

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**THOMAS HIRSCHHORN
POOR-RACER
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY CHERYL BERNSTEIN**

Thomas Hirschhorn

Poor-Racer

15 March 2009, 00.00 to 23.59

The Esplanade, Sumner, Christchurch

Sunday March 15 2009 saw The Physics Room and Christchurch Art Gallery present a new sculptural work by the international artist Thomas Hirschhorn. This remarkable sculpture existed for just 24 hours, starting at midnight on Saturday and ending at midnight on Sunday, in a busy public location on The Esplanade that runs adjacent to the Christchurch beaches of Sumner and Scarborough. Hirschhorn dramatically customised a standard sedan with a variety of cheap materials as is typically seen in his practice, and places the car on show for a limited time only—potentially attracting both car enthusiasts and the general public alike. The sculpture references the global enthusiasm for car customisation evident in the lowered, louder, brighter and bolder DIY modifications seen parading city streets: "I am interested in the universal act of customising. Its universality comes from its personal act as an individual gesture. Universality is created by love, by personal implication, by giving a form to one's passion...Customising or tuning is an act of resistance to the non-written laws of all kinds of exclusion. In the desperate and useless act of car-tuning I see a form of resistance throughout form. And as an artist - what can interest me more than Form?"

***Commissioned by the Physics Room, Christchurch
Project Curators: Kate Montgomery and Danae Mossman***

Cheryl Bernstein

Thomas Hirschhorn's *Poor-racer* was an artwork perfectly conceived for Christchurch, the unabashed boy-racer capital of New Zealand. The defining sound of the suburbs is no longer lawn-mowers and leaf-blowers, as the recent promotion of the Ellerslie Flower Show would have you believe, but instead the 'Pssst! Pssst! Varoommmm' of a customised Mazda Familia accelerating at speed. The small guy had complained about driving out to see the sculpture on a Sunday morning, suggesting that a car covered in cardboard would be boring. 'What is it? A car covered in cardboard? Did he use blue-tack or sellotape to stick it? It's a car, and it's cardboard. Not interesting.'

But when we saw it, it was. Actually, the small guy's eyes lit up. The car was parked nonchalantly about halfway

along the Esplanade towards Scarborough Hill: a lowered, modified Japanese four-cylinder pimped with gigantic cardboard sideskirts, spoiler and insanely large hood scoop (or perhaps intercooler?), and tin foil mags, plus internal stabilising bars made out of what looked like toilet roll inners sellotaped together. The bonnet was raised to show engine parts 'chromed' with more tin foil. It looked driveable, but only just. Ridiculous and entirely wonderful, its obvious painstaking labour out of all proportion with the results, Hirschhorn's low rider was like a school project on steroids, its materials unfit for its ambitious conception. I couldn't decide if it was a monument to heroic failure, or just plain heroic. It reminded me a lot of New Zealand photographer Marie Shannon's photographs of her own 'unworthy objects', like her cardboard model house or the 'museum of cat fur'.

There were a few people milling around the pimped

cardboard car with a vague sense of purpose as we approached. It was an unlikely and diverse group of individuals who'd bonded in contemplation of a peculiar object. There were half a dozen puzzled elderly punters who'd diverted from their Sunday constitutional(0), and a plump young guy with a curly mullet and nylon soccer shorts. There was the cultural attaché from the Swiss Embassy; curator Danae Mossman who greeted us with a grin and a wave; a couple of bleary-eyed young art students who'd assisted with gaffer tape and tin foil through the night, sitting on a tartan picnic blanket beside a chillybin like refugees at Glastonbury; and the artist, tall and thin and dressed in black, chatting with all-comers. There was a tension in the air, a sense that something might be going to happen, or perhaps that something had already happened and we'd missed it.

It was quieter than usual on the foreshore. A coldish easterly had blown up along the beach, so the usual hordes of girls in bikini tops and board shorts and guys in wet suits a size too small queuing on the reserve for the sole public dunny were conspicuous by their absence. A modified car slowed down as it passed by on a circuit of the Esplanade, four pale faces pressed to the windows.

Even if it's only to last for 24 hours, the launch of a new public work of art is a performative event. Specific codes of behaviour apply. The people who've arrived before you have already bonded; until you can ingratiate yourself, you're an outsider. People move around the sculpture chatting in a desultory sort of way, sometimes concerned with the work but usually with something else entirely. There is a great deal of one-up-manship: art people are off to Venice, just back from Sao Paulo or Storm King. When the small-talk fails, people stare fixedly at the work again until conversational inspiration strikes or someone more interesting arrives. The awkwardness of it all is intensified when the person who made the work is standing there too, hands in pockets, contemplating the scene.

My usual defence against social anxiety (or indeed performance art), mindless badinage or smart remarks, is instantly ruled out as an ice-breaker in the presence of the artist. On this occasion, only one coffee down, my hair unbrushed, accompanied by two small and grumbling children and unable to make consolatory wisecracks, I felt less than adequate for the task of intelligent viewership. The whole venture was puzzling. The work seemed to be about the glory of failure, its monumental effort realised with patently inadequate means; but its ideological position

was unclear. Was it intended as a celebration or a critique of the supercharged rituals and aesthetics of car culture, or indeed, those of the international artworld itself? Could it be potentially all of those things, all at once? I strongly suspected that it might.

