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**A WOLF ENTERS
THE FIELD OF THE ARTS IN WANGANUI
AFTER THE
2004 LOCAL BODY ELECTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

This research uses a Bourdieuan framework to explore 'the collision' between the fields of local government and the arts at the symbolic site of the Sarjeant Art Gallery in Wanganui, New Zealand. The Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project, conceptualised to make the Gallery more accessible and inclusive, had 84% of the necessary funds committed when it became a key issue in the 2004 local body elections. Once elected the new Mayor, who opposed the Project, swiftly undertook an intensive media campaign to discredit it. Within weeks, the entire Sarjeant Gallery Trust Board had resigned, the Extension Project was abandoned and the artists of the town were profoundly shocked. In response to these acts of symbolic violence by the Mayor, the artists developed a number of strategies that were ultimately unsuccessful in reviving the Project.

Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the social space as a site of struggle between fields for the many different kinds of capital he identified resonates with the aim of this research, which was to explore the possible causes and consequences of this monumental clash of fields. Undertaken in three phases, the first two stages of the research mapped the field of the arts in Wanganui and documented the events of 'the collision'. These set the scene for the fieldwork, which took the form of structured interviews with eight agents from the field of the arts who had been involved in devising strategies to respond to the attacks on their field.

Bourdieu's analysis of the field of the arts as autonomous explains why its agents looked for support for the Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project from the national field of the arts instead of its own social space. This meant that the Project never gained the wide support and political leadership it needed to take it through to completion and that calling on funding from local government became fraught with difficulty even though the Project was predicated on social inclusion. His notion of habitus, an unspoken set of values and beliefs within fields, explains why the agents within the field of the arts responded the way they did to the attack on their symbolic capital, with some agents abandoning the site of struggle and others engaging in strategies that were ultimately ineffective in constructing an included and supportive public that could have persuaded the politicians of Wanganui to invest in art.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Wanganui is a quiet provincial town, nestled on the banks of New Zealand's second longest river. It was once a bustling place, in the nineteenth century, with its port full of ships and riverboats plying their trade up into the bush-covered hinterland. Although its prominence as a trading centre has completely waned, you can still get the feel of how important it once was when you stand in the main street, with its many ornate Edwardian buildings, and look up the rolling hill of Queens Park to the Sarjeant Gallery. This magnificent building, built in 1919 with funds bequested by Henry Sarjeant, was opened to great acclaim and the townspeople flocking to visit.

When I came to live in the town, in the early 1980s, it seemed quite dark to me. There were few jobs advertised and the place felt down on its luck. This became worse when the railway workshops were closed down by the third Labour Government and then, after the 1987 share market crash, it was hard to see a way forward for the town, its economic base was so eroded. This began to show in its main street, where many of the beautiful heritage buildings became empty and dishevelled.

A community-driven initiative to develop a tertiary institution for the town so that local people could learn new skills helped to turn things around for Wanganui. This initiative was very successful and, by the early 1990s, the arts, crafts and design courses had become a particular strength. Several accomplished artists, mostly from the United States and Britain, came to live in the town to take up teaching positions at what was now known as Wanganui Polytechnic. The field of the arts began to grow in size and capability as significant numbers of local people took advantage of these new learning opportunities and graduates stayed on to live in this beautiful town with very affordable housing and studio space.

Within a space of ten years there was a large community of a few hundred artists living in the town. Some more politically-active members of the field started to assert that the town

was an art centre. No one else really took much notice of this bold statement until, in 2001, a television production company filming *The Great Art Trip* came to town. One of the co-presenters, Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins, waxed lyrical about Wanganui, its art school, beautiful environment and wealth of talented artists. Another person who did take notice was the Wanganui District Council's Economic Development Manager, Philip Shackleton, who had just come from Dunedin where he had been involved in setting up that city's fashion incubator. He recognised that the arts could provide a way to lead the town out of its doldrums and started to consult with the field about how this idea could be advanced.

