

**THE
PHYSICS
ROOM** A CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECT SPACE

2nd & 3rd Floor 209 Tuam Street
PO Box 22 351 Christchurch, New Zealand
+64 3 379 5583, physicsroom@physicsroom.org.nz, www.physicsroom.org.nz

Resingularity

Lisa Samuels

A response to the installation *The day is a fume*, with artists Dorota Broda, Juliet Carpenter & Evangeline Riddiford-Graham, Gregory Kan and Tahi Moore. Curated by Elle Loui August at The Physics Gallery, Otautahi/Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, 1 February-2 March 2014; opening 31 Jan 6pm

Friday Night

I am invited to give a response to four visual art works assembled under the title rubric “The day is a fume.” I give a title to this talk, “Resingularity,” before I arrive to witness any of the pieces. Each of the four has a title:

Untitled
A speaking Platform made by heaping up
Variance, time, Problems, etc
Enlightenment Tissue

These titles are framed inside the assertion that *the day is a fume*, given to variance and evaporation, untitled; it’s a speaking platform made by heaping up, with time and enlightenment tissues. We become the day by naming ourselves within it: we are a fume, we go poof, we are perfume, we speak on platform and we heap up, we have variance within ourselves and our bodies are made with cultures of enlightenment tissue. Our bodies are tissues.

The title “resingularity” begins from the physics term “singularity” and opens up a wide signage: a musical or mathematical point at which an object, structure, or event is unruly, unsmooth, impossible to singly define except in terms of a present absence such as a black hole. This open and unruly sign is added to the “sing” of burning in the fume of the day and added to the re-singing that is part of the re-making urge we see in Christchurch and that we see articulated in the pieces of this installation.

None of this art is mute. In each case words announce the intentions of each piece, though differently. Dorota Broda’s tenuous gazebo bears the artificially faded imprint of the construction company name FLETCHER and another more local name, Opus, a heritage and reconstruction company. There’s another banner name, too, but it’s also faded. The construction project of art is a meta-commentary built into this piece. There is a place to sit, but we are not indicated or invited to sit in the director’s chair. It’s flimsy, like a beach or portable spectator chair. There’s a rope, trailing, a tenuous threat to the chair. The gazebo tilts a little during the very active opening night; that’s okay, says the artist: the arch is still up, the thing’s in place.

The gazebo is open to the elements of the gallery room. But during the opening, almost no one crosses the interior space of the gazebo. It has assumed the aura of a walled work, though there are no walls and it’s easy to

walk through. People assemble themselves around it, walk around as though there is a real obstruction. People obey the law of construction space, and of art, not to touch.

The gazebo is a turning of the necessity of corporate re-making toward critique and aestheticism. Instead of labelled construction sites we have a futurity of constructive non-compliance: the corporate names are faded, very hard to make out, as though art has faded commerce and as though the project of rebuilding has been abandoned before it's complete. It's a medial piece, it sits in the middle of non-completion. It's an echo or skeletal mirror of the Christchurch break.

*

People pour into the gallery's opening night: pakeha mostly, some Asian New Zealanders also: someone tells me "this is Christchurch." Someone else tells me the brown people are on the east side of town, where the sun rises. Among the many brochures in the small lobby area of my apartment-hotel, whose outside vertical light advertises **ACCOMODATION** in red neon, one brochure advertises "Kotāne, the Maori experience." The standing figures are wearing cloaks with feathers and they are all looking out at you. Unlike any of the other brochures, this one is Janus-faced. When you turn it over it becomes an entirely new, double-duty brochure. The other side advertises the Kiwi Wildlife experience. A kiwi bird's feathers gently bristle as it looks at you with a steady eye.

None of the works in this installation look at you. The faces in the two video works are close and present, but they are not addressing you. They are involved in imagining as though observed. The atmospheres are puzzled, not threatening. But they are not turned to you. You are looking through the windows of the videos into the happening there, constituted there. The loops of the videos are an enactment of reconstitution. The videos loop reenacting. The reenactment is like a war parade in which you do again the thing you know about so as to re-experience history. The reenactment is a demonstration of being in the loop of return, the things we do again and again and know about and cannot stop, the 24 hours of the day as fume.

