

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**JAMES LUNA
URBAN (ALMOST)
RITUALS
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY
CAROLINE VERCOE**

James Luna
Urban (Almost) Rituals
THURSDAY 14 MAY 2009, 08.00 – 16.00
SOUNDINGS THEATRE, MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND
TE PAPA TONGAREWA, WELLINGTON

Urban (Almost) Rituals by James Luna, Luiseño, Pooyukitchchum/Ipai, was realised at Te Papa on 14 May in the Soundings Theatre at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. The artist undertook a marathon performance/installation which started at 8am and unfolded over the following eight hours. The project was originally planned for the outdoor Amphitheatre at Te Papa, but, because of the changeability of the winter weather, a decision was made to move the performance/installation indoors a few days before the project occurred. The artist began developing *Urban (Almost) Rituals* following a three-week research visit in late January 2009. It was his first visit to New Zealand and involved travelling to locations in the North and South Island. The aim of the research was to connect him with people and places that were significant from both an artistic and a Maori perspective. Luna was particularly keen to connect with Maori communities, 'for them to see and experience my work', and to give him some insight into, and understanding of, the cultural context within which he was to work. Early in the research phase Luna decided to include other performers in the project on an open-call basis. The eventual performances would include Butoh dance, beat poetry, opera, Capoeira, stiltwalking and an art performance piece that included the making of a clay baby. This variety of performances acted as a kind of punctuation to the tempo of Luna's monologues and also to the building of a sculptural koru on the floor of the stage, which functioned as the physical centrepiece of *Urban (Almost) Rituals*. The work was web streamed, making it available to people not able to be at Te Papa during the performance, in particular friends and followers of the artist who live in the United States and Canada. This accessibility created a different audience – geographically scattered, yet able to watch the piece unfold at the same time. James Luna has been at the forefront of many developments in contemporary indigenous art and Native performance art and is the first native American artist commissioned to create a work at Te Papa. Charlotte Huddleston and Megan Tamati-Quennell

Commissioned by Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Project Curators: Charlotte Huddleston and Megan Tamati-Quennell

Caroline Vercoe

James Luna's one day sculpture occurred a little later than was originally planned. Due to illness, Luna was unable to stage the work as initially envisaged, to coincide with a three-day symposium and with other commissions by Roman Ondák and Billy Apple. My response to Luna's work, then, is filtered by my direct experience of these other works as well as my long-term interest in his art practice. *Urban (Almost) Rituals* diverges from other *One Day* weather, Luna's performance was *Sculpture* works, which took place in public spaces and were often conceptualised as interactions, or interventions, within their everyday environments. Due to inclement situated

in a theatre space before a seated audience, and was loosely arranged into four parts. Less dialogic in nature and, to a degree, lacking the charged expectation of something happening outside of the ordinary – due to the prosaic nature of the setting – *Urban (Almost) Rituals* blended a number of signature elements of Luna's performance practice with a broader engagement with notions of ritual, community and the idea of indigeneity.

Luna's eight-hour work took place in Soundings Theatre at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington. The venue, a professional theatre with rigged lighting; video projections and pre-set audio loops, created by Luna, formed the setting for his multi-disciplinary, multiperformer extravaganza. Simultaneously taking on the role of storyteller and circus

ringmaster, the artist played host to an eclectic range of local acts including a Capoeira group, Bhuto dancers, beat poets, an opera singer, a violinist and an experimental electronic street musician duo. He encouraged, interacted with, and at some points, looked slightly perplexed at the goings on. Throughout the day, a young man dressed in black worked industriously as Luna's silent accomplice, constructing a large spiral that took up most of the stage. This spiral formed a kind of conceptual and meditative focal point for the artist as he sought to symbolise a bridge between, or relationship with, his own Native American culture and Maori – a conversation between two indigenous cultures. The artist had previously embarked on a tour of the country with the two commissioning curators, endeavoring to get a sense of the place and to make connections. Towards the beginning of the performance he recounted that he identified with the spiral in Maori art forms, recognising similarities in its fluid and symbolic form with patterns made by Native Americans. This spiral took shape slowly during the day as he, and more often his assistant, knelt and placed different objects, including dried corn, slices of kumara, Maori potatoes, beer lids, sugar, chillies, paua shells and sweets, onto its outlined form.

Luna has described his work as 'places for people to meet'. His notion of place differs from artists like Carl Andre, whose 'sculpture as place' sought to highlight or change one's spatial awareness, through an interaction with the formal dynamics of his art. Luna's idea of place relies on an interaction between people – deeply informed by and embedded with, the histories and interrelationships that have occurred there. Not surprisingly, his *Urban (Almost) Rituals* sought to offer a place where people could meet. Throughout the day, the stage became a meeting place for Luna and a number of artists and performers, with whom he had little previous relationship. As the spiral took shape, Luna spun his tales and the various performers came and went.

Prior to the day of the event, Luna made an open call to performers, artists and musicians around Wellington. Flyers were posted around inner city streets and word of mouth functioned to attract a number of individuals and groups. Lured by the prospect of performing at Te Papa, to a potentially vast audience (the performance was streamed live on the internet for its entire duration), an assortment of amateur and professional performers volunteered their time to participate throughout the day for a set length of time.

