

Xin Cheng, Michael Parr, Blaine Western

S/F Project with Xin Cheng, Michael Parr, Blaine Western

22 June – 21 July 2013

The Physics Room

Good Intentions

Henry Davidson

split/fountain's project at The Physics Room with Xin Cheng, Michael Parr and Blaine Western comprised a number of parts – temporary, permanent and interactive – complicating ideas around building, change and process. As a show about transitional and temporary structures it could well have been swallowed up in the glut of such projects that continue to take place in Christchurch. But the project dispersed itself through a wide range of contributors and over a number of platforms including furniture and display structures, a publication with 23 contributions, a reading room and workshop. As such it formed a network of structures that were themselves multifaceted.

Like many people who don't live in Christchurch I have been astonished by the emptiness of the city during recent visits. While on these trips I have come across some of the temporary projects in the city that aim to draw attention to and energise the city or act as suggestions for the rebuild. Amidst rubble and the remnants of demolition, these projects often appear like bizarre fruit-bursts of colour. Perhaps they are better than fallen stone and smashed brick but their sugar-high entails a subsequent crash. Fast, easy and fun; such projects' contribution to discussions about, and actual habitation of public space feels hollow, falls flat.

As Ella Sutherland points out in her text 'Building with the ghost bitch,' 'the novel experience cannot compete with the indeterminate hum of the comings and goings of the city, for it is here, with the in-between and the unseen that the kingdom of belonging lies.'¹ Sutherland problematises the gestures that a number of commissioning bodies have been making in Christchurch. She acknowledges that these gestures, performed originally in the spirit of revitalisation, have become rote and formulaic. In some ways, they now act as a template for how to navigate Christchurch's commons. But the commons cannot be conjured or even called. In many ways the commons does not exist. But its absence is shockingly apparent.

split/fountain's investigation into the temporary offered an interaction that is different to the spontaneous (or forced) socialisation that has been criticised in the transitional city. Rather than colour, texture and 'fun,' Cheng, Parr and Western's objects and arrangements were paired back, simple, plain – they appeared less 'temporary' than

¹ Ella Sutherland, "Building with the ghost bitch," in *WORK-BOOK*, ed. Matthew Galloway et al. (Christchurch: split/fountain, The Physics Room, Ilam Press, 2013).

skeletal. Locally sourced raw materials suggested frameworks and building blocks rather than curiosities. Perhaps these material choices signal the need for both real beginnings – real buildings – as well as the importance that the ephemeral has to add to conversations about the future of Christchurch.

In her piece Sutherland also notes the confusion and the dulling of the voices in Christchurch; the voices that are always temporary, the conversations that once spoken, dissolve into air. The emphasis on reading in split/fountain's show, and the manner in which seating and table structures accommodated this, felt like it contributed to a different sort of temporary experience; one that is more actively consumed and digested and less about visual spectacle; less about the flaneurial experience of oddities and amusements in the broken city and more about committing personal time to thinking about possibilities and solutions. Positioning reading as a sort of building sought to reinforce the idea of the production of public space as a slow and gradual process that cannot be hurried, however much we wish to fill an emptiness. Blaine Western and Michael Parr's ongoing investigations into architectural histories also signaled an imperative infused with reflection as much as action. In their 2012 National Contemporary Art Award winning piece *Parallel of life and Art* they uncovered a Brutalist bus shelter in provincial New Zealand. Western's more recent project at Window with Nell May, which examined the façade of the General Library at the University of Auckland, drew attention to the redundancies of design details even when they are vested with 'good intentions.' It is these good intentions which split/fountain's project seemed to make visible and questionable.

Similarly, the participatory element of the project avoided being a tired exercise in relational aesthetics and instead facilitated an engagement with tangible and potentially 'useful' skills, which sat in relation to the local context. In a workshop at the opening of the exhibition, artists assisted visitors to build a piece of furniture from instructions for temporary structures – many of them simple seats, tables or display mechanisms. This was no bubblegum dreaming. As a gesture extended from the spirit of the rest of the exhibition it reminded us about the very real work that must take place before a city can really be a city. Not only must things go up (good, bad or ugly) but they must also be broken in. As Sutherland wisely points out: 'it is only through the gentle movement of people eroding space that we will be left with a place to *be in*'.²

Henry Davidson is co-director at Gloria Knight in Auckland. In 2014 he completed a curatorial internship in Contemporary Art at Dunedin Public Art Gallery where he presented 'Campaign Furniture'. Its sister exhibition 'Everyday Backwash' was shown at Michael Lett, Auckland. Other projects include, 'Chill Spree' at Dog Park Project Space in 2013.

² Ibid.