

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**LIZ ALLAN
CAME A HOT SUNDAE –
A RONALD HUGH
MORRIESON FESTIVAL
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY PATRICK LAVIOLETTE**

Liz Allan

Came a Hot Sundae – a Ronald Hugh Morrieson Festival

Sunday 26 October 2008, 12pm to late

Hawera, South Taranaki

*A renowned author and musician, Ronald Hugh Morrieson (1922 – 1972) lived all his life in Hawera. He was attributed with forging the genre of Taranaki Gothic through his books *The Scarecrow*, *Came a Hot Friday*, *Predicament* and *Pallet on the Floor*, all of which except *Predicament* were made into films in the 1980s. Morrieson's distinctive writings echo the people, livelihood and milieu of South Taranaki and although he died in 1972, he remains a contentious figure in the region, due to both his work and colourful reputation. Symptomatic of this uneasy relationship, in 1992 the author's family home was demolished to make way for a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise. Engaged with the histories of South Taranaki and episodes that have generated conflict or debate, artist Liz Allan coordinated a festival to commemorate the writings of Morrieson. Held in Hawera on Sunday 26 October 2008, *Came a Hot Sundae: A Ronald Hugh Morrieson Festival* promised to offer something for everyone. The day included *The Scarecrow* and *Came A Hot Friday* film screenings, readings from Morrieson's novels at the KFC, music that reflects Morrieson's importance within this scene, historical walking tours of the Hawera township, visits to the Morrieson attic, a scarecrow costume competition, and the 21st anniversary of the Ronald Hugh Morrieson short story competition, as well as the chance for some sly grogging and a light flutter.*

*Commissioned by Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Project Curator: Melanie Oliver*

Predicament of Placelessness

Hawera roughly translates as the Maori for burnt place. Now it is probably quite difficult to tell for sure whether or not the local author Ronald Morrieson was deliberately playing on these origins when writing his second novel *Came a Hot Friday* (1964) but fire certainly plays an essential role in the narrative structure. It is the means by which the story begins and ends. On both occasions it harbours powerful messages about sacrifice and revenge.

Not only do I want to use this context to provide an obvious link to Liz Allan's dialogic or interventionist festival *Came a Hot Sundae*. I also wish to highlight the contemporary significance of ritual destruction as well as the occasional ramifications that result from certain forms of modern urban development. After all, the first domestic fire in the book derives from an insurance scam and the second is

connected to illicit gambling. It is noteworthy that in the case of Morrieson's home, the demolition protest for No. 1 Regent St. Hawera was relatively small and ultimately ineffective. The petition against the sale of the property was out-petitioned by more than 20 to 1 – not the best betting odds as any aficionado of señor Ron's *Came a Hot Friday* would attest to. There are undoubtedly many reasons for this. Largely, however, it has been attributed as a form of collective vengeance. That is, a type of punishment against the memory of an unorthodox character whose personal eccentricities and public irreverence in his written representations of South Taranaki had caused so much resentment amongst what some people have called the uncompromising, semi-conservative population of small town New Zealand, that it resulted in an attempt to materially erase his presence. Instead, we can see that it was through big business enterprise and the bureaucracies of regional planning

(filtered via public opinion) that an element of New Zealand's literary history was ritually destroyed – not by fire but rather by the doyen of charbroiled chicken and chips.

In its wake, there have been a number of events that have repositioned and venerated the importance of this author. These include: the partial salvaging of the attic of Morrieson's home by Mr Robert Surgenor, a local builder and farmer; the annual literary awards ceremony held by the District Council School Board; the opening of Morrieson's Café and Bar in the centre of town; the artistic recreation of views from, and of, both the inside and outside of the author's house (*Letters from Ronald's Room*); and most recently, Liz Allan's One Day Sculpture project *Came a Hot Sundae* – a celebratory festival in honour of the creative contributions of the region's most infamous prodigal son, a black sheep if ever there was one – Ronald Hugh Morrieson.