Tahi Moore's video loop is not silent but seems to be. It is declarative; it tells its subjects:

"memory"
"cities that don't exist"
"description versus other uses of language"
"life outside language"
"descriptions versus things"
"parts acting as the entire system they belong to"
"as if the loop was a fundamental form of intention"

These are quotations from the lines that come up as white ink at the bottom of the screen as a man moves around a neutral room, like a hotel room or small temporary apartment, like a living installation, during a day and a night. The sheets are white as bleach; the swimming pool at night from above, encased in the cage of the overhead glass ceiling which we are looking down on from the room of the hotel in which the man stands looking, that swimming pool has the green tinge of gas masks from the inside in World War I, the tinge of night attacks in present-day drone strikes. The flickering light from the pool organizes into two areas that are like the eyes of the liquid building existing under the man's gaze. This video turns back and forth, from the man looking out to the camera looking at the man. He turns hapless at one point, fingering the clothing whose neutral tones echo the neutral tones of the hotel room or untitled apartment space. He talks to no one, and no one else is there, so you know he is looking at himself from the camera looking at him. The camera and his eyes are looking back and forth at each other, and the observer is an interlude, an intersession; we don't come between the camera and the man looking at his pants, standing on the bed, lying down, watching the swimming pool at

night. The title is an assembly of *Variance, time, problems etc.* The problems are of separatism; a man's eyes separated from the camera, the camera separated from the body of the man, the man separated from linkage, the interior décor and exterior scenes separated from definition, location, naming. The things are not named; they are parted. The human has only a neutral unspoken part of the partedness of the room.

The screen of *Enlightenment Tissue*, the talking video by Juliet Carpenter and Evangeline Riddiford-Graham, seems to be available to you. If you stand in the middle of the work, very close to the screen, your body is as tall as the head of the man behind the screen. He is talking but you can't really understand because no one is answering him so you don't have context for the one-sided dialog. The woman figured at the start and end of the video loop is smoking and not speaking – the video goes blank. Begin again. 5 minute loop with a solid quietude to start. Leaves on mottled glass. She's laughing very quietly. A man's voice comes over her, he's blurred with papers. Soft blue shirt on diffused green background. He starts to talk, and in the loud involvement of the opening night you cannot understand where he's coming from. He says words that sound like this:

Want to pluck a gender. Yeah. Seems safe but I'm not want not, speaker, it's black heap page one. Perfunctor. But I'm not crystal as that intention. Some painter clay brick is it day wanting? Downish, breath. Well. Well, no, you're down here for pollution and skeptical legs to grow, you see here I meant fellow waste, borrower of some long-time friend near to the community of chances. Just some bits of flukes, I've been through all my jokes. We'd not not, we'd come to get that, we apologize with the little let we've put it on the internet I said I'm leaving and I'm never coming back – perhaps, clipped phonetically phonetic, but we're going out proof - I'm perfectly judge real. I'm bounded to make my wireless. I'm optic night out. My precious breath. If you cleanse me, I will dead. Which I get round here I lack the apricot on laundry shelf that strikes of paltry founded fret they ought to be wash them darling – put a sock on it, I mean on the sat belt which dissipates all the earth, be somewhere else it's a place I ought to be but right now? I thought not coming back there – I want to TALK – why don't you just come alive while I'm here??!!? Come alive!!! Knock knock. Oh, I'm Buddhist poise and Gertrude glow. At this sink they've got the hedge, it's a no-hair know and when have I end? I've got a lot of things to say and it's true I have painted it, well rock on keep the place, we can show the bone chicks because what are – initiative.

The terminal voice whispers while she's smoking, then the loop goes blank.
LOOP.

The man's face is blurred behind dimpled glass, as though he is a witness you are not supposed to identify. The motives of the video sometimes turn toward temperate color and rain on glass, as though the people have disappeared. The man's voice rises in anger, he shouts when he addresses you and asks you to come alive. Why can't you reach the man, or the woman?

The screen is tilted at the corner of the darkened room. It's the only angled presentation in the gallery, as though pushed up in a corner because it's only there for a while, not fixed to the wall. The title of the work smashes together the rational dream of Enlightenment's intellectual suturing with the ephemera of the tissue that is the flesh of the city behind walls of vision.

*

The loop of the room is a maze within a simple rectangular space on the top floor of a four-story building: one part of this area is where the Volunteers go to wash the glasses being used by the hundred people who are coming in and sifting-watching within the gallery space. One part is where the drinks are poured. The area by the door stays dense with people. As you enter further into the room the people cluster slightly less densely, avoiding as heretofore explained the unclosed construction space of the *Untitled* gazebo. You walk further in

until you get to the door of the back room where the video voice and the darkness of the space closes up the people's social speaking and makes them attend. They watch for not as long as the loop, when I am standing there. The gallery is loud with people's voices, and the night is about *sampling* pieces made for later, more solitary attention. When you stand at the end of the room and look at the people, you see they are watching each other, talking with each other. The art has not, apparently, swerved their social attention toward meta-social attention.

