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REPORT

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MASTER OF ARTS (VISUAL ART) by Research

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Abstract

PERFORMING OBJECTS: research into the constructive processes of inhabiting. The work employs installation and performance based practice to explore the social and physical processes of inhabiting, addressing the inherent tenuousness of these processes and focusing on instances of rupture, destabilization and excess. The Subthesis uses the example of the *Tocumwal House Stories* to argue that constructing narratives – telling – is a fundamental part of the inhabiting process whilst simultaneously articulating its instability, it explores the tenuousness of settlement within the Australian context and the function of stories as memorial objects. A study taking the form of an exhibition of Installation and performance documentation exhibited at the Canberra School of Art Foyer Gallery and Photospace from September 13 to 16 2000 which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component (66%), together with a Sub-thesis (33%), and the Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken.

Declaration of originality

Please insert and sign the following at the bottom of page 2 of the thesis:

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, ...............(your signature)......................(........./....../......) hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.
Acknowledgments

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Prologue

The girl stands on the side of the road - she can't quite decide to cross. There are no cars around, but one might come past at any time. Can she risk stepping out into the street? What if . . .

What if a car came around the corner and swerved to avoid hitting her, and all the occupants were killed.

She worries about getting in the way - in the pub, she drives her friends mad with questions - did I bump you? am I in the way? Someone on the other side of the room spills their beer - she is convinced it is somehow her fault.

It was as if she had no right to the space she took up in the world, no personal space of her own. It was as if she was always illegitimately inhabiting someone else's space. Yet the space she inhabited was paradoxically larger than her body, as if she spilled out into the surrounding world unable to keep herself in check.
Introduction

I am fascinated by how people inhabit.

I see *inhabiting* as a constructive process. I am informed by Heidegger's notion of *dwelling* which I discuss further in my sub-thesis\(^1\). We do not simply inhabit given spaces, we construct the world around us by enacting the process of inhabiting. This is both a physical and psychic building process through which we create inhabitable spaces.

I have an early memory of riding a tricycle over a wonderful flat expanse of concrete that eventually became *The Family Room*. This memory is followed by other memories of that house, memories of dark coloured carpet replaced by light carpet, red walls painted over in green. I remember a sixties lime green and yellow kitchen, renovated into early eighties apricot and finally nineties white, colour schemes that reflected the year and decade, and half built do-it-yourself furniture that was never finished. Whenever I enter other peoples' houses I notice the furnishings, the walls, floors and smells. More importantly I notice the evidence of process, houses are continuously worked in and on. I am fascinated by the continuous motion of production and consumption that creates a sense of stability - of everything in place - order. Yet I am also interested in looking at where those processes are interrupted, where they break down or fail in some way. Or at how the process might take over - get out of control - become obsessive.

When I first embarked on this project I was particularly interested in the construction of domestic architecture. I wanted to know how and why we build the spaces we do, and how our built environments inform our self-construction. I worked with these initial preoccupations to produce a series of experimental objects based on furniture. As I constructed these objects I began to focus more on the construction process and became interested in what I have come to describe as the performative processes of inhabiting. The word performative is important - inhabiting is performed, acted - whether it is by telling a story or washing the dishes.

My MA thesis became an exploration of these performative processes. Drawing on the essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” by Heidegger\(^2\) I developed a working method of inhabiting through constructing; producing, consuming and acting. I also began to play with those boundaries, to address the points, zones, where the inhabiting process fails.

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\(^2\) Heidegger, M, Ibid p323
My frame of reference for this project is collaged together from a variety of sources. I draw on a range of texts including do-it-yourself guides, home renovation magazines and the fiction of authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Perkins-Gillman and Marilynne Robinson. I indirectly make use of serious fictions such as those of de Certeau, James Clifford and Bachelard. I work within and in response to contemporary sculptural and performance practice - I will discuss the influence of particular artists later, in reference to the specific works.

The following report charts the developmental process of my research project, it is not strictly chronological as I trace the production of series of works over time. Several of the projects were in process simultaneously so I have split them up into related groups.

In the first chapter I discuss those initial experiments, the objects I produced and the references I was using. These objects were all based around floors, walls, doors and furniture. I used predominantly recycled materials, things that had a previous existence. I was interested in how objects and materials contain and express memory. I struggled with these objects and found myself willing them to fail - creating things that subverted their own functions. I investigated a range of artists who worked with themes of domestic architecture and furniture including, Jan Vercruysse, Richard Artschwager and Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio. I was also drawing heavily on the advice of do-it-yourself home renovation guides and the Bedroom and Bathroom book.

In the second chapter I outline the development of a major component of the final work, an ongoing collaboration with fellow artist Emma Jean. Emma and I share a variety of preoccupations; we are both interested in how people inhabit socially, in how we create patterns and follow rules in our daily lives. We share a sense of humour and a willingness to push each other into places we would not necessarily go alone. The collaboration is a continuing conversation, itself a never-ending process that throws up objects and performances along the way. There is an inherent tension as we both circle each other - compromising, questioning, challenging - drinking a great deal of tea.

In the third chapter I discuss the initial development of my individual performative practice focusing on a particular work, *The Dining Performance*, and the two experimental projects *Slowness* out of which this piece developed. This is the first series of projects where I have begun working as a solo performer. The pieces in this series are very much about developing an inhabitable space in which to perform, negotiating different public spaces as performance sites.

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In the fourth chapter I focus on *Light Work*, an installation/performance shown at Strathnairn Gallery in March 1999 and in another incarnation for my final assessment. *Light Work* is inhabiting becoming obsessive or out of hand. This work takes a series of typically domestic activities and turns them inside out. I also use materials to construct an evocative space that triggers a range of associations and memories for viewers.

In the final chapter I discuss the construction of a domestic object - a mattress - which has grown excessively until it can no longer be used in a domestic context. This ridiculous object is used as a buffer between myself and the built environment. Whilst the object operates as a security blanket it also becomes a burden, large, awkward and out of place, yet providing a way of taking up space, extending the space I inhabit and, in the form of documentation, playing with the imaginative space of the digital image.
Chapter 1

Faulty Furniture - The demountable drawings

In 1994 I spent five months living in Chiang Mai in Thailand as an exchange student. The experience of living there had a profound impact on my awareness of the cultural construction of domestic architecture. I noticed the physical differences, for example, houses in Thailand often lack kitchens. The other students I associated with lived without the same sense of privacy, six students would share a two-bedroom house. They worried about me being lonely living with only one other person. The tropical climate contributed to an accelerated cycle of growth and decay, black mould in the bathroom would flourish in a matter of days, the walls would sweat. The road I lived on flooded regularly, each inundation carrying away the top layer of dust, revealing building rubble used to fill the potholes - bricks, fragments of tile. The experience of living in Thailand was formative in developing my existing interest in architecture towards the cultural specificity of domestic spaces.

Thus, when I wrote my original proposal I was interested in investigating how people relate to the architecture they inhabit. I was informed by my experience of domestic architecture, and background historical research into western domestic architecture. In particular the development of bathrooms and kitchens, sites of housework, production and consumption. I was fascinated by how scientific developments such as Pasteur’s germ theory could impact on the design and construction of houses.

When I embarked on my current project I started off by collecting home decorating magazines, bedroom and bathroom books, do-it-yourself advice from the hardware store. I used these resources as points of departure, ways of generating images and objects. I became fascinated by the advice these publications gave on how to do things. The majority of my sources date from between the 1950’s and 1970’s as these publications were readily available at markets and opp shops.

I found starting - getting going - difficult. Initially I just needed to make something, to have a physical object. So I began by drawing, I produced a three-dimensional drawing using ash taken from old doorframes. This wood had been holding up a shed for years. It had outlived its purpose and was being thrown away, discarded in favour of a shed three times the size without leaks and spiders. This material had memories, nail holes, marked and splintery surfaces.

I could have bought new, freshly sawn wood, it would probably have been worth the expense in time saved. Yet I chose to spend weeks denailing and machining up this
stuff, stripping it back until it looked fresh and naked, its memories partly erased from
the surface. For some reason I had to go through that arduous process of cleaning up
and reusing, partly because this was good straight wood and it would have been wasteful
to throw it away. There was more to it however, than the conservation concern and my
almost obsessive desire to make life difficult for myself. I was beginning with an
interest in history and it seemed that I needed to attempt to erase history altogether, to go
as far as possible with a material in order to learn how to work with things that have a
memory. There was also a sense of satisfaction gained in this cleaning up process, the
repetitive physical work enabled me to think about what I was trying to do while
working.

