

SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned response to Heather & Morison's *Journée Des Barricades, 2008*

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Heather & Ivan Morison
Journée Des Barricades, 2008
14 December 2008, midnight to midnight
Stout Street, between Lambton Quay
and Ballance Streets, Wellington, New
Zealand

The temporary public artwork entitled *Journée Des Barricades* acted as a rupture in the everyday comings and goings of the city. An assemblage of car wrecks, discarded furniture and other urban detritus that barricaded a central city street, the sculpture suggested associations with the history of political actions and social unrest. As a collection of discarded consumer products it also brought to mind questions about our environmental and economic future. Challenging people to look squarely into the future and prepare themselves for what might be coming, it proposed a shift in thinking from the popular environmentalist view that we must preserve the status quo to the survivalist approach of preparing for an unstoppable and inevitable change. In stark contrast to the sculpture's grandiosity was its temporality - installed overnight between dusk Saturday and dawn Sunday, the work was in situ for just 24 hours before 'disappearing' overnight, returning Stout Street back to normal for the Monday morning rush-hour.

"Every performance enacts a theory, and every theory performs in the public square." (Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*)

The first decade of this new millennium is haunted by the spectre of catastrophe, found in spectacular events that invade and haunt the collective imaginary: floods, tsunamis, earthquakes and invasions, as well as the collapse of monuments, regimes and economies. Operating on an epic scale these extended moments in nature and civilisation unsettle our sense of security, shift our consciousness and blur boundaries between the local and the global. British artists Heather and Ivan Morison tend to refer to this "worrying world"¹ through what curator Claire Doherty calls an "ongoing investigation into future catastrophic scenarios and their social implications."² Their most recent project, with its direct allusion to the Parisian revolutionary barricades, also references the blockades of more recent protest and warfare as well as forming a post-apocalyptic image that suggests some "climatic disaster."³ Such artwork, which takes on the role of playing between past, present and future histories not only elicits an aesthetic charge within the civic realm, but could also feasibly harness public and private performances.

If performance is, as Elin Diamond contends, both "a doing and a thing done"⁴ then the *barricade* – an unstable and ephemeral architecture originally built as a communal act of camaraderie and defiance – presents a powerfully performative concept for *One Day Sculpture's* focus on the artwork as a fleeting event. Like the words 'construction' (a structure and the act of its making) and 'refuse' (that which is rejected and a mode of resistance), 'barricade' (a temporary obstruction and its swift formation) represents both object and action. A barricade constructed of refuse is therefore potentially an active and activating thing, and it was precisely this phenomenon that Christmas shoppers encountered in New Zealand's capital city on Sunday, December 14th, 2008.

The monumental installation "made up from the detritus of Wellington" inhabited and bifurcated Stout Street, which provided an ideal urban

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frame for viewing the sight from Lambton Quay.⁵ A colossal mass of inorganic rubbish borrowed from local recyclers and the dump, it was formed from abandoned vehicles, tyres, compacted plastic, household appliances, bicycles, supermarket trolleys and – on closer inspection – garden and domestic objects, including a host of children’s toys. It seemed as if Wellington had violently disgorged its suburban contents only to be washed up onto the city’s original shoreline, now 250 metres from the existing waterfront. Passers-by were drawn towards this massive spill, which somehow made sense of *Ruamoko* (1998), the Hotere/McFarlane sculpture standing in the foreground. Like *Ruamoko* – composed of pillars and letters from the State Insurance Building that once occupied the corner site – this behemoth was formed from salvaged materials. However, unlike the smaller public artwork, the wall of rubbish was designed to inhabit the street for a single day; from its construction, which began at midnight on Saturday, to its total disassembly and dispersal 24 hours later: hence *Journée Des Barricades* – The day of barricades.

This project’s title reinforces the durational and ephemeral quality of the work of art – literally here today and gone tomorrow – as emphasised by the *One Day Sculpture* series. The artwork’s enduring objecthood is questioned and undermined by focussing on its passing performance. However in my response to the work, which considers the barricade as performative architecture, I propose that a potential discrepancy resides at the heart of the Morisons’ project – the place where noun and verb fail to cohere – thereby withholding the barricade’s promise as both object and action. Before discussing this perceived gap I will outline the origins of the barricade and consider its implications within a contemporary context.

