

LE 'WELSH' MAN'S 24HOUR

Bedwyr Williams





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Published by Enjoy Public Art Gallery to document Bedwyr Williams'  
One Day Sculpture Project: *Le 'Welsh' Man's 24Hour*, 12 February 2009.

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Editor: Jeremy Booth  
Catalogue Design: Alice Baxter  
Printed by: Printlink  
Edition: 300  
ISBN 978-0-473-16710-3

Cover image: Christina Oldfield

First published in March 2010

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This publication is generously supported by Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa.

## Bedwyr Williams Le 'Welsh' Man's 24Hour

If Bedwyr Williams' One Day Sculpture project was a piece of math, it would be one of those 'fun' mathematical anomalies where you work your way through a series of calculations to arrive at some amazing and inexplicable conclusion which is usually your birthday, social security number, or the number of freckles on your arm. The variables offered would include 24 hours, 24 paintings, the average speed of the car, the distance travelled, drying time of paint, the arm span of a Rembrandt-like smock, food breaks, pee breaks, and so on. Not to mention the price of petrol, soggy wet takeaway pizza and, the weather.

Feeling that every one of the 24 hours should count Le 'Welsh' Man's 24Hour brought us a formidable endurance performance art work in real time; 24 paintings in 24 hours in 24 locations. Most painters would be happy to do one painting in this time. Most car enthusiasts would not bother painting, nor parking to savour the view. And most tourists would let their mobile phone cameras do the job. Inspired by 24 Heures du Mans, the world's oldest endurance car race, Williams' project tested the ideas embedded in his own artistic quest, and the premise of One Day Sculpture itself. Equally, Williams raised the bar of performance art, testing an artist's ability to work fast, and to endure under any condition.

Let's go back to the beginning. Roughly 18 months earlier my first contact with Bedwyr Williams was a wobbling phone call of 13 hours time difference. I attempted to chit-chat and gently prepare him for working with a not-for-profit artist-run space, still needing to find a substantial amount of money before we could go ahead. Bedwyr had worked with ARIs before and was not easily scared. Rather, he seemed pleased to be working with us and wanted to do something challenging from the outset.

One Day Sculpture's *raison d'être* was heavily reliant on the artist's own site-specific research and development, leading to the unfolding of each project in situ. After months of sporadic e-mails and phone calls exchanging local information so that Williams could get an idea of the sites and props he wanted to use, we started to realise that our best and most reliable research tool was Google Earth – at least it was affordable. In fact, initially perceived as a possible handicap, the project's trans-continental situation heightened the challenges involved; something Williams welcomed with open arms. *Le Welsh' Man's 24Hour* began to take form as an endurance art performance; the contours of the project at this stage already seeming

an incredible, near impossible physical and logistical challenge. But this was exactly the point for Williams. A performing artist's body puts an entirely different spin on the situation to that of an installed art work. Williams was setting both himself, and his audience up for a wealth of genuine, localised, time and place-dependant, and often unforeseen events.

Several ODS projects seemed to select and command a particular site by means of a well-researched and often pre-built sculptural object or installation thereby facing crucial challenges in the installation process. Williams' project positioned itself on the other end of the spectrum and (instead) sought to plan, map out and embark upon a route of no less than 24 personable and intimate Wellington locations. At each of these locations the artist would produce a single painting on canvas. In a race against the clock, this was to happen in exactly 24 hours. Meaning that any unforeseen situations, such as traffic jams, punctures, boiling radiators, etc., would need to be overcome.

In the face of the impressive One Day Sculpture series, Le 'Welsh' Man's 24Hour seemed to defy the trend for the artists and organisers alike to attempt to fool-proof the experiences of their audiences. The project also responded to the Series' often challenging and subversive relationship to art's bad cousin – advertising. One Day Sculpture at times projected a near-campaign feeling, which attracted participating artists' attention and became a challenging tool of art making in several projects. Williams who during his research had sacrificed his love for vintage Holdens and Bedfords, instead chose a commonplace Subaru station wagon, a popular contemporary kiwi vehicle, and in true sporting fashion, resolved to plaster the many logos of his sponsors all over the car.