I drew three objects, rectangular prisms. They were 1:1 scale outlines of the furniture in
the bedroom of one of my flatmates. I snuck into her room one day and measured her
bed, her wardrobe and her bedside table. The objects I made were frameworks,
reproducing the proportions of a room, attempting to re-present the physical experience
of moving in that space, marking out a three dimensional set of proportional
relationships. Yet I subverted this aim by stripping the work as bare as possible, pulling
back and away. The material had a history, yet it held back as much as it expressed.
Objects with memories cannot be read like books, they have to be experienced
sensually. Already the objects were about absence. At this point it seemed that I had to
get as abstract as was possible for me in order to come back to representation.

Because I was reading house renovation magazines I became interested in the
relationships between plan and object and in following instructions. I was looking at the
way information is presented in those magazines, the relationships between words and
images and the overall graphic sensibility. Home decorating and renovating magazines
present a particular view of the world, they provide instructions that are then acted upon,
they are performance manuals. I did not directly reproduce any of the objects in the
magazines, I used them to generate ideas and for construction advice, then designed my
own objects using the knowledge I had gained. These magazines - and brochures from
hardware stores - informed my father and my friends’ fathers when they constructed
objects for their homes. The things my father and friends’ fathers built were often left
unfinished, or were over constructed, built with materials that were unnecessarily strong
and clunky. It was these failings that drew me to thinking about do-it-yourself, the
amateurishness.

I was also fascinated by the sense I got from the magazines that they were presenting
the consumer with an opportunity to construct their dream home. These magazines were
about improving your life, making it better, making it over. The house was more than a
Demountable Drawing: Bedroom
private space, it was a public showpiece, an artwork which you could use to express yourself, to show your friends how, clever, and tasteful you were.

My interest in relationships between images and objects drew me to works by artists who blurred this boundary or worked across it. I looked at a number of artists who often work between drawing and object, constructing things that look like plans, flattened out perspectives that operate in dialogue with walls rather than just hanging on them. My list of visual references at this time included Richard Artschwager, Jan Vercruysse, Glen Seator and Fred Sandback. They all deal with architecture and the conventions surrounding the depiction and construction of architectural spaces. However, there was a sense of distance with all of these artists, a minimal coolness or conceptual aloofness that I was too comfortable or familiar with. I really liked all these artists’ works, but somehow they were too easy, too smart - they appealed aesthetically - but I was beginning to look for something to make me edgy.

David Watt’s work with the Knowledge series and his performance practice also informed my choice of sources. David used Knowledge encyclopedias, taking images and reproducing them on pieces of board. He played with this vernacular visual language to comment on how knowledge is constructed, there was a particular sense of humour in his work that I really enjoyed, he did not simply criticise the world depicted in the encyclopedias he enjoyed it and was fascinated by it. I think subconsciously I began to draw on material from magazines and manuals because I was fascinated with the languages that operated in them. I wanted guidance and reassurance, these publications are so assured, so definite. If you follow the instructions you will have the perfect cupboard, a customised and efficient life.

Gordon Bull describes David’s approach as seriously funny⁴, he argues that David’s serious humour worked through pathos, that his work was “about the absurdities of life.” Whilst I did not consciously set out to make funny objects my work has been infected with a kind of tragic comedy, I am interested in lack, failure and absurdity, especially where systems appear to break down.

Working back from the almost abstraction of the wooden frameworks I stopped to reproduce my kitchen floor in yellow vinyl tiles, making its way dynamically off the floor and up the wall in the Sculpture workshop. I had seen so many in the home decorating magazines and was intrigued by those exploded plans that show you a deconstructed view of all the elements in order to instruct you on how to put them together. I was also beginning to think more and more about behaviour and movement. The floor was built to scale; it was actual size. The tiles were rescued from a skip behind

Demountable Drawing: Kitchen Floor
a floor shop, they were originally large vinyl covered sections of grotty Masonite. I took them into the workshop and cut them up on the table saw, cleaning them up. The surfaces still bore traces of past wear and tear but they had been brought under control.

I was starting to think about the possibilities of houses acting as socialising agents, and wanted to address the popular notion of the insides of houses as private and the rest of the world as public. So the next object I built was a cupboard - a glorified box really - that was hinged so it could literally be unfolded and laid out flat, an object where the inside was always contingent. A temporary object, one that was somewhat hopeless, that could not actually fulfil the role of closet.

It was around this point that I started to understand that I was really ambivalent about building at all, and began to think about why it was that I was building things that seemed to subvert themselves or be built to fail. This was partly due to my interest in the clumsy renovations and do-it-yourself projects of my family and friends, I was replicating their clumsy methods. But there was more to it than that, I was frustrated by the objects and wanted to do more than reproduce things. The process of constructing them was important, yet the objects did not speak of that, they were so still, so dumb. Too easy.

While I am interested in houses and furniture and domesticity, it is the performative processes of inhabiting that raise questions for me. It wasn’t so much the objects that I produced but the process of renovating, building and cleaning - the various ways spaces are constructed and inhabited that was most interesting for me - the way these objects and spaces were performed. My own performance as well as that of the viewer experiencing the work, had to be explored. I needed to highlight my own process of making, the presence of my body in the process, the ways in which I inhabited, physically.

I began to think differently about the nature of objects and the possibilities for them. Up until this point I was thinking of objects in a very sculptural way, using the word object to refer to physical things in the world. I have come to think of performances and stories in terms of objects as well. In researching my sub-thesis I was testing out the idea that a story could be a form of intangible memorial, a conceptual object/thing. The story is constructed anew each time it is told, thus it is an object that has a kind of organic life, yet there is a thingness about it, it can be thought of as a single thing and as one of many things. When I refer to performances as objects I am thinking in a similar way; the performance object is a combination of the actual event unfolding in time and space, the memories of the event which the performer and audience take away with them and
Demountable Drawing:
Cupboard
the physical objects and documentation that are produced as a result of the performance event.
Chapter 2

An Extended Conversation - Collaborating with Emma Jean

Indeed, no matter what hegemony the entertainment industry has given to its meaning of amusement, 'entertainment' still keeps its more primary meaning of being engaged, having attention focused, being held to something.5

Performance was something I began to experiment with under the umbrella of ACME performance group. This group was initiated by David Watt in response to sculpture students asking for some guidance with performance work. David’s own performance practice informed many of the members of the group. ACME operates in that fuzzy realm between theatre, performance and sculpture taking full advantage of its ambiguous status. It is a loose association of artists, predominantly with a background in sculpture. We work site specifically, often interrogating social conventions and modes of behaviour with an absurd sense of humour.

Through participating in this group I developed a particular working relationship with one of the other members, Emma Jean. We had been working with ACME for a couple of years and discovered some interesting connections in our approaches.

Emma and I first collaborated directly within an ACME performance called Addressing the Object in the foyer of the National Gallery of Australia for the Canberra National Sculpture Forum in 1998. In addressing the object we addressed, and dressed, each other. We played with the idea of paper cutout dolls, creating lifesize cardboard clothes which we modelled, standing on white plinths. This light hearted and absurd work started something. We began to talk about social behaviour, to playfully manipulate materials, to use the materials of play, cardboard, masking tape and our imaginations. We began to plan another performance.

Construction/renovation Project

Our first ‘independent’ performance was produced in November 1998 and was called Construction/renovation project

Our materials were - cardboard, Stanley knives, masking tape and one day, time functioned as an element of the work. We chose to use cardboard because of its availability and because we could build quickly with it. We liked the idea of using something ordinary, something that had been discarded, that had a variety of uses. Time was very important, (how long is a performance?) we planned to have a series of events

5 Denning, Performances, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1996 p43
unfold over the course of a day. We started in the morning and completed the project in the afternoon, as time passed we constructed and renovated - we took time to act, to think to construct. Other people came and went, observed for a few seconds or minutes, the object we were working on continued to change. Our performance over time was a process of constructing a space and of inhabiting by constructing.

Over the five hours we turned a large box into a room, constructed furnishings and renovated. We started with a loose brief and engaged in a dialogue with each other over the course of the day to decide what would be built, where it would go and whether we should pull one thing apart in order to replace or transform it into something else. The conversation was an essential element in the production of this work. Over the course of the day we continually discussed, made plans, changed our minds. Talk is also a means of constructing and inhabiting. We started talking in order to generate the performance in the first place, we are still talking, building with words a relationship and a practice.

After this performance we wrote the following statement as a way of representing our collaborative process:

We work predominantly with performance and installation addressing themes of time, space and washing dishes. We are interested in renovation, history and futility (process, process, process). Operation in a state of fragmentation and transience across a shifting temporal landscape. It depends on whether you are wasting, using or losing it; time is always relative. Sometimes it hangs heavy on our hands and when we least expect it time flies by leaving the watched pot boiling dry.

