

SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned reponse to Lara Almarcegui's *Relocated Houses,* *Brittons Yard, 2009*

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Lara Almarcegui
Relocated Houses, Brittons Yard, 2009
13 February 2009, 6.30 to 8.30pm
Brittons Yard, Haywards Hill Road, Wel-
lington, New Zealand and and insert in
Dominion Post newspaper

Mini van to Brittons Yard was provided, leaving from outside the entrance to Te Papa at 6pm & 6.45pm, returning to Wellington at 7.45pm and 8.45pm. Gold coin donation. On the outskirts of the city of Wellington there is a strange street of houses. On display temporarily whilst awaiting sale, each house in this street has undergone removal by Brittons Housemovers from another location – perhaps an area of development in the city itself, or in some cases, from another region. Following several visits to New Zealand that involved careful systematic research into the Wellington area, Rotterdam-based artist Lara Almarcegui was drawn to investigate this curious way-station for relocated houses for the site's atmosphere of dereliction and decay. Drawing on her experience of researching the histories of wastelands and ruins, Almarcegui worked intensively to trace the roots of each house on the street. The resulting *One Day Sculpture* project included a catalogue of the houses' histories published as an insert in Wellington's daily newspaper, the Dominion Post, and an exclusive artist-led tour of the street at Brittons yard. Inviting us to visit the yard with her one evening, Almarcegui coaxed us to look not simply at what these buildings are but why and how they are here, and in turn to speculate on the processes of change in our environment.

Now We Are in Taradale...

There is an expectation of buildings, of architecture, that they will frame or anchor us, allowing us to know where we are. When Nicolas Bourriaud states 'Time is succession; space is simultaneity,'¹ he refers to the stratified *ordinary* ground of the built environment; where space pins through time, saving its residue, making it available for archaeological revealing and enframing. However in Lara Almarcegui's *Relocated Houses, Brittons Yard, 2009*, an extraordinary built environment, without grounded archaeology, has been brought forward to view. In this work, time is foreshortened to be nearly simultaneous, permitting a successive reading of space.

The work lives/lived as a double page spread in the classified section of Wellington's Dominion Post newspaper of February 13, 2009, and, for just two hours, at Brittons Yard, Haywards Hill outside of Wellington, between 6.30 and 8.30pm of the same day. The newspaper article presented each building in the yard as a photograph, supported by an account of where the building had come from, the nature of its occupation, and the reason for its removal to Brittons Yard. The spread could not simply be read as a real-estate posting, because there was no mention of price, but nor was it a history, as there was no narrative or apparent purpose for the information presented. It is in this slippage, a conjunction of commerce and history, that I see Almarcegui's practice providing the most effective critique of the built environment. But in what way does this work uniquely engage the problem of a singular day?

As pages in a newspaper, the work can be dated transparently; it is of the day of the edition's publication. This appears to naturalise the parameters of 'One Day Public Sculpture.' However, because of the historicising authority of newspaper documentation, the wider 'problem' of the One Day Sculpture project is focused upon how art participates in modernity's contradictory play of progress and time.

As a disposable text, newspapers have traditionally functioned as a key mode of information in

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the dissemination of breaking news as it happens. However, against their disposability, there is a popular and institutional habit of preserving newspapers (several copies of Business Section for the 13th of February for example) that reflects a fear of losing the present, what Jacques Derrida described as an *Archive Fever* (1995). This is a paradox of modernity, and a paradox of One Day Sculpture, where the desire to hold on to what is new in its condition of newness (especially via the authentic and original documentation of the event), complicates the possibility of recognising when and how the ‘new’ effects society, culture or the public, how even the ‘new’ might be seen to affect progress.

In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) Michel Foucault calls the dispersal of *statements*, for example the *discursive gestures* of a newspaper article, the ‘Archive’: a terrain across which *discursive formations* can be mapped as a regularity, more commonly defined as a discipline, such as Modern Art. According to the curatorial statement for the Estratos project mentioned earlier, in Bourriaud’s conception of terrain, as for Foucault’s archive, space pins time. By contrast, Almarcegui’s recounting of the story of each building became a litany of places: now we are in Plimmerton, now we are in Johnsonville, now we are in Taradale. We are privy to a collection of 16 houses and 2 pre-fabricated classrooms, aged between 127 and 40 years old, gathered and steadied, by Britton House Movers and Construction Company.

On the evening of the 13th, a small audience gathered in the faux-suburban street that they formed, a barren gravel expanse of potholes and puddles, exposed to a bitter southerly wind, pausing before each where the front yard should have been. Forlorn price tags, taped inside their windows, produced an experience somewhere in-between real-estate auction and gallery showing. Detached from the infrastructure of power and pipes that would once have supported them, the buildings were cold, in some cases dismembered, emptied out, and forlorn.

