

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
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This Art Life:

A study of six contemporary Australian artists

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Submitted for the degree of Doctorate of Creative Arts

2019

Supervisor: Associate Professor Robyn Ferrell

Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Katharine Sands, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctorate of Creative Arts in the School of Communications, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signature:

Date: 22/02/2019

Acknowledgements

My profound thanks go to my supervisor, Associate Professor Robyn Ferrell, firstly, for taking on my supervision at such a late stage and, secondly, for her intellectual guidance, her unfailing enthusiasm and her generosity of spirit. I would also like to thank Associate Professor Elaine Lally, my principal supervisor from 2013 to 2017. Her academic guidance and enthusiasm helped me to lay down the foundations of the project and her guidance in framing the work of artists was invaluable.

Thanks are due to my editor, Emma Wise, for making the manuscript far more readable. I would also like to thank Professor Roger Benjamin and Professor Mary Roberts, both from the University of Sydney, for their warm encouragement and assistance.

Thanks go to my friends and colleagues at the University of Technology Sydney, Dr Chrisanthi Giotis, Dr Burcu Cevik, Dr Tara McClennan, Dr Helary (Boi Huyen) and Dr Judy Betts for their friendship, support and encouragement. Judy Betts and Steve Curran provided accommodation on several occasions and their hospitality and friendship are greatly appreciated. Thanks go to Dr Chrisanthi Giotis for her generous assistance with replanning the exegesis and for reading a draft of the book.

My sincere thanks go to the artists who rendered this project possible and who gave generously of their time and energy in interviews and in the reading of drafts: the late Polixeni Papapetrou, Elizabeth Gower, Karla Dickens, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, and Hossein Valamanesh. I am very grateful for their collaboration and am honoured to present their stories.

Thanks go to Professor Rick Iedema for his support in the early stages of the project and for encouraging me to bring it into the academic context of UTS.

Thanks to my children Sophia and Stuart Benjamin for their unfailing belief in me and for their love and support. I dedicate this project to you.

Ethics approval for the interviews conducted with the artists was granted by UTS in 2013. The HREC number is 2013000096.

The format of this thesis

This thesis comprises two sections. The first, entitled ‘This Art Life: A Study of Six Contemporary Visual Artists’, constitutes the creative component of this Doctorate of Creative Arts, and the second, entitled Dispersed Agency: Creative Practice in ‘This Art Life’, comprises the exegesis. The former is a series of essays written in a non-academic voice, whereas the latter is a piece of research abiding by academic conventions.

Abstract

Contemporary visual art is a field distinguished by the rolling evolution of forms and practices that are indicative of the time and place from which they derive. The study of the artistic practice of individual artists working in the field of contemporary visual art reveals that their art emerges at the interface between practice and life. Informing artworks is a multiplicity of factors across the social and material environment of the artist's world. Writing about this exchange in an accessible manner generates an appreciation of contemporary visual art and the textured landscape from which it emerges. The adoption of a conceptual framework from a work of literary criticism serves to illuminate particular qualities of both art and artist.

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This Art Life: A Study of Six Contemporary Visual Artists

Creative Component

Introduction

When my son was three I used to read to him books by the American author Richard Scarry. With titles like *Busytown* and *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go*, Scarry's illustrated books are peopled with comical animal characters going about their daily lives. A favourite was *What Do People Do All Day?* *This Art Life* is a book about what people do all day, about contemporary art and the artists who make it. It is about the texture of art making and the everyday rhythms that govern it. It is about what contemporary artists do.

Contemporary visual art has burst the bounds of the museum and can now be found almost anywhere – in the street, in parks and gardens, in the foyers of city buildings. Behind the scenes in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is a sign that states: "Yield to art in transit." The Met's injunction might serve as a reminder for us to pause and take a look, to expose ourselves to art, as the saying goes.

But contemporary visual art is challenging. It is radically diverse, frequently changes shape, and pushes at the boundaries between art and life. It is often obtuse, sometimes breathtaking and almost always in need of some sort of explanation. Responses to traditional art used to go along fairly predictable paths. Art was admired for its beauty, or because it depicted something, or because it was well executed. But what do you do with an art that is not necessarily interested in these things, not concerned with aesthetics, representation, or genius of execution? It often helps to have some information. This may come in the form of facts or a narrative, a story that underlies the art or relates to the artist's materials and technique or the influences and ideas that have inspired the work in the first place. Part of that narrative may concern the movement or context within which a work of art sits.