We work with used cardboard cartons, masking tape, plastic Stanley knives, found and constructed text, and a well developed sense of absurdity. We explore notions of movement, temporality and nonsense. We construct, renovate, collaborate and articulate. We engage in a dialogue with each other, our audience and the objects around us to make a series of transient manifestations that are there one moment gone the next. When they are remembered, how long will they exist? Ultimately these works will only exist as traces, memories - and how they exist will be dependent on the minds eye of the beholder.

In a merging of technologies, a play between real and fictional we remember that we are here (location, location, location), now, where the past, present and future exist simultaneously in a continuous proliferation of stuff.

This statement highlights a number of issues that Emma and I are interested in exploring in collaboration with each other and independently: the use of ephemeral materials, duration, conversation and behaviour.

Construction/renovation Project was constructed with a built in time limit, it existed in its original form only for a period of hours on one day. Throughout that day it was in a continual state of change. There are a number of ways that the preoccupation with time comes through in this work. I am particularly interested in the notion of a domestic
temporality, there are certain times at which things happen, there is the continuous motion of inhabiting and the sense that domestic spaces are stable, unchanging. We broke our day up starting with tea breaks. In the morning we built the internal structure, we had a tea break and began to renovate, adding, subtracting, changing. In the afternoon we invited passers by in for tea, as the space had become presentable, homely. After afternoon tea we took out our knives and cut from top to bottom each corner of the "room" opening it out, turning it inside out as the walls fell and left the interior exposed, a pile of rubble. Then the object ceased to exist, the individual pieces were removed, only a couple of fragments remained. In this particular performance the production of the object was only important during the performance, it did not result in an intact artefact in the end, the remnants of the performance do not stand on their own as independent artworks.

The following quote from the catalogue of Islands an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Australia in 1996 discusses the role of time in the construction of installation:

Time: Mathematical time, composed of standard units and following a single course, is illusory, where as installation art takes its cue from cinematic experience, in its representation of the immanence of the past in the present, of the compression of time, and its manipulation of the time the viewer spends within a work. The experience of time is direct but multifaceted: The “flow” of life as a primary inner experience [is, in reality] a succession of states that melt into one another to form an indivisible process. 

Construction/renovation project was a process piece, a work that moved, it had a beginning and one kind of end, it exists still in the form of the photographic documentation, which becomes a trace, a visual reminder which marks time, presents a moment from the past; presenting - making present. Within that work there was a temporal convergence, for us the piece evoked memories of play houses and cubbies, and mimicking adult behaviour, all the while we were aware that this ephemeral, slight material is used as protection, as the only form of housing available in some circumstances, devalued scrap we hauled from bins, yet a basic necessity.

It is this convergence of a number of possible readings and particularly a number of temporal experiences that interests me. The word convergence is becoming increasingly important as I attempt to avoid being sucked into continual binary oppositions. Memory/history, fact/fiction/ inside/outside and the inevitable privileging of one side of the binary. It is that muddy place where these things converge rather than the on boundaries where they are separated off into distinct compartments that I want to splash around in.

6 Davidson,K, Desmond, M, Islands : contemporary installations from Australia, Asia, Europe and America. Canberra : National Gallery of Australia, 1996
This work reminds me also of Schwitters’ *Merzbau*, of his obsessive collecting and assembling. It also resonated with a kind of Dada sensibility, it is nonsensical, an assemblage of found materials forced together, ordinary activities made strange by their context. The materials when accumulated take on a life of their own, observers cannot help but read meaning into the random text on the cardboard, pointing out the repetition of the word *Freedom* which appears on the cardboard walls.

**Withdrawn Room**

In May 1999 we produced a second performance. We were still playing with boxes and continuing with our dialogue, continuously talking through our ideas and decisions. At times I find this really scary, it is like being on a slippery slope with nothing solid to hold on to. I feel that we both push and question each other we both feel we owe it to each other to be rigorous with our ideas and willing to let them go. By building an idea in this way there are always some elements that are out of control.

Much of that process is not apparent to the audience, they will not know how much furniture we moved in and out of the space before finally reverting to cardboard. They will not know how many tangents we went off on before ending up where we did. They will see a series of objects and witness a series of events. Yet that dialogue also becomes a material. It is not something that is immediately obvious to the audience. We relate to each other while performing as a result of this dialogue, the audience knows there is a relationship, a conversation, even when we do not speak to each other.

The other materials we used were also ephemeral. We used cake, text, sound, time, cardboard, hot glue.

Instead of building a space to inhabit within the gallery, we worked with the gallery space itself. We were still interested in evoking a sense of the domestic so we built a mantle piece and an ottoman from cardboard. The windows were covered in glue patterns traced from wallpaper and apricot jam - sticky. Emma literally inhabited a dividing wall, inside, hidden from the view of the audience she operated a number of appliances. Two tape recorders, also hidden inside the walls played a Jane Austen narrative and a detective story, texts bounded by the domestic, which employ, speculation, gossip, surveillance.

I began by hiding inside another wall - inside the walls we listened - inhabited strangely. I emerged from the wall with a tray of cakes which I lowered down onto the cardboard mantelpiece. I then emerged, climbing over the top of the wall with another plate of cakes. Climbing out of the wall was difficult, awkward. Once down the ladder and on
Withdrawingroom
the ground I offered the cakes to members of the audience. They were not delicious, they were dry, cheap, home brand cakemix cakes with hard lemon icing, the kind of thing you might be served at tea with an elderly relative. The kind of thing you eat to be polite with no real enjoyment. There is an interesting tension here created by offering food as a way of connecting with the audience, making them feel at home, yet offering something unpleasant, keeping them on edge.

Once I had handed around a plate of cakes, I took my own tray, and seating myself on the ottoman, I began to eat. My consumption of one object (the cake), produced another, a partially unreadable text, this typewritten text which emerged from my mouth contained fragments of text taken from Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Charlotte Perkins-Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*. As I removed the strips of paper from my mouth I took them over to the wall and stuck them on using my saliva, creating vertical wallpaper stripes.

Austen has been an important point of reference for me in the last couple of years. In her writing she constructs social spaces, spaces encountered and activated through dialogue. In the words of Witold Rybczynski:

> An Austen novel is a tour de force, at least by modern standards. Nothing extraordinary happens - no murders, escapades or disasters. Instead of adventure or melodrama we read about the prosaic daily comedy of family life. There is little complexity to the plots (compared to Dickens, say), and the suspense, such as it is, arises chiefly out of questions of love and marriage. Jane Austen single-handedly invented and brought to perfection, what could be called the domestic genre of novel writing, the literary equivalent to the seventeenth century Dutch school of interior Painting. Her books are, of course, much more than a faithful representation of the period, just as Vermeer’s paintings were more than illustrations of young Dutch women at home. Like Vermeer, de Witte and other Dutch domestic painters, Austen chose to stay strictly within the limits of the everyday, not because her talent was small, but because her imagination did not require a broader canvas.

Emma’s and my materials, like Austen’s inspiration are drawn from our immediate environment, we do not go in for dramatic occurrences. Our work is about social conventions and conversation, about acceptable modes of behaviour and silliness. We focus on the details of daily life, but we manipulate them, take them out of context in order to put them under a magnifying glass, blow them up and draw attention to them.

The work of artists such as Janine Antoni and Carolee Schneeman resonates for me when I think about this performance. In particular I think of Antoni’s work *Lick and*
Lather where she constructed self portrait busts from soap and chocolate, performing with them, licking the chocolate and washing with the soap until the objects lost their identifying features. The eating of the cake and regurgitating of the text draws on these kinds of performances, playing directly with bodily consumption and production.

The works however also have a wider frame of reference. Emma and I draw on popular culture, anecdotal evidence, women’s magazines and romance novels, anything that we can work with to explore social conventions and behaviour. My initial inspiration for the action with the cakes came from the experience of eating a commercial chocolate bar I had purchased from a vending machine. When I was about half way through eating it I bit down on something hard, it turned out to be a small ball of paper which, when unfolded bore a name - Dave - and a mobile phone number. Needless to say I did not eat the rest of the chocolate, however this physical experience stuck in my mind, made me think about eating and speaking, about the possibility of revisiting this action in another context.

Waste

In late 1999 Emma and I were invited to participate in an exhibition called Glue, organised by Neil Roberts. The works in the show were connected only by the material/concept of glue. Once again Emma and I embarked on a complex conversation that continued for weeks about the nature of glue, as a substance and an idea. I had been creating beautiful patterns in hot glue on glass, but these were not resolved enough to be considered. The other issue that was important here was one of collaboration, we needed to make a work together rather than using one of our pre-existing pieces.

