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Makeshift memory: engaging an aesthetic of transition

To address the provocation provided by the editors I wish to reflect upon the ongoing civic and artistic responses to the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand, 2010-11, in which 185 people lost their lives (largely due to poor engineering and construction practices). Whilst the example is very different in character from that of efforts to memorialize July 22, 2011, I wish to use the case to briefly respond to the issue of temporality as raised by Jacques Rancière in his critique of the ‘endless work of mourning’ produced by testimonial art [1]. The orientation of this mourning, he argues, is always backward-looking, characterized by, ‘a reversal of the flow of time: the time turned towards an end to be accomplished – progress, emancipation or the Other – is replaced by that turned towards the catastrophe behind us.’ [2] How might memorial practices divide their gaze between remembered pasts and possible futures?

In the absence of an official memorial, the people of Christchurch have found their own ways of memorializing the losses incurred through the quakes. A temporary outdoor installation called *185 Chairs* by Joyce and Peter Majendie, for example, features old household chairs, one for each of those who lost their lives [3]. *A Temple for Christchurch* invited the public to inscribe thoughts and attach mementos to its temporary structure. The project culminated in the ritualistic burning of the temple on the outskirts of the city [4]. These temporary memorials reflect a broader movement within Christchurch that its participants call the ‘transitional city.’ In response to the city’s vacant spaces organizations such as Gap Filler [5], Life in Vacant Spaces [6], and the Festival of Transitional Architecture [7] have installed events and artworks around the central city. These works respond to the absences effected by the quakes by demonstrating the persistence of a city through its people. Bodies replace architecture; the makeshift replaces the monumental: absence is met with transformation and becoming.

Although many of the projects do not explicitly memorialize loss they are implicitly framed by it. In a physical sense their backdrop is a landscape of razed buildings buffeted by concrete dust storms whipped up by the wind that blows down off the nearby Alps. Conceptually, themes of memory and loss arise again and again. The Pallet Pavilion was a temporary structure made in response to the lack of public gathering space in the central city. Upon its deconstruction, an ‘Archaeological Dig on the Pavilion site’ took place, unearthing all the belongings that had been lost through the cracks of the wooden structure [8]. *Ghost Poems* featured a series of four poetic murals made in response to four unidentified victims. The murals are designed to disappear as new buildings are constructed in front of them. In a rebuilt city they will remain only in the memory of their creators and spectators, and as archaeological artefacts waiting to be discovered by future generations [9]. *The Transitional City Audio Tour* curated a walking tour accompanied by a soundtrack of voices that both remembered the former city and discussed its present state, engaging critically with the ideology behind the rebuild [10]. In each of these examples, memorialization is not set apart from the present. Because the present moment itself is underscored by an ethos of continual becoming rather than a movement towards fixity, the process of remembering the past is dynamic, informed by a creative ethos that mitigates deathly affect. Memorization is dispersed, plural and ephemeral (but also under threat of the rebuild as a reinstatement of officialdom).

To return briefly to the question of how we commemorate atrocity, Rancière calls for an ‘art of the unrepresentable,’ which eliminates the ‘boundary that restricts the available choice of representable subjects and ways of representing them’ (11). However there is a fine balance between memorializing the lives of victims of an atrocity and simply remembering the moment of their death. When this happens, it is often the actions of the perpetrator that are remembered and given monumental stature. The more radical proposition is not commemorative work that memorializes the pain of the atrocity in dramatic or no-holds-barred fashions, but work that dares to unseat the hold of such pain by privileging vitality instead. That is, ethical transgression lies in refusing a culture of mourning by examining how emancipation might be advanced through the processes of creativity that arise in the aftermath of disaster (Rebecca Solnit writes compellingly on this topic [12]). In aesthetic terms, this requires a kind of poverty (in the sense meant by ‘poor theatre’), working from available means and privileging the caprice of the fleeting present, subject to disappearance and transformation. Such work refuses to cede cultural authority to officially sanctioned memorial practices. In this way an ethos of transition allows us to turn our gaze from a mourned for past towards an emancipatory future.

[1] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury 2013), 200.

[2] Rancière, 192.

[3] <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/columnists/jane-bowron/6956240/185-Empty-Chairs-treated-with-deep-respect>

[4] <http://lives.org.nz/projects/i/temple-for-christchurch/>

[5] <http://www.gapfiller.org.nz/>

[6] <http://lives.org.nz/>

[7] <http://festa.org.nz/>

[8] <http://www.gapfiller.org.nz/archaeological-dig-on-the-pavilion-site/>

[9] <http://www.gapfiller.org.nz/april-23-poeticas-ghost-poems/>

[10] <http://www.gapfiller.org.nz/the-transitional-city-audio-tour/>

[11] Rancière, 197.

[12] Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: the Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters* (New York: Viking, 2009).

Dr. Emma Willis teaches Drama at The University of Auckland. Her research interests include: the intersections of theatre, ethics and tourism; spectatorship; memorial practices; and theatrical representations of the medical and experimental writing for the stage. She has recently published a research monograph with Palgrave Macmillan, *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship: Absent Others*. She is also an active theatre practitioner, working as a director, deviser and dramaturge with a particular interest in collaborative practices, site-specific work, and the interface of dance and theatre. Recent creative works include collaborations with Malia Johnston, *Dark Tourists* (2007-8), *body / fight / time* (2011), and *Amanimal* (2013).