This book is designed to shed light on how contemporary art is made and why it matters. Such art is, by definition, of its time. It is engaged with the contemporary, exploring either what it is to be alive in the moment, or what art can be in the moment, or both. It may be in dialogue with art of the past, including twentieth-century Modernism, it may be local or international in reach, and it may engage with politics, questions of identity or the environment. It can take the form of the post-contemporary, in which art form or style is no longer aligned with a historical period; it might be post object art such as performance, conceptual art, earth works or systems art; or it might be in what Rosalind Krauss calls the 'post-medium condition,' of digital art, "a heterogeneous and often provisional structure that channels content" (Joselit in Halsall 2016a, pp. 441-3).

Contemporary art is rich in ideas and in materials, in innovative practices and approaches. One of the key parameters of a contemporary artwork is the idea it extrapolates. In addition to material form, contemporary artists deal with ideas and they own the trajectory of that idea. In so doing they pave the way for new subjects and new themes.

The six artists in this book are Hossein Valamanesh (mixed media, lives and works in Adelaide); Karla Dickens (mixed media, lives and works in Lismore); Elizabeth Gower (collage, lives and works in Melbourne); Polixeni Papapetrou (photography, lived and worked in Melbourne), and Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro (mixed media, live and work in the Blue Mountains/Sydney). They are all mid-career artists whose art has received critical attention. Their work is represented in public galleries and also held in private collections.

What is meant by the term artistic practice? Not unlike a musician, an artist practises his or her craft each day, developing and refining work and building on her expertise. Pursuing a career as a contemporary visual artist resembles the running of a small business. Alongside the core time spent sourcing and working with materials and/or

developing ideas, it involves research, general administration and preparing grant applications. Collaborative practices involve meetings with other parties, and there is also the documentation of work, the upkeep of the artist's website, the giving of talks and interviews, meetings with art world people, including the artist's gallerist, and keeping up with the art world generally. Most contemporary artists have completed a masters or doctorate of fine arts, which has meant the development of academic skills alongside those of art making. In addition, all but the few economically successful artists have second jobs or even more with which to subsidise their practice.

In this book, each chapter is given over to an artist or, in the case of Healy and Cordeiro, to two artists who work together. I delve into both the art and the artists' practice from my own perspective as art educator, writer and scholar. This has involved listening to, and relating, the artists' own accounts of their work. The stories artists tell are a mixture of the familiar and the novel. They tell of the challenges we all face in juggling work and life, family and career. They also intimate aspects of creativity, but this is not creativity conceived as some mysterious and ineffable thing. Rather, in these stories we hear how artists develop their signature work over time through training, daily practise, experimentation and research.

We learn about the sources of inspiration, and how their art often seems to arise at the interface between art and life. We learn about the impact that social context and the material environment have, even down to the level of the individual artwork. Context brings a mix of factors, which might include cultural background, the influence of family and children, the natural environment, politics and the everyday, alongside those of the art materials and techniques used themselves. Chance and the accidental also play a role. Here we find that an artist may embrace things that have come about independently of his or her control. Creativity from this perspective is not merely about creative decision-making but also brings into consideration the landscape of elements that coalesce to shape the individual work of art. In the project, this model is designated as 'dispersed agency.'

There are three broad strands of international art practice: firstly, art that engages with the styles and practices of the past, particularly the modernism of the twentieth century; secondly, geo-political art that concerns itself with questions of identity, rights and ideology; and, thirdly, art that investigates the condition of contemporaneity (Smith 2011). The art in this study takes in the broad sweep of these concerns. Karla Dickens' urban Aboriginal art tackles questions of identity, rights and redress head on. It takes issue with the representation of Indigenous people and pays homage to those who have suffered at the hands of racist policies of forced assimilation and cultural genocide. Her sculptural work is multifaceted, at once political, angry and beautiful. It also conveys a sense of what it can be like to have lost connection with country and traditional lore, with the language, Dreamings and Songlines that sustain people.

The photographic work of Polixeni Papapetrou has involved a long-time collaboration with her children Olympia and Solomon and her husband Robert Nelson. The former have acted as her models for her immaculately staged portraiture, and the latter has painted the ornate backdrops that cast her work in the mould of cultural archetype. Papapetrou's work concerns performance and identity, portraits of characters drawn from cultural history, archetype and fairytale. In studio portraits or landscape scenarios, her costumed and masked figures explore in various configurations the notion of the other and are shaded in mystery and ambiguity.