In January 2009 Williams had arrived in Wellington for a month's site-specific research, to be concluded by his 24 hour adventure. In the pressure of applying an artistic anthropological observation to site and time, and given his somewhat limited on-site research period, Williams continued to explore ways in which to push himself and the project to new and extreme physical, and psychological heights. Among these, Williams entertained a critical approach to his own occupation and the dynamics of the artworld. In gleeful irony he decided to make his project so challenging that other performers, in his shoes, may have changed their minds – perhaps especially given the level of commitment his size 46 shoes would require. But

as he was playing an innocent trick on other performance artists, he himself fell victim; to Wellington's subtropical weather conditions which struck back and played havoc with our wildest imaginations of what a performance art work could endure.

On the day of Le 'Welsh' Man's 24Hour, the worst torrential down-pour of 2009 rearranged Wellington, appointing Williams to a duel. There were suddenly no rules. Endurance, sport, art and humour were pushed along the edge of pure survival, producing a sense of absurd urgency and an unlucky, miserable no-ying Welshman acting out a form of radical tourism.

In spite of it all, once in the midst of the project Le 'Welsh' Man's aberrant sworn musing on endurance was contagious. Williams' paintings flourished alongside endless downpours and accompanying unforeseen circumstances. And through it all, his intense slapstick marathon invited audiences, his dedicated pit-stop crew, camera men, pizza delivery team and umbrella holders, to understand their own experience as an essential aspect of the performance, and as co-acting mathematical anomalies.

**Siv B. Fjærestad**

Enjoy Curator & Manager

## Wet Weather Painting: A Users Guide

It may not have had quite the palpable excitement of the real Le Mans 24-hour countdown, but the key elements were all there: digital clock, revving race car covered with sponsors' logos, and a soundtrack straining through the budget speakers of the Team Bedwyr Williams Subaru. Granted, there was not a scantily clad sponsor's ambassador in sight, and the lighting in the car park next to Enjoy Gallery was rudimentary at best, but the start of Bedwyr Williams' 24-hour rally was certainly suitably theatrical. In still conditions at midnight on February 12 2008, Williams effortlessly guided the stock car past the parking meter, dodged a drunken bar patron, gave way to oncoming traffic, and began a quest that was to challenge the very limits of extreme sport endurance.

It was quite a sight. Williams dressed in flamboyant painting attire of smock, Rembrandt era floppy hat, and an ample moustache that doubled as a crash protector, weaving through the tight streets of Wellington, followed by the official support car and assorted hangers on. The sense of excitement and absurdity that the audience felt as we wove up the hill towards Mount Victoria was tempered however by an overwhelming sensation of the enormity of the endeavour that lay ahead. 24 paintings, in 24 selected sites, over 24 hours seemed a compelling idea on paper but the manifestation of this was always going to test the artist's highly developed sense of humour. Little did we realise on top of Mount Victoria in balmy conditions without so much as a breath of wind, that in a few short hours Wellington's notorious weather would push the artist to the very heart of performance art darkness.

The initial signs however were all good. Williams got off to a crackling start with a deftly handled midnight landscape of Wellington employing searing yellow highlights on the requisite black field. Morale was high and even a persistent moustache malfunction was not enough to put the artist off his game. In less than thirty minutes, he had completed the acrylic canvas and decided it was 'not shit', held it up for the cameras, stored it to dry on the customised race car roof rack, and we were off to the next site. The Watusi Bar was one of only a handful of indoor locations in the schedule and provided a very convivial location for the support crew and audience. With intense concentration, Williams rendered the slightly seedy bar area in an expressionistic style that proved very popular with those who got to see it. Two down, and the artist appeared to be enjoying himself.



Around 4am a portent of what was to come revealed itself in the form of a slightly chill wind. After painting the moon (largely from memory as the sky had well and truly clouded over), a lone security guard prowling the exterior of Te Papa, and the local skate park, the artist headed off in the early morning to the top of Brooklyn Hill intent on capturing Wellington's lone wind turbine. It was here, high above the city, that the heavens really opened up and the act of plein-air painting took on sublime proportions. Sheets of horizontal rain began to lash the vicinity and visibility was reduced to absurdly negligible levels. The support team tried to protect the artist with an umbrella but its effect was pathetic. What started out as a painting of a well-known landmark quickly descended into a watery mess. The site of the artist battling to hold onto his paintbrush, brought to mind JMW Turner's famous anecdote of being strapped to the mast of a steamboat in a storm in order to completely grasp the experience of a vessel buffeted by the elements. Such a

commitment to researching his subject matter however did not extend to Turner actually painting the picture in a storm. As it became clear after forty minutes that this was no passing shower, Williams' attempt to depict the sublime was replaced by a battle simply to avoid drowning in it.