It's very hard, the pull between social and meta-social attention. The language we come up with to experience art that wants to pull us from the social to the meta-social, where we might talk about what makes us make events like art, and conversation, and a socius, and a city.

Gregory Kan's piece, *A speaking Platform made by heaping up*, is the most visually diminutive. A small, perhaps A4 paper folded into an A5 folio, 20-page unbound chapbook is placed on a low oblong white stand. The chapbook is sited to the left, as though you are supposed to look away from the center of the oblong, as though it's in the blind spot of the retina. The oblong might even be a bench; you might sit there, and finally you do see someone sitting there to look at the book and talk with her friend. It tells you the oblong is neutral enough to lack the instruction not to touch. The unbound chapbook does not say "don't touch," and by the end of the evening it has been handled many times. The papers are mussed and bent a little; the art work has crossed into permission to touch.

The pages are left-margin justified considerations of the circumstances of walking through Christchurch – though the location is unnamed – which is a platform made by heaping up leftovers from the earthquake-disheveled city. If you read it out loud it calls out indexically to the situations that it signifies. The land is like the first line of the chapbook, "Practically equivalent to that of quicksand" and maybe when the air pressure of the quake happens – and a sudden air pressure drop is another kind of singularity – you feel the second line, "Pressures in the pores" or does that happen when you become a building?

Because buildings are alive, because they are alive as signs of the human bodies inhabiting, planning, building, living in them. They are extensions of human tissue assemblies, they are carapaces of intention. They are the swerve of accidental bodies into made constructions. It's like you could make yourself really tall and strong, you could make an assembly of humans called a city. They would be tall strong bodies made of Halswell stone, which even before the earthquake was available only as recycled building material from a 19th century project of decimating a volcanic cone and bringing its stone to build the city until the cone was gone and the blank area it once inhabited became, in the 20th century, a park: the quarried demesnes turned green as Halswell Park, a recycled city project. Because a city is a recycled work of art, if art is human intention beyond solitude. The city stands and sits up around and as the humans. It is therefore completely significant when buildings fall. No history obtains without a living present.

Gregory Kan's chapbook ends with these two lines: "Is it under a chair / Is it covered with moss." And you see, within the areality of the open and unbound pages, the reorderable shuffle. You can reassemble the words and read those two lines as "I sit under a chair"; "I sit covered with moss". The transposition goes from "it," the pronoun of the idea of the city – under a chair covered with moss – to "I," the human body; it goes from object question to subject position. And both are blocked, under furniture and stagnant vegetation. The report of the ephemeral chapbook is akin to the blocked visuals and the mute man of the videos, akin to the abandoned construction gazebo.

The installation makes sense not only a mirror but as a turned event, a turn of the screw of the absent city to the present humans, works which call mutely for us to turn our attention to the meta-social, the meta-building

codes, so that we can re-imagine how people who have no places, and words that are shaken out from their contexts, constitute the real situation of city-making. Because the city does not exist; it is not a given anywhere. It's no different now; but we see it because it's shaken out, the words separated from the visuals, the visuals from the frame, the book from its spine, the gazebo from its use.

This is an installation of partness. Partness is what we have to make the wholes. Re-singing re-singes you, because if you're lucky you don't get to disappear. In the singularity of this installation, the star collapses into its black hole and then – it comes back out, it doesn't disappear. That describes an impossible re-singularity, and imagination is the signage of the actualized impossible. So this exhibit is balanced on the part-heap of description and the vacuum of response that is the city always waiting to happen. We can re-sign as re-singing, all of us, ka waiata tatou.

The night, until I fall asleep, is full of shouts of men in the streets.

*

Saturday morning

Last night I had the idea to buy long swaths of green cloth and cover the floor of the gallery, bringing green into the gallery, also to buy green sticky notes and pencils and invite people to write one word and stick it on the wall next to the works. I'll need to walk in the city this morning to find these tools for the talk.

I kept thinking about the art works and where we can respond to them. The works are spare and austere. They are black and white and neutral toned. They are parts. Their framing subject, the repressed city named Christchurch, is never mentioned. The subject turns to the part-people, the cut lines, the spare temporary architecture. The part-people in the video works have no names; some personal pronouns frame the part-people.