This new attention to the arts was a shot in the arm for the Sarjeant Gallery Trust Board. Formed in 1993 at the behest of the Council, which until then had managed the affairs of the Gallery, the Trust Board was tasked with governing the Gallery and solving the decades-old problem of having out-grown its infrastructure. Storage and staff facilities were antiquated and unsuitable by current museum standards and it had none of the modern conveniences that art museums now provide their visitors, like a café, modern toilet facilities, retail and educational opportunities. In 1998, the Sarjeant Gallery Trust Board had commissioned New Zealand's leading conservation architect, Chris Cochran, to provide advice on how best to extend this iconic building, which has a Historic Places Trust Category One classification. In 1999, this report came to form a part of the brief for an architectural competition to find a sensible solution to the institution's many issues and bring its functionality into the 21st century. In line with this brief, the winning design by Steve McCracken of Warren and Mahoney, a nationally-renown architectural firm, was simple and functional.

Once the design for the extension to the town's art gallery was confirmed by the Trust Board, it began fundraising for the \$8.3 million dollar project. Local philanthropic trusts pledged \$400,000, the Lotteries Board granted \$400,000 and a well-known patron of the arts, Dr Robin Congreve, undertook to raise \$1 million from other Auckland art patrons. Artists from around New Zealand donated their work to an art auction, quickly raising another \$160,000. In May 2004, a second application to the Ministry of Culture and Heritage's Capital Works Fund, which took into consideration the increased cost of the Project, finally secured a grant of \$2.2 million. Shortly after, in August, and just before campaigning for the local body elections began, the Wanganui District Council agreed to contribute \$2.2 million and underwrite the balance of the fundraising, which was a

condition of the grant from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage. It had taken the Council a long time to get behind the Project. The politicians, even some of those that supported the Extension Project, were not entirely convinced that it had the public backing that such a big project needed. Finally, with Council support in place, it seemed that the Project could move forward and all that it needed was one last check that the costings were correct.

The Sarjeant Gallery Trust Board, however, had become very aware of a developing threat to the Project in the form of a new political group contesting the local body elections, which were imminent. Michael Laws, a lively and intelligent publisher and talkback host, with some notoriety as a politician and political strategist, had formed the Vision Party to fight the 2004 local body elections in Wanganui. Their campaign strategy was unlike anything the town had seen before: it was smart and savvy. The twelve Vision candidates shared resources and campaigned together under one banner, so they were able to achieve extensive media coverage. One of their election promises was that the decision to fund the Sarjeant Gallery Extension would be re-visited and taken to the community for a decision. This was of great concern to the Trust Board, though many others did not see it as such a threat. At election time, the Vision team achieved their goal, winning six of the twelve Council seats and their leader, Michael Laws, was elected Mayor. I was one of those who had not been overly worried about the possible threat to the Extension Project if the Vision team was elected. This was partly because the messages from the Vision team had been so inconsistent, ranging from a suggestion that the proposal should be re-considered to an assertion that the Project would not go ahead. It seemed to me that a policy had not been fully developed and, as it was mooted that the community would be party to the decision-making, I felt sure I would be able to take part in the process and put forward my views. I could not have been more misguided.

Less than four weeks after the election I vividly remember picking up the *Wanganui Chronicle* on Thursday morning, 11 November 2004, and exclaiming with surprise 'What's going on?' The Sarjeant Gallery Trust Board was featured on the front page of the newspaper, and in the article the new Mayor of our town seemed to be saying that there was some problem with the Extension Project. I did not understand. I thought everything was fine; in fact, I was sure everything was fine. A good proportion of the funding was already in place and supporters of the project were furiously raising more...but here was

the Mayor saying that things were so amiss with the Project that 'people's reputations were at stake' (*Wanganui Chronicle*, 11 November 2004:1).

That was only the beginning. Things did not get better, they only got worse and worse and worse. For the next few days, on Friday, Saturday and Monday, only a meagre amount of information was fed out to the public through the local newspaper. We were all pretty much in the dark and it was difficult to piece together just what was going on. It appeared that there was a problem with the funding for the Project and that, in some way that had not been explained, questions were being asked about the Trust's accountability in regard to ratepayer funds. The language that the Mayor was using was very authoritative and accusatory - he was 'summonsing' the Trust Board to meet with the Council that Monday afternoon, 15 November 2004, at 4 o'clock.