In his research into suitable places to document, Williams was drawn to sites or buildings that were somehow emblematic of the particularities of Wellington. Buildings like the air traffic control tower located not in the airport but in a suburban street, or the hermits cave house in Breaker Bay, were of interest to the artist because of their distinctly idiosyncratic alterity. A particular favourite of Williams was the pie shop in Petone that operated also as a public toilet. This curious mixed economy was a source of wonder for a Welshman whose attempt to paint the building was in large part driven by an urge to unravel the almost uncanny cultural hybridity of this pleasant, but to his mind, eccentric city.

By eight o'clock in the evening, the crippling effects of the day began to take hold. Twenty hours of continuous painting across all parts of Wellington, most of them in a half squint, had pushed Williams to a state of near derangement. Without a patch of dry clothing on and a level of fatigue one could only imagine from looking at textbooks on 70s durational body art, it seemed a toss-up as to whether he could in fact make it to the finish line. Sitting under a rudimentary tarpaulin in Wahine park at Breaker Bay looking out at the site of the infamous 1968 ferry disaster, conversation had almost completely evaporated and all involved had started to retreat to states of protective interiority. One support member had gone blue and was told to go home while others had fallen into that cycle of survival whereby all actions were rote and rationally detached. Still Williams kept mixing paint and staring intently at his subject treating each scene with the integrity the conditions simply did not seem to warrant.

After four hours on the miserable Seatoun Peninsula in an assortment of locations, the artist's luck finally changed. A forty-minute drive high above the harbour took us to the Korokoro house of Margot Griffith, President of the Wellington Welsh Society. Unsure that we would be welcome to watch the artist paint Margot's portrait, the team waited in what had become misty rain, resigned to our fate as the 'suffering for art' support crew. Almost immediately, Williams appeared and said we could all come in and there in the hallway



appeared Margot barking orders for coffee, tea and biscuits for all. Not only was the house warm and inviting, it was a repository of Welsh history with its carefully recreated interior aesthetics and stunning retro carpet. Margot sat on her couch in a regal pose and spoke to Williams in Welsh. For the first time in hours, the artist's laugh transcended a caustic chuckle and it was clear that Margot was bringing him slowly but surely back to life. Whether she had any sense of the project as a whole or even an affinity with contemporary art, Margot wholeheartedly embraced Williams and the rag tag team of helpers. She saw beyond the madness of it all and embraced the simple coming together of two Welsh strangers connecting for all of thirty-five minutes in her lounge. This was a most unexpected place to have a pure art moment but in this exchange Williams had succeeded in capturing the elusive yet profound value of dialogical art practice. Through a bizarre conjunction of chance, shared ethnicity and humour, the artist illuminated how art can indeed

function to draw people into candid and profound levels of social exchange.

After the swapping of cards and Margot offering anyone within ear-shot the keys to her ancestral home in Carmarthen, it was all downhill -literally- to the finish line. The penultimate painting of the war memorial was done in only the faintest drizzle and by the time Williams had made it back to the Enjoy car park, twenty-three hours after the start, the rain had completely stopped. In what seemed like a perverse final irony, the last painting took place inside a humid, wet-dog-smelling, faux racing car while the audience of around twelve stood watch bone dry outside. The concluding choice of subject matter was particularly apt, a self-portrait captured from the passenger side rear view mirror. Struggling to concentrate, Williams' eyes began to increasingly wander towards the count-down clock projecting from Enjoy Gallery. Those confident enough to approach the car remarked how much the picture resembled a Gauguin self-portrait, another European man trying to make sense of himself in the South Pacific.

When the clock digitally clicked into Friday, cheers and applause rang out. Williams gingerly stepped out from the passenger seat, held the canvas up one last time for posterity, and was rewarded with the presentation of the victory wreath and a bottle of cheap and very fizzy champagne.

