

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**MICHAEL PAREKOWHAI
YES WE ARE
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY LARA STRONGMAN**

Michael Parekowhai *Yes We Are*

THURSDAY 28 MAY 2009, 05.00 – 22.00
MULTIPLE LOCATIONS ACROSS WELLINGTON

*Michael Parekowhai began thinking about the invitation to produce a work for the *One Day Sculpture* series by reflecting upon its inevitable conclusion. Wanting to respond to the sequential nature of the series and to offer a concluding statement, he proposed that his work should be the last of the 20 works to take place. Parekowhai is best known for striking, large-scale sculptural works which have a refined and seductive presence. His work often appropriates familiar forms placing them in intriguing relationships that purposely invite new interpretations, in particular in relation to the cultural context of New Zealand.*

Consisting of a 4.6 metre-high neon sign, which spelt out the word 'OPEN', the work was intentionally incongruous in Wellington – part-retro, part-Vegas. It was mounted on the back of a flat-bed truck and installed temporarily at a series of locations across the city on Thursday 28 May. The first location of the work was the Interislander Marshalling Yard – at the mouth of the Interislander Ferry Terminal. Designed to be viewed from the motorway, at the entrance to the city, and from across the harbour, the sign first flickered on in the darkness at 5am. Subsequently, the sign was driven to a series of undisclosed locations throughout the day, arriving at its final location, Mount Victoria at 9pm, where it remained for a final hour until 10pm.

Parekowhai's title refers explicitly to the convention of shop signs which substitute 'Yes We Are' for 'Open' – an assertive, optimistic and somewhat pre-emptive response to a potential enquiry.

Constructing his own bold, new readymade, Parekowhai proceeded to enact a series of 'displacements', through which the sign became relocated across a variety of contexts during the day. By not allowing us to know a predetermined route for the work, simply indicating where the work would start and finish, the artist coaxed viewers to think about the terms on which public sculpture is encountered.

*What does it mean to come across this sign unexpectedly, how open are we to such new encounters and how does our understanding of this sign operate if we see it in a number of locations? Parekowhai is particularly interested in the potentiality of the term 'open' and what such a disembodied sign might indicate about the future of public art in an open field. Conceived as an elusive finale for the series, Parekowhai's *Yes We Are* indicates that this might be the end of the beginning for new public sculpture in New Zealand, rather than the last word. Claire Doherty*

Commissioned by Litmus Research Initiative, Massey University
Project Curator: Claire Doherty

Lara Strongman

'Open?' roared the drunk man on Cuba Street, 'Open? What's fuckin' open?'

It was lunchtime, and the flat-bed truck was parked on the east side of Cuba Street by Swan Lane, just up from the Peter McLeavey Gallery. The sun was bright in the sky. The rain had stopped the previous night after a downpour lasting ten days. The streets were full of people.

The OPEN sign on the back of the truck was pointing at nothing in particular, its red arrow blinking towards the back of a multi-storey concrete car park building, partially visible through an alleyway. With its flashing circular coins, it looked more than a bit like a vertical version of the famous 'Welcome

to Las Vegas' sign. Passers-by looked up at the huge neon, which was suspended six metres in the air from the truck's crane hoist, and then they looked in the direction it was pointing, and then they looked back at the sign again, uncertain whether they were looking at an event or an object. They moved on. Sometimes people stopped, their hands on their hips or in their coat pockets, and looked round for someone to speak to about the sign. 'Where's the boss?' I asked a guy in orange and blue overalls, one of a group sitting on a low wall staring glumly at the truck. He motioned over his shoulder with his thumb. 'Off at lunch.'

