

New Zealand Sculpture OnShore: Popular, Successful and Vitaly Important

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*“The field of art...
a site of infinite crossings among languages.”*

Germano Celant¹

As a result of not being subject to the same rules, regulations and public consultation requirements of permanent public artworks, temporary art occupies a privileged position. If a member of the public does not like what they see, they need not worry. The artwork in question will be gone soon enough. This position presents not only an opportunity for engagement with a large, diverse audience, but also, as will be suggested, the necessity for the temporary to engage meaningfully with the physical, historic, and cultural layers of the site on which it occurs. Taking the Auckland Council Public Art Policy as a point of departure, and using New Zealand Sculpture OnShore (NZ SoS) as a proxy for temporary public art exhibitions that co-opt public spaces, the complex matrix and inherently political nature of public art will be explored and examined. Specific attention is given to site, audience, time and space that combine create place. The theories of Lucy Lippard, Mary Jane Jacob, John Dewey and others inform the critical discussion. Interviews with multiple people who had significant roles in the development and creation of NZ SoS as it exists today offer deeper insights into the historical background, ideology and purpose that underpins the exhibition.

Our modern cities no longer have dedicated town squares for public forums and discussions that were once common place. Yet, the need for such physical spaces within the public sphere is no less essential. Today, we often find that the open green spaces of parks morph back and forth between being a space of rest and respite, and the tangible place where diverse cultures and ideas or ‘languages’ might cross paths and converge. In such public spaces we find ourselves not only in direct relationship with one another, but also with time, space, and place. In addition, in Aotearoa New Zealand there exists a tangible connection to the natural landscape and complex layers of history. When these green spaces become the location for temporary public art exhibitions, the power of art and landscape is amplified. The exhibition itself is transformed into the fulcrum for ‘infinite crossings among languages.’² It is here, at this unique ephemeral junction, that the potential for meaning, placemaking, representation and dialogue between diverse cultures resides, and the additional opportunity to address pressing social issues presents itself.

New Zealand Sculpture OnShore (NZ SoS) is one of the longest running temporary outdoor art exhibitions in Aotearoa. The now biennial fundraising event takes place over fourteen days in November at the stunningly beautiful, palimpsestuous site of O Peretu Fort Takapuna.³ Owing to its long history and co-opting of a significant piece of public land, NZ SoS presents fertile ground from which to examine the potential of temporary public art to meaningfully represent people and place.

Founded in 1996 by Genevieve Becroft QSM, NZ SoS was originally conceived as a local community fundraiser for the New Zealand Women’s Refuge. First held at the Mairangi Bay Arts centre, the inaugural exhibition raised \$23,000. The following year, Becroft generously offered her own home and garden – a large, architectural award-winning property on the shores of Lake Pupuke – to host the event. By 2007, with over 5000 people streaming through her gates, winding their way through her beautifully manicured garden, and across her lawns, the beloved local fundraiser naturally had to find a new home – which it did, not far from Lake Pupuke, at O Peretu. The “stunning clifftop park with the backdrop of Rangitoto Island and the Hauraki Gulf lent itself perfectly to the staging of the country’s largest exhibition of contemporary sculpture.”⁴

Today, the now biennial event welcomes in excess of 20,000 visitors across fourteen days in November. Showcasing up to 100 works by established and emerging Aotearoa-based artists, whose practices span from



FIGURE 1. Aerial view of NZ Sculpture on Shore at O Peretu. Image reproduced with permission from the Sally Dewar, NZ Sculpture on the Shore Board Chair.

sculpture to sound art, it has established itself as one of the country's longest running and largest public art exhibitions. It is also the largest single donor for the New Zealand Women's Refuges, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars to support the work they do.

However, running through NZ SoS as it exists today is a complex matrix of intersecting points of tension: a palimpsest site history; the beauty of the natural landscape; social issues surfaced by fundraising for the Women's Refuge, and the public vs private debate. Given its complexity, NZ SoS demands critical attention. Nowhere else do we encounter the potential of reciprocal relationships between the public audience, temporary art and significant social issues of family violence; presented amidst a quintessentially Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) landscape, on a site steeped in layers of Māori, colonial, and military history.