The performance began with a woman performing a lengthy, if tongue-in-cheek, enactment of a flight attendant instructing passengers of their safety requirements. A video projection, featuring Luna, was then shown, the artist dressed 'ceremonially' in a red bowler hat, purple satin suit jacket, loin cloth and moccasins being pedalled in a small paddle boat up the waterway beside Te Papa. After an 'altercation' with a security guard who questioned his lack of passport, the artist demands entry as an indigenous man by producing his own 'sacred tribal passport'. He convinces the guard of his legitimacy and is then admitted into the museum. The video fades and Luna himself enters, accompanied by his assistant, to take his place on stage for the duration of the day. The whole work transpired as a series of devised actions while the ostensibly random acts of some of the performers involved lent an air of spontaneity. As a viewer, access to the performance had to be intentional and there were seemingly no opportunities for audience interaction. The response from the audience, which changed over the day, was markedly different from one hour to the next: some applauded after different acts, while other more seasoned viewers of performance art remained passive throughout. Unlike most performances in theatre venues, the entire space was lit, and so the audience could make direct eye contact with those on stage. Different performers also seemed to expect different responses from the audience; after a particularly rousing and energetic display by a local Capoeira group, the leader bowed and the audience applauded, while others came on, quietly performed and exited apparently oblivious to our presence.

The viewing dynamics of the theatre space – with spotlights, set, visual and audio tracks playing for the duration of the 'show' and Luna pretty much a constant presence – meant that, as an observer, I felt obliged to stay for most of the day, so as not to miss anything. Luna's presence on stage gave continuity to the overall form of the work. Throughout the performance, he played a vital role in maintaining our attention, his confidence and experience provided an interesting counterpoint with some of the groups. The artist explored several themes during the day. He talked about the long and laborious process of making acorn bread, highlighting the significance of the process in relation to bringing people

together. His tales were, at times, whimsical and philosophical and, at others, offered us rare insights into his childhood. Whether telling a story, observing groups as they performed (sometimes interacting with them) or helping to construct the spiral, Luna remained the crucial point of focus. To the left of the stage, a pile of monitors screened looped images of flames, which blazed throughout the performance. Periodically, Luna stood before them and 'warmed' his hands.

A number of elements of *Urban (Almost) Rituals* resonate with earlier performances. Luna's art practice characteristically attempts to highlight the ways in which indigenous stereotypes – in his case Native American – have been constructed within mass culture as a blend of ethnographic and popular imaginings. He adopts faux indigenous personae such as the 'Shameman' in *La Nostalgia*, a collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, in which he sells 'authentic' cultural paraphernalia and mixes vodka and pink Pepto Bismol martinis for his audience as he tells stories of otherness and the everyday, attempting to confront his viewers with their complicity in these 'rituals'. In contrast to works like *La Nostalgia*, a more reflexive and less ironic Luna took the stage at Te Papa. While periodic outbursts of 'Jim Morrison says the West is the best' and the odd rendition of fragments of songs by Muddy Waters and the Beach Boys reminded us that Luna's experience is as much influenced by American mainstream culture as by his Indian heritage, he sought to develop an ongoing narrative through the day which highlighted notions of ritual and their interface with the everyday. At times, he spoke of ceremony and its significance. At others he described personal rituals like eating a meal a certain way.

The culmination of the work featured two dramatic performances by a virtuoso violinist and an opera singer, both Maori. Their highly polished presentations and their physical engagement with the spiral comprised some of the few conversations that took place between the various streams of the work. The striking visage of the violinist, complete with Mohican, and the opera singer who followed her, in flowing satin skirt, flax bodice and feather necklace, created an intriguing juxtaposition with Luna's Shameman persona. It seemed to resituate the polemics of his faux identities into a different kind of dialogue. Rather than signifying the fictitious and constructed artifice of cultural identity, which often foregrounds Luna's performance practice, their complex and intertextual indigeneity seemed to

draw Luna's Shameman into one of possibly unintended cultural authenticity.

At the end of the performance, Luna announced, 'It is done'. He formally thanked the performers, named them all, and we applauded. Acknowledging the distance between the audience and performers that the theatre location created, Luna invited the audience onto the stage to take a closer look at the now completed spiral. A still engaging, but definitely tired, artist finally announced, 'scuse me while I kiss the sky' and it was over.

James Luna

James Luna, Luiseño, Pooyukitchchum/Ipai, uses a variety of media including made and found objects, moving image and sound in his performance/installation work.

His multifaceted pieces employ humour and irony to challenge audiences to re-examine their perceptions of what it means to be Native American, calling attention to the difficulties, complexities and challenges facing indigenous peoples today. The resulting performances and works hold highly specific references, which also respond to universal concerns of place and identity, increasingly experienced as a result of globalisation and migration. Luna's work has featured in the Whitney Biennial (New York); the New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York); the National Gallery of Canada, and the Nippon International Performance Art Festival in Japan. In 2005 he was selected by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian for the Venice Biennale. He lives and works on the La Jolla Indian Reservation, San Diego County, California.

Her writing also features on the London based Digital Archive of the Institute of International Visual Art. Her Doctorate focused on American performance art that deals with issues of race and gender.

Recommended Reading

Staging the Indians: the Politics of Representation (New York: Tang Museum, Skidmore College, 2002)

Lisbeth Haas, Truman Lowe, Paul Chaat Smith, W. Richard West, *James Luna: Emendatio* (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2006)

Lucy Lippard, 'The Lure of the Local', *Mix Magazine* (Winter 2001)

Caroline Vercoe

Dr. Caroline Vercoe is a Senior Lecturer in the Art History Department at the University of Auckland. She teaches courses in Pacific Art, Postcolonial Theory and Contemporary New Zealand Art. She has published essays relating to Pacific art and visual culture, stereotypes and representation and performance art in a number of journals including the *Journal of Pacific History*, *The Journal of New Zealand Art History* and *Art Asia Pacific*, and in books including *Pacific Art Niu Sila: Pacific Heritage in the Arts* (Te Papa Press), *Paradise Now? Contemporary Art from the Pacific* (Asia Society Museum), *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (International Centre of Photography) and *The Bodies That Were Not Ours and Other Writings* (Routledge.)

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