

## Structure Signalling (Logical Structure or Relating to Something That Happened)

Jonathan Alexander Kennedy  
RM Gallery & Project Space  
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Jonathan Alexander Kennedy's project *Structure Signalling (Logical Structure or Relating to Something That Happened)* engages in a series of responses to a public sculpture by the late Mexican artist Helen Escobedo, installed in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 1971. The sculpture, *Signals*, is located on a small stretch of lawn at Fred Ambler lookout in Parnell on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Waitematā Harbour.

Escobedo was one of four international sculptors flown to Aotearoa to participate in the International Sculpture Symposium commemorating Auckland City's centennial, The symposium was organised by conceptual artist Jim Allen, then head of the Elam School of Fine Arts.

*Signals* is an eleven metre tall metal sculpture consisting of eight vertical steel 'I' beams in a rectangular formation with a series of horizontal aluminium poles affixed to them. The aluminium poles are painted with diagonal stripes of red, yellow, blue and green - colours significant within Escobedo's aesthetics as well as in Mexican culture. The structure rests on a rectangular slab of concrete slightly raised from the lawn and has an open form allowing visitors to walk through as well as around it. *Signals* echoes the industrial forms of cranes used in the port it overlooks, as well as boat masts and booms visible in the Waitematā Harbour. Its forms have also been likened to scaffolding, perhaps referencing local building construction. What the sculpture might signal, and to whom, remains open to interpretation.

Kennedy first came across Escobedo's sculpture in 2016 but began formative research in 2019 as an MFA student at Whitecliffe College, whose former campus was close by. Kennedy began researching *Signals* in the sculpture symposium's archive held by the E. H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Escobedo and Allen's correspondence revealed that the sculpture was originally intended to contain a number of other curvilinear elements installed around the base of the structure, which would have significantly altered the appearance of *Signals* and audiences' physical engagement with it. This aspect was later abandoned for aesthetic reasons.

Kennedy is interested in what he calls the "unrealised potential and ontology" of Escobedo's work.<sup>1</sup> His response to the sculpture, its past and present, is foregrounded in play. This approach is informed by Escobedo's interest in the occurrence of audiences acknowledging their surroundings.<sup>2</sup> After an initial period of research, Kennedy set about conducting and constructing a series of temporary interventions, additions, and alterations.

Firstly, he wrote to Auckland Council about a neighbouring hokataka tree whose branches had grown into the empty spaces within the

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Kennedy, interview by Emil McAvoy, June 16, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

sculpture, requesting it be trimmed at a time when he could film this. They agreed, however a contractor recently cut it without him present. The circular ends of the trimmed branches now echo those of Escobedo's aluminium poles.

Late afternoon on May 24, 2021, at the lookout, as the light began to warm and the shadows stretch toward dusk, Kennedy engaged in a multi-part performance to a small team of documenters who captured the event using analogue photographic film and digital video. Kennedy erected two collapsible aluminium poles adjacent to the sculpture in curved arcs, criss-crossed over one another, akin to the bones of a tent. From the photographic documentation it appears Kennedy took a circular aluminium form he fabricated to reference one of Escobedo's imagined curvilinear elements and played with it like a hula hoop. He also improvised new forms by intersecting several loops of aluminium in his hands. Motivated by an interest in what he describes as "different states of a thing", in front of the sculpture, Kennedy took a bag of ice and melted it in a whistling kettle over a portable gas stove, then pouring the water into a vacuum flask.<sup>3</sup> He also placed four white painted wooden panels on the grass nearby and used them as platforms upon which to stand and perform other acts. These panels feature bevelled edges cut at 44 degrees in order to complete a 360 degree circle, given that Kennedy calculated the viewing angle of Escobedo's work at 316 degrees north when standing inside the sculpture and looking out to sea.

The material remnants of this performance, along with its lens-based documentation, are exhibited in *Structure Signalling* at RM. The long arcs of aluminium now enclose an entire gallery space, anchored in the corners and touching the ceiling. An altered baking rack with wheels acts as a trolley to house the other remnants of Kennedy's performance, collectively titled *Logical Structure, Fragments of Play* (2021). An aluminium pole rests against the wall, titled *To be Painted White, Yellow, and Green* (2021), fabricated by the artist to the dimensions of a broken, now missing aluminium pole of Escobedo's original. A 1970's style presentation of photographic prints documenting Kennedy's actions hangs on one wall, in a single frame with cream-coloured backing board and unpainted wooden frame. A wall-mounted monitor plays a looping edited video of Kennedy's performance, cutting readily between selected acts as he exits and re-enters the fixed frame.