In the introduction to What John Berger Saw, Nikos Papastergiadis states that collaboration demands:

\[
\text{a surrender of the self to the other. Submission need not lead to a passive mimicry of the other but a heightened and intimate level of receptivity of the signals that can cross between and transfigure the understanding of identity.}^{10}
\]

In this instance the conversation between Emma and I resulted in a very succinct performance. The performance itself was not witnessed by an audience - what ended up being shown in the gallery was the aftermath - the traces.

We spent approximately four hours spitting balls of soggy paper at the windows - spitballs - glue/saliva. A childish social game, at once revolting, a sign of rebelliousness, disrespect and an act of belonging, conforming behaviour amongst children. This was a physical, sensual, visceral activity, expectorating, spitting out, purging.

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10 Papastergiadis, N, What John Berger Saw, Canberra School of Art Gallery Canberra 2000 p6
Waste
Until this point I have not discussed the significance of the body, of our bodies, our physical presence, in performance. All of our performances have employed a constructive element, we do things. In \textit{Waste} we spat, we stood next to each other and spat at the window. Before we could do this we cleaned the window, rubbing, scrubbing, working. Our works are about the physical processes of inhabiting socially, the relationship between bodies, how we move, how we respond to each other, what we do.

This doing reminds me of the processes of other artists such as Marina Abramovic and Mike Parr who use repetition to build a sense of tension, to really make the audience aware of the presence and actions of the body. One of the most important performances I have seen was a very simple action performed in the CSA Sculpture workshop by Robin Backen when I was in first or second year. It was the first piece of performance art I had seen, and had a profound impact on me at the time. She stood at the base of a large ladder and rubbed her nose, she then proceeded to climb the ladder stopping at intervals repeating the action of rubbing her nose. Each time the action was repeated it was slowed down, this slowing down created a sense of tension for the audience, by the time she reached the top of the ladder I felt myself holding my breath. The simplicity of the action and the energy it contained, the way it affected my perception of time fascinated me.

In \textit{Construction/renovation project} Emma and I spent a day building, busily cutting and sticking and pulling apart. In \textit{Withdrawing Room}, Emma spent the entire time inside a wall, her physical presence marked only by the sounds she made, turning appliances on and off. I climbed in and out of the wall - mostly outside - I ate in front of the audience and removed paper strips from my mouth pulling unreadable sentences out of it and sticking them to the walls. Our conversation is not just an abstract engagement with words, it is a physical process, our bodies are as important to the process as all the other materials we use.

With \textit{Waste} all that was left for the audience to look at were the abject, dried up spitballs, creating a random pattern across an otherwise clean window. They were the reminder of a bodily activity, evidence. Anthony Howell discusses the significance of stillness in performance, claiming “The performance artist often feels that he or she begins with a lack, an absence of what is to occur.”\footnote{Howell, A, \textit{The Analysis of Performance Art}, Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam 1999 p9} Howell argues that in this absence stillness is used as a ground in much the way a canvas is used as a ground for a painting. Stillness frames a performance. \textit{Waste}, our performance that was over before the opening of the show presented a still memory of an event, a yucky, yet humorous.
memory of an excessive activity, it was the stillness after the action. The presence of the objects stuck to the windows highlighted our absence from the space.
Chapter 3

Consumption

The Dining Performance

The dining performance was first performed as part of an ACME performance *A Quiet Drink With Friends* in June 1999 and repeated later for video. The site was a pub called All Bar Nun at the O'Connor shops in Canberra. On a Sunday night the members of the performance group mingled with the crowd of regulars in the bar creating a sense of awkwardness, shifting the atmosphere just slightly and subtly interfering with the normal functions of the space.

*The Dining Performance* took place outside the bar opposite large windows. I approached the venue from down the street dressed in a white coat to which I had sewn many zip lock plastic bags. Each bag contained the food, cutlery and crockery necessary for an evening meal. The coat was worn over a long white garment - a cross between a dress and a pinafore - fringed along the bottom with rows of plastic spoons. Attached to the front of was a four metre long table cloth, white damask, the same material as the garment. Damask, the fabric of family Christmas dinners, of formal occasions. The whiteness created a strong visual effect, it provided a break from the colours and patterns of the surrounding environment, it drew attention to me, the performer. The spoons along the bottom of the garment also fulfilled this attention grabbing function, they made a loud rattling, rustling sound as I walked.

I sat at an outside table and covered it with the tablecloth attached to the front of my costume. I then proceeded to unpack the contents of the bags and construct a meal, lamb chops, peas and potato. I lit a candle and placed a rose in a vase. The people seated at the other outside tables and those inside looking out through the windows observed this strange approach.

Later audience members told me what I looked like slowly walking up the street, elegant, like some kind of alien, as if I was wearing outlandish catwalk fashion that is never seen elsewhere in public. I felt completely paranoid, with all those people watching me, I wanted to disappear. I find performance is a strange activity to engage in, while I am performing I hate it, I feel uncomfortable, and extremely silly, yet it seems to be the most appropriate medium. There is a part of me that is interested in that discomfort, in the strangeness of the experience, it keeps me on edge, prevents me from relaxing too much.

The idea was to play with the notion of inhabiting outside a traditional domestic space, the meal was similar to standard dinners I was fed as a child, it is also the kind of food
Dining Performance
you would expect to find as a counter meal in a traditional Aussie pub. This is not about *domesticating space*. The spaces I work within are all man made they are already domesticated in a manner of speaking. It is more about taking Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, that we are by nature dwellers and that space is contingent on our dwelling. What I was doing in this performance was highlighting the dwelling process by dwelling differently, unexpectedly.

The tablecloth/apron I was wearing was four metres long, it covered the table and spilled over the edge, excessive. By spreading the cloth I was claiming that space as my own temporarily. The meal represented a form of self sufficiency, containment.

Throughout the performance I had a small clock on the table, I gave myself half an hour for the meal. I ate my meal then proceeded to clean the dishes. I put on rubber gloves and used a water spray bottle and detergent to wash everything. I then used a tea towel to dry the dishes before carefully packing them up again. I packed everything else away neatly and rolled up the table cloth, I then got up and walk slowly back the way I came leaving no evidence of my recent presence.

*Slowness*

There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. Consider this utterly commonplace situation: a man is walking down the street. At a certain moment he tries to recall something but the recollection escapes him. Automatically, he slows down. Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time.

In existential mathematics, that experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.\(^\text{12}\)

The performances entitled *Slowness* were two ‘background’ performances that led up to the dining performance

The first performance was made up of the following components:

- Two chairs
- One Kitchen table
- Table cloth - 1x4m
- White Paper Serviettes - several hundred

\(^{12}\) Kundera, M, *Slowness*, Faber and Faber, London 1996
Slowness
Pins - several hundred
Performers - two
Small travel alarm clock
White plastic laundry basket
Small brush

Attire - Performer 1 wears tunic made from the same fabric as the table cloth, several rows of plastic spoons sewn to the bottom of the garment. Performer 2 wears light coloured clothing.

Table is ‘set’ prior to commencement of performance. Tablecloth extends approximately 2-2.5 metres beyond table and on to ground.

Performer 1 arrives with plastic laundry basket containing serviettes and pins. Places serviettes and pins on the table and basket underneath and sits at the end of the table. Performer 1 proceeds to fold serviettes into flower forms and pile them on the table.

Performer 2 arrives half an hour later and sits at table on one side adjacent to 1. Performer 2 unpacks clock and small brush then proceeds to take flowers one by one, smooth them out, clean any dust off them and then pins them to the end of the table cloth.

This process continues for a couple of hours.

This performance was very much a beginning. My aims were unclear - I simply wanted to do something in public - to test myself. The Kitchen table framed the performance. This was before Emma and I had started collaborating, but already I was interested in conversation. I wanted to have two women sitting at a kitchen table - talking. At is was, we did not talk much at all, we simply worked.

The second Slowness performance occurred on the front steps of the State Library in Melbourne about two months after the first performance. I worked alone for four hours each day for four days folding serviettes and pinning them to the table cloth. I did not have a table this time, but spread the cloth on the ground. This created a very different dynamic to the performance in Canberra. Many more people approached me and asked me what I was doing - I think this was because I was alone and sitting on the ground - a very unthreatening position.

This direct dialogue with the audience was extremely valuable and stimulating. Some people thought I must be protesting about something, others thought it was some sort of
religious activity. Some people instantly related to what I was doing, talked to me about domestic activities and art. The whiteness of everything I was using stood out against the grey of the surroundings creating a visual interruption. The people who stopped and spoke to me all told me stories about themselves. I was initially surprised at how my performance became an opportunity for strangers to approach me and tell me about themselves, one man told me about his fascination with architecture, others told me about housework or doing repetitive jobs. It made me think about the potential for collecting other people's stories and using them somehow.

