and villagers' faces—a hallmark of Pasolini's camera in many of his films including *Accattone*—suggest a reverence in representing “the unspeakable” other embodied in the sub-proletarian. In Téllez' work, the lion (the heraldic symbol of the city of Caracas) is posited as a potential vehicle for agency of the underclass. The lion is revered and met with fascination and intense interest by the local children in the video as it winds its way through the vertiginous streets of the *barrio* to finally arrive at a level area at the bottom of the settlement. The children then revel in their ability (and permission) to touch and “encounter” the lion. Hands are placed in the lion's open mouth, fingers poke the glass eyes and run through the mane, etc. The (taxidermic) lion here becomes a means for the local population to interact in a non-violent way with the policemen who are the custodians of the lion, and who would have little opportunity to engage with these citizens other than within the confines of aggressive law enforcement. This suggests that the Lion of Caracas might embody a symbol of future hope and possibilities for relations—no matter how fleeting

they may be—between the disenfranchised and the instruments of power that the policemen represent. Here too is another type of encounter that Téllez puts forth for us to consider, one that is politically charged and has a social resonance.

Many of the projects in *One Day Sculpture* are concerned with the specificities of place, and *Intermission* is certainly among them. What may have initially been perceived as an idiosyncratic *homage* to the cinema and the carnivalesque, with oblique autobiographical references, reveals itself to be rooted within a larger project concerned with people's experience of their social and political status. To understand *Intermission* as a commentary about the social dimension of the remoteness of place is to begin to understand the political commentary embedded in Téllez' work. The artist has been successful in creating a lasting memory for a localized community by presenting an opportunity for that community to experience something out of the ordinary, and thus the artist opens up the possibility that something “unimaginable” might have the potential of becoming reality. Like the symbolic and momentary agency the children of the Caracas shantytown found in facing their fear of a repressive police force via their encounter with the Lion of Caracas, in *Opunake* too we might begin to understand the potential agency the encounter with a real lion may illicit. By bringing something “foreign” to *Opunake*, to provoke a precarious yet rich experience where curiosity, awe, fear, and power collide, Téllez opens up the possibility for its inhabitants to imagine the “unreal” as very real indeed. In so doing, the ability to manifest something outside of what is normally prescribed might now become possible in the minds of its inhabitants. In an understated yet nevertheless radical gesture, Téllez offers an opening within the local imaginary of a remote community.

1 Javier Téllez in conversation with Creative Time curator Mark Beasley (2007): www.creativetime.org.

2 Ibid.

Javier Téllez

The work of Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez reflects a sustained interest in bringing peripheral communities and invisible situations to the fore of contemporary art. His work deals with institutional dynamics, disabilities and mental illness as marginalising conditions, and borderline collective and individual behaviours. His practice has developed mostly within the video and installation tradition, although it also contains elements of performance and sculpture. Being research-based and place specific, Téllez' projects often dwell on the social and political histories of the locations where they develop. Based in New York since 1993, Téllez has exhibited widely internationally and his work has been included in important exhibitions of major institutions including InSite 05, Queens Museum of Art, P.S.1 MoMA, ZKM, Centro Cultural Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico City, as well as biennales such as the Moscow Biennale, Kwangju Biennale, Venice Biennale, Yokohama Triennale, the Biennale of Sydney and Manifesta.

John Di Stefano

John Di Stefano is an interdisciplinary artist, writer and curator whose current research interests revolve around the relationship between identity, displacement and transnationalism. His video work has been broadcast on American public television (PBS), and has won several awards, including the *New Vision Award* at the San Francisco International Film Festival. In 2001, his work was selected by the publication *Artforum* in its yearly international survey. Exhibitions and screenings include: *Transmediale* (Berlin); Barcelona Museum of Modern Art; *Kassel Documentary Film Festival*, (Germany); Hammer Museum (Los Angeles); Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles); and Palais des Beaux-Arts (Brussels). Di Stefano's curatorial projects include *Satellite* (Shanghai), *Open Cities* (Hong Kong/Chicago), and *Not On Any Map* (Chicago), and programming for various international film festivals. He is an itinerant curator for MOCA-China (Hong Kong). He has published in various international journals and anthologies, and is the New Zealand editor of *Art Asia Pacific* (New York). He is presently Associate Professor and Director of the Postgraduate Studies programme at Massey University's School of Fine Arts.

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Recommended Reading

100 Latin American Artists, Rosa Olivares, Exit Publications, Madrid, 2007, pp. 410–413, 452.

Between Two Deaths, Ellen Blumenstein, Felix Ensslin, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, exhibition catalogue, 2007, pp. 28, 55, 58, 232–235, 303.

Footnotes on Geopolitics, Market, and Amnesia, Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, Moscow, exhibition catalogue, 2006, pp. 168–169.

First Architecture, Art and Landscape Biennial of the Canaries, Viceconsejería de Cultura, exhibition catalogue, 2006.

"Javier Téllez bei Peter Kilchmann", Dominique von Burg, *Kunst-Bulletin*, Lucerne, No. 5, 2006.

"Biennials/Survey Shows", Will Bradley, *Frieze*, London, Issue 96, Jan/Feb, 2006.

Un Nuevo y Bravo Mundo, El Perro, Jordi Costa, Sala Alcalá, Madrid, exhibition catalogue, 2005.