Journée Des Barricades – which translates as The day of barricades (objects) as well as The day of protest (action) – refers to the Parisian revolt of May 12th 1848 when the populace successfully enacted a spontaneous uprising against the King and his troupes by hastily constructing street blockades. This was the first use of such structures to create combative urban obstructions, although their genesis lay in the practice of bolting chains to the foundation stones of buildings and

stringing them across street openings as a devised means of isolating and protecting sections of neighbourhoods from local aggressors. However on May 12th these chains were augmented with piles of wagons, timbers and wooden barrels (*barricades* – hence the term ‘barricades’) filled with earth and paving stones. Parisians have since utilised this improvised architecture as an effective means of public insurgency during a number of 19th-century revolutionary events, as well as those of 1968 – commonly referred to as *Année des Barricades* (The Year of Barricades) – creating street obstructions by literally uprooting the urban environment (trees, cobblestones and street furniture) as well as disgorging and hastily reassembling household contents.

“*Sous les pavés, la plage!* – Beneath the paving stones, the beach!”⁶ Although this Situationist slogan, which appeared scrawled on Parisian walls in 1968, is relevant to the reclaimed waterfront site selected for the Morisons’ sculpture, such radical events in which streets are torn apart and domestic environments are emptied out to create lines of defence seem far away and long ago. Yet Wellington’s *Journée Des Barricades* followed hard on Thailand’s airport blockade; an eight-day public siege in which demonstrators against the government paralysed cargo shipments and stranded thousands of travellers by setting up an encampment around the airport. The Morisons’ project directly coincided with riots in Athens (in protest against the police shooting of a teenager) where clouds of tear gas were blanketing the city while protestors hurled paving stones at the police and set Christmas trees alight. These extended moments of public insurgency force us to question the value of an aesthetically constructed barricade in downtown Wellington during the Christmas season.

In her investigation on the emergence of post-revolutionary social space, Kristen Ross suggests that the bricolage construction of the 19th-century barricades – where quotidian objects are recycled – provided an antithesis to the autocratic.⁷ As a radical form of architecture continually fashioned from the debris of assault, the barricades transformed the concept of space from sedentary environments, designed to contain and control our lives, to more dynamic structures we helped

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create.⁸ Revolutionary events therefore signalled a shift in attitude against monumental architecture, for which German architect Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) was renowned. Yet Semper designed and supervised the construction of a makeshift wall of carts and domestic items outside his house during Dresden's 1848 revolution. His erstwhile collaborator, Richard Wagner, referred to the "famous 'Semper' barricade"⁹ built "with all the conscientiousness of a Michel Angelo [sic] or Leonardo da Vinci".¹⁰ As the architect of monumentality Semper also embraced the symbolic impermanence of spectacular events, theatrical masking and carnivalesque atmospheres. His involvement in the 1848 revolution led to long-term exile and the curtailment of his involvement in major architectural projects, suggesting the radicality and threat of such ephemeral architectures. Mikesch Muecke points out that Semper's temporary architecture of resistance was "significantly not a conventional building but rather an intervention between buildings."¹¹ It was also, as Muecke illustrates, an intervention between theory and practice, art and architecture, the status quo and resistance.

160 years after Semper's Dresden barricade and five centuries after the first *Journée des barricades* in Paris we find ourselves living in an era of barriers; from data codes that restrict our access on and offline; to ephemeral constructions of plastic tape and synthetic webbing, which file us into obedient rows in airports, banks, museums, galleries and corporate lobbies; to the more overt portable concrete fences that surround the White House or divide Palestinian territories from land claimed by Israel. No longer constructed as revolutionary acts of resistance, these shifting obstructions are associated with the status quo. Established in the name of security, they have come to limit our freedom in the very name of freedom. The Morisons' barricade reminds us that in this current condition of a global crisis – referred to last year by our Prime Minister as "the newsecurityparadigmsince9/11"¹² – it is critical we question the many obstructions (real and virtual) which are created as a means of public protection.