In doing this performance I was carrying out a methodical, repetitive action. I was interested in the concept of bodily memory, of repetition and re-presentation, of the role of memory in the inhabiting process. These interests were not successfully explored until the later performance Lightwork. The slowness performances were really an experiment, a way of starting to work with performance in public space, of beginning to negotiate and respond to those contexts. They generated ideas which I followed up in Lightwork and the Dining performance.
Chapter 4

Lightwork

Lightwork was an installation/performance carried out over three weeks in March 1999.

This work was the result of the opportunity to use Strathnairn, a space that is both a gallery and a former house. I planned to inhabit a room in the space and to work in there for the duration of the exhibition. In that time I produced an ephemeral piece that continued to change over the installation period.

I began with a table, chair, kitchen knife and approximately a thousand bars of sunlight soap. I sat at the table and sliced the soap into thin tiles which began to form into piles around my feet. As the piles grew I then glued the tiles directly to the walls. It was a domestic activity gone wrong. Rather than using this substance to clean the surface I was using it to cover, engaging in a labour intensive repetitive and absurd process, working the space from floor to ceiling, claiming the space, the tiles a visual record of my journey across the walls, touching every inch.

This was when I really began tossing around the idea that working can be a process of constructing and owning a space, making it a place and maintaining a particular kind of temporality, that to inhabit is actually a constructive process. This work was produced after the first performance - Construction/renovation Project - with Emma and prior to Withdrawingroom. That first collaborative performance and the conversations we were having had triggered some of these thought processes around constructing and inhabiting. With Lightwork I had the luxury of spending three weeks in the space to work and to think about my process of inhabiting by constructing.

I was working with a familiar substance, soap, but working that substance in an unfamiliar way and in an inappropriate part of the house, a living space rather than a kitchen or laundry. I was interested in upsetting the domestic order, in shifting into focus through an act of unbalancing, the constant work that goes into maintaining that illusion of stability. Rather than using the soap to clean the surface I was using it to cover, engaging in a labour intensive repetitive and absurd process, working the space from floor to ceiling, claiming the space, the tiles a visual record of my journey across the walls, touching every inch. One visitor said Lightwork reminded them of a Grace Cossington-Smith painting. The pieces of soap became marks, of form of expression. The production of the work was arduous, painful yet enjoyable. Cutting the soap made my back and arms ache, the caustic smell of the soap drove me to wear a respirator and then have a shower as soon as I arrived home each day to remove the lingering smell.
Lightwork
The production of the object, the transformation of the space was immensely satisfying, probably more so because it involved a huge physical effort.

Anne Hamilton’s work was of interest to me at this time. There is no one piece in particular, but rather the sensibility overall that interests me. There are certain images of her work permanently lodged in my mind, thousands of blue work shirts, piles of pennies covering a floor, canaries in the rafters and melting wax heads. There is one image I remember seeing when flicking through a magazine. I can’t remember the publication or the title of the work, but the image was of clean white walls, gallery walls, sweating. A minimal yet sensual, embodied work.

I was also reading Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. It is the story of a household out of control, the protagonist, a young girl tells the story of her aunt who comes to look after her sister and herself after they have been orphaned. The aunt lacks the skills to inhabit in the ordinary way. She has lived out of doors as a drifter for years and continues inhabiting her accustomed way. She forgets to cook and clean, fills the house up with old newspapers and the boundaries between inside and outside loose their definitions until eventually the house is abandoned. In this book the construction of the physical space is literally contingent to the inhabiting process of the characters.

In working the room at Strathnairn I claimed it and transformed it. The labour, the intensity, was exhausting, the smell overwhelming. The performance of working the space produced an object, all my objects seem to come out of performance, whether the performances are made public or not. In the past I have performed the production and transformation of objects in private and then abandoned these objects to the public realm. As I have continued to engage with objects and substances the performance of producing has forced itself into public. There would be no good reason to sit there for three weeks hand cutting soap if no one got to know that this was how the tiles were produced. The end result is an object that exists only temporarily and only in the context of its production.

This work was never finished, I had a time limit of three weeks and managed in that time to get most of the room covered, but not quite all. Finishing came second to doing, while the space was open to the public I remained in there working, my presence in the space was important, I did not want this to be seen as a finished, static object. For the duration of the installation the work was always in process always moving. At the end of the time I removed all traces of the soap and repainted the space, *renovated* it leaving behind only a memory of what had occurred.
The soap, of course still exists, awaiting its next transformation. The images still exist and become documents, evidence, memories, a material in their own right. The other material this performance produced was a series of textual documents. As I was sitting cutting and gluing soap visitors to the installation told me stories they talked about the smell and the colour, about how it reminded them of childhood events or how it overwhelmed them. I was fascinated by these responses and the fact that these people approached me and wanted to tell me these detailed stories. As a result I asked a number of visitors to the space to write down their responses to the work. I specifically asked people to describe the space and how it made them feel, leaving the brief fairly open.

I received five texts which engaged with a range of aspects of the work. My mother Elizabeth Murphy responded enthusiastically. When she visited the exhibition she started to talk about childhood experiences, the colour and smell triggered strong visual images of her mother in the laundry:

Mum at the sink - “tub” in a floral apron, hair in bobby pins, and scarf and flatties. So much activity. Copper boiling, ringer grinding, washboard with clips tilted at the perfect angle to scrub a stained collar and cuff.\(^\text{13}\)

I was initially surprised by this response, this urge to tell me these stories that the visitors to the exhibition seemed to have. The smell of the soap in particular had a strong impact, it was so concentrated in the space it could actually be tasted. Several visitors mentioned this and the experience of having their mouths washed out with soap for using ‘foul language’ as children.

THAT TASTE IN YOUR MOUTH
SOAP BUBBLES THROUGH THE NOSE
DID YOU EVER GET YOUR MOUTH WASHED OUT WITH SOAP AND WATER?
A LOT OF WORK\(^\text{14}\)

Emma Jean produced a list responding to the physical and psychological sensations that were triggered by being in the space. Anne Brennan made mention of the way light operated in the space.

The smell greeted me before I entered the room, and persisted while I took in the other things: the yellow light for example. It was hard to ascertain where the light came from, but I was aware that it was reflected light, not simply yellow paint.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Elizabeth Murphy - For full account by Elizabeth and the other contributors see Appendix 1
\(^{14}\) Emma Jean - For full account see Appendix 1
\(^{15}\) Anne Brennan - For full account see Appendix 1
The light was another important element of the work, it lent the space an other-worldly feel and made it feel very warm. I have worked with Strathnairn before and addressed the light in the space by covering the windows with stretched shower curtains. This drew attention to the windows as light sources. In the case of *Lightwork* I covered the one window in the space with soap affecting the colour of the light entering. Windows are an interesting feature to play with, they frame a view to outside, they let light in. In this case I was turning the gaze of the viewer inwards by covering the window.

I was fascinated by these responses. I had asked the writers to describe the space and tell me what it made them think about. They each wrote a highly personal response, a response that told me as much about them as it did about the work I had produced. I had hoped that the soap would generate associations for the audience, I expected the connection to mouthwashing and memories of laundries, but I was surprised by the detail the writers went into they really thought about what they were writing.

The following quote from Georges Teyssot about inhabiting and modernity stuck in my mind when I read it a couple of months after producing *Lightwork*:

> There is an etymological connection between habit and *habitation*. Habitations are actually places for long habits, places where habits may be inscribed in a space that awaits them. But as soon as the condition arises in which everything must be continuously neurotically renewed, one needs to shorten one’s habits.

Teyssot refers to Benjamin’s allusion to the “neurotic, or compulsive, renewal of things within the household. Things must always be new and are continuously renewed according to fashion.” I disagree with Georges Teyssot’s point above that a space awaits the inscription of habits. I prefer to think of spaces being built as a result of a habitual process. Yet I find his idea that *habitations are places for long habits* fascinating. In the case of *Housekeeping* to which I referred earlier, the character of aunt can be seen as fundamentally changing her habitation by her habits. The physical environment was contingent on her own inhabiting process. Teyssot describes artists such Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, David Ireland and Gordon Matta Clark as engaging in a process of suppression or disruption of the habitual. They work with *domestic* environments and deconstruct them to reveal systems and processes which ordinarily remain hidden or unnoticed.

I see my project *Lightwork* as an extension of the habitual. I have taken a process and let it go out of control, yet paradoxically, maintained my own kind of obsessive control, extending a habitual process until it becomes disruptive.