In the art of Elizabeth Gower there is an unexpected pairing of waste paper and pristine geometric pattern. A collage artist, Gower takes cuttings from this fairly unprepossessing material and builds her gorgeous coloured and decorative patterns. Her work displays an ethics of recycling that is both local and global – the patterns we see in her work are often the signature ones of a famous city, the wrought-iron balconies of Paris, the geometry of New York, the Moorish patterns of the tiles in Barcelona.

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro are collaborative artists who are also a couple with two children. Their art is also predicated on recycling and repurposing. The focus of their work is the systems of globalism. Their intricate installations not only reference travel and freight, consumerism and mass marketing, but they are made from materials derived from those sectors. Their source materials have included a small plane, Lego and the floor plan of an entire house. As a whole, their art throws into question some of the global practices that have come to rule twenty-first century life.

The art of the Australian Iranian artist, Hossein Valamanesh, is at once lyrical and metaphysical. Characterised by sheer beauty and simplicity, it draws on both the cultures to which the artist belongs, on the Australian landscape and nature, and on the Persian culture and poetry with which he grew up. This is art that encourages us to pause and to inhabit a time and space different to that of the everyday. It contains transcendental elements, telling us what might be as well as what is.

Each artist has been paired with a quality – lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility or multiplicity. This thematic framework is borrowed from a work of literary criticism, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, by the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1988). Calvino is best known for his fiction in books such as *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (Calvino 2010). *Six Memos* takes these so called universal qualities and applies them with wit and intelligence to a wide range of examples of European literature. At once an intellectual self-portrait and a personalised tour through European literature of the past and present, the book also establishes a generalised framework of interpretation applicable to creative practice, one which serves to shed light on the six artists discussed in this book.

It takes courage, competence and self-belief for people to pursue a career as a contemporary visual artist. For women, particularly, it takes determination. Gender inequity is alive and well in the visual art world. In 1971, the American art historian Linda Nochlin published a ground-breaking essay, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (Nochlin 1971). She was referring here to artists who influence those

who come after them. Whilst there are now a number of distinguished and influential female artists in Australia, amongst them those who have represented Australia at the Venice Biennale (for example Rosalie Gascoigne, [1982], Emily Kame Knangwarreye [1997], Fiona Hall [2015], Tracey Moffatt [2017]), invisible barriers remain.

According to *The Countess Report (Richardson)*, in Australia in 2017, 74% of visual arts graduates were women and 26% were men. And yet, *The Countess Report* reveals that gender disparities extend throughout the museum sector: male artists outweigh female artists in gallery representation (men 60%, women 40%), in museum acquisitions (men 53%) and in solo shows (men 60%). The current project recognises gender inequality in the art world and responds by weighting the project towards artists who are women. All the artists, however, have been chosen for the diversity of their practice and the strength and interest of their work. Their stories too are an intrinsic part of the narrative. Finally, all these artists have also been chosen because they are parents. One element of this study investigates how these artists have been able to pursue artistic careers whilst bringing up children. The influence of those children on the art itself is a second, interlinked question.

Tragically, Polixeni Papapetrou died in 2018 during the writing of this book, her decade-long experience of cancer coming to an end. She was an indefatigable artist who continued to work during the bouts of illness that came and went over that decade. She researched and planned her work from her bed if she needed to. Her final exhibition, curated by herself, was a survey of the themes of her work, and a tribute to her daughter Olympia with whom she had collaborated along with her son Solomon. She was a force of life and will be sadly missed.

My sincere thanks go to the artists who have collaborated in the writing of this book. Your work continues to be inspirational, and gives hope at a time of great social flux.

Italo Calvino – writer

Six Memos for the New Millennium

1988 Harvard UP Cambridge Mass

The proper use of language “enables us to approach things (present or absent) with discretion, attention and caution with respect to what things (present or absent) communicate without words (Calvino 1988, p. 77).

Think what it would be to have a work conceived from outside the self, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in the spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic (p. 124).