THE ETERNAL PUBLIC VS PRIVATE DEBATE

One of the challenges that arises when analysing public art exhibitions from a critical perspective is the debate as to what exactly constitutes public space and public art. While some critics may suggest that events of the type and form of NZ SoS are not public, owing to the fact that they are organised by a private entity and entry is granted by way of invitation or purchasing a ticket, such a position runs counter to the definition of public art outlined in the Auckland Council Public Art Policy. Public art, or art in the public sphere as defined by the policy encompasses "...both the council's own public art activity as well as any arts activity in public places that is intended as public art and planned and delivered by external third parties."⁵ Public place and public space, again defined by Auckland Council, is "...a place that is under the control of Auckland Council and CCOs (council-controlled organizations), and that is open to, or being used by, the public, whether or not there is a charge for admission."⁶

Sally Dewar, NZ SoS Board Chair similarly stated in a phone interview: "It is very much a public event. All 20,000 tickets are sold to the public."⁷ Thus defined as a public event, it can be asserted that NZ SoS not only has the capacity, but also the obligation to "...celebrate the region's creativity, highlight Māori identity as Auckland's point of difference, reflect and express the diversity of Auckland's people, respond to our unique natural landscape and the special character of our built environment, generate pride and belonging, and transform Auckland's public places."⁸

Because all art in the public sphere is inevitably read as a cultural touchstone, as the preceding quote implies, at its most fully realised NZ SoS could become a tangible representation of 'us'. Public art is ideally the tangible expression of collective identity; it is what communities lean on to find a sense of grounding and place in amidst the liquefaction in uncertain times. The implication of this is that, in addition to being celebratory and responsive, exhibitions such as NZ SoS must also serve as the starting point for conversations, engage in representation, and meaningfully contribute to the role of placemaking.

HEADLANDS, PŌHUTUKAWA, AND THE WAITEMATĀ: THE INVISIBLE BACKGROUND OF BEAUTY AND VIOLENCE

American poet and transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson says, in his 1841 essay "Thoughts On Art," that art which finds itself "exalted by the beauty of sunlight, by the play of the clouds, by the landscape around it..."⁹ becomes imbued with the physical and metaphysical transcendental qualities of nature itself. An encounter with art outdoors, therefore, presents an opportunity for a transformative experience. At an individual level, such an encounter might offer a subtle shift in perspective. Considered collectively, as part of a wider exhibition shared with others in a community across space and time, the potential for a larger transcendental experience that transforms a space into a place emerges. American artist and writer Lucy Lippard offers a related, contemporary take on Emerson's philosophy which speaks to the reciprocity and dialogue between people and the environment: "Places bear the records of hybrid culture, hybrid histories that must be woven into a new mainstream. They are our "background" in every sense... Space defines landscape, where space combined with memory defines place."¹⁰ It is vital therefore, that the public art encountered in these outdoor public spaces "...ideally creates better places and provides enjoyment, insight, and maybe even hope to its participants, viewers, and users."¹¹

Embracing these positions and applying them to NZ SoS, we see that the multidimensional layers of the site beyond its physical charm alone must be acknowledged. Standing on this elevated headland, gazing at military fortifications and ancient pōhutukawa in the foreground, Narrow Neck beach (a known taonga) below, and out across the harbour to Rangitoto in the distance, we absorb history. Not only aesthetically beautiful, O Peretu holds a special place



FIGURE 2. The Fort. Built in 1886-89. In addition to holding German prisoners of war, the fort was used to imprison Ngāti Pāoa men who refused conscription in 1918. It is now used by NZ SoS to host the school children's art exhibition that is part of their event. Photograph by Jessica Agoston.

in the narrative history of Ngāti Pāoa. In conversations with the author, George Kahi, Kaumatua of Ngāti Pāoa, speaks of the deep layers of history and stories of conflict, struggle and hope that his people experienced at and around O Peretu dating back to the 1300s. As one of the five iwi in Tāmaki Makaurau which trace their ancestry back to the Tainui Waka, Ngāti Pāoa have an ancestral and present day connection to this area that runs far deeper than what we see in front of us, or what we might find if we scratch the surface of the clay. Theirs is a history that stretches in all dimensions, which for the most part is rendered invisible at the site.

From a purely physical perspective, this headland was prized for its strategic central position between fertile North Shore maunga by all who have come to utilise this land over generations. Given its geographical advantages, it is not surprising that the headland became a strategic site for the New Zealand Navy during both the first and second World Wars after initially being built as a fort in response to the perceived Russian threat in the 1870s and 1880s. "In World War I the nucleus of a camp was built at Fort Takapuna as a training area for Māori and Cook Island reinforcements. In 1918 the camp accommodated German prisoners of war and in 1919 was used as a hospital for flu victims."¹² It is clear that bound within the sedimented layers, tree roots,



FIGURE 3. World War II era gun fortifications on the O Peretu headland facing towards Rangitoto. Photograph by Jessica Agoston.

concrete and timber structures at O Peretu lies the not always pleasant histories and memories of many.

