



DAVID CROSS

David Cross is an artist, writer, curator and Associate Professor in Fine Arts at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. He is the director of the Litmus Research Initiative, a centre devoted to the examination of temporary public art. He has published extensively in this area as well as convening conferences and commissioning new work in the field. With Claire Doherty he co-directed the internationally acclaimed One Day Sculpture series of twenty temporary commissions by national and international artists across New Zealand in 2008-9. The book of the series, co-edited with Doherty, was published by Kerber in Germany in November 2009. His artwork has been exhibited in New Zealand, Australia and Eastern Europe and he has performed in international live art festivals in Poland and Croatia. His work featured in Perspecta 99 in Sydney and he has shown at Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne and Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. His work Bounce (2006) was featured in a solo exhibition at Wellington city Art Gallery and also in the survey exhibition of contemporary New Zealand performance art, Mostly Harmless, at Govett Brewster Art Gallery curated by Charlotte Huddleston. He was also commissioned to develop a new work Two Lines (2008) for He Korowai o Te Wai: The Mantle of Water curated by Ian Wedde for the Rotorua Museum and Art Gallery. His performance work Pump (2009) was selected for inclusion in Performance Studies International in Zagreb, Croatia and subsequently at St Pauls St Gallery in Auckland. His writing has been published in numerous journals and magazines including Art and Text, World Art, the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art, Photofile and Column. He is a Wellington correspondent for online website Eyecontact. Currently he is 2010 international curator at Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania in Hobart.

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image © David Cross, Hold, performance/installation, Litmus Research Initiative, May 2007, photography: Stephen Rowe



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Performance Space, Sydney 2010
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HOLD

## HOLD

*Hold* is a performance/installation that asks us to consider the nature of trust in the context of current participatory art forms. Consisting of a 25 metre by 8 metre purpose built inflatable structure, the work functions by firstly coaxing the audience inside to engage in a one-on-one interaction with an unseen performer. It is the encounter with the performer that shifts the tenor of the work as this meeting of bodies is purposefully incomplete or partial. There is a strangeness to this meeting that is only heightened by the unusual levels of physical and psychological interaction as the audience member is challenged to navigate a carefully constructed ordeal of ledges, corridors, and pitch-black spaces while being suspended above ground by nothing more than air. By limiting the participant's knowledge of the performer to the act of touching or 'holding' (only the performer's arm is ever visible), the work questions whether trust can be established without a clear understanding of the identity of the performer.

*Hold* is part pleasurable children's playhouse and part extreme performance art engagement with just a hint of reality television ordeal woven into the mix. Like Hansel and Gretel's alluring candy cottage or the colourful boat in H R Puffnstuff, it aims to draw the audience member in to the curious blue structure before recasting the terms of engagement. Critic Mark Amery in his review of the work highlighted how '*Hold* has pushed out into powerful territory, the experience of the fairground ride and performance in contemporary art. It explores how the contemporary artist might, through performance and our participation, provide a complex psychological and physical experience; a genuinely active, rich participation in the conceptual'.

Working across disciplines (live art, sculpture and installation) and genres (the films of Hitchcock, Bruce Nauman's corridors, and bouncy castles) the work aims to activate a multi-sensory response that draws on and responds to the heavily idealized notion of the total work of art. In his book *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, Mathew Wilson Smith examines the idea of gesamkunstwerk as a key idea in the evolution of nineteenth and twentieth century culture. Smith outlines how the ideal of creating a holistic artistic experience linking a plethora of artistic genres from theatre, to literature and architecture has occupied a diverse range of artists from Wagner, to Warhol and Walt Disney. For Smith, the gesamkunstwerk is founded on a fundamental contradiction: namely that it is both a modality of control and yet also a system of freedom. Its appeal may be for both controlling and liberatory purposes. Underpinning both impulses is an "uncompromising wish for a joyful community to be realized in this world. It is a longing for unity amid fragmentation, for collectivity amidst alienation. It is inherently restless, potentially revolutionary and ultimately the shape of radical hope".

The total work of art, as Smith suggests, is on many levels an "absurd idea predicated on building spaces/worlds that remove participants from the everyday and orient them instead within an idealised stratum of carefully interlocking themed experiences. Think Disneyland in the urban wasteland of Orange County or Bauhaus theatre with its immersive constituent parts. Central to these experiences is a fundamental chasm that cannot be resolved". As Smith tells us, "gesamkunstwerk will always be both avant garde and mass cultural, oppressive and communitarian; it will always be technophilic and technophobic; it will always be insufficient".

*Hold* seeks to grapple with the possibilities and impossibilities of the total work of art. Like many works that engage with this idea, *Hold* is made up of a multitude of media. It is a highly immersive architectural experience that focuses in part on activating a testing multi-sensory response from the audience. Such a response-diverse as it may be- is based on the prefacing of participatory experience as fundamental to the artwork, drawing the audience into a dynamic and potentially fraught relationship between play, interaction and phobic space.

By limiting the audience's knowledge of the performer to the act of touching or 'holding', the work questions whether trust can be established without a clear understanding of the identity of the performer. To this end, the work seeks to explore the relationship between current participatory art practice with its focus on exchange, the individual agency of the audience member, and the more assertive and often agitational methods of performance art.

New Zealand art critic Marcus Moore has spoken of *Hold* in the context of recent thinking around participation as a key mode of contemporary art. Today, he has suggested, participation is conditioned by the situations we find ourselves in, as well as the situations that are constructed for participation. Models for participation are prevalent across popular culture, with our thresholds for engagement constantly being pushed to further extremes. Art History demonstrates that extremes in performance and installation have been central to avantgardism. In recent fine arts and visual culture the extension of extreme is found across a wide spectrum in the attempt to achieve a sense of an unmediated pure experience. Moore suggests that Cross is at pains to ask what is the successful extension of extreme in performance and installation? Do we wish to engage – to participate to find a limit, or depth – or is this phenomenon already over the edge?

*Hold* examines the fluid divide between our experience of pleasure and fear by juxtaposing the visual and sensory languages of children's inflatable play structures with a more sinister architecture of phobia and physical constriction. Through suggesting the possibility of markedly transforming the audience's experience of the art/entertainment divide, *Hold* turns from performance to sculpture to spectacle, as it interrogates architectural space, performance art, participation, aesthetics and the murky space where pleasure and fear glide.

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