Six Memos for the New Millennium is a work of literary theory and criticism by the Italian author Italo Calvino. It is a slim volume, modest and personable in tone, cultured and scholarly in reach. In it, Calvino takes an unorthodox approach to literary criticism, choosing five universal values with which to trace a thematic thread through a rich selection of literary works. The qualities he structures his discussion around are lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity. The sixth, consistency, remained unwritten at the time of his death in 1985.

In this work I have employed Calvino’s five qualities as a conceptual frame for the discussion of contemporary visual art and artist practice, pairing each one of his values with one of the artists in this study. I have done so because Calvino’s choice of universal values and the tenor of his discussion enable his approach to act as a framework for culture generally and more particularly onto this project.

Writing just before the turn of the millennium, Calvino wished to see these particular qualities preserved in the literature of the future. His choice was not intended to detract from their opposites, but rather sprang from a deeply held and personal conviction as to their value. Calvino envisages a wider role for literature at this turning point in history, and the book is prompted by a concern for both the future of literature and for society itself in the face of what he perceives to be problematic societal developments, in particular, the imprecision and noise generated by the mass media, and the persistence and inevitability of conflict.

For this project, the shift of context from literature to contemporary art is a form of cultural translation. Calvino's work provides a system, a structure, a formal scheme and a method. Calvino argues that a systematic approach to writing can paradoxically generate freedom. One example he employs is the rule-bound approach employed by Georges Perec and other members of OULIPO (Workshop of Potential Literature), founded in France by Raymond Queneau. This is a loose confederation of writers who devise rules by which to write literature, arguing that such formal constraining techniques generate inspiration and ideas. Employing the Calvino as a template immediately grants 'This Art Life' a structural and thematic coherence it would otherwise lack. It makes the project in part a literary exercise.

My contention in writing 'This Art Life' is that artistic practice emerges from a confluence of factors, including life matters themselves. In this light, it makes sense to employ a framework derived from a book that brings universal values to its discussion of literature and the writer's practice. Calvino hazards the idea that there are two types of imaginative processes – from word to image, and image to word (p. 83). This project negotiates both in its conversation with art and its delineation of art practice. Applying Calvino's values as a framework through which to examine the artists and their work establishes a coherent thematic thread. This results in an enriched understanding of the artists, their work and their *modus operandi*, and also generates a more sophisticated and interdisciplinary text, one that matches its form with its subject matter.

Calvino's book was originally written as a series of talks he gave to for the Charles Eliot Norton Lecture series at Harvard University. His wife, Esther Calvino, collected the manuscripts and oversaw their publication. Italo Calvino (1923-1985) was an Italian writer and journalist. Born in Cuba to Italian academic parents, he grew up in Italy. A former member of the Italian Communist Party, after the invasion of Hungary and the revelation of Stalin's crimes against humanity he became disillusioned with the party and left. Attracted by the atmosphere of cultural revolution, in 1967 he moved with his family to Paris, where he joined the OULIPO group of experimental writers. He is best known for his novels *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (Calvino 2010) and *Invisible Cities* (Calvino 2013) and his *Cosmicomics* collection of short stories (Calvino 1968).

The way in which Calvino treats the five values in *Six Memos* is playful and versatile, interpreting them at various points as physical properties, literary forms and figures, or philosophical concepts. His choice of literary examples ranges from the classical to the contemporary. Alongside more obvious contenders such as Dante and Shakespeare, he cites with a light touch and obvious delight everything from nineteenth century Italian poets to classical epic poetry, Modernist and Postmodernist novelists to folk and fairy tale. He quotes at length from his chosen texts, first in the Italian, then in the English translation. By doing so he gives each example the space to breathe, sometimes choosing not to add an exegetical gloss but leaving the literature to speak for itself.

The book is beautifully written, lively and interesting in literary terms and in the light it sheds on the writer. It is something of an intellectual self-portrait. Calvino's choice of literature is idiosyncratic and catholic and the tenor of the discussion personal and revealing. He will, at times, intersperse his discussion of literature with personal asides, perhaps his preferences in mathematics or his notion of literature as a refuge from the world's ills. The book is a cry for the continuance of certain qualities in the light of certain problematics, for the literary styles, tropes and figures to be found in

superb writing, for the insights applicable to life that can be found in great literature, including its ability to enhance our observation and teach us the value of things, for mindsets, images and tropes, and for ways and means of proceeding and applying ourselves to things. Quickness of style, for example, becomes synonymous with quickness of thought; lightness in literature becomes part of literature's existential counteracting of the weight of living; exactitude becomes two types of knowledge – bodiless rationality and knowledge of the particularity of objects; visibility becomes a gateway to fantasy and the imagination; and multiplicity points to the way in which the novelists handle thematic and structural complexity in their attempts to represent whole worlds.