At 5.30am that morning, I'd been standing with a friend on the hard shoulder of the motorway from Porirua, looking down over the Inter Island Ferry's marshalling yard. It was bitterly cold. We were

waiting for the artist. We walked up and down and banged our hands together for warmth as cars sped by six feet away, their tail lights disappearing in the darkness. The ferry was covered in lights. Trucks parked in neat rows waited to board. At the far end of the yard, pointing out to sea, the OPEN sign blinked on and off. There was a silence. 'It's smaller than I thought it would be,' said my friend, doubtfully. 'I don't think it's meant for us, up here,' I said and, indeed, we'd driven up and down the motorway several times looking for it before we pulled over in the breakdown lay-by. From the road, we had seen only a tiny neon flash, gone in a second. 'I guess the audience is down there. Truck-drivers, people on the ferry. What's open? The journey. The harbour. The day ahead. Whatever you like.' Back in town, the city was caught in that strange still moment between sleeping and waking. Everything seemed slow and charged with significance. It felt like a De Chirico painting. We drove around looking for somewhere to have breakfast, but all the usual places were shut. From the other side of the harbour, you could see the sign flashing in the black water at the foot of the motorway, declaring the city open for business. Street cleaners were working on Courtenay Place. As we turned down Allen Street, a small knot of people lurched out of the door of the Vespa Lounge, about to embark on the 6am walk of shame. The bar's neon sign flickered off.

The next stop for the sign was Buckle Street, at the foot of the War Memorial and the tomb of the unknown warrior. The flat-bed truck parked on the left-hand side of the road, and as dawn broke, the sign was erected. It seemed ridiculously triumphal. The arrow pointed outwards, away from the old National Museum building on the hill and towards the waterfront and Te Papa, but most directly it pointed to a vacant lot across the road. It felt like we were on a film set. People were taking calls and pacing about, waiting for something to happen. The road was jammed with commuters. A few metres back from the truck stood the historic Police Station where the government had locked up the prisoners of conscience from Parihaka in 1882. I thought for a while about that, and about the sign that had

appeared in the sky to them in Taranaki. 1 The four guys in jumpsuit-type overalls were standing on the footpath near the truck; they looked like they meant business; one, the artist, was wearing gold-framed sunglasses. He said, 'I've been waiting twenty years for this moment – for wearing these overalls to make sense'. 'Where's it going next?' asked the Radio New Zealand interviewer, but no one would say. By mid-morning, the OPEN sign was parked in Manners Mall near a discount shoe shop. The scale had shifted, and, against the city buildings, the sign seemed gigantic. Up close, you could see what a beautifully-made object it was. Amid the rabble of other signage competing for attention – billboards, hoardings, shopfront signs, sandwich boards, posters, tags and bombs – Parekowhai's neon looked like the king of all signs. It looked guileless, casual, magnificent. 'There's a Dean Martin thing going on here, isn't there?' I said to the artist, who was sitting on a park bench with his work boots straight out in front of him.

'Well, it's like anything,' he replied, 'It's all about balancing the effort with the effortlessness.' After lunch in Cuba Street, the next stop was the financial and governmental district at the other end of town. The sign went up with the efficiency of a flagpole at the end of a military campaign. We took up position on benches on the other side of Molesworth Street from the truck, which was parked outside Parliament grounds. The arrow pointed to the Beehive, where the budget was being read that afternoon. It was hypnotic, watching the sign blinking against the trees in the weak afternoon sun. Everyone felt exhausted. Someone fell asleep. At 3pm, a huge cloud of school girls blew down the hill. They saw the sign and giggled and took photographs with their mobile phones, and nudged one another and made jokes, all without breaking stride. Then two young men came across the road, in search of someone to speak to about it. 'Excuse me, you chaps,' they said. 'Who's in charge of this? Is that sign always there? We're over from England, and we think it's a genius idea. Where's it really meant to go?' By 5pm, the sign was in Oriental Bay along from Waitangi Park, throwing the evening open to homeward commuters. The water and the footpath and the Norfolk Island pines were washed with blue and red light. The natural authority of men in fluorescent vests over public places was apparent.

'This is the third time today I've seen you guys,' said a woman. 'When's it going to stop?'

As darkness fell, the wind got up. A howling gale was blowing at Point Jerningham in Shelly Bay, but the sign was steadfast, anchored to the crane and the deck of the truck, powered by a generator, the noise of which was lost in the weather. We were standing on land that had been occupied by the defence force and now belonged to the iwi [tribe] again. I considered the way the sign had directed attention to the Maori history of each of the places it had stood. The arrow pointed away from the harbour, to the dark bluff of the Miramar peninsula. The wind whipped tears from your eyes and tore the breath from your lungs. A car pulled up, having taken the long narrow road around the bays. A couple got out. 'We saw the light from the other side. We had to come across. What is it?' they asked.