No doubt this feat of endurance that linked painting and performance together was an attempt by the artist to shake out and challenge the key premise of One Day Sculpture. Yet in seeking to ride at the very outer edges of what might be understood as sculptural practice, curiously he brought objectness centre stage. The costume, the cheap ready stretched canvases, assorted paraphernalia, and 'race' car itself were props that battled for principal signification over the artist's performing antics with the final result being a rather uncertain tie. Worn down by the weather and exhausted to a level that disintegrated even the mildest ironic impulse, Williams was forced to confront his carefully cultivated personae and test its mettle. Perhaps, he fancied his chances of conquering the twenty-four hours and in the process turn out a year's worth of painting for good measure. Perhaps, the audacity of the premise was security against anyone closely scrutinising the paintings. Perhaps, he wanted to know at what point the Welsh-artist-road-trip-down-under shtick might short circuit. Or maybe, in a far-flung country, he



used the One Day Sculpture parameter as a way of interrogating how duration, place and performativity might activate new and important meanings in his work. The answer most likely is a viscous coagulation of all of the above.

**David Cross**

Originally published in Cross, D and Doherty, C (eds) *One Day Sculpture*, Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld, 2009, pp130-32

## The Schedule

00.00-01.00 Wellington from Mt Victoria lookout  
01.00-02.00 Watusi (Bar), 6 Edward St, Wellington  
02.00-03.00 The Moon  
03.00-04.00 Warehouse with Japanese style mural, waterfront  
04.00-05.00 Telegraph Mast seen from afar  
05.00-06.00 Security Guard, CBD  
06.00-07.00 Skate Park near Te Papa, Cable St  
07.00-08.00 Wind Turbine, Brooklyn  
08.00-09.00 Radar Station seen from Brooklyn wind turbine  
09.00-10.00 Lions' Enclosure at Wellington Zoo  
10.00-11.00 Greek Orthodox Church, 23 Bay St, Petone  
11.00-12.00 Pie Shop, the Esplanade, Petone  
12.00-13.00 Cable Car from Botanical gardens end, Upland Rd  
13.00-14.00 Basin Reserve seen from Mt Vic lookout  
14.00-15.00 Mount Vic Tunnel (no room for spectators)  
15.00-16.00 Control Tower, 36 Tirangi Rd, Rongotai  
16.00-17.00 Airport Runway from Cobham Dr, Evans Bay  
17.00-18.00 Massey Memorial, Massey Rd  
18.00-19.00 House in Cave, Point Dorset, between Seatoun Beach  
& Breaker Bay  
19.00-20.00 Guitar maker (private residence)  
20.00-21.00 Sunset at Wahine Park, Breaker Bay  
21.00-22.00 Welsh Society (private residence)  
22.00-23.00 Carillion (war memorial) Buckle St  
23.00-00.00 Self-Portrait in carpark next to Enjoy  
00.00 Grand finale display of 24 completed paintings

00:00 – 01:00



**Wellington from Mt Victoria lookout** The first location, Mount Vic, gave me the best start possible. It was a clear night and the city twinkled in front of us. This will make for some good documentation, I thought. It looks, from a distance, like the kind of performance someone in his mid-thirties should be doing. It was the first time I had painted for years and the plastic bile smell of acrylic took me right back to a life class in 1993.

01:00 – 02:00



**Watusi (Bar), 6 Edward St, Wellington** It occurred to me, that before I headed into the Wellington night to paint, there should be at least one location with people. The Watusi was a kind of alternative bar, a bar for bands or, at least, a bar for people who maybe ruin their lives thinking about bands. It had a nice vibe and in my moustache and smock I didn't feel too conspicuous. There was a drunk, tall, teen-type who shouted something as he left but I didn't quite catch what he said – like a two-legged foal trying out a new tongue.

02:00 – 03:00



**The Moon** Early on it became clear that night time locations would be tricky, so as a kind of time wasting ruse I decided to paint the moon. We had seen it skulking above the Watusi but when we walked down to the waterfront it had fucked off. I painted it from memory, making the first of the many compromises that would follow.

03:00 – 04:00



**Warehouse with Japanese style mural, waterfront** I had driven past these Warehouses decorated with Japanese characters many times. I think they are the most beautiful warehouses I have ever seen in my life. No one really knew why they were decorated this way and I didn't really want to know. The explanation would probably ruin the little fantasy I had brewing in my head about the Shoguns and Geisha girls driving forklift trucks elegantly around the warehouse floor.

04:00 - 05:00



**Telegraph Mast seen from afar** It was at this location where I felt tired for the first time. Vivien gave me an ANZAC which is a type of wartime biscuit. I have a Dutch friend who pronounces it Biskwit, in New Zealand it's pronounce Busket. A police car pulled over and asked what was going on. I think they may have been given an ANZAC each before they left. As they rounded the corner I took the opportunity to take the loudest piss of my adult life against someone's corrugated shed.