In addition to the historic, metaphysical and spiritual properties of O Peretu, it is undeniable that it offers an exceptional outdoor stage for a temporary public art exhibition. In a NZ SoS promotional video, Becroft discusses the reason for selecting O Peretu as the new site: "Well I used to love walking around on that lovely headland... we all went and had a look, and yes! It was very good."¹³ The question, however, is good for what purpose, and for whom? One could argue that as NZ SoS exists to raise funds to support the very necessary work of the Women's Refuge, the 'good' resides simultaneously in fundraising, and the presentation of art beyond the often intimidating white walls of a gallery proper. Both are very valid points. However, it is a well-known fact that Aotearoa has a disproportionately high rate of domestic violence, a fact that is brought to attention by the very *raison d'être* of NZ SoS. According to Emma Gilbert, (Team Leader, Te Puaruruhau - Child Protection and Family Violence Intervention Team, Auckland District Health Board), "New Zealand police attend a family violence call out every four to six minutes in New Zealand. The police researchers estimate they are only seeing 18-20% of true family violence occurrences (because so many don't contact the police)."¹⁴ These alarming statistics, together with the significance of

the site to Ngāti Pāoa, highlights the essential need for NZ SoS to give intentional consideration to these aspects, and actively endeavour to give these marginalized groups voices through embedding them into the thematic and curatorial mandate of their now significant and highly visible platform.

UNEARTHING PUBLIC ART REALITIES: A LACK OF CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Permanent public art works are generally analysed and considered from an art historical, critical, socio-political or cultural perspective. However, the same level of critical attention has not been afforded to temporary outdoor public art exhibitions. Often, the discussion of temporary art occurs within the echo chamber of news and popular media, together with the now ubiquitous social media platforms where the public themselves hold the court of opinion. The reason for this lack of critical attention is multifaceted and difficult to pinpoint. It is reasonable to assume that temporary exhibitions, such as NZ SoS (despite their large scale and high level of public visibility), are not held to the same artworld standards and expectations as a result of their being outside the artworld sphere of private galleries, public art institutions, and artist-led cooperatives. Additionally, as Shelley Chignell, NZ SoS board member points out, critical attention may also be lacking due to the exhibition being located beyond the Heart of the City arts precinct: “We’re on the North Shore, which is art-world Siberia.”¹⁵

An additional confounding factor which has contributed to NZ SoS being overlooked from a critical perspective is that it is unclear whether it is an exhibition or an event. Indeed, even on their own website these two words are used interchangeably. The not always cohesive and thematically disparate works on display, combined with the non-art focused accoutrements that go along with events – food vendors, port-a-loos and fencing for example (all of which are standard, unavoidable elements of large-scale anythings held in the public sphere), naturally makes an analysis and evaluation grounded in art historical criticism more challenging. Unsurprisingly, a concomitant level of disregard by the arts establishment persists. The discussion, now demoted to the realm of popular opinion, inevitably has a tendency to focus on the dichotomy of failure or success, and a judgement of ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

What matters most, it seems, (and this is true for the vast majority of arts and cultural exhibitions and events in Aotearoa) is the number of people going through the gate;

the amount of money raised and the number of artworks sold. Very rarely does the discussion of temporary public art delve into broader philosophical thought or intellectual inquiry which considers the contribution that the temporary might make in terms of enriching the fabric of our society, and strengthening the increasingly tenuous ties that bind. Of course, the primary focus for NZ SoS is fundraising, so quantifiable measures of success are of vital importance. However, when the financial imperative is the primary deciding factor informing both creative curatorial decisions and critical assessment, the prospect of a genuinely site and socially responsive offering is diluted. It is diluted further still when the whole is transformed into a selfie-ground... – the place to be and be seen. From this point of understanding, it is very unlikely that NZ SoS would be described by the media, let alone the artworld, as an exhibition concerned with representation and imbued with meaning, much less a fully integrated transformative aesthetic experience of the type John Dewey outlines in his seminal text *Art as Experience*.