Three things happened as a result of that meeting: the Council resolved to ask the Chair of the Trust Board to resign, the Director of the Gallery was put under internal investigation for misconduct and the Mayor announced that the Extension Project was called to a halt. This was an incredible turn of events for a project that had seemed to be progressing well. What was the explanation? How had this come about?

The crux of the matter was that although the Auckland art patron, Dr Robin Congreve, had undertaken to support the Project by raising \$1 million dollars, the money had not yet been forthcoming. The Mayor had taken the position that these funds were unlikely to eventuate, and that this not only presented a risk to the Project for which the Council could find itself responsible but also implied that the Sarjeant Gallery Trust Board had misrepresented its financial position to its many funders.

The Trust Board fought back but not with sufficient vigour. Within the space of three weeks, the Board had all resigned, the Extension Project had been abandoned and the artists of the town were angry, very angry. They were particularly incensed by an editorial by the Mayor in his regular column in the *Sunday Star Times* (28 November 2004) denigrating the arts and calling those within the field elitist and bludgers.

The arts, those that practise them and those that enjoy them, have long been associated with elitism, a perception that persists today, even amongst art sociologists:

When individuals seek to understand, appreciate and collect art works, they are expressing an aspiration to membership in a status community of the cultivated (Zolberg, 1990:156).

The prerequisite education in the arts that is needed to participate in this field does work to exclude those who have not had the opportunity to acquire such knowledge. The previous Council may have found it difficult to commit to the Project because it felt it had limited relevance, and consequently support, within the social space. The new Mayor, an experienced politician, realised that coupling the Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project with elitism and social exclusion would have popular appeal. In a field that is more formed from artists than arts patrons, and has a strong capacity for considering the well-being of the whole field, the accusations of elitism were galling enough. Seeing them used as a means to destroy the Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project, which promised to raise the profile of Wanganui as an arts centre and make their vocation economically sustainable, was unimaginable. The artists protested, loudly and messily, at Council meetings and through the national and local media. Despite a sustained campaign over some months, of protest, lobbying and even reasoned pleas, the Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project was finished with. Many people in the field of the arts were left profoundly shocked, trying to understand how this could have come about. I was one of them.

This research project is the means for me to make sense of a situation that I have found very difficult to comprehend because I am such a committed and passionate supporter of the arts. I am a founding member of the Whanganui Artists' Guild (known as WAG), which was formed in 2002 to lobby in support of the arts, and currently serve as its Secretary/Treasurer. In this role, I have presented submissions to the Wanganui District Council's Annual Plan process that have supported the Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project and a review of the Council's Arts Policy. I am part of the WAG subcommittee that, in 2003, initiated the arts broadsheet, *Frisky*, and continue to be its key coordinator. As I began this research, in March 2005, I was appointed by the Whanganui Arts, Culture and Heritage Development Trust as the town's first Arts Developer and in that role I moved between the arts and political fields as I supported and promoted the art sector until the end of August 2005. Although funding was confirmed for the position for a further year and I could have continued in this role, I decided to return to work for the South Taranaki District Council as its District Community Development Advisor.

At a personal level, I am in a long-term relationship with an artist and good friends with many others. I am a small-time collector of art, a supporter of the Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project, and one of those dubbed an 'art groupie' by Michael Laws. My personal situation obviously has a bearing on how I approach this research. For me, interpreting these events is much more than simply an intellectual exercise in the pursuit of knowledge 'for its own sake'. Clearly there is a risk that my interests are so direct and strong that they will somehow distort the knowledge I seek to gain. I need to be able to challenge and explore rather than merely rationalise beliefs I already hold. To this end I am committed to working in a reflexive and vigilant manner throughout this research project. I aim to do the best job I can in the interest of the integrity of the findings.

I have undertaken this research project because I feel some responsibility to do so. For many agents of the field of the arts in Wanganui the events that led to the abandonment of the Extension Project have been extremely demoralising. This research offers an opportunity for some agents of that field to speak freely without comment or being derided as 'arts activists' by agents of the media or local government. It also gathers together information about the field of the arts and its history, and records the events of this time in one place. A third purpose of the research is to look at the whole situation in a broader context using a sociological framework.