05:00 – 06:00



**Security Guard, CBD** The object of this painting was to depict the security guard of Te Papa Museum. He didn't stay still for long enough so one of the volunteers, Vivien, took his place. It started to rain, and little did I realise that it would carry on raining for the rest of the day. As I was finishing it, a trio of clubbers (I hate that word), walked past. Some artists try to humour passers-by that are baffled by what they see. I don't. I just want them to walk on. I tried to ignore them but the shortest, and, by a whisker, the ugliest, came up to my face and ripped off my moustache. I smarted and told her that it really hurt. She tried to stamp on it but her nasty little trotter missed. This the first of many ordeals for the moustache.

06:00 – 07:00



**Skate Park near Te Papa, Cable St** The basketball court was going to be my touch of urban. Wellington is a nice place and even its urbanest urban is pretty pleasant. In the rain I put paint to canvas trying to capture the scene but it was hopeless – the paint ran off as soon as I applied it.

07:00 – 08:00



**Wind Turbine, Brooklyn** By now my legs felt like they had been skinned and re-upholstered by wankers. My tongue was swollen and I was wet through. The wind turbine was almost hidden in the mist, but impressive nevertheless. We have a lot of them in Wales and I'm a little scared of them. A keep-fit nut who actually was a nut came by to watch, the flapping side gussets of his shorts hinting at his lunacy. The volunteers had brought a fantastic breakfast and coffee. This cheered me up.

08:00 – 09:00



**Radar Station seen from Brooklyn Wind Turbine** The next canvas blew off my light-weight easel and landed on the palette. I decided to leave it as it was – self-loathing was moving in as well as a more general band of loathing.

09:00 - 10:00



**Lions' Enclosure at Wellington Zoo** I thought that the zoo would be a fun highlight but as it turned out it was a soggy groin-chaffing nightmare. A zoo keeper tried to freak my partner and my baby boy with a dingo, and I lost all sense of perspective, literally. The lions didn't really help us out but there was a great moment when the photographer tapped on the glass and two paws, the size of giant pizzas, hit the toughened glass. Lions are so much more exciting than artists, I thought, as the photographer drew back.

10:00 – 11:00



**Greek Orthodox Church, 23 Bay St, Petone** This is a beautiful building. It's a bungalow that has had a Greek Orthodox Church body-kit attached to it. It was raining like old women and sticks as we hardly ever say in Wales. This was one of the better paintings but only by chance. Next door someone was playing 'Song for Guy' by Elton John on a piano. I'm not an Elt fan but the song moved me. I found out later that Guy was a messenger boy who died on the day the song was written. The week before, when I was doing a 'reccy' of the church, a guy had shouted 'Prick' at me out of a passing car.

11:00 – 12:00



**Pie Shop, the Esplanade, Petone** The pie shop at Petone is a beautiful carbuncle. Like a set of concrete bagpipes that also house some public toilets, it is one of the strangest buildings I've ever seen. It was once a tea-room which is hard to imagine. The pies there were a highlight of my stay in Wellington and the owners were super friendly. On such a wet day the pies were a real lifesaver.

12:00 - 13:00



**Cable Car from Botanical gardens end** This is a tourist 'must-see' in Wellington. It's not a cable car in the Swiss sense but rather a diagonal rack and pinion tram. The gardens set around it are pretty. I was in no mood to appreciate the setting and set about painting it as quickly as possible. An old Jewish New Yorker said it was 'neat'. I tried to picture the rest of her holiday. She seemed like the kind of tourist that appreciated everything she saw.



13:00 - 14:00



**Basin Reserve seen from Mt Vic lookout** Back up on Mount Vic to paint the basin reserve roundabout and the weather was really taking the 'basket'. I could barely see the roundabout, which contains a cricket ground, due to the low cloud. I was starting to feel like a fraud as I painted a pathetic green oval in the middle of a blank canvas.

14:00 – 15:00



**Mount Vic Tunnel (no room for spectators)** is a fume filled tunnel where it's traditional to honk your horn as you pass through. Painting the tunnel in the driving rain I dammed every honk and beep that I heard. I was fantasising about pulling out of the event and driving off somewhere with the heater on.

