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Commemoration and Moral Choice  
in *the Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's  
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**Abstract**

This article/photo essay examines Sally J. Morgan's 2013 work, *The Travails of the Bomb Aimer's Daughter*, a performance/installation that unfolded over a week at Wellington's Performance Arcade Festival. Acting as a kind of 'denkmal' or commemorative provocation, the piece interacted with the audience in ways that unsettled viewers' expectations and demanded moral choices. The presentation examines and discusses the installation's development and denouement.

Keywords: performance art, temporary memorial, denkmal, commemoration, World War II.

This article/photo-essay discusses an installation presented by the author in the *Performance Arcade (PA)* 2013 in Wellington, New Zealand. *PA* is an annual, international Live Art festival that selects proposals from artists, musicians and designers who work in the areas of installation, performance, and interactive art and design. The presentation spaces allocated to the selected artists are freight-containers arranged in a small village next to a thoroughfare by the water. Here artists, designers, musicians, and theatre-makers make site-specific artworks that remain on display for a short period of time in a well-traversed part of New Zealand's capital city.

I am a Welsh born artist who is now a New Zealand citizen. As an artist I have worked with matters of memory, both personal and public, as source material for the exploration of notions of guilt and complicity in relation to heritage. In addition, as a cultural historian, I have written and co-written<sup>1</sup> extensively on memorials, monuments and other forms of formal and informal commemorative practices. This artwork constituted a coming together of these threads in an enactment that plotted its way through the creation of a destructive event, and the eventual consignment of that event to a commemorative process.

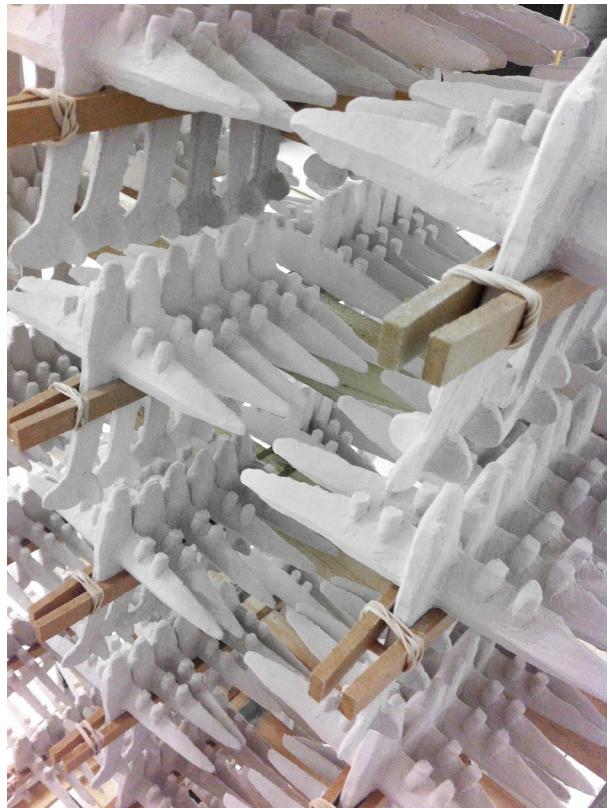
The work selected for this festival was called *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter*. It was described in the programme as an 'episode in a series exploring memory, grief and guilt in a durational performance installation'. It was five days long and had its genesis in a sequence of performances/installations that I created after my Father's death in the early 1990s as explorations of grief, war, guilt, and memory.