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17 Teyssot, G, *Ibid* p53
Chapter 5

Rest

A rest, in a musical score, is a notation indicating a space for silence. It does not necessarily indicate total silence - in the case of an ensemble or orchestra it is often used to draw attention to particular sounds - the silence of certain instruments throwing other sounds into relief affecting the overall atmosphere of the piece. Silences and absences enable us to focus on what is here and visible or audible, just as that which is present always alludes to that which is absent.

arrest - stopping - being held up - interruption

One day I was walking down the street when I passed a skip full of rubbish. I live in a suburb full of old houses, many are being torn down in favour of modern dual occupancies, and many others are being extended and renovated. This particular skip contained a large amount of fabric from curtains, enough for four or five floor to ceiling windows. The colour was a mustardy yellow. I decided there had to be some use for this stuff so I took it to the studio and left it there piled up next to mountains of tontene - synthetic pillow stuffing - also rubbish I had collected as it was being thrown out.

Seeing these materials sitting next to each other sparked the idea of constructing a mattress. I had for some time wanted to construct something that had its origins in furniture, yet taking a different approach to the earlier wooden frameworks. I wanted to see something that, while it had connections to a domestic sensibility had grown out of control, exceeded its boundaries, become somehow independent. I had in my minds eye, the strange paintings by some of the female surrealists, particularly Eine Kleine Nachtmusik by Dorothea Tanning. This painting of a hallway is inhabited by two dreamy girls with long hair and a huge mangled sunflower which looks as if it has just been dragged up the stairs. The sunflower has been placed to emphasise a sense of strangeness. When I have talked about my work to people in the last couple of years the words displacement and misplacement are often used. I feel somewhat reluctant to use these terms myself because while my works and actions often appear ‘out of place’ they are placed very consciously by me.

Rest is a combination of the original object, the mattress, and a series of images of myself with the object in different settings. I see this object as an inhabiting device, a strange thing that I drag around as if it were a security blanket, yet is simultaneously an impediment, large and unwieldy. It enables me to claim space, to create a break - arrest - in the composition. It either highlights the absence of the human body or dwarfs it.
It is also incredibly fragile. The underside is made of the material which originally lined the curtains. It tears easily and a number of people have put their hands through it. As damage occurs I obsessively repair the object, stitching and over stitching. This fragility - vulnerability - lends the object and anthropomorphic quality. The soft underside like the weak soft spot of some creature, its weakness makes it somehow tragic and pathetically humorous at the same time.

I originally planned to make a video of my process of travelling with the object through a series of spaces. As I have been learning to shoot and edit video, however I have also become more interested in working with still images. These is something mysterious and ambiguous about an image of this object on the roof of a multi-story carpark or a sports playing field, that would operate differently if you could see exactly how it got there and what happened next. The still images suggest possibilities, they depict man made environments, as digital prints from photographs they are constructed worlds.

*Rest* is an ongoing project I am not finished with this object yet, and am interested in exploring further the possibilities of working with combinations of objects and images.
Conclusion

My studio practice and theory components have developed in a mutually co-dependant manner over the course of my research. Occasionally one or the other has gone off on a tangent, but the two projects have generally informed each other throughout. The main link between the projects comes from my interest in the processes of inhabiting. The studio work has explored various instances of the physical and social inhabiting processes, starting from a domestic point of departure. The theory component focused on the act of telling stories arguing that constructing narratives is also an important part of the dwelling process and thus the construction of space. Both projects address the inherent tenuousness of these activities.

My initial interest in Heidegger’s construction of space was sparked by an article written by Sue Best on the work of Joan Brassil which I have quoted in the sub-thesis. I was reading up on Joan’s work last year while assisting her with an installation in one of the telescope domes at Mount Stromlo Observatory. This notion of space as contingent on dwelling articulated a process I had been engaging with, but until this point, had been unable to put clearly into words.

The research I have carried out for the MA has provided a solid basis for the development of future work. My ongoing collaboration with Emma Jean continues as we are currently planning to tackle the sticky subject of romance by writing a romance novel. In my individual practice I am becoming more confident in exploring the possibilities of performance, installation and the production of objects - physical and conceptual - in pushing my own practice and in researching the relationship of performance and spatial politics. I have recently been reading about the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko and am interested in exploring the implications of the following questions he asks:

How close are we all to the ground? How much contact do we have with the social terrain when pacing or enjoying that creative freedom? To what degree is our creative life machine under the control of our ethical consciousness? And to what degree is this machine simply a component of a much larger apparatus, whether centrally controlled in authoritarian ways, operated at arm’s length by a liberal system, or run by the law of capitalisme sauvage?18

18 Wodiczko, K, Critical Vehicles: writings, projects, interviews, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1999
Appendix

Responses to Lightwork

Elizabeth Murphy

The room was calm, soft, symmetrical. The soap tiles looked innocent enough, yet the strong smell of sunlight soap evoked such memories of childhood in the laundry at Abbotsford Road, Homebush in Sydney, many years ago.

Mum at the sink - “tub” in a floral apron, hair in bobby pins, and scarf and flatties. So much activity. Copper boiling, ringer grinding, washboard with clips tilted at the perfect angle to scrub a stained collar and cuff.

The ringer was an amazing piece of equipment, it could turn almost anything into a flat board. The flat boards were then lowered into the other tub of blue bag and wriggled free, into socks, hankies and petticoats. Only to be wrung flat again and tossed into the wicker basket with the dog chewed sides that were once handles.

The red concrete painted floor where Mum stood, was laden with piles of clothes. “Always separate the whites from the colours dear, and remember, when you hang the clothes on the line, put the heavy objects on the back and the light ones on the front, and do try and hide the undies from view at all times.” This I still do.

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Emma Jean

THAT TASTE IN YOUR MOUTH
SOAP BUBBLES THROUGH THE NOSE
DID YOU EVER GET YOUR MOUTH WASHED OUT WITH SOAP AND WATER?

A LOT OF WORK

TILLING
SLABS
CUTS
saving the last slither
BETTER SAVE THAT, IT MIGHT COME IN HANDY
WALL SKINS
WALLPAPER
TOOCLEAN
SO CLEAN IT’S UNHEALTHY
OBSESSION
EYE-STINGINGLY-YELLOW
MUCUS MEMBRANES OBJECTING
CONTAGIOUS
TARTAR ON TEETH
EXTREME & ORDINARY (SOAP IS NOT AN OBJECT, IT’S NOT IMPORTANT ENOUGH, THOUGH IT CAN BE A MATERIAL)
HOUSEHOLD PALAEONTOGRAPHY OR DOMESTIC PALAEOGRAPHY?
PLAGUE
A BENIGN HARASSMENT BY SOAP

EVIDENCE
SMALL DETAILS
SHINY STRETCH MARK IMPRINTS SHOW WHERE THE SOAP BLOCKS WERE CUT
GOSSAMER STRANDS
Anne Brennan

The first thing I noticed was the smell: it was overpowering. A sweetish smell I associate with clean laundry: not the faint scent which clings to newly washed towels, but the same smell amplified: shouted persistently and unceasingly as long as I was in the room. The smell greeted me before I entered the room, and persisted while I took in the other things: the yellow light for example. It was hard to ascertain where the light came from, but I was aware that it was reflected light, not simply yellow paint. Then I saw that the room was tiled with thousands of rectangular yellow tiles. They were applied to the wall systematically in a grid, but the grid was not regular - the tiles themselves were slightly irregular, and the tiler had applied them using the judgement of her eye alone. The tiles spread most of the way up the walls, suggesting an as yet unfinished job. They did not cover the other architectural details in the room: the fireplace and bookshelves, for example.

In the middle of the room, a young woman sat at a small table. Before her she had a chopping board, a sharp knife and a cake of sunlight soap. She was methodically slicing the soap like a piece of cheese, widthways from top to bottom. At her feet was a growing pile of slices, which I realised were in fact the tiles which she was using to tile the walls. When she ran out of soap she would get another cake from the stockpile on the shelves in one corner of the room. I realised that at some point the walls must have been bare and the shelves jammed with cakes of soap. Now there was a small stack left on the shelf, and the walls were nearly covered.

The realisation that the tiles were in fact soap induced a strange sensation: a squirmy sort of feeling that had to do with the thought of the slightly waxen surfaces of the tiles and the way in which they might lather up given the slightest contact with moisture - a sweaty hand, or a leak in the roof, for example. It was a feeling closely associated with contamination a strange inversion of our usual association with soap as a cleansing agent. Perhaps this feeling was induced by the excessiveness of the room: the overpowering smell and the huge quantity of soap; the obsessive, meaningless ritual of slicing the soap over and over again, which made me feel claustrophobic - as though the conventional ordering of the domestic environment had taken on a mad life of its own and spun out of control. For the rest of the afternoon my sense of smell was completely overpowered by the smell of the soap, and even now, a month or so later, when I think about it, I feel slightly nauseous at the olfactory recollection.