So now that the tables are turned, what role can the artist play in this new era of the officially erected bureaucratic barricade? Less than two

weeks after Wellington's Barricade was constructed and dismantled, Israel attacked the Gaza Strip where Hamas were resisting being fenced in and blockaded by building tunnels below the borders. The anonymous artist, Banksy, shows us that the artwork can still do battle in the face of power's brutal obstructions. His graffiti images on the West Bank walls – silhouettes of children lifted into the air by balloons, ladders inviting escape or apertures showing views onto more idyllic landscapes – remind us that these barriers form "the world's largest open prison."¹³ Such guerrilla activities, which challenge the status quo, do not require permission or negotiation with the authorities. This can also be seen in Olafur Eliasson's *Green River* series (from 1998) where the artist furtively pours fine grains of a nontoxic pigment into the rivers of major cities, temporarily turning them neon-green.

The paradox of the Morisons' project is that, despite its associations with political resistance (involving radical, hostile or unexpected manoeuvres), the erection of the barricade engaged in neither spontaneous nor furtive action. Theirs was a carefully planned installation that required exhaustive negotiations with the authorities in order to close off a city street, erect a blockade and comply with health and safety issues – all with minimal disruption to the city's traffic and negligible damage to its urban fabric.¹⁴ This pacified both the object (and its objective), rendering it monumental, sculptural and totalising rather than durational, subversive or communal. The giant barricade – perspectively framed by some of the most European buildings in Wellington – also resembled a scenic backdrop. Cleared of parked cars, Stout Street became a picturesque space that drew the public in from Lambton Quay towards the artwork. But once you approached the spectacular assemblage, you realised that physical engagement with it was restricted, other than to look and marvel at its epic scale or enjoy the carefully arranged objects within objects – the most delightful being a collection of toys staring out at you from the dashboard of a van. Discretely placed stewards appeared (like museum docents) to prevent people from rummaging through its contents, scrambling up its

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precipitous structure or even climbing the rusty ladder left invitingly against the back of a battered vehicle.¹⁵ Nevertheless moments occurred where the barricade was breached to the delight of onlookers who tended to stand back and capture it on camera.

A limited active connection with the installation is what sets this work apart from the Morisons' earlier celebrated project – *I lost her near Fantasy Island. Life has not been the same* (2006) – in which they staged an apparent accident with an articulated lorry. As part of the *British Art Show 6* in Bristol this previous installation presented an ambiguous scene in which 25,000 cut flowers were scattered from the shed of the jack-knifed truck; yet as with *Journée des barricades* the aesthetic arrangement suggested it was more installation than mishap. The public who approached the floral spill also tended to keep their distance throughout the day but tentatively began to help themselves to its wilting contents, triggering a free-for-all activity that mobilised and dispersed the work into the city via its inhabitants. This durational work recalls Wolfgang Hanfstein's project *Entropie* (2006) staged that same year during Germany's hosting of the World Cup in June. Hanfstein arranged 60,000 blue balls en masse in various city squares and parks and, as with the Morisons' flowers, people hesitantly began to engage with the balls until all joined in a communal celebration of play, gradually disassembling the piece and eventually taking its contents away. Both these durational works unfolded as participatory gifts in which the community actively completed the work: each event concluding when the last object was disseminated into the urban environment.

As a public performance, the participatory event challenges the artwork's longevity by leaving few traces and only secondary recordings for the archive. However Wellington's *Journée Des Barricades*, which was presented as a distanced, safe and static object, foreclosed on the element most critical to the barricade as a "global symbol of revolt" – what Mark Tragoutt calls the "repertoire of collective action."¹⁶ Diana Taylor takes up this notion of the 'repertoire' as opposed to the 'archive', maintaining that the former is predicated on 'being there' as a necessary part of the trans-

mission.¹⁷ The performance of works calls upon the public as social actors to participate in the scene "as witnesses, spectators, or voyeurs [...]. What is our role 'there'? – how are we ethically and politically implicated?"¹⁸

Yet it is in *Journée Des Barricades* archive (the place in which the repertoire is banished to the past)¹⁹ where we find its true action.