15:00 – 16:00



**Control Tower, 36 Tirangi Rd, Rongotai** This control tower is the only one in the world, as far as I know, that is on a residential street and not in the airport. A TV crew came to film us for a news item; the cameraman was grumpy as they always are. Things were becoming farcical – it was raining so hard that we were only able to stay outside for moments at a time. A school-kid from a local school, where I had given a talk the week before, had turned up with her mother. The mother gave me a look which said 'You are an idiot'. Pizzas arrived but it was too late, I was fading and getting ratty.

16:00 – 17:00



**Airport Runway from Cobham Dr, Evans Bay** This painting seems like a blank canvas but I did paint on it. Volunteers were fatigued and I was starting to shiver. We were close to the sea, its spray and the rain was drenching us. The boot of the car was turning into a mucky acrylic and food mess. Everything was covered in gray paint.

17:00 – 18:00



**Massey Memorial, Massey Rd** Like a set from Jason and the Argonauts, the Massey Memorial is a hidden gem in Wellington. My feet got so squelchy walking up the path that I started to resent them and my stupid velcro shoes. Little of what I painted remained on the canvas – most of it was washed off as we transported it back to the car.

18:00 – 19:00

**House in Cave, Point Dorset, between Seatoun Beach & Breaker Bay** This is where I hit the wall. I was soaked to the skin and freezing cold. To get to the cave, where a local eccentric had once lived, I had to walk along a coarse beach, part of which was used by naturists. One would have to be a naturist and a moron to lie on the beach that afternoon. At the Cave, the sea was thrashing against the rocks and the wind-cheaters and umbrellas held aloft to keep me dry had little impact. I imagined Ross, the hermit who lived there having to deal with such weather – it must have been, in turns, frightening and shit.



Image: Stephen Rowe

19:00 – 20:00



**Guitar Maker (private residence)** Ray Ahipene-Mercer was away the day of my project so we arranged for him to leave a photo of himself under his front doormat. When I got there the arrangement of knick-knacks in his porch was so pretty, like the desk of a tidy but eccentric Japanese calligrapher. I decided to paint it all.

20:00 – 21:00



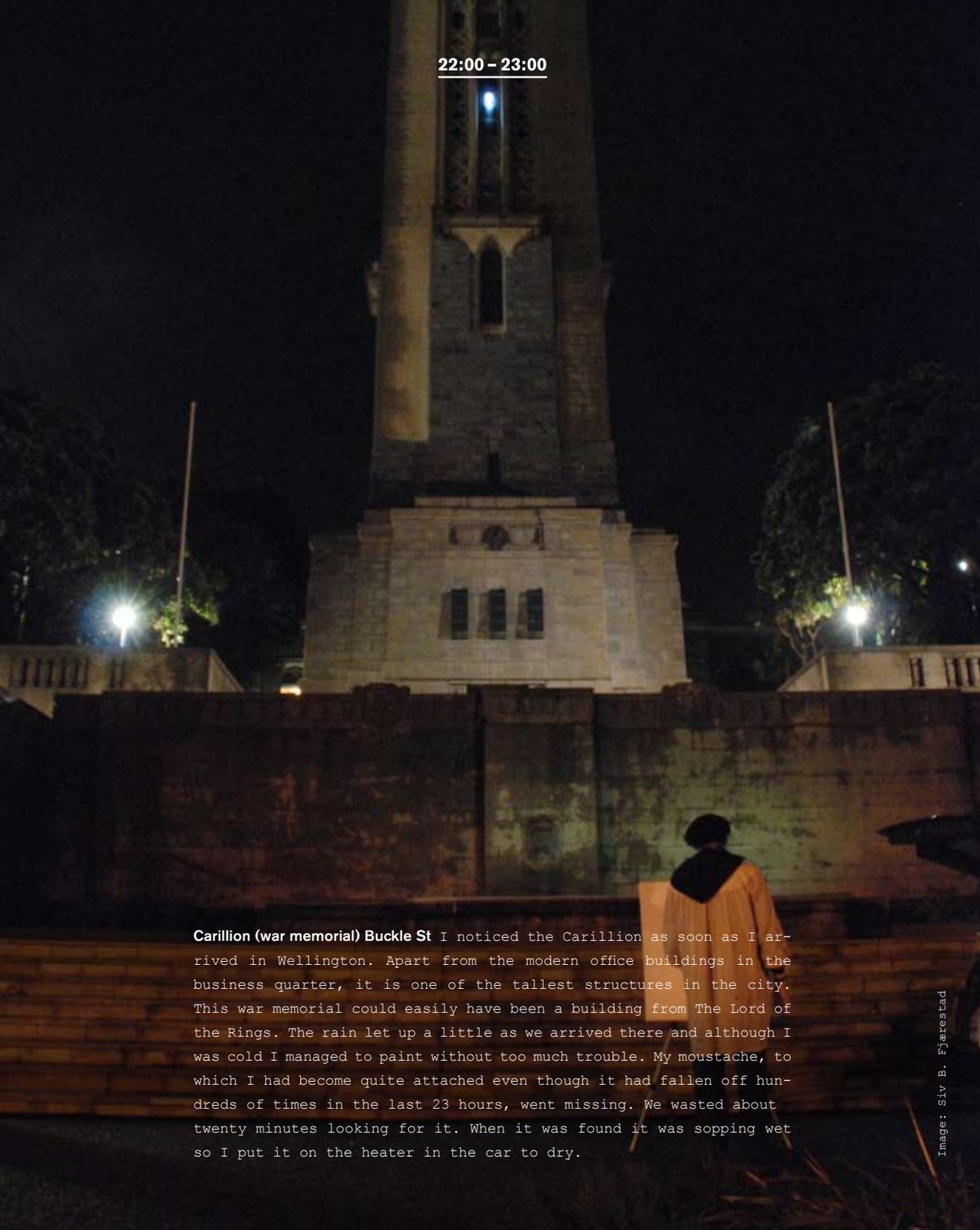
**Sunset at Wahine Park, Breaker Bay** The bad weather was peaking and the gazebo, mentioned at few of the previous sites, appeared. It had been brought down to its knees, with the legs at half mast to save it being blown out to sea. I was given a few chunks of an unfamiliar spicy chocolate bar. Despite the appalling weather this was perhaps the prettiest of the paintings. I was given a lift to the next location by a member of the film crew. She said that work in Wellington was 'feast or famine'. I fantasised about a feast but not a famine.

