

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**BIK VAN DER POL
1440 MINUTES TOWARDS
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A
SITE
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY JON BYWATER**

Bik van der Pol
1440 Minutes Towards The Development Of A Site
Wednesday 8 April 2009, 00.00–23.59
Band Rotunda, Albert Park, Auckland

In being invited to produce a project that engaged in the language of sculpture and also prefaced a new curatorial model for context-responsive art practice, Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol decided to strip their proposal down to its basic fundamentals. With 1440 minutes towards the development of a site, they took time itself as material. The artists framed their chosen site of a public park, next to the university where they were undertaking a month's residency, with a sign for time. The large digital clock ticked down from 1440 minutes, marking every minute of the day. The stage set by the clock was handed over to the students at the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland, who with Bik Van der Pol had workshopped the subject of free speech in New Zealand to produce a series of posters. The posters of various points of view were collated into a pamphlet and dispersed from the centre of the band rotunda. The publication reflected on the inherent contradictions and paradoxes that inform the very subject of free speech at this time. These contradictions also pointed back to the arbitrary clock, and further to the ambiguous expectation for an artwork to deliver in an outcome-orientated milieu.

Commissioned by independent curator Laura Preston, in association with Artspace and Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Jon Bywater

Ten paragraphs towards the interpretation of a public event

1

Precise but abstract, with no overt connotations of allusion or metaphor, *1440 minutes towards the development of a site* is a title well camouflaged for deployment in the civic realm. Appropriately clear and impersonal for the context, it names an artwork that takes place in a public park, somewhere readily identified as a site, and does indeed exist for 1440 minutes. How, though, are we to understand the artists' intervention here as 'developing' something? The ambiguity of this term might suggest a purpose for the

work as an experiment in or as a demonstration of the idea of development. But 'site', too, then, is in question: what is it that might be seen to be being developed by this event? Returning to the measure of time, three questions emerge: what is a site, what is it to develop a site, and how much can one day count?

2

In Albert Park, Wednesday April 8 2009 dawns overcast. It is a university holiday. Working nearby as I do, these facts stand out to me as reasons why the flow of people around Bik van der Pol's encampment in the band rotunda feels sparser than usual. Otherwise more students might be cutting the corner from Wellesley Street to Princes Street, and more workers coming by to snatch some sunshine.

The leaves of the deciduous exotics are falling. Acorns are strewn across the lawns. Not a great deal seems to be going on. Inside the rotunda a large digital clock, facing outwards on a simple stand, is a quarter of the way through counting down 1440 minutes. Next to it, stacks of publications on a trolley – which also started in the order of 1000 – are slowly diminishing, at a less regular but nonetheless steady pace. Half a dozen of the students from the University of Auckland’s School of Fine Arts who have been involved in the artists’ project are giving copies away to passers-by.

3

I file my copy of the publication, my attention taken up with the artists and the art school people. Taking my time to experience what is going on, wanting to see what the situation might reveal to me, my first impression is one of slowness. I find myself anticipating the shift from minute to minute, as the filaments of the display flip from digit to digit. When I look to the clock, it can take slightly longer to change than I predict it will, and seems to draw me into its rhythm. The patience or resignation of those people committed to being here for the duration has a parallel effect. The stories being told this morning are about earlier encounters. A stranger who is a regular here has led the art team through a yoga routine. Someone else came to converse with a “cheeky” tree that evidently required a talking to. People also do Tai Chi here. Having pushed myself to stop and stay, forty minutes pass in no time. I take my leave and head back to work.

4

The curator Laura Preston’s essay for the publication begins by poetically evoking the indefinite multiplicity of stories that might be told to rehearse the history of this place, a starting point for private reminiscences that come out during the day. The artists’ generic title for the work, though, leaves the parameters of its site undefined, and so its subject more general. Travelling from the Netherlands, Bik van der Pol are careful not to make any strong claim to discuss this particular place – its history as an indigenous

paa-turned-colonial-barracks-turned-lunch-spot that the Auckland City Council, in any case, makes available through its own presentation of the site – but instead, they frame the municipal lawn and its eccentric architecture as an example of something perhaps familiar in the way many places are ‘officially public’. The work’s inquiry might include too, then, the questions: what are the conditions of possibility for making something show up in such a space; and to what extent can this be available to or constitute a public?

5

In their white shirts and dark pants, Red Cross volunteers are accosting people near the entrance to the park, signing people up for automatic payments, clipboards in hand, pens on strings. They are competition for the crew distributing the art publication. Some of the art students report that they have had to insist that they don’t want anything back for the paper they are offering. I am reminded of my impatience with cold-calling direct marketing on the telephone and my sense of anachronism encountering the Mormon minister at my door the weekend prior. The forms and mechanisms of the broadsheet and placard, and even of a public gathering or display, are freighted with connotations that render their aim to communicate at best indirect. The park is revealed to be saturated with such expectations of commerce, economies of attention and calculations of returns.