Allan's piece on 26 October 2008, in collaboration with the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in nearby New Plymouth, seemed to me a sort of curatorial and administrative exercise in art/event management. It involved organising such activities as music performances in Hawera's town square and Morrieson's Café, film screenings in the local cinema and an unoccupied shoe shop around the corner, visits to the attic, literary and fancy-dress competitions as well, of course, as selected readings from Morrieson's novels on the site of his birthplace and life-long home, now a fast food outlet since 1993.

For many people on the day, this temporary reappropriation of a multi-national firm was the highlight. The readings were evocatively performed by a gender-balanced foursome who parodied the irony of commemorating the author/musician in the premises of this particular location.

The artist and teacher Tim Chadwick, who had also been the Chair of The Scarecrow Committee which struggled to maintain the original site, started off with a compellingly rich and morbid reading. He was followed by a candid rendition from Mary Bourke, the Mayor of Hawera at the time of the property's take over. Then the actress Nicola Kawana, a former resident and the niece of one of Morrieson's long-term romantic liaisons, read from the second chapter of the posthumously published *Pallet on the Floor* (1976). Finally, John Summers, a writer/poet from Wellington and avid admirer of Ron's oeuvre concluded the

proceedings. His and the first two readings were from Morrieson's first novel *The Scarecrow* (1963) (e.g. from Chapters 4 & 11), perhaps indicative that the event was staged on the bank holiday leading up to Halloween.

As someone who works on placelessness, I can certainly appreciate the humour and subversiveness of having a public reading in a fast food franchise where none of the participants purchased anything on offer. Morrieson was hugely controversial because he often overtly described South Taranaki as barren, backward and destitute. Yet paradoxically, he is as spatially grounded as any place-based authors out there. Herein lies the predicament of what I would call the placeless elements particular to his renowned gothic style. Hence, the aesthetic, mnemonic and socio-political success of the *Came a Hot Sundae* reading session reflects that, along with the demolition of his home, Morrieson's memory is significantly celebrated in the vein of the anti-material. His is a literary legacy. Words, those that transcend the particularities of place, become the dominant sculptural form here. If we see sculpture as the general shaping and transformation of materials or ideas into an artform, then there should be no real problem, at least conceptually, with calling the monumental task of shaping a participative community event a public sculpture. Indeed, what more appropriate term is there for a piece of work made for, with and of people, local residents and visitors alike, than 'public sculpture' – a one day sculpture at that, especially if the piece is a fleeting one-off event. And perhaps this is where the sculptural becomes even more tangibly durable – will the idea of turning this event into a recurring festival take hold? And would it replace any craving for such a thing as a Ronald Hugh statue?

Allan has already investigated the possibility that such a festival might become a regular occurrence, although it seems that the celebration of his birthday on 29 January might get taken up as the day of choice. So one question that I keep coming back to in my own head is "where does the potential significance of the dayness of such an event lie"? This relates both to the issues of temporality particular to the One Day Sculpture series as well as to the global contextualisation of literary landmark events such as this one. Indeed, there is a growing wealth of literature on site-specific art, as there is on time-specific interventions. But it is place, not time, that still seems to dominate the discourse. As a result, one of the lessons learnt is that site-specific art events are far from

parochial given the international and interactive dimensions to such projects.

Now admittedly there was still a bit of a 'locals versus outsiders' divide in the way that many people experienced the day's festivities on *Came a Hot Sundae*. This probably resulted from the sheer number of people who came over from Auckland, New Plymouth or Wellington. Since several art historians or critics have recognised that certain jet-setting artists run the risk of producing a kind of half-arsed 'ethnographic art' that superficially reproduces their personal biases towards specific locales, then there is always reason to be wary. But this is where Allan's sensitivity shines through. The anthropological side to the *Came a Hot Sundae* festival was not only present through its connection to abstract temporal issues or the idea of addressing the ritual destruction of place – it also resulted from the methods that the artist has selected.