As I waited at the gate for the plane, Elvis's *Suspicious Minds* was playing quietly over the loudspeaker. I thought back over the day: the city figured as a Big Room, the neon OPEN sign like a top-billing entertainer making a series of unscheduled guest appearances. I thought about the way in which the audiences in different parts of town had assumed their own distinct identities, and had connected with the work in their own distinctive ways; the diverse lives that had accommodated the work for a few minutes; the work, I saw, laid itself open to a vast range of possibilities. I thought about the emotional reactions it had generated. There had been everything from anger ('What are you trying to do? Cause an accident or something?' a woman at the ferry terminal had spat in fury, momentarily disorientated), to the spontaneous delight of the afternoon schoolgirls, one of whom walked into a tree while absorbed in watching the sign flash on and off. Most of all, I thought about how Michael Parekowhai had made an object that was also a performance. The action was all in the interaction between the work and its audiences. Not so much a conduit as a trigger, it directed attention away from itself and back to the city and its people. As the work moved around the city, it changed the way I thought about each of the places it temporarily occupied. It didn't identify itself as an art event, and didn't need to be understood as such to play for a moment as an imaginative symbol in the lives of people passing by. *Yes We Are* was at once a statement and a series of questions in the minds of its viewers: We're OPEN. To what? What's next? More than anything, I realised, it was a challenge.

The last location for the work was the lookout near the radio mast at the top of Mt. Victoria, high up over the lights of the city. From there Wellington looks like a natural amphitheatre, its steep rake rising from the stage of the harbour. One of the guys in overalls took a phone call while I blew in, briefly, on my way to the airport. 'It can be read as far away as Vogeltown,' he announced with satisfaction, snapping his phone shut. Half an hour later out of the window of the plane, the sign blinked for the last time: blue, blue, blue, blue, red; and then we flew into a cloud and it was gone.

¹ In September 1882, a year after the Government's military occupation of Parihaka Paa, Halley's Comet (Orongomai) appeared in the sky over Mt. Taranaki. To the people waiting at Parihaka for the return of their menfolk who had been imprisoned at the other end of the country, the comet was seen as a manifestation of hope in the form of the raukura, or white feather of peace, associated with one of the visionary leaders of the passive resistance movement, Te-Whiti-o-Rongomai, and still worn by the Taranaki Whanui (Taranaki tribes).

Michael Parekowhai

Michael Parekowhai was born in Porirua in 1968 and is of Nga-Ariki, Ngati Whakarongo and European decent. He holds a Masters degree from the University of Auckland School of Fine Arts. His practice engages with a range of European artists and movements, from Marcel Duchamp to Minimalism and Pop, using them as a frame in which to consider the place of Maori culture within New Zealand's dominant Pakeha (non-indigenous) society. His work often appropriates the forms of familiar things, placing them in intriguing relationships which purposely invite a wide variety of interpretations relevant to the cultural context of New Zealand and beyond. Selected solo exhibitions include 'The Big O.E.', (Wellington: Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 2006); and the acclaimed touring exhibition 'Patriot: Ten Guitars' (Auckland: ARTSPACE, 1999). Selected group exhibitions include the 5th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2006), the 13th Sydney Biennale (2002) and 'Flight Patterns' (Los Angeles: MOCA, The Geffen Contemporary, 2000). Michael Parekowhai currently lives in Auckland.

Recommended Reading

Michael Parekowhai (Pittsburgh: The Andy Warhol Museum, 2002)

Justin Paton, 'Special Agent: Michael Parekowhai's Generous Duplicity', *Art New Zealand*, No. 103 (Winter 2002)

Lara Strongman, *Shared Pleasures: The Chartwell Collection* (Hamilton, New Zealand: Waikato Museum of Art and History, 1993)

© Lara Strongman and Litmus Research Initiative, Massey University. Published by Massey University, 2008. The person using One Day Sculpture Critical Responses online may view, reproduce or store copies of this paper providing the information is only for their individual use, and is not used for commercial purposes. Any copies of this paper, in whole or in part, must include the copyright notice above and the customary bibliographic citation, including author, attribution, date, article title, One Day Sculpture Critical Responses Online, and the URL <http://www.onedaysculpture.org.nz>. The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Publisher.