Perhaps this is where the potential of the ephemeral resides – in the experiential. We live in an experience-centric culture, “...dominated by the attention economy, the ultimate result of which is a scarcity of attention and thus lack of public engagement with issues of the day.”¹⁶ Through the temporary’s ability to capture the attention of the public (a public whose attention is being pulled in multiple directions, numerous times a day by advertisers, social media, and the unrelenting pressures of a global pandemic and the far-reaching tendrils of its flow-on effects), exhibitions such as NZ SoS have the capacity to be a panacea. It can serve as entertainment, while simultaneously performing a vital role within our cultural and political ecosystem. Through becoming the locus for truly meaningful shared experiences which foster understanding and connection across cultures, languages, time and space, it could become a powerful cultural ally.

SHIFTING TIDES: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESPONSIVE NEW GENRE

Over the past 30 years, temporary outdoor public art exhibitions have become increasingly popular and widespread. This is in part because of their ability to draw in and entertain the public, whilst simultaneously offering a site for the expression of pressing issues, which ideally leads to the manifestation of productive, fruitful encounters. Indeed, the temporary nature of these events reduces, to a degree, the

fear or anxiety which may be generated by the creation of permanent public artworks. The risk of public controversy, or negative criticism from the artworld (which often rains down on permanent public artworks) is largely evaporated when both the artists and exhibition organizers know that what they are creating is unlikely to become the subject of ongoing public scrutiny. Temporary public art, by virtue of its temporality, does not need to strive for universality or subscribe to populism. In a few days or weeks, it will have disappeared. When the constraints of permanence give way to the openness of the temporary, the opportunity for pure creativity, genuine engagement with issues, and the pushing of boundaries surfaces.

However, there is concomitant risk inherent in ephemerality. When the temporary exhibition becomes so large, so well attended, it often devolves into populism and the quest for mass appeal, rather than striving for genuine engagement with a community and the pursuit of place-making. A vast variety of work may generate excitement, but ultimately it “is nothing more diverse than furniture scattered about the sidewalk waiting for the moving van. Yet order and serenity do not emerge when these things are forced together in the van.”¹⁷ Without a curated linking of artworks responding collectively to a theme, which then flows into the overall experience of the exhibition itself, the critical disregard may continue.

Viewed from this perspective, in tandem with the entwined threads of the social, political, and cultural issues that make up the fabric of NZ SoS in its entirety and the general lack of critical analysis of exhibitions of this nature, a challenge arises. How can a curatorial pathway be delineated within the exhibition itself so that it might be able to act as a powerful communication and placemaking tool, rather than an outdoor dealer gallery, or source of superficial entertainment? How does one avoid the mire of reducing the focus of analysis to specific individual artworks and their relative success, failure or quality? How can the trap of critiquing solely from the perspective of event-related qualities and functions, rather than through an art criticism and public art focused lens be avoided? The answer lies in critiquing NZ SoS as a whole, and placing it in the category American curator and writer Mary Jane Jacob refers to as “...‘projects’ and a new genre known as site exhibitions.”¹⁸ Considering NZ SoS in its entirety as a public art “project” lifts the discussion out of the popular event sphere and into the sphere of public art, thus making it possible to give meaningful consideration and “constructive reappraisal”¹⁹ of the event in and of itself.

GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND MIXED MESSAGES: CAPITALISM AND THE OUTDOOR MUSEUM

In 2007, the founders of NZ SoS established The Friends of Women’s Refuge Charitable Trust (FOWR) which wholly owns New Zealand Sculpture OnShore Limited (the company which runs the event on behalf of the FOWR Trust). Given the growth and relocation of the exhibition from a private garden to a significant public site, establishing a corporate structure was necessary in order to support the fundraising mandate of the trust. Today, as has always been the case, 100% of the profits from artwork, ticket, and booklet sales are donated to the Women’s Refuge, via the FOWR. Certainly this formal structure has proved effective when considering the calculable facts and figures that create the all-important business return on investment. This evolution, however, ushered in a transition away from the original ethos of a volunteer group of philanthropically minded North Shore women, to that of a bureaucratic and rationalised institution akin to a museum.

Replete with a board of directors, paid positions including a general manager and professional curators, and an engrained methodology and expectation for the display and production of the exhibition, NZ SoS now finds itself facing both internal and external pressures that coincide with being a public icon. Appearing every other year, in the same location, NZ SoS has become a hybrid outdoor public gallery *and* a dealer showroom. On offer is a visual extravaganza for public enjoyment and enrichment, as well as an opportunity for art collectors to attend exclusive openings and buy highly desirable artworks by established artists, all whilst raising money for a worthy cause. The magnificent gala event is what all those who attend have come to expect, not least because this is the way the exhibition is promoted and advertised. Today, NZ SoS is practically and ideologically a long way away from the original event held in Becroft’s garden on the shores of Lake Pupuke.