Apart from the part-people, these works have no natural bodies nor even shreds or parts of natural bodies. The closest possibility – the drops of water in the large video work, that might be rain or might be sprinkles from a tap – cannot reach through the pane of glass inside the electric screen image containing them. There is otherwise not a leaf, not a flower, not a bird or pile of earth. No sky. For a moment, in the speaking video, shadows of a tree branch are on the other side of the mottled glass, but I forget about those until I see the installation again later today.

The part-people keep their clothes on and don't open their bodies. The loneliness and apartness of the works is both inherent and displayed in their removal from each other in the long room.

The titles push the abstract against the concrete: Dorota Broda's Untitled names its dislocation from identity. It is titled with its untitledness. It is named its unnamedness. The abstraction of naming things is pushed up against the concrete absence of the work, which gestures to the lack or abeyance – and also to the potential – of construction.

In Gregory Kan's *A speaking Platform made by heaping up*, the metaphor of the speaking Platform turns us to the political impulse of a human with a "platform" to advocate, but at the same time the passive verb construction – "made by" – takes agency away from the speaking, and we don't know if the reference is to a

platform for advocacy or a concrete platform for re-stabilizing the subsidized city. The “heaping up” takes us to the piles of stones that are the city here, and to speaking as a piling zone. But you don’t heap a stable platform: you heap sliding stuff, you heap ephemera or materials, you heap earth. So the ground of speaking and building is still moving.

The other titles use abstract terms firmly, as though situated in communicative polyvalence. In Tahī Moore’s title *Variance, time, problems etc* we can think that “variance” happens within something, so the work never leaves its propositions; it cycles its variances and loops to them again. “Time” as a cultural organization fiction is additive, but time as a natural counter is a loop, like 24 hours, a lunar cycle, seasonal cycles, annual earthspins, like the three years now since the earth moved under this city. “Problems” go together with “etc” and prompts us to think the list of soluble negatives will continue. That is to say, we can think of “problems” as not only difficulties; we can also think of problems as mathematical and logical orders inviting the application of play, the mind in solution mode.

Only the last title, *Enlightenment Tissue*, lets in the body’s tissue, and even that is held at abeyance by the elision of the terminal “t” – at the end of “Enlightenment” – with the initial “T” – at the start of “Tissue.” So the tongue has to decide the “t,” and we get three innuendoes from the title’s inflection: first, the blend of the era or descriptive adjective Enlightenment with the subject of the tissue its description means to touch or illuminate from within; second, an imperative to enlighten men tissue, to bring light or realization to men; and third, an “issue,” or matter, of Enlightenment-era description. The variance within the title barely unsuppresses its potentiality: we can get “issue” out of this, but only by speaking aloud, by using our tongues and voices.

These titles are names for works we cannot embrace. We can hold the chapbook in our hands but we can’t enfold it. The video technology forbids us to kiss it. The gazebo shifts when touched with enthusiasm.

*

The bodies of the people gathering on opening night are hungry for socius. They look at each other, they fill in the parts and hungry neutral tones with their warm loud humanity and leading eyes looking. They stand tall like buildings, they move through each other like warm buildings.

The austerity I’ve described, the thin and lonely works, the innuendoes of bracketed possibility, ask us for response. In the talk version of this piece I invited everyone to stand with me on the 8.7 meter bolt of soft green cloth I’d purchased that morning in the city and spread out in the center of the long gallery room, walking on it as I talked. At the end, everyone got up and stood on the green cloth together. We greened the red zone together.

I also invited everyone to take a pencil and a green sticky note, also bought that morning in the city, and write a word or more and put it on the wall near any of the art works. I invited them to a naming renewal ceremony of “Otautahi/Christchurch,” which is the name I wrote on a green note sheet, renewing by externalizing the city name that is absent from these installation works concerned with it. We leafed the gallery walls together; some of the word-leaves fell from the walls into the gutter of the floor.

The city is built continually on earth and we choose to name it. It does not exist until it’s remade in a loop. The city is a fume held up by the respiration of people. Ka waiata tatou.

*

Lisa Samuels has published nine books, recently *Wild Dialectics* (Shearsman 2012) and *Anti M* (Chax 2013), as well as soundwork, chapbooks, and essays in poetry, theory, and critical practice. Her MA & PhD are from the University of Virginia, and she teaches imaginative writing and theory at the University of Auckland. Some of her work is available via the Electronic Poetry Center (epc.buffalo.edu/authors/samuels) and Pennsound (writing.upenn.edu/pensound/x/Samuels.php).