Using the 'externalist' approach of sociology, in particular art sociology, allows this research to consider the significance of the arts within the social space of Wanganui. It also provides valuable insights into the functioning of the field and its systems of classification and distinction. Bourdieu, one of the great post-war French sociologists, undertook a huge research programme to develop a sociological framework that is able to both contextualise the field of the arts within the social space and provide an analysis of the practices of that field. His conception of the social space as a place of constant struggle between fields for the many different kinds of capital he identified resonates with the concerns of this research. I am investigating the collision between local government and the field of the arts at the site of the town's art museum. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, an unspoken set of values and beliefs held within fields, helps to explain why the various agents acted the way they did. In addition, his extensive application of these concepts to the field of cultural production, but also that of the state and, to a lesser extent, the media mean that his framework has particular relevance for this research project.

Bourdieu expanded the notion of capital past the economic to include cultural, social and symbolic capital, which when aggregated determine the status of an individual. Those within the field of the arts generally have high levels of cultural capital acquired through familial transmission or higher education, which allows them to occupy a dominant, powerful position within the social space. This thesis will argue that placing Bourdieu's sociological framework over the collision between politics and art in Wanganui, looking more closely at his explanation of how the social space works, with its many overlapping fields all jostling for legitimation, provides a rationale for why events unfolded as they did.

The following two chapters establish the Bourdieuan concepts and outline the methodology that underpins my analysis of the Wanganui case. In chapter four I document the collective capital of the field of the arts in Wanganui and provide a short history of its symbolic site, the Sarjeant Gallery. This is followed by a chapter describing the issues of accommodation that the Gallery faces and how the Extension Project came to be developed. Chapter six gives an account of the struggle between the new Mayor of the town and the Sarjeant Gallery Trust Board, which provides further context for fieldwork. The findings of this fieldwork, undertaken with the aim of exploring the possible causes and consequences of this monumental clash of fields, are presented and analysed in chapter seven. The final chapter draws all my findings into a conclusion.

As I will argue in this thesis, Bourdieu's analysis of the field of the arts as autonomous helps to explain why the Sarjeant Gallery Extension Project never gained the public backing and political leadership it needed to take it through to completion. While the field of the arts was looking to extend itself, to gather in the wider public to enjoy art, it asked for legitimation and support from the national field of the arts instead of the agents of its own social space. To put it crudely, even though the entire Project was predicated on social inclusion and education about art for all, the agents who were driving the Extension Project only talked to those within the field of the arts and failed to communicate the benefits that it could provide across the social space. This failure was exploited by the new Mayor in ways that ultimately led to the Extension Project being abandoned altogether.

The Bourdieuan concept of habitus explains why those within the field of the arts developed the strategies they did when subjected to attacks by the Mayor of Wanganui. It explains why, when the Extension Project was denigrated in many ways, but primarily as

being a project for the elite, the agents of the field were unable to respond in a way that would resonate with the wider community. Their habitus assumed that art is valued by all and so they failed to powerfully respond to the intervention into the social space of a politician arguing otherwise and trading on the elitist history of the arts. Many of the strategies they chose, like protesting, stencilling slogans in public places and printing protest T-shirts only served to define them as 'a minority' and isolate them further from 'the mainstream', especially as the fight between the agents of the field of the arts and local government became vociferous. Once again, even when aiming to talk to others, they were talking to themselves. Their responses only confirmed the vulnerable, elitist position for which they were being attacked.

It seems tragic that the demise of a project conceptualised to make the art museum more accessible and inclusive was brought about, in part, by the habitus of its most fervent supporters. The autonomy of the field, evidenced by the Gallery's close ties to national and international art networks rather than its own townspeople, sadly led to a generally-held perception that it was elitist, despite the best efforts of the curators at this symbolic site to provide exhibitions that might engage the local people. Given that the issues of accommodation and accessibility are still facing the Sarjeant Gallery, and the need to solve these issues is still present, I hope this thesis will provide some insight into this situation as well as lessons for the future when an extension to the Sarjeant Gallery eventually goes ahead. As Bourdieu says in the postscript to *The Weight of the World*: 'What the social world has done, it can, armed with this knowledge, undo' (1999:629).