

SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned response to Maddie Leach's *Perigee #11*, 2008

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First published on www.onedaysculpture.org.nz, 2008



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Maddie Leach
Perigee #11, 2008
28 August 2008, midnight to midnight
Boatshed 805, opposite 171 Breaker
Bay Road, Breaker Bay, Wellington, New
Zealand

On 28th August 2008, a storm (or perigee) was predicted over the city of Wellington. Using a long-range weather forecasting system, artist Maddie Leach pinpointed a winter's day in which downpours, hail, wind and rain were expected to descend upon the North Island's most southerly city. Anticipation for the storm was built by the artist through a series of newspaper advertisements placed in the preceding days that identified the changing weather conditions. On the day itself, visitors were encouraged to seek out a boatshed at Breaker Bay, set at the mouth of the harbour, Te Whanganui-a-Tara, from which to watch in anticipation over the Cook Strait over a period of 24 hours. The boatshed itself had undergone extensive work by the artist – cleaned out and lined with cedar wood, the window replaced and door refurbished – acting as an adjusted sculptural readymade as well as a viewing platform or shelter. Leach's work has always been concerned with potentiality and it is in that gap between actuality and potentiality, in the waiting for something to happen, that Leach encouraged us to think back and forth between what we imagined was going to happen and what we were experiencing physically in this work. *Perigee #11* occurred as rumour, as text, as topic of conversation, as quest, and as a site of sociability in public space.

It was once, and now is again, a boatshed. However, for a recent 24-hour period a picturesque seaside location in Wellington, New Zealand became alchemically transformed into an expansive site of creative possibilities. Maddie Leach's deceptively simple *Perigee #11* is a work that offers multiple challenges owing in large part to its hybrid status: not exactly sculpture, not precisely performance, not land art *per se*.

Leach's artwork manifested an open framework, which could take on all sorts of real world 'events', whether random or intentional. By the end of its day/night run, the primary material component of *Perigee #11* had been 'tagged' with a graffitoid blotch, its bolted main doors had been unceremoniously pushed open, and liquor bottles were left behind as if votive offerings.

The immediate environs of the shed: a craggy shore akin to that depicted in some uninviting Surrealist tableau, lighthouses glimpsed across the way as if miniature children's toys and then the luscious blue sky and the less than turbulent sea. It was a blindingly gorgeous day, emerging in stark contrast to the terse phrasing printed on Leach's announcement: "Northern declination, perigee, southerly storm, downpours, hail, wind and rain." Thus, we were warned of an onslaught of near-Biblical—or at least typically Wellingtonian—proportions that never materialized. This prognosis was attributed to the weather predictor Ken Ring, a one-man meteorological industry, from whom Leach purchased this tip as a sort of 'readymade' to be tinkered with and used as a trigger for further research.

Indeed Leach's updated use of Duchampian notions has been critically discussed in the past (particularly by writers Christina Barton and Marcus Moore). But rather than Duchamp directly, I am also thinking of Michael Craig-Martin's 1973 *An Oak Tree*, perhaps the apotheosis of the Duchamp heritage industry, in which the artist placed a glass of water on a shelf and in an act of re-naming (elucidated further in an interview-style wall text) 'transformed' the glass into the aforementioned

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oak tree. Inasmuch as the boatshed on Breaker Bay was simultaneously a viewing station, framing device, isolation chamber, and a shelter from the (non-)storm, it also flickered ambiguously in this strange, intermediary state: both/and, either/or, within/without.

But perhaps contradictorily it must be acknowledged that after I had spent a few solitary minutes in the boatshed of *Perigee #11*, I thought: *This is a sculpture*. That is to say sometimes one can get carried away (particularly if one is a critic) by considering overly the more abstract, philosophical and purely notional aspects of a work, such that it becomes crucial to actually contend with its concrete, material presence. Leach had carefully lined the interior of the boatshed with exterior-quality cedar, painted and replaced portions of doors and window frames, added a radio to monitor the reports on nearby nautical traffic, and also a small camping-style lamp for modest illumination during the evening hours. The radio periodically offered eruptive bursts of sound: “*just passing the power station—squawk!*”

The quasi-Minimalist set up lent a great amount of significance to a select number of decisions made by the artist. The cedar interior of the shed in turn had a distinct olfactory presence, but also recalled the unadorned use of wood in the early works of Carl Andre, and in addition wrapped around, and served to unify the space. If one looked above and below there were the areas less touched by Leach’s craft, notwithstanding knocking away some cobwebs and sweeping out the space. Leach sought to make a clear demarcation between the interior and exterior of the boatshed, and has emphasized her interest in classic slapstick films of Chaplin and Keaton in which the small wooden cabin is often portrayed as a refuge from arctic and desolate surroundings.

If *Perigee #11* as a work is accommodating to the notion of performance, it would be solely the performance of its visitors in response to the site, as Maddie Leach after a complex series of preparations has left the building to its own devices. Leach is *de facto* a Feminist artist

although she might shy away from telegraphing this aspect of her work overtly—after all her work gains much of its power from its subtlety and understatement.

Part of this involves her generosity and the notable reciprocity between Leach as artist and viewers in the space, for whom she both makes the work but is dependent upon for the work to fully exist. Again the Duchampian trace: viewers becoming essential to the work.