Calvino is not averse to discussing the applicability of his chosen values to the realms of computing or science, as in for example this excerpt from his chapter on lightness: “Today every branch of science seems intent on demonstrating that the world is supported by the most minute entities, such as the messages of DNA, the impulses of neurons and quarks, and neutrinos wandering through space since the beginning of time...” (p. 8).

He not only includes his own novels and literary practice in general as part of the discussion but also life itself, revealing at times something of his own character traits and proclivities – his preference as a writer for short literary forms and economy of expression and, more generally, for geometrical forms, for quietness, for the future over the past, for the written word over speech. He tells us that since his youth his motto of choice has been the Latin *festina lente*, hurry slowly (p. 48). This is both as a philosophy and as a liking for the emblems with which this tag has historically been illustrated, such as the butterfly and the crab to be found in a sixteenth century collection – “incongruous and enigmatic figures,” despite their symmetry, which “establish an unexpected kind of harmony” (p. 48).

Every now and then a note of urgency surfaces. At one point he decries the impoverishment in people's use of language generally, calling it a “pestilence” of

“automatism” that deprives language of “cognition and immediacy” (p. 56). He also criticises the indirect imaginary, the images derived from mass culture that “litter” the imagination “like a rubbish dump” (pp. 91-2). His rationale for the title of the book arises at various points: “Among the values I would like passed on to the next millennium”, he writes, “there is this above all: a literature that has absorbed the taste for mental orderliness and exactitude, the intelligence of poetry, but at the same time that of science and of philosophy...” (p. 118).

The creative process involves rhythms and one passage invokes the rhythms that govern the writer’s work: “Vulcan’s and Mercury’s, a message of urgency obtained by dint of patient and meticulous adjustments and an intuition so instantaneous that, when formulated, it acquires the finality of something that could never have been otherwise” (p. 54). This meditation on artistry, this evocation of the unpredictability and ungovernable nature of creativity, where periods of heightened productivity may be preceded and followed by fallow periods, is as pertinent to any creative process, including art, as it is to literature.

Lightness – Hossein Valamanesh

Calvino’s discussion of lightness is as varied as the quality he explores. One minute he is talking about the scientific pursuit of the atomic and subatomic, and how knowledge of the world demands dissolving the solidity of the world. In another he is talking about the atomising of things in Lucretius’ epic poem, *De Rerum Natura*, and “the little motes of dust swirling in a shaft of sunlight” (p. 9). Hossein Valamanesh’s work has a metaphysical quality along with a clarity and simplicity of form. Its grounding in the poetry of Rumi adds a poetic dimension. It is interesting, then, that Calvino sees the quality of lightness as one found in abstract and philosophical forms, in metaphysical speculations as well as in literary and poetic figures.

The Rumi we see in Valamanesh’s work is a celebration of universality and of the oneness of things, from the physical to the spiritual. “In [the poet] Cavalcanti,” says

Calvino, “the weight of matter is dissolved because the materials of the human simulacrum can be many, all interchangeable” (Calvino 1988, p. 13). Lightness takes both the poet and the writer right down to the level of the atomic. Cyrano de Bergerac, Calvino says, is the forerunner of science fiction and also the first poet of atomism in modern literature. Then comes Calvino’s extraordinary statement about Cyrano and the advent of living things: “In pages where his irony cannot conceal a genuine cosmic excitement, Cyrano extols the unity of all things, animate or inanimate, the combinatoria of elementary figures that determine the variety of living forms; and above all he conveys his sense of the precariousness of the processes behind them. That is, how nearly man missed being man, and life, life, and the world, the world.” (p. 20).

It is here in Calvino that we find the sentiment that literature has an existential function – a “search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living”. Lightness he says is something subtle and fine. He follows with a question: “But how can we hope to save ourselves in that which is most fragile?” (p. 6). The world, you sense, may or may not be on a precipice, but the human condition always has need of personal resources, which he details in his beautiful account of Perseus from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Finally his retelling of a scene in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* about the “agile leap of the poet-philosopher” (p. 12) in the face of Renaissance menace seems a perfect analogy of the work of this quietly spoken Adelaide artist. Valamanesh’s sculptural art has a distilled quality that derives both from the natural and found materials with which he works and from the cultural resonances that together carry the work into a zone of contemplation.