So what is the central idea of Kennedy's project? As a precedent, one might look to artists like Billy Apple and some of his work to 'correct' the presentation of existing art works by other artists. One example, *Less is Moore* (2009), a part of *One Day Sculpture*, saw Apple propose the removal of the waxed lacquer patina of British sculptor Henry Moore's *Bronze Form* (1985-6), installed at Pōneke Wellington's Botanic Gardens, upholding Moore's wish that his work be allowed to weather naturally and to interact with its environment. *Less is Moore* extends Apple's work from the 1970s onwards in which he has collaborated with galleries, often intervening in their architecture to draw attention to their systems of representation and display. However, Apples' works in this realm are not simple gestures designed to restore another artist's original intentions. Rather, they are artistic acts with their own conceptual identities, and visual and material traces. Where Apple's interventions are at times consciously heavy-handed,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

authoritative and confrontational, Kennedy's are more improvised, indeterminate, open-ended and dispersed, sympathetic to potentials that eventuate in time.

In contemplating Kennedy's logic, we might also further consider the layered histories of the site. Firstly, the land remains open to contestation. Kennedy notes that this area is known to have been used by a number of iwi for trade, both well before and during early European occupation, with recent Te Tiriti redress claims helping to define historical narratives of the site.<sup>4</sup> In May 2018, the Supreme Court heard an appeal by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei Trust, who consider it part of their whenua, and whose dispute claim was based on their lack of inclusion in discussions regarding proposed sites the Crown planned to redress to Ngāti Paoa Iwi Trust and Marutūāhu Rōpū Limited Partnership. Kennedy's research draws attention to how Escobedo's sculpture remains entangled in wider, evolving histories.

Secondly, *Signals* was sponsored by Comalco who provided the steel and aluminium for the sculpture. Comalco also opened the Tiwai Point Aluminium Smelter in 1971, the same year as Escobedo's work was installed. Tiwai Point is now the subject of ongoing controversy over the storage of vast quantities of its toxic waste. It lies at the entrance to the Bluff Harbour between Awarua Bay to the north and Foveaux Strait to the south on the South Island's southern coast. Given the threat posed by rising sea levels, it has been likened by some to a catastrophic, irreversible environmental disaster waiting to happen. Comalco is now called Rio Tinto, a multinational corporation with an appalling environmental track record. The work's funding exists in tension with Escobedo's ecological concerns, for example, in later work *Acid Rain* (1992) and *Por las tortugas* (1992).

Thirdly, the highly controversial Mount Erebus memorial is also planned for nearby Dove Myer Robinson Park, attracting vocal criticism and substantial national news coverage over the last few years. Opponents cite a number of criticisms, including the appropriateness and large scale of the proposed design for such a commemoration, and the relevance of the Parnell location to memorialise an accident which occurred in Antarctica. The construction of the proposed installation is also thought to cause damage to a large historic pōhutukawa tree adjacent to it. This unfolding example demonstrates the often fraught politics and fervent debate which can accompany a public sculpture and its history.

Escobedo's *Signals* has had a comparatively quiet life - perhaps too quiet. A National Film Unit production made to document the planning and construction of the sculpture shows only a small hokataka tree adjacent to Escobedo's work.<sup>5</sup> Over the last fifty years this tree has grown into a screen which effectively masks the sculpture from the neighbouring car park lookout. *Signals* is now frequently overlooked and practically hidden in plain sight. It is, however, popular with local bird life, who use the structure's vantage point as a lookout of their own. Lichen has grown over the poles, its faintly weathered appearance further embedding the sculpture in the local environment.

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<sup>4</sup> See the New Zealand Supreme Court ruling, [https://www.courtsofnz.govt.nz/assets/cases/2018/sc\\_jdg\\_1709.pdf](https://www.courtsofnz.govt.nz/assets/cases/2018/sc_jdg_1709.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> *Four Shapes for Four Spaces*, New Zealand National Film Unit, 1972, film, 11:02, <https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/four-shapes-for-four-spaces-1972/overview>

Kennedy's *Structure Signalling* draws renewed attention to, and reconsideration of the sculpture, and its past and present contexts. His research foregrounds the role of documentation in an art work's life and history, and his series of conceptual gestures establish an ongoing dialogue with Escobedo's work. The project also foregrounds the question: where might we locate Kennedy's art work? The performance? Its documentation? Its material remains? Perhaps it can be located across all these aspects - and beyond them.

In correspondence, Kennedy writes: "I am looking to see actions are informed by taking instruction from the site of inquiry. Instead of instructing, I am asking to be instructed, looking to what could have happened if an alternate perspective of the work's potential is taken."<sup>6</sup>

Emil McAvoy  
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<sup>6</sup> Email to the author, June 27, 2021.