The installation was designed, in its entirety, to act as what the Germans call a Denkmal, the kind of monument that invites sober contemplation of the past rather than its unreflective celebration. This denkmal would unfold over time through discrete 'chapters'. It would move quietly through the city from my office, in what was once the National Museum, to the National War Memorial that stands directly in front of the Museum, then down through busy Cuba Street to the Waterfront, and back again. In my mind, I was already sub-titling the work *The Peripatetic Memorial*: something not only temporary, but also without a fixed abode. So it was not a "site of commemoration", but a process and a critique of "memorialisation". In this respect it would be similar to works by artists such as Christian Boltanski, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and indeed Paul Gough, whose Faux Cenotaph I wrote about in a exhibition catalogue essay in 2003<sup>2</sup>, and again in an article that he and I co-published in the *Journal of War and Culture Studies* in 2013.<sup>3</sup>

Although my father was not a New Zealander, his World War Two experience is recognisable to New Zealand viewers whose fathers and grandfathers served in the same arenas as their British counterparts. Up until 1948 all New Zealanders were holders of a British passport, many New Zealanders enlisted in the British armed forces, and some had been aircrew in the Royal Air Force; indeed my father told me he flew with a New Zealander as his Rear Gunner. Furthermore, the pattern of migration from the United Kingdom to New Zealand after the War means that a fair number of Kiwis have parents or grandparents who served as Britons in the UK

armed services before they or their children emigrated. I was therefore confident that a New Zealand audience would understand and engage with the work I was making.

Figure 1. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter*, Wellington, New Zealand, 2013. Detail: stacked planes.



The first chapter of this denkmal was 'The Making'. It began in November 2012 when I fashioned a small aircraft out of clay. The aircraft's shape resembled the Liberator Bomber that my father flew in during the Second World War when he served in the Burma Campaign as a Bomb-Aimer in the British Royal Air Force. From such a plane he bombed the marshalling yards of the Burma Railroad in Mandalay. From this small sculpture a mould was cast and 500 planes were made from a stone compound mix. They were white in colour, hard and brittle and rang like porcelain when struck. Each plane was trimmed by hand—my hand—and then stored in a specially made wheeled wooden rack. This labour went on until early January, and my factoring was witnessed by all who went through the workshop. Word spread, and soon people were making special trips to see the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter at work.

Figure 2. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter ("The March to War")*, Wellington, New Zealand, 2013.



The second chapter was 'The March to War'. Together with a colleague, Tanya Marriot, a New Zealander whose British grandfather had been a Bomber Pilot in the European Theatre in the Second World War, I trundled my planes out of the workshop in mid-February and stood them for one minute at the front of the National War Memorial. Shiny and white, all pointing upward, all beautiful, identical and clean, they were the epitome of martial optimism. Then we two women proceeded to parade the aircraft to my site on the waterfront. On the way down Cuba Street an exultant young man burst out of a coffee shop and ran down the street behind us impersonating a fighter plane. People smiled and clapped as we took our planes to war.

Figure 3. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter, Performance Arcade (PA), Wellington, New Zealand, 2013.*



In chapter three, ‘The Theatre of War’, I transferred the planes into a wheelbarrow, and began to throw them at four minute intervals into the container that was my performance space. The container was situated at an intersection between a market place and a popular waterside promenade. My public was mixed: runners and cyclists, market goers, tourists, random citizens, children, teenagers, and adults. Some stopped to watch me, some observed from a distance. As the planes hit the wall or the floor they splintered with the sound of china breaking and scattered across the floor. I had intended the destruction of the planes as my own task and was surprised by how fiercely people wanted the chance to join in the destruction. I first realised this when a group of people gathered around the rack of planes that was standing ready for emptying into the wheelbarrow. I was watching from a distance. Someone gingerly picked up a plane and threw it. Then another person did the same. Then someone else. Before I knew it, they were clamouring and grabbing and had broken the rack, and plane after plane was crashing into the container. I managed to stop them, but they were very grumpy about it and slunk away, half-angry at being stopped, and half-embarrassed. Then an amiable drunk begged and begged to be allowed to smash a plane. Eventually I gave in, and he threw it with all his might. “That’s my grandfather”, he said, “Killing those fucking Nazi bastards”.

Figure 4. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter*, Performance Arcade (PA), Wellington, New Zealand, 2013.