Given a period of residency in New Plymouth with an intense collaboration with Govett-Brewster assistant curator Melanie Oliver, Liz Allan was regionally based during this project's preparation. She has implicated herself as an informed participant observer in the local Hawera community: making contacts, listening to the stories of different generations of people who knew Morrieson and coming up with a programme schedule that was felt to capture what local people thought was suitable for all concerned. After all, the Morrieson issue is still a delicate topic, even though time seems to have healed some of the wounds. In these terms, it was also interesting to witness Liz performing on the day, dancing with children in the town square, drinking with everyone in Morrieson's Café and karaoke singing with the local band the Saints Ano (which was made up of musicians who performed in the same era as Ron). Liz has clearly gained the trust of many local people, evidenced with the praise, gratitude and repeated acknowledgements that she received. Her approach therefore suitably parallels what the art historian Hal Foster (1996), inspired by Walter Benjamin, has identified as 'the artist as ethnographer', a movement over the past 30 years concerned with both political-cultural intervention and the ethics of engagement.

According to Foster and many others, such a dialectical movement has struggled with the possibility of thinking in oppositions, of developing a logic for contradiction. Here Foster reveals the significance of appropriating ethnographic concepts such as participant observation to understand how work such as Allan's can take shape beyond exploitative or itinerant artist models. In this sense, perhaps the RHM festival

has begun a long overdue celebration of this local personality's contradictory features as both loved and loathed. Maybe then could he become the person that Hawerians hate to love as opposed to the one which they love to hate?

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe's (2005) notion of the 'agonistic public sphere' also reminds us that the visiting art crowd was complicit with this process on the day. And they will likely continue to be so. Through the apologist/anthropologist technique that was so convincingly presented in *Came a Hot Sundae*, the public will certainly continue to respond to the discursive opportunities that this festival has opened up. By addressing the predicament of the placeless in so many ways, the RHM festival seems to have been instituted as a process whereby provincial New Zealanders can confront the past politically, aesthetically and experientially. As a mechanism for dealing with the complex issues of memory and the emotional reactions towards forgiving the irreverence found in Ronald Hugh's writings, one can see the festival as a forum for social catharsis.

So my feeling is that this project follows those which have contributed to broadening the scope of dialogic art. By bringing in another discipline, say for arguments sake ethnographic participant observation, it has helped sharpen the mode of discussion about those site and time-specific works that are especially poignant in shaping words, places, forgiveness and social relations.

Patrick Laviolette

For their various contributions to my participation in this event, thanks to L. Allan, D. Cross, C. Doherty, M. Moore, M. Oliver and B. Phillips.

Liz Allan

Born in Whangarei in 1978, Liz Allan lives and works in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Since graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Massey University, Wellington in 2003, her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions throughout Australasia, including most recently *Unsheltered Workshops* at VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne as part of the 2008 Next Wave Festival; *Telecom Prospect 2007: New Art New Zealand*, City Gallery, Wellington; *Sister City*, Blindside Gallery, Melbourne, 2006; *SCAPE 2006 Biennial of Art in Public Space*, Christchurch; and *Linked: Connectivity and Exchange* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 2005. She is also a founding member of The Association of Collaboration, a collective of artists, curators and writers interested in collaborative and participatory practices. Allan was the 2008 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery New Zealand Artist in Residence. Her exhibition *How to Dress for Local Conditions* is on at the Govett-Brewster until 16 March 2009.

Patrick Laviolette

Patrick Laviolette has presented over 40 conference and seminar papers in 10 different countries. His art related research involves a project on recyclia (*International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2006 vol 12, issue 1) as well as an exploration of the relationship between performativity, identity and truth (*Performance and Place* 2006, Palgrave). Along with Wellington's K. Baird, he has recently been appointed as Artist Consultant on the Heartlands community regeneration project in Cornwall. He is also working on a special issue on 'anthropographic mappings' with Wystan Curnow for the *Journal of Visual Culture* (forthcoming 2009). Patrick was formally appointed as a joint post-doctoral fellow in the Anthropology Department and the Bartlett School of Graduate Studies at University College London. He is currently Senior Lecturer and Director of Post-Graduate Studies in the School of Visual & Material Culture, Massey University,

Recommended Reading

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