Quickness – Karla Dickens

Calvino explores quickness as a literary motif and poetic figure through diverse literary forms, notably shorter ones such as the novella and poetry, as well as legend, folktale and his own work. His treatment of the idea of quickness in relation to folk tales is particularly insightful *vis-à-vis* the artist Karla Dickens. She is someone for

whom art is a pressing, political matter and whose urban Aboriginal art is story based. Calvino's thematic conception of quickness, and his emphasis on storytelling and the oral tradition in particular, serve to highlight the importance of time in Dickens' work and the urgency of her quest.

Oral traditions of storytelling possess formal constraints: they need to be concentrated and memorable, and they usually involve repetition, conciseness and relativity of time. Calvino's description of fairytales as combining economy, rhythm and hard logic is apt when it comes to Dickens' art – this could describe her work, in its political weight and the directness of the messages it conveys, and in her utilisation of found objects and assemblage in its material form. His account helps us to discern the role of the telling or magic object at the centre of Dickens' work, something that Calvino sees operating as a kind of force field that reveals significant connections between people and events, and between the present and the past.

Exactitude – Elizabeth Gower

For Calvino, exactitude acts as a brace against the infinite and the indefinable. He develops this chapter around two literary approaches, which he characterises by means of the sixteenth-century emblems of the crystal and the flame. These are, he says, “two forms of perfect beauty that we cannot tear our eyes away from, two modes of growth in time, of expenditure of the matter surrounding them, two moral symbols, two absolutes, two categories for classifying facts and ideas, styles and feelings” (p. 71). These two literary impulses he explores in relation to his own work, articulating them respectively as “logical, geometric and metaphysical procedures” on the one hand, and the all-consuming attempt to render all details with verisimilitude on the other, a doomed task he associates with the flame. As a writer, he alternates between these two approaches. “When I feel I have fully explored the possibilities of one, I rush across to the other, and vice versa” (p. 75).

In the chapter on the collage artist, Elizabeth Gower, I take these two concepts and adapt them to the two poles of her work – abstract geometric pattern and the detritus of a consumer society. Waste paper is the source material of Gower’s art. She collects and renders this chaotic mass into art that is characterised by pattern and order. Collecting and the principle of exactitude perhaps go hand in hand, as she wrestles geometric order from the disorder of the things we jettison as junk. But her work is not necessarily a critique of consumerism; the lightness and cheerfulness of her work recognise the pleasures of consumption.

Visibility – Polixeni Papapetrou

Calvino’s treatment of visibility is idiosyncratic. Rather than relate his theme to things seen (or not seen) in the world around us, he develops it in the light of fantasy and the visual imagination. With characteristic élan, he begins with the assertion “Fantasy is a place where it rains,” a thought derived from his reading of Dante’s *Purgatorio* (p. 81). This is the imagination as “high fantasy,” as distinct from what he calls the “chaos of dreams.” High fantasy is the world that is inhabited by Polixeni Papapetrou’s photographic oeuvre, in which she explores, in particular, children’s imaginary play.

Calvino discusses the importance of thinking in terms of visual images, asking where images in the mind come from. Dante, he suggests, would claim divine inspiration but more contemporary writers “establish their thoughts through earthly transmitters, such as the individual or collective unconscious; the time regained in feelings that re-emerges from time lost; or ‘epiphanies,’ concentrations of being in a single spot or point of time.” (p. 87) In the mind of the poet, the association of images can link the possible with the impossible.

Calvino proceeds to investigate his own “fantastic” fiction, in particular *Cosmicomics* and the role of imagination in the organisation of his material. The imagination is a repository of the potential and the hypothetical, and images, he states, “develop their

own potentialities” (p. 89). Looking at the history of the imagination, he proposes a quintessential idea that captures an important but elusive side to Papapetrou’s work, the neo-Platonic Renaissance idea of imagination as “communication with the world soul” (p. 88). Imagination can be a source of knowledge, and he comes to the conclusion that a Jungian identification with the world soul is more to his liking than is a Freudian worldview delimited by the individual ego and the unconscious. Papapetrou’s own “fantastic iconology” created with nuance and sympathy establishes just such a universal truth to the world.