David Nugent

Errh, it stinks!
It’s makin’ me nose funny!
Fucken’ell, it’s yellow bloody soap...
On the walls!
Yeah... Fuck man.

What’s she doin’?

Jees, she’s cutten’ up blocks of soap.
She’s just chukin’ the bits on the floor.
There’s a stack of em but.
(long pause)

What’s she doin’ it for anyway?
I mean like why wouldja wanna stick bits of soap to the walls for?
I thought this was sposter be nart gallery.
If this is sposter be art, then I reckon she’s a bit loopy in the head if yoos ask me.

It woulda taken er ages.

She probly bought all the soap too.
Nar, someone musta givnit toowa.
Tricia Hanson  
The smell, it is evident 6 or 7 metres or more away from the gallery as I approach. It gets stronger as I get closer to the door. I see the tiles glued to the window, hovering on the glass, they could be floating in space. The smell is very strong now. It reminds me of laundries, scrubbing, cleaning, old houses, boarding school, large laundries, my mother, grandmother, other grandmothers, dishes, scrubbing boards, the old one my Nana had on the farm, the butter churn and other bits of rusted machinery, scummy little bits of soap, brittle bits, pocked bits, the Sanders family and the kids having to wash their socks after school every day; being glad my mother didn’t make me do that. How frustrating it was waiting for them to finish so we could go and play. More recently dishes, environmental concerns regarding dish washing detergent; Penny and her politics.

Entering the space now, I’m delighted by the colour, lush yellow, if it wasn’t for the smell I could be in Venice, the rows and rows of hanging laundry, like carnival flags, my fondest memory of that time, an animated conversation about clothes lines and aesthetics with a woman who spoke no English, and me no Italian. I’m amazed at the presence of the soap, mosaic like in regular patterns around the walls. Almost golden. The wooden beams in the walls stand out in deep contrast, white and blocky, like the grouting gaps left between the tiles. The glue hangs spidery, like lots of silver webs, it could be fairy webs, a magic space. The yellow brick road. The light reflects off the yellow soap, beautifully, so yellow, it really is quite a beautiful space, but the smell is really strong, it gets up my nostrils, invasive, I head for the safety of the view from beyond the curtain. The smell is not so strong now and I can just keep looking. Kate sits and keeps on slicing little tiles, like cheddar cheese they peel away with the knife and drop onto the chopping board. I want to keep looking, the visual effect is wonderful, but the smell is overwhelming and I can’t stay in the space. Very evocative, the rural homestead environment is a nostalgic one for such work. It sits comfortably with my rural past.
Demountable Drawing - Bedroom 
constructed from Ash and dowel, 
dimensions variable

Demountable Drawing - Kitchen Floor 
Masonite, vinyl, glue

Demountable Drawing - Cupboard 
Masonite, pine, woodgrain finish 
contact

Construction/renovation project 
performed by Emma Jean and Kate Murphy 

Images 8, 9, 10, & 15 photographed by 
Kate Murphy 
Images 4, 5, 6, 7 & 9 photographed by 
Marcia Lochhead

Withdrawingroom 
Performed by Emma Jean 
and Kate Murphy 
Canberra School of Art Foyer Gallery April 1999 
Photographs Tricia Hanson and Wendy Teakel
Waste - performed by Kate Murphy and Emma Jean
November 1999

The Dining Performance part of ACME group performance "A Quiet Drink With Friends" at All Bar Nun in June 1999
Photographed by Marcia Locchead

Slowness - Canberra performed by Kate Murphy, Deborah Garden and Tina Waring.
Photographed by Marcia Locchead

Slowness - Melbourne Performed by Kate Murphy.
Photographed by David Nugent

Lightwork Installation/performance March 1999
Photographs 31 & 34 taken by Tricia Hanson
Photographs 32, 33, 35, 36 taken by Kate Murphy

Rest 1999/2000
Photograph 37 taken by Kate Murphy
Photograph 38 taken by David Nugent
Endnotes

2. Heidegger, M, Ibid p323
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Elizabeth Murphy - For full account by Elizabeth and the other contributors see Appendix 1
11. Emma Jean - For full account see Appendix 1
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Initial Work Plan

What is the work about?
A central preoccupation in my studio work is the question of how humans as physical beings relate to the architecture they inhabit. I am interested in how we orient ourselves within certain architectural spaces, and in how these spaces inform the construction of our self/body images.

The thematic focus for the body of work I will produce is centred specifically around the construction of domestic architecture.

There are a number of issues that I will be addressing/exploring...

- Physical engagement with certain spaces - How do people move in particular spaces such as bedrooms and bathrooms? Does the physical structure of the space encourage a certain kind of movement?

- What informs the construction of the domestic environment? Our western houses are more than simple shelters, their construction is affected by developments in science, technology, social structure, politics and psychology etc. The physical environment that we live in thus informs the construction of our own self images/identities. This is of course a two way thing, we construct the environments we live in and they confirm/inform our sense of identity.

- Can a space/place can bear witness to its own history? What do the surfaces, spaces and objects contained within communicate about the history of that place? Can the object become a locus for memory? Does its presence evoke a past?

- The construction of many western houses is informed by major developments in modernist and post modernist design. The ideals and interests of these movements are also expressed through such productions of knowledge as art, philosophy and literature. What are the ideas that modern domestic architecture represents? What do such structures say about the society in which they are produced?

Over the course of this century western house design has been streamlined. Function has been important in dictating the form of our domestic environments. Scientific theories such as germ theory have had a physical impact on our domestic spaces. Both aesthetically and theoretically the construction of domestic architecture has parallels with the development of western artistic practices such as abstract expressionism and minimalism. Yet these practices distance themselves from our daily lives, sometimes making claims to total abstraction and transcendence over the world of ‘ordinary things’. I am interested in playing with this idea and with notions of representation and abstraction. My aim with the objects I intend to produce is to work in between the conventions of abstraction and representation producing works that are evocative of specific objects and spaces.

What methods of approach do I intend?
I intend to begin by responding to the questions I have asked about how we engage physically with our domestic environments. At this point I am doing some general background research and reading. The material I am reading ranges from theoretical texts on architecture to ‘Home Beautiful’ type magazines which communicate a range of popular ideas about houses and housing.

I am photographically documenting my own and other peoples houses as a way of familiarising myself with a variety of conventions of decoration and physical proportions of ‘average’ houses.
As a starting point I propose to build a series of maquettes/small pieces exploring a variety of materials and construction methods.

As previously mentioned in my MA application I will also embark on a series of larger objects informed by the construction of domestic furniture, these would be built to exist in groups thus evoking or delineating a specific space or environment. In order to engage with these objects the potential audience would need to move around and between them. The idea of the viewer travelling around the surface of the object with their body as well as their eyes seems particularly important at the moment.

The objects may be partly or wholly made up from used or recycled building materials. These objects will retain traces or memories of their former identities as domestic furnishings yet will have been recontextualised as art objects.

My initial means of construction will be producing wooden frameworks which may be clad in a number of ways. The surface treatment may include tiling, use of wood veneers, plastering and upholstering.

**What work by other artists is relevant?**

**Whose work am I referring to?**

A diverse range of artists and works are relevant. Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt, Fred Sandback, Hilarie Mais, Jackie Windsor are all artists who work in different ways, yet work with geometric forms and address formal issues of space abstraction and the physical relationship of the work to the viewer.

With regard to my interest in houses I must mention Rachel Whiteread and Michelle Beevors as two artists who deal specifically with houses and memory as subject matter for their work. I am currently carrying out research to find other artists who also deal with this subject matter.

Over the course of the first semester I have become familiar with a range of artists who seem relevant in some way, either through their use of material, space or construction methods or through their conceptual and theoretical approach. The following artists are currently of interest to me ... Jan Vercruysse, Geoff Kleem, Richard Artschwager, Dan Graham, Inge Mahn and Mikala Dwyer

**What is the context of my study?**

I situate my work in reference to developments in sculptural practices over the course of this century. Currently I am particularly interested in Minimalism of the 1960’s and since, and contemporary sculptural installation art practices.

I am also referencing information gained from the reading of historical and ethnographic research and criticism and writings about architecture. As these areas of research inform the eventual production of my work I see them also as the context or framework within which I operate.

**How does the proposed work sit in relation to the traditions which are relevant?**

I intend to begin working with fairly simple geometrical forms that will reference the forms that make up furniture and domestic architecture.