21:00 – 22:00



**Welsh Society (private residence)** Margot Griffith is the President of the Wellington Welsh Society and I think she may have saved the project with cake and tea.

22:00 - 23:00



**Carillion (war memorial) Buckle St** I noticed the Carillion as soon as I arrived in Wellington. Apart from the modern office buildings in the business quarter, it is one of the tallest structures in the city. This war memorial could easily have been a building from The Lord of the Rings. The rain let up a little as we arrived there and although I was cold I managed to paint without too much trouble. My moustache, to which I had become quite attached even though it had fallen off hundreds of times in the last 23 hours, went missing. We wasted about twenty minutes looking for it. When it was found it was sopping wet so I put it on the heater in the car to dry.

23:00 - 24:00



**Self-Portrait in carpark next to Enjoy** This painting in some ways was one of the hardest to paint. I just wanted to go home. I could only find green paint and painted a picture of myself using the rear view mirror. Some American jerk-offs came and sat on the car and started making loud American, not very funny, jokes. Someone told me later that they weren't jerk-offs and were actually quite charming. Fatigue had obviously bugged my senses. When I finished I opened a bottle of cheap bubbly and sprayed it over my support crew. They laughed and then frowned as they realised that I was splashing booze all over their cameras.



Image: Christina Oldfield

## Thanks to

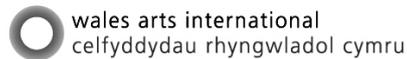
ONE DAY SCULPTURE was a New Zealand-wide series of temporary place-based artworks. A Massey University College of Creative Arts, School of Fine Arts, Litmus Research Initiative.

Bedwyr Williams' project was realised with the help of generous support from Wales Arts International, British Council, Massey University College of Creative Arts, Massey University School of Fine Arts, Wellington City Council Public Art Fund, Creative New Zealand - Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, Massey University Foundation, The French Art Shop, and the Chartwell Trust.