This was presented by the artists in the public forum on December 17th 2008 as projected images of the sculpture's construction throughout the night and early morning.²⁰ These images of the barricade being erected by a team of volunteers who willingly took on hard physical labour – expending a huge amount of energy to create something so transitory – suggest a more compelling experience than viewing the work after they had departed: witnessed 'live' by those few who happened upon this 'happening' – *Nuit des barricades* – in the small hours of Sunday morning.

The potency of *Journée Des Barricades* lay in its scenic splendour as a sculpture that fleetingly linked the theatrical and the quotidian with the catastrophic. Confronting the public with an image that suggests some sort of epic failure (social, political or ecological) recalls Walter Benjamin's conflation of the "moment of enchantment" with the "figure of shock."²¹ Coming across a barricade constructed of refuse indexes the ground on which it stands – reclaimed land constructed over a century ago from barricades of refuse – reminding us that we occupy despoiled shores. It also affirms Victor Burgin's statement that art itself could be considered a "form of ecological pollution."²² Although the barricade was more object than action, returning the sculpture's contents to the dump and recyclers from which it was borrowed still positions the artwork as a fleeting event: a transitory performance that leaves its traces only in the minds of those who witnessed it as well as in the archival documentation and articles such as this one.

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Biography

Professor Dorita Hannah (PhD) lectures in Spatial Design at Massey University College of Creative Arts, New Zealand. Architecture and performance form the principle threads weaving through Dr Hannah's creative work, teaching and research. Her practice includes scenographic, interior, exhibition and installation design with a specialization in performing arts architecture. Both her design and writing explore the politics and dynamics of spatial performativity.

- 1 Heather Morison, speaking at Massey University public discussion on *Journée Des Barricades*: December 17th, 2009.
- 2 *One Day Sculpture* website: http://www.onedaysculpture.org.nz/ODS_artistdetail.php?idartist=13
- 3 Heather Morison, speaking at Massey University public discussion on *Journée Des Barricades*: December 17th, 2009.
- 4 Elin Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London: New York: Routledge Press, 1996), p5.
- 5 *One Day Sculpture* website: http://www.onedaysculpture.org.nz/ODS_artistdetail.php?idartist=13
- 6 Anonymous graffiti, Paris 1968
- 7 Kristen Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pvi.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p8
- 9 Richard Wagner, *My Life, Vol. 1* (BiblioBazaar, 2006), p515.
- 10 Wagner cited by Harry Frances Mulgrave in *Modern Architectural Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p133.
- 11 Mikesch W. Muecke: *Gottfried Semper in Zurich - An Intersection of Theory and Practice*, Ames: IA, Culicidae Architectural Press, 2005, p14.
- 12 Helen Clark's address to the US Secretary of State on July 26, 2008, published online by the US Department of State, 30th July, 2008: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/07/107512.htm>
- 13 www.banksy.co.uk
- 14 As Heather Morison explained in a radio interview that morning, the site was carefully selected in order to create minimal disruption for the public: "we didn't want to inconvenience people." (Arts on Sunday, Radio New Zealand National, December 14th, 2009).
- 15 Although the artists may have wished for the public to have an unmediated experience with the work, 'protocols' were established for stewards to prevent people from climbing on the barricade or taking anything away. In my personal experience and observation over a couple of hours we were told the artwork could not be touched.
- 16 Mark Tragoult: *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, Duke University Press, 1995, p54.
- 17 Diana Taylor: *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003, p20
- 18 *Ibid.*, p32.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p21.
- 20 There was discussion between Heather and Ivan Morison as to whether showing images of the building of the barricade was appropriate, as it is not their intention to document the construction as part of the work: Massey University public discussion on *Journée Des Barricades*: December 17th, 2009.
- 21 Walter Benjamin: "Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: a Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, 1997, p27.
- 22 Victor Burgin cited in *Art Works Perform*, edited by J. Hoffmann and J Jonas, Thames and Hudson, p61.

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