Rising up as a backdrop were high-mounded hills covered with straggling bushes, weeds, gorse, and grass. Not a beautiful landscape, unless one is perversely attracted to recently broken farmland. Placed in the context of her international practice,

Relocated Houses, Brittons Yard, 2009 continues Almarcegui’s exploration of the processes of excess and entropy in the built environment. *Rubble Mountain* (Spain 2008), *Ruin de Holanda* (Ruins of the Netherlands, 2008) and *Removing the Outside Wall of a Ruined House* (Taipei, 2008) are responses to transformations in the urban fabric as either demolition or potential preservation;² buildings making room for more infrastructure, for bigger buildings, for ‘progress’, or else persisting and thereby outlasting their useful life, decaying and sagging toward the ground. Almarcegui has discussed these spaces of transformation, particularly where the transformation is stalled, as holding a type of magic or freedom. Perhaps such freedom is the potential a society retains in such sites, to construct an alternative value system to that built by commercial developers?

While elsewhere Almarcegui looks for building becoming ground, becoming ruin, falling toward the ground, or heaped up as ground, here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, she works on buildings detached from their historical ground merely pausing on the contingent ground of Brittons Yard. Closer in effect to her 2006 project for the Frieze Art Fair – a collection of all the materials required to build the gallery space – *Relocated Houses, Brittons Yard*, 2009, has a magical potential of what we could have, make, or build; the possibility of a home, to take home and make a home. It is in this gesture, the acquisitive ‘I want’, that emphasised how these structures are valued – they did all have price tags. However it was also apparent, to me at least, that their value lay impossibly far from the attributed dollar sign.

Where is value? From one perspective the ability of contemporary art to create value, or “value added” products, makes it the doyen of contemporary economics. However with this power it is also able to parody the supply and demand cycle: there is comparatively little value in canvas and paint except within the socially constructed network of meaning and information exchange which makes up the discipline of contemporary art. Damian Hirst’s diamond studded skull disturbs this balance of value in the other direction, becoming grotesque, not because of what it is as art, but because of how much it is worth as a commodity. Architecture, as an art form too tightly wound in

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the machinations of development and commerce, finds it very difficult to respond to these issues around value in an effective manner. In the practice of Rem Koolhaas, as an often cited example, unresolved paradoxes exist between his critique of capitalism on the one hand, and on the other, the success of his designs for Prada stores. In *Art and Architecture; a Place Between* (2006), Jane Rendell proposes a 'critical spatial practice,' between art and architecture, as the method by which the construction of the built environment can re-engage with the problem of value beyond capitalist economics. Reading Joseph Beuys, she suggests perhaps that all architecture is necessarily produced in the mode of Social Sculpture – the collaboration of many individuals and the negotiation of prescribed codes, working toward a final object that is always slipping beyond the control of the architect. Rendell is not satisfied by this reading, however, and pushes further, suggesting that a social architecture emerges in the discourse of public hearings through which urban and suburban plans are developed.

Rather than a social sculpture, Almarcegui's work succeeds as a socialising sculpture. Her archival research into the relocated houses included finding their dislocated inhabitants, and it was these people who were particularly invited to Brittons Yard on the evening of the 13th. Standing out there on the 'street,' the displaced buildings become a gathering place for the exchanging of histories: past owners were reunited with their homes, bringing with them photographs of past lives and detached views. It was in these moments that the otherwise abject structures were remembered as houses. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) Walter Benjamin argued that architecture is experienced peripherally, distractedly; architecture works best when it is hidden in the mundane and everyday. The conversations before these houses acted to return architecture to the background.

(You can see the house doubled in the photograph, behind a younger version of the speaker – a past owner. She is dressed in new clothes; it is a sunny day. The site and its view are sneaking out from behind her left shoulder). Seen as empty carcasses, or a pile of materials, buildings have limited value, but as a society comes together to dwell, to inhabit, and to exchange stories, value is created

within such materiality just as this materiality is being lost from sight.

Relocated Houses Britton's Yard, 2009, as a One Day Sculpture, is concerned with the expression of time in limited duration. While such relocated buildings exist detached from an archaeological ground, they were re-grounded, and re-built by Almarcegui's work in society's other ground: the archive. In an era of disposable consumerism, and era which makes the built environment similarly disposable, the archive grows (swelling excessively) in the desire to hold on to the ephemeral, things that pass. Newspaper, the material manifestation of this work, though inherently disposable, will most likely have a longer life than the buildings which it documents; the duration of a daily exceeding that of the everyday.

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Biography

Kate Linzey is Senior Lecturer at the Wellington Institute of Technology. She holds a Masters of Architecture (Hons) from Auckland University and is a current PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, supervised by Dr John Macarthur, Dr Andrew Leach and Dr Nicole Sully. The thesis will focus on proposals for kinetic public art developed by Len Lye (1901-1980). Kate is a member of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand and the Wellington Architectural Centre.

- 1 Nicolas Bourriaud, catalogue for the exhibition Estratos, PAV Murcia, Spain, 2008).
- 2 Pablo Llorca, 'Lara Almarcegui' in Artforum, February 1, 2009.

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