To get my bearings I walked round the car, and had a look at the detail -- the cardboard steering wheel, the fruit tray like a little mat on the passenger's side floor, the flames emblazoned in magic marker, and took a few photos, and thought about it for a bit, stalling for time before I might be required to say anything sensible. The front windows were plastered in a grid of carefully-applied masking tape, like the way public galleries tape glazed artworks for travel. Twin exhausts were covered in tinfoil, poking through a drippily-sprayed red cardboard flange. The ridiculous sideskirts were festooned with 'sponsors' stickers, haphazardly applied. Amateurishly lettered signs done in magic marker decorated the roof and doors ('Able Racing', 'Constellation', 'Inter-Cooler'). No surface remained unmodified. I made a circuit of the car by myself, and then another one with the small guy, who pointed out things I might have missed. After a while one of the curators, Danae Mossman, came up for a chat, and told us she was living in New York, but might move on soon. There was a pause. We all turned to stare at the car again.

'Supersized subwoofer,' said the big guy presently, making conversation.

'It's not actually a subwoofer,' explained Danae. 'It's the petrol tank: when cars are lowered, apparently, the petrol tank needs to be raised and welded into the boot cavity so it doesn't scrape along the ground and burst into flames.'

'Oh, OK,' we said, and nodded.

It was one of those strange art moments, standing in the cold wind of the Esplanade at morning tea time on a Sunday looking at a cardboard box covered in tin foil and being instructed by an art history MA in the finer points of street racer customization.

'Take a photo of me in front of the car,' said the small guy, and posed, legs apart, hands behind his back, squinting into the weak autumn sun. It was about then that the artist finished speaking with a passerby. He looked our way. 'Come on, I'll introduce you,' said Danae. There was no escaping it.

'Hello,' I said, and 'Great work.' There was a slight pause.

'Thanks for coming out to New Zealand,' I squeaked.

'Thank you,' he said seriously. Although I had no idea what else I could say, I opened my mouth to speak, trusting that something vaguely intelligent and critically penetrating would come out. I was aware of a certain pressure to perform. Suddenly I was aware of a strange sensation behind me. It was the small guy, who had momentarily escaped from his father and crept up to ping the elastic of my underpants. 'Snap! Snap!' they went.

Hard to sustain any pretence at the serious art thing after that, and probably just as well.

The drive back into the city was punctuated by sightings of customized vehicles, as well as by the painful realization of vaguely intelligent things I might have talked to the artist about, if only I'd thought of them at the time. When I got home, I read Thomas Hirschhorn's statement about the work.

'The fact of personalising one's own ordinary car in order to give it a unique individual touch is the revolutionary gesture of everybody, without exclusion. Customising or tuning is an act of resistance to the non-written laws of all kinds of exclusion. In the desperate and useless act of car-tuning I see a form of resistance throughout form.'

On that particular Sunday morning desperate and useless was something I could identify with. I thought for a bit about the way the artworld has always customized the forms of other cultures for its own ends, and realized that I wished I'd asked what the car enthusiasts present made of Hirschhorn's project. Not for the first time, I reflected on the handbrake factor applied to thinking seriously about art while one's in charge of small kids. I thought about the way that public works of art, even when co-opting the dumbest popular forms, can't help but exclude simply by requiring intelligent and open engagement on the part of the passing viewer: art itself conceived as a form of resistance to stupidity. And then I thought I should consider the underpants tweak as the small guy's own personal act of resistance to looking at too much art in the weekends.

Thomas Hirschhorn

Renowned for hypersaturated installations, Thomas Hirschhorn's work is a bombardment of information and imagery. Referencing philosophy, popular culture, economics, poetry, artists and designers, Hirschhorn's assemblages commonly employ foil, tape, board, plastic, paper, and other found and ephemeral materials. As part of a generation of European artists and intellectuals who came of age in the wake of the 1968 Paris student uprisings, Hirschhorn's perspective is informed by boldly anti-hierarchical notions, a stance consequently reflected in the thrift and eccentricity of the materials used to construct his works. Deeply suspicious of traditional notions of heroism, Hirschhorn has adapted the format of spontaneous public memorials and commemorative roadside shrines in order to pay homage to the artist's heroes without the overblown semantics of the monumental tradition. Avoiding the pristine expectations of the gallery, Hirschhorn's altars are acted upon by time and environmental contexts and ideally blend back into the situations from which they emerged over the period of their installation. Born in Switzerland and spending time in France, Hirschhorn was educated at the Schule für Gestaltung in Zürich. Exhibitions of note include 'Bataille Monument', Documenta XI, Germany, 2002; '24h Foucault', Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2004; 'FlugplatzWelt/World-Airport', Venice Biennale, Italy, 1999.

Cheryl Bernstein

Cheryl Bernstein is an art writer and blogger who lives in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Recommended Reading

27a. Bienal de São Paulo: Como Viver Junto, eds. Lisette Lagnado and Adriano Pedrosa (Casac Naify, São Paulo, 2008).

Stations: 100 Masterpieces of Contemporary Art (Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 2008).

Into Me/Out of Me (KW Institute for Contemporary Art; P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008).

Collage: The Unmonumental Picture (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007).

Volksgarten: Politics of Belonging (Walther König, 2007).

Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London: Whitechapel; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Alison M. Gingeras, Carlos Basualdo, *Thomas Hirschhorn* (Phaidon, 2004).