The institutional structure and commercially-focused attitude which now underscores NZ SoS, coexistent with the omnipresent challenges and competition for funding within our creative sector generates dualities of tension. As a result there is a trade-off between the exhibition and its populist role in the public sphere and the content of the exhibition itself. The artists, including the curators, find themselves walking the knife edge of creating works which need to function on multiple levels. From a curatorial perspective there is an urge to be genuinely site responsive, acknowledging the shifting expectations and roles of temporary art in the public sphere on the one hand, while on the other,

there is a realisation that the work presented must appeal not only to a broad public audience, but also to the high net worth individuals of the art market.

Perhaps this trade-off is inevitable when grassroots community initiatives become so popular and 'successful'. When the focus is on width rather than depth is there any meaningful space left for representation and placemaking? In a discussion with the author, Deborah White ONZM recalls the early days of the event: "We were all there, in Becroft's garden, having a glass of wine and canapes that she had probably made herself. Then a woman from the Refuge started to speak. We all stopped. It was just so moving and real. I'm pretty sure all the artwork sold that year because we all had a true sense of what it [the work of the Refuge and the reason for the exhibition] all meant."²⁰ Perhaps, when 20,000 people stream through the gate at a public park, and hospitality now comes after 'tapping and going' at an on-trend food truck (*hashtag Iloveartandculture. Prayer hands emoji,*) the distance between the human, and the number on the ticket or the price sticker, becomes so great that 'what it all meant' is distorted by the pursuit of increased return on investment and likes. It seems that even within temporary fundraising exhibitions, the omnipresent tension between art and finance casts its shadow.

By virtue of the fact that the primary objective of NZ SoS is commercial, albeit a philanthropic form of commercialism, there is a consequential restriction on the ability of the curator/s to fully inhabit their role, leading to a thwarting of NZ SoS contributing meaningfully to the dialogue of awareness raising and placemaking. It is open to conjecture that given this 'capitalist model', NZ SoS may be better located in a dedicated event centre. In such spaces, the social and cultural expectations and objectives of art events in the public sphere, particularly those which co-opt historically, culturally, and spiritually significant sites, are less likely to exert their critical gaze. In remaining at O Peretu, the challenge for the event organisers is to develop a shared common language to meet the needs of disparate groups. While satisfying the board, sponsors, and sybaritic art market buyers on the one hand, on the other it needs to balance the desires and core motivations of the artists – curators included – alongside the social needs and expectations of the Tāmaki Makaurā community, and the many spirits present within the site itself.

MEETING WHERE WE STAND: A SUGGESTION FOR THE WAY FORWARD

In essence, the layers of tension present in NZ SoS symbolise those which have prevailed at O Peretu and across wider society for many hundreds of years. This presents a significant and confounding challenge for the professional curator/s whose task it is to stand within a centre that cannot hold in our current era and "moment of racial reckoning."²¹ As the desire and need for places that truly represent the diversity that is 'us', grows, the weight that rests on the shoulders of temporary public art has increased. Yet this increased weight need not be a burden. In being a charitable organisation, not strictly an institution, NZ SoS possesses the gift of flexibility. It is capable of expanding its internal world view, and embracing the potential of ephemerality to become an event which is visually engaging and successful in terms of its self-determined quantifiable parameters, while simultaneously being a fully integrated transformative aesthetic experience which meaningfully responds to and creates place within the wider community. Perhaps the place to start for NZ SoS is exactly where it stands: outside the institution proper, investing financially and philosophically in the possibilities of genuinely engaged and site-responsive public art. From this location, it might be possible to foster reciprocal discussion, connection, representation, and ultimately create a sense of place. If this cannot transpire on a stunning headland such as O Peretu which is itself an infinite crossing of languages, where can it?

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ENDNOTES

1. Ida Panicelli, quoting Germano Celant in "Germano Celant: 1940 – 2020," Artforum. [Print edition]. July/August 2020: 21
2. Ibid
3. Despite most of the literature referring to O Peretu Fort Takapuna, I have consciously chosen to subsequently refer to the location by its Māori name only. I do so out of respect, recognition and allyship for Ngāti Pāoa.
4. New Zealand Sculpture OnShore "Event" <https://www.nzsculptureonshore.co.nz/event/> Accessed October 26, 2020.
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