In addition, the emphasis on the gaze is intriguing and significant here, as the spectator enters a closed chamber, almost a surrogate camera in order to look outwards, into the unknown to discover things only partially revealed or visible. The space subsequently becomes, as a public location, a context for social exchange and interaction between individuals. Such interactions however are much less choreographed and undramatic than, for example, the use of skating and dancing in two of Leach’s earlier works (*The Ice Rink & The Lilac Ship*, 2002; and *Take Me Down to Your Dance Floor*, 2004). Here instead it’s quite possible that “nothing really happens.” Nonetheless Leach leaves a trail of interesting data in her process, either wholly integral or almost immaterial to the final outcome of the piece. The accretion of facts, false leads, negotiations, pretenses, alterations becomes a kind of constellation in which the work resides. Just as intriguingly enough on a radiant August morning, visitors spread outwardly from the boatshed down to the shore, walking, sitting, standing as if enacting some kind of material analogue to the many disparate and largely ephemeral components that contributed to the creation of *Perigee #11*.

Leach’s mode of art practice is in the best sense ‘relational’—however much this term has been of late overused and extended nearly to the point of meaninglessness. The privileging of art considered as ‘games’ and ‘situations’ which unfold within a variety of creative contexts, as highlighted in writings of critic Nicolas Bourriaud, curator Claire Doherty, and others, is relevant when considering Leach’s approach. What Leach achieves in large part is a sleight-of-hand to be reckoned with. How best to pull off a risky maneuver like this? She has been no stranger to curious conceits: building a boat from start to finish and having

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it hoisted atop The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa high above Wellington Harbour; creating a dance floor used by troupes of all types; installing an actual ice rink with a nearby video which portrayed the passage of a cruise ship; and using the auction site *Trade Me* as a context for selling timber.

What binds most of these works is Leach's concerted effort to contain, organize, and merge aspects of the everyday with her own artful whimsy and loopy versatility. Leach's works betray as much affinity with the language of fables and tall tales as with documentarian social practice. This keeps the viewer guessing, off-guard, and in this particular case revisiting the principles behind weather forecasting, perhaps learning new vocabulary (perigee is not the most common word on the street), and pacing about in a tiny shed pondering its aesthetic merits.

A central character in Leach's vignette from some unknown narrative is the sea, which was visible from the shed's window, always audible, creeping its way up the floor further and further as the tide came in. As I backed up to look out the window at a beautifully rendered seascape, I thought of the painter Ad Reinhardt and his (not entirely) flippant comment that "Sculpture is something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting." There I was in this amazingly mad sculpture, conjuring glimpses of Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner, Winslow Homer. But more to the point might be projects by the artists Bas Jan Ader and Marcel Broodthaers. Ader, though emerging from a conceptual scene of the early 1970s, tended towards Romanticism, incorporating movement and risk; Broodthaers, however, was purely cerebral, managing a closely controlled game of chess. Broodthaers used a banal maritime scene as readymade to satirically scrutinize as if fodder for a traditional art history slide lecture. Ader became infamous for his untimely death somewhere in the Atlantic after setting off in his boat *Ocean Wave* for a performance entitled *In Search of the Miraculous*. One could also surmise that it simply seems rare for a New Zealand artist to avoid the sea, always nearby. Moreover as a non-native observer, I couldn't realize how much the location of *Perigee #11* might be linked to one of the worst tragedies in New Zealand history, the *Wahine* ferry disaster

of April 10, 1968, in which more than fifty passengers perished when, in a horrible storm, the ship struck rocks near Breaker Bay. This event understandably looms large in the local consciousness as well as throughout New Zealand broadly.

A striking aspect of *Perigee #11* was its markedly different feel between the morning and evening hours. In the former, on my first visit, it was quiet, clear and I was prone (as close as I get) to reverie and fantasizing about staying in the shed all day, both illusions broken quickly by sudden noises: the squeak of the door, a dog barking, a tyre tread upon gravel. In the late evening, a calm yet festive atmosphere had settled in and the darkness around the shed made a kind of visual barrier, drawing people (and there were more of them now) closer in. Everyone seemed to be on the verge of something, as the piece ticked its way toward culmination at midnight. Murky introductions displaced the dutiful appraisal of patterns of wood and arrangements of nails. We were the sculpture as well of course and increasingly self-conscious of the fact, getting chillier, and finally chatting with the artist who had rematerialized, from her rented cottage across the road.

Many thanks to Maddie Leach, G.Bridle, David Cross, and Carole Bonhomme, as well as many others with whom I have discussed Maddie's work in addition to those who have written about it previously. Without gaining essential insights from both these contexts it would have been far more difficult to write this response.

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Biography

Martin Patrick (PhD, University of Kent at Canterbury, UK) is an American art critic and historian whose writings have appeared internationally in many publications including *Afterimage*, *Art Monthly*, *Frieze*, and *Third Text*. He has taught at the University of Chicago, Illinois State University, and the Savannah College of Art and Design. He is currently Senior Lecturer of Critical Studies at Massey University Wellington. His research interests include conceptual and performance art, photography and photomedia, and art theory and criticism.

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