By working in this way my work is likely to evoke certain aspects of minimalist art. I will research this area by investigating the works of a range of minimalist artists and familiarising myself with their theoretical/conceptual concerns. I do not know yet exactly how my own work sits in relation to this tradition, (however I am fascinated by the articles in home and garden type magazines on the ‘minimalist’ look/trend and a potential dialogue that could exist between this ‘minimalism’ and the ‘minimalism’ of 1960’s abstraction), thus I need to carry out this research in order to fully understand the frame of reference and traditions from which I am working and to clarify my own ideas and position.
I intend to use this research as an opportunity to explore differing notions of representation in the light of artistic traditions such as minimalism and historical/anthropoligical traditions such as ethnographic writing.

**Workplan Update - New thoughts and notes, March 1999**

In my first work plan I raised a series of issues that I have been interested in exploring. These issues have circulated around themes of Construction of domestic architecture and how we interact with it - and a preoccupation with history, looking at houses as historical objects. Over the course so far I have focused on three key words which form the basis of my exploration.

Time - all of my investigations circulate around issues of duration, history, memory. Because I have focused more and more on installation and performance based work, time and duration have become increasingly important. Over the last year I have become increasingly interested in working with performance and installation. These media seem to be the most appropriate as temporality and ephemerality have become concerns in the work. When and where do the works begin and end, do they begin or end?

Work - this follows on from time. By work I mean movement and process, in particular the work we do to inhabit spaces and the ways in which we work spaces.

Context - what is the context for inhabiting? I began by thinking about domestic spaces as a point of departure, but I am also interested in the process of inhabiting generally.

Ultimately all of the works deal with placement: of the body in space, of things in wrong/uncomfortable places and production and consumption.

**Questions I am asking at this point:**

All of the work in some way addresses notions of comfort and discomfort or in Freudian terms the *unheimlich* in the context of domestic production.

Something that has been coming up in my thoughts lately is the notion of the temporality of domestic spaces. Is there a ‘domestic temporality,’ how can it be described? This question came from a conversation about the collaborative work I did with Emma Jean at the end of 1998. The project was called Construction/Renovation Project. We built a cardboard interior space over the course of a day. The activity inside the space was intense and constant as furniture was constructed and immediately made over into something else.

Not a ‘stable’ environment you normally expect inside a ‘real’ house. I began to think about the amount of work, continuous production that goes into maintaining a seemingly stable environment where things don’t change.

Maybe it is that change occurs so constantly that we don’t see it - a forest and trees thing.

The current work also involves and arduous labour intensive process. The tiling of the walls in soap is a process that occurs over a period of time - it has been an isolated, obsessive and ridiculous activity. It does has a cyclical structure as it began with the idea of starting and ending with a clean room.

This all ties in with the preoccupation with Renovation - again a potentially futile and never ending activity. The interest in renovation came from reading home magazines and thinking about the way they dealt with that subject. Advocating renovating as an activity whereby house owners could express their own identities through the construction of their environments and at the same time dishing out Style and Design advice.

It is the do-it-yourself side of renovating that intrigues me, not the architect designed approach.
This ties in with and crosses over the preoccupations in the theory component, the preoccupation with historical construction. I have been thinking of the construction of histories as a form of renovating where it is always possible to add to and ‘improve’ on what has previously been constructed.

duration

layering

So what about the audience - where do they come in to it? I am placing myself in a space and experiencing the work I am making - what is the role of the audience? I like to be working in a space with the audience present because I can interact directly with them and can observe their responses immediately. I aim to produce work that presents a range of ways that an audience can engage with me and the work.

The process is evolving to focus on the moments of production and consumption.
Curriculum Vitae

Kate Murphy

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Education
2000  Candidate for MA (Visual Art) by research
1992-95  Bachelor of Arts (Visual) Hons, Canberra School of Art, Institute of the Arts, ANU
1994  Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, exchange student May - October
1991  Completed year 12, Narrabundah College, Canberra

Solo Exhibitions
1999  • Light Work - Installation/performance, Strathnairn Gallery, Canberra
1997  • Aprons - Working Drawings, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Manuka

Group exhibitions
1999  • Glue - Gallerie Constantinople, Queanbeyan
1998  • Point of Departure - Installation/performance, Next Wave Festival, Melbourne and Canberra National Sculpture Forum
1997  • AAAR - Australian artists against racism collaborative exhibition, Canberra School of Art Gallery
1996  • Spirit House - Site specific installations, Gorman House Festival of Contemporary Art, Canberra
1995  • Finnish - Graduating student exhibition, Institute of the Arts Gallery, Canberra
1994  • PhrickArt - Chiang Inn Plaza Chiang Mai, Thailand

Group Performances
1999  • ACME presents A Quiet Drink With Friends - All Bar Nun, Canberra
1998  • Construction/Renovation Project - in Collaboration with Emma Jean, Canberra School of Art Foyer Gallery
1998  • ACME addresses the Object - Canberra National Sculpture Forum, National Gallery of Australia
1997  • ACME presents A Night at the Flicks - August, Electric Shadows Cinema Canberra
1996  • ACME meets Splinters in Faust-The Heat of Knowledge - University House, Australian National University, Canberra.
1996  • ACME presents D Block - October, Festival of Contemporary Arts Gorman House Arts Centre, Canberra.
1996  • ACME presents D Block - July, Performance Space Sydney
1996  • ACME presents Back Yard Performances - O'Connor Canberra.
Residencies
1996 • Graduate in residence in the Sculpture Workshop, August and September whilst working on Floriade Sculpture Project
• Graduate in residence April - July, Studio One, Canberra. (EASS Award)

Grants/Awards/Commissions
1998 • Canberra School of Art, Postgraduate Student Materials Grant
• Arts ACT grant to Point of Departure to assist with producing works as a fringe event to the Canberra National Sculpture Forum and as invited artists in the Next Wave Festival in Melbourne
• Arts ACT grant to ACME inc to produce two public performances in 1998
• Arts ACT grant to the Community Education Initiative assist with mounting a public art project to be exhibited as part of the Canberra National Sculpture Forum
1997 • Pat Corrigan Artist Grant to assist in covering the costs of mounting the exhibition “Room” with Tina Waring
• Commissioned work for the Australian Science Archives Project, “Cabinet of Curiosities” made in collaboration with David Nugent
1996 • ACT Cultural Council grant awarded to Group Eleven to assist in the production of installation works for “Spirit House” exhibition, Gorman House, Canberra, 1996
• ACT Cultural Council Grant awarded to Group Eleven for collaborative sculpture work exhibited in Floriade, 1996
• Healthpact - Canberra School of Art Student Sculpture exhibition, materials grant for artwork exhibited in Floriade, 1996
1995 • Interiors Australia acquisitive prize (Emerging Artists Support Scheme Award) awarded December 1995
• Studio One inc Residency award (Emerging Artists support Scheme Award) awarded December 1995

Reviews/Articles
1998 • Muse, Canberra’s Art Monthly, April, Interact With Sculpture, article by Priscilla Henderson
• Canberra Times, 14 April, Signs of the Times, article by Cassie Proudfoot
• Canberra Times, 7 April, A Fleeting Glimpse of Inner City Living, review by Myra McIntyre
1997 • Muse, Canberra’s Art Monthly, September - ACME inc. performance “A Night at the Flicks” reviewed by Sarah Roberts.
• State of the Arts April - July. The RTZ - CRA Cabinet of Curiosities, a collaborative project between eight artists (including myself) and the Australian Science Archives Project appears in the article New Images by David Malin
1996 • The Canberra Times, Friday October 3 - ACME inc. performance “D - Block” reviewed in Sending up the World of Work by Allana Maclean

Reviews/Articles published
1999 • Muse - April, article about Metis - Festival of Science and Art, and profile on participating artist Joan Brassil
• Muse - March article Faces of a Nation, and review of Suddenly the Lake, CMAG
1998 • Muse - October review of Applied Relativity installation, CCAS
• Muse - September review of Restorative Digestion Desired performance, Juniperberry Restaurant
• Muse - May 1998 review of Haake Herrman Was WA Wa performance at CCAS

Relevant Employment History
1999 Project Manager for installation of Gondwana and the Cosmos - Listening to the Dead Stars Singing. Installation by Joan Brassil as part of Metis - Festival of science and art
1999 Gallery Assistant, Canberra School of Art Gallery
1997 - 99 Technical Officer, Canberra School of Art, Art Theory Workshop. Coordinator of Artforum public lecture series
1997 - 99 Business Manager, Art Association of Australia
1996 - 98 Administrative Secretary, Institute of the Arts Student Association

Other Professional Activities
1998 - 1999 Student Representative, Canberra School of Art Gallery Advisory Committee
1997 - 1999 Public Officer for ACME Inc