After spending the whole day working out how to stop people smashing the planes, I realised that evening that, actually, this was at least part of what I was examining through the work: social complicity. Who makes war: the Warrior or the Civilian? Where does guilt lie? It had always been my intention to make a work that asked these questions, but I had originally imagined that the public would observe this through my actions. The thought of involving my audience in making moral choices was suddenly very compelling and offered me a very interesting route forward. The piece evolved, and the next day I determined that I would offer every passer-by the opportunity to throw a plane onto the growing pile of debris in my container. I stood with arm outstretched, plane in hand. Whenever I caught someone's eye, I gestured in a welcoming way, making it clear that I was offering the chance to throw a plane. Some were eager, some were reluctant. Some smashed them into the wall so hard that the fragments struck us. Some placed them unbroken on the floor. A very few asked to be allowed to take them away rather than to break them. Some were overcome with sadness after they had done it. Some burst into tears. Some kept coming back to watch, or to ask me questions. For the majority, the destruction was exhilarating, but afterwards many felt a sense of guilt. For a significant number it was a moral dilemma. A surprising number of people, across a whole range of social backgrounds, understood the symbolism of the work. A doctor and his wife came back to see each stage and became increasingly excited as the work unfolded. A young Māori woman said, "This is what we do isn't it, we send them off and they come back broken—and

they can never be mended". Cliff, an elderly man, a war veteran, who watched silently every day, brought his friends, and said to me in a barely audible voice, "This is beautiful".

Figure 5. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter, Performance Arcade (PA)*, Wellington, New Zealand, 2013. The artist "plane in hand".



Chapter three took us into the process of collecting and categorising the evidence of the past. The container and the high pile of smashed planes became an archaeological site. My years as an archaeological site-worker informed this part of the work. I measured, drew and recorded the debris where it lay and collected the 'finds' in trays. I then informally displayed the finds and the drawings as they would be at the site of an on-going excavation. I also attempted to rebuild a whole plane by wandering through the debris and retrieving pieces that matched. I managed to find three pieces that were a fit. As I did this I overheard someone saying "Is she trying to glue them together!? That's impossible".

Figure 6. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter*, Performance Arcade (PA), Wellington, New Zealand, 2013.



In chapter four the container became a museum. The finds were arranged by typology, and a notice, like a plaque, was put on the wall. It read:

*On this site, in February 2013, five hundred Liberator Bomber Planes were deployed. Passers-by were invited to launch a plane to certain destruction. Twelve chose not to and opted to take a plane away with them. One returned the plane, unbroken, into the hands of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter. Two placed a plane, unbroken, on the ground (these were later picked up, by others, and thrown). Four hundred and eighty six planes were destroyed.*

The audience came and went easily, did not feel complicit, felt able to judge the process as though it were finished.

Figure 7. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter*, Performance Arcade (PA), Wellington, New Zealand, 2013.



In chapter five all the remnants were sorted into boxes and placed at the front of the container with a tube of glue placed next to them. This was designed to indicate the impossibility and futility of trying to mend the outcomes of war. In this phase something unexpected happened, which was rather beautiful. A group of international exchange students, aged seventeen or eighteen, happened upon the artwork, examined it carefully from all angles, and decided to repair the planes. They weren't daunted by the seeming impossibility of the task. With the confidence of youth, they set about the task systematically. They laid out the pieces and worked through the parts until they found a match. Using this technique, they reassembled three planes before darkness fell and they moved off to do other things. The bleakness of my piece was changed by the optimism and energy of youth. They had succeeded in repairing the irreparable, though the planes were still scarred and chipped, they had, against the odds, been put back together.

Figure 8. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer's Daughter*, Performance Arcade (PA), Wellington, New Zealand, 2013.