6

At dusk the red glow of the digital clock appears as an illusory, fiery warmth, and finds an echo in the corporate sign of the Oracle building in the distance. The clock still addresses a potential crowd, who never in fact assemble. People drop by and move on. Camaraderie builds and wanes. The gathering is always relatively small. One of the volunteers points out that the number of minutes remaining is more tangibly imagined as it’s down to multiples of the length of a DVD. Ana has been here for the entire time. The irony, she says, is that she will have to leave at a quarter to midnight. I talk about the sense of completeness that Frans

de Waal mentioned chimpanzees display in relation to what might otherwise be open-ended tasks, such as making a 'painting'. The chimpanzee 'painter' will be upset if the painting she is making is taken away from her before she is finished, but loses interest in it once she has. We laugh at the strength of the instinct that it makes any difference to have been here for the entire duration. Someone arranges a ride for Ana.

7

At a public lecture the previous evening, Bik van der Pol presented a selection of other works they have made in public space. Their *Art is either plagiarism or revolution, or: something is definitely going to happen here* made on the proposed site for the Museum of Revolution in New Belgrade in 2007 stands out as a comparison. A spectacular non-event, the concrete platform that is the marker of the stalled project in The Park of Friendship was cordoned, lit and filmed as a media event emptied of content. In today's case, the 'non-event' is not staged for a photo opportunity, but allowed to generate its small-scale counter public quietly, in a way that becomes meaningful as an experience first on the scale of personal interactions. This place within the artists' oeuvre also brings to mind the piece's position within the One Day Sculpture series. The One Day Sculpture Wellington symposium took place just prior to Bik van der Pol's project, and the single-day format is now familiar to some of the audience. The directness of the artists' response to the parameters fits this autumnal mood of summing up.

8

As the rotunda and the park around it have historically functioned as a platform for political demonstration, so the parameters of the event and the publication — the outcome of a workshop the artists have run with the students on the subject of freedom of speech — provide a venue for expression. Acknowledging the problem that freedom of speech is a liberty not a licence (as Nigel Warburton summarises it, after John Stuart Mill, in his recent *Free Speech: A Very Short Introduction*, 2009), Bik van der Pol have used a quotation from the North American writer, Rita

Mae Brown, for the cover that neatly expresses the hope that style can sort out the difference between, say, dumb propaganda or idle prejudice, and expressions worthy of the right: 'My only request is that participants have a sense of humour. Freedom demands a constant vigilance against the dull, the pretentious and the bad liar.'

9

The artwork's official description borrows the concept of 'free zone' from the location's history of political protest. Its sense of time finds an affinity with an earlier era for students, when study may have involved less clearly instrumental ends, leaving some more open and able to take up others' causes. It is easy to romanticise such conditions, but nonetheless there seems to be a connection between that kind of freedom from ends in daily routine, this piece, and art in general, something like Kant's 'purposiveness without purpose' perhaps.

10

The site that is developed might best be understood as one created by the work; not a pre-existing physical or cultural location but a set of coordinates defined by those relations through time that it creates or uncovers and acknowledges. Inhabiting this ground for a single day, measured in a plain, conventional way, it does not seek to entertain, nor disguises itself as entertainment. Pointedly refusing to be dramatic or otherwise to offer up a definitive image, the gestures of the occupation and the publication open a space in which others' ideas can assemble in conversation, and from where they can continue to develop and become effective as they disperse.

Bik van der Pol

Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol have worked collectively as Bik Van der Pol since 1995. In vastly differing formats spanning installation, temporary public architecture, workshops, billboards, live collaborative events and publications they explore the potential of art to produce and transmit knowledge. Proceeding from an engagement with place, their working methods are based on co-operation and research, often involving direct exchange with their audiences and/or institutional partners. By these means they seek to 'activate situations' and create platforms for various kinds of communicative activities. Recent projects and exhibitions include 'Plug In #28', (Eindhoven: Van AbbeMuseum, 2007); 'Models For Tomorrow' (Cologne: European Kunsthalle, 2007); Moscow Biennale (Moscow, 2007); 'Fly Me To The Moon' (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2006); 'Naked Life' (Taipei: MOCA, 2006); and 'Nomads in Residence', a mobile workspace for artists, (Utrecht, 2003).

Jon Bywater

Jon Bywater is a writer, widely published on art and music, and teaches at Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland, where he is Programme Leader for Critical Studies. He is a member of the collectives Cuckoo (<http://www.cuckoo.org.nz>) and Local Time (<http://local-time.net>), and a regular contributor to Artforum and The Wire. He was a co-organiser of the international symposia for practitioners and theorists, Cultural Provocation: Art, Activism and Social Change (Auckland, August 2003) and Cultural Futures: Place, Ground and Practice in Asia Pacific New Media Arts (Auckland, December 2005). With Danny Butt and Nova Paul he is a co-editor of the collection *Place: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

Recommended Reading

Fly Me To The Moon (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2006)

Past Imperfect (Utrecht: Casco; Frankfurt: Revolver, 2006)

Jean Attali, Wouter Davids, Charles Esche, Mary Jane Jacob, Sven Lutticken, Arno van Roosmalen, Jan Verwoert
With Love From The Kitchen, On The Work of Bik van der Pol (Rotterdam: NAI 2005).