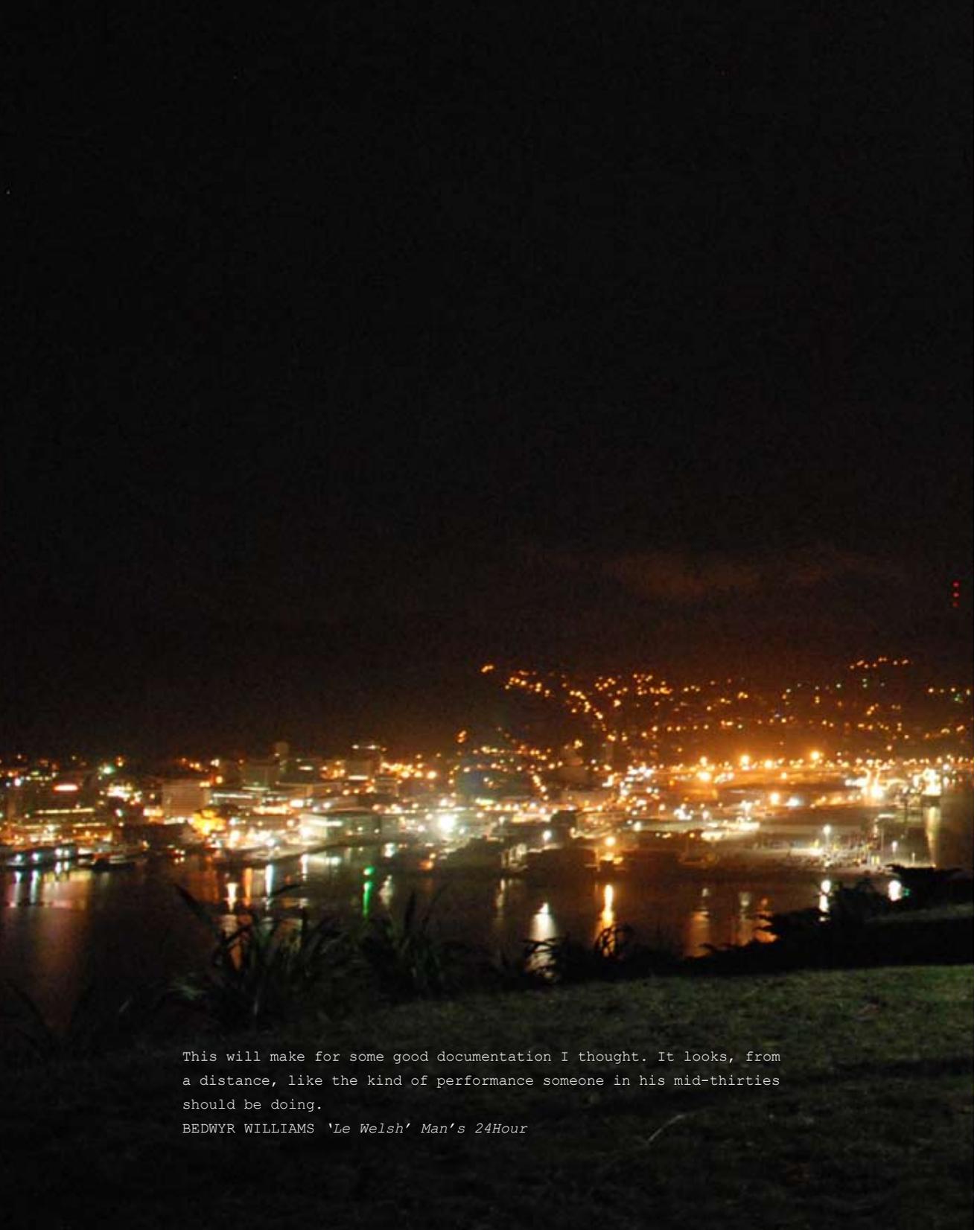
Enjoy would also like to thank Yvonne Adams, Vivien Atkinson, Alice Baxter, Paula Booker, Jeremy Booth, Chris Brady, Kate Trafford, Caroline Johnston, Christina Oldfield, Tim Owens, Bex Pearce, Hayden Prujean, Ann Shelton, Suspect Productions, Justine Flanagan, Andy Kirkwood, Laurie Wright, Jon Dazeley, Johnathon Titheridge, Bryna O'Brien, Murray Hewitt, Houghton Valley School, Ariana Millin White, Katie Grinsted, Raewyn Martyn, Mark Cockburn and the Wellington Wind Turbine, Ray Ahipene-Mercer, Margot Griffith and niece Rebecca, Wellington Zoo, Tracey Monastra, William Woods, Francesco and Gary Bridle, Maddie Leach.



*Enjoy*







This will make for some good documentation I thought. It looks, from a distance, like the kind of performance someone in his mid-thirties should be doing.

BEDWYR WILLIAMS *'Le Welsh' Man's 24Hour*