Chapter six, called 'The Forgotten', began at dusk on the last day, and consisted of the disposal, small bag by small bag, of all the unassembled fragments of the bombers. Carrying two at a time, I threw them into rubbish bins, skips, landfill sites and secluded parts of the Harbour under cover of darkness. Then the remaining few crippled planes were put back on the transportation rack, this time hanging downward like corpses where they stood in the cleaned-out container under a hanging light as darkness lay over the Harbour-side. The next morning I rolled them through the back streets up to the National War Memorial. No one ran behind me impersonating a jubilant fighter plane. No one saw me. Before taking the planes back into the Old National Museum, I stood the rack for one minute BEHIND the National War Memorial. Like the crippled British war veterans who were not allowed into the Service in Westminster Abbey after the Falklands War, my broken bombers were hidden from sight. Pathetic rather than heroic, they didn't evoke any narrative of national glory and they were finally trundled away to the oblivion of my office.

The work, from start to finish, worked through a complex range of questions on matters of war and the commemoration of war. In the final chapters the piece enacted a ritualisation of forgetting rather than remembering. The broken planes, standing for the bodies of broken warriors, buried without ceremony in the rubbish bins and landfills of Wellington as well as the peregrination of disfigured and crippled Liberator Bombers through the back streets of the capital stood as the opposite of the victory parade or the state funeral. It was a physical

enactment of the deliberate forgetting or obscuring of inconvenient truths of war. In this way it was perhaps an example of the kind of counter-memorials that have been discussed by scholars such as James E. Young in “The German Counter-Monument”<sup>4</sup> and *At Memory’s Edge*<sup>5</sup> and *Michalski in Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage*.<sup>6</sup> Like the works of Gerz, Boltanski and Whiteread, this work attempted to be contentious in the way that it asked “us to interrogate our relationship with events of the past in a difficult and often uncomfortable way, (asking us) to acknowledge guilt and deliberate forgetting”.<sup>7</sup> In particular, it asked us to examine the notion of complicity. We make the planes and we throw the planes. We do not participate, but we facilitate. We make a moral choice. The planes fly easily from our hands to certain destruction. Once the plane is thrown, we realise our culpability, and perhaps at that moment, we also realise that the only way forward for us now is to find a way to forget.

Figure 9. Sally J. Morgan. *The Travails of the Bomb-Aimer’s Daughter*, Performance Arcade (PA), Wellington, New Zealand, 2013.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>. See for example: Sally J. Morgan, “Memory and the Merchants: Commemoration and Civic memory”. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 103-13; Paul Gough and Sally J Morgan, “Manipulating the Metonymic: the politics of civic identity and the Bristol Cenotaph 1919-1932”. *Journal of Historical Geography* 30, no. 4 (October 2004): 665-684.
- <sup>2</sup>. Sally J. Morgan, “Paul Gough’s Faux Cenotaph: the contestation of rhetorical public space”, Catalogue essay *Victory/Peace Exhibition*, Watershed Media Centre, Bristol. 2003.
- <sup>3</sup>. Paul Gough and Sally J Morgan, “‘A Faux Cenotaph’: Guerilla Interventions and the Contestation of Rhetorical Public Space”. *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 6, no.1 (2013): 92-108.
- <sup>4</sup>. James E. Young, “The German Counter-Monument”. In Mitchell, W.J.T., ed. *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- <sup>5</sup>. James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, 1st ed. (Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).
- <sup>6</sup>. Sergiusz Michalski. *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage, 1870-1997*. 1st ed. London: Reaktion Books, 1998.
- <sup>7</sup>. Paul Gough and Sally J. Morgan. “A Faux Cenotaph”, 108.

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### Biographical Note

Sally J. Morgan is a conceptual artist and cultural historian whose research spans creative works and text-based inquiry. Her writing on visual artefacts as 'historical texts' informs her performance, installation and publicly located contextual artworks. She has presented work in France, Switzerland, Germany, USA, Japan, Brazil, Belgium and the Netherlands as well as in the UK and New Zealand. Career highlights have included work being presented at the ICA in London, the Arnolfini in Bristol, and Belluard Bollwerk, International Live Art Festival, Fribourg Switzerland. Sally J. Morgan has also published articles in international journals and chapters in a number of scholarly collections.

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