Multiplicity – Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro

The final chapter of Calvino’s book, entitled multiplicity, is about the novel. He calls this chapter his “apologia for the novel as a vast net” (p. 124). His preoccupation with multiplicity centres on the novel’s capacity to represent the world in all its complexity. The novel, he suggests, is “an encyclopaedia, a method of knowledge, and above all a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world” (p. 107).

The above sentence by Calvino could as well serve as an introduction to the work of Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. Healy and Cordeiro’s work focuses on one of the dominant narratives of our time, globalisation. Their work mines its systems and how we are constituted within them. The remarkable thing about this art of globalisation is its transitive nature. It takes globalism as its theme but it is also derived from it, a product of it. Healy and Cordeiro employ their own practice as global artists as the raw material for their art, working with their experiences, their material circumstances and their critical intelligence to forge their art. That is to say, this is art that is provisional to the way we negotiate the globalised world, and the way it increasingly produces us. Their work takes the form of sculptural installation, exhibiting a formal multiplicity parallel to the novel as the writer conceives it. Calvino’s insights into (the Italian writer) Gadda’s philosophy – “the world as a ‘system of systems’ where each conditions the others and is conditioned by them”–

could be posited as a description of globalism – economically, socially and digitally. In Healy and Cordeiro’s art, webs of connections both radiate from their art into the world, and converge from the world to form their art.

Calvino’s chapter on the novel was also an inspiration for the arguments in this project about the dispersed nature of authorship in artistic endeavour. The chapter operates as the literary equivalent to the cultural theory concepts of assemblage, and the infinite networks and rhizomic structures that Deleuze and Guattari put forward in their investigations of change. An exemplary sentence in this chapter is one about Proust, and refers to Proust’s anxiety to “plumb the multiplicity of the writable within the briefness of life that consumes it” (p. 111).

It is significant that here, too, Calvino sees a wider role for literature in this world that has lost its “grand narratives,” with literature’s interdisciplinary capacity enabling it to “weave together the various branches of knowledge.” This sentiment is equally applicable to other forms of creativity, and whilst contemporary visual art does not necessarily produce coherent narratives, it is masterful at weaving together form and content in a way that, once decoded, may bring to bear reflection and critique along with aesthetic experience.

Hossein Valamanesh – Lightness

The heart decides in the end where the work is at.

Hossein Valamanesh



Figure 1: Hossein Valamanesh, *Breath* 2013, bronze, 143 x 140 x 5 cm, ed. 1 of 6+

Lightness is the subtlest and most fragile of elements, states the Italian writer Italo Calvino. Like air, we could add. Hossein Valamanesh's work *Breath* (2013) is a wall work made from bronzed twigs. These are arranged in two almost symmetrical hemispheres that describe the ventricles of the lungs. It is an understated realisation of an essential point, and the kind of art that acquires emblematic value. Art asks something of us, proposes Alfred Gell, it calls to us, eliciting a response (Gell 1998). What particular artworks want, and what that response might be, depends on the work and the viewer in question (Mitchell 2005). For me as a viewer, this artwork

proffers not so much a question but sheer recognition, a flash of illumination about the symbiosis between trees and ourselves. The work manifests simultaneously as: the tree itself, the air we breathe, and our very selves. Botany, physiology, art and humanity flower in a moment's recognition, as Keats put it, of truth and beauty.

Hossein Valamanesh is an artist whose work evokes the great themes of mortality, time and love with simplicity and a lightness of touch. Talking to this artist about his practice, what comes across is the playfulness of his material approach and the joy he finds in making art, indeed in everyday life itself. Calvino would perhaps say of him that he creates a "poetry of the invisible," (Calvino 1988, p. 9), and this rings true to the metaphysical dimension of Valamanesh's work. His work has indeed been called a "poetry of existence" (GAGProjects 2017). But this is art possessive of a strong material presence; the two are indivisible. This is not conceptual art, where the idea takes precedence over the material form, but a marriage of idea and form that exceeds the sum of its parts.

Hossein Valamanesh's story reflects an inter-cultural harmony that is somewhat at odds with the current narratives around conflict, displacement and asylum. He was born in Iran in 1949 in Khash, a small town in the province of Baluchistan. He moved with his family to Tehran in 1960. He came to Australia of his own accord in 1973, "following a girlfriend." That relationship petered out, but it led to lasting ones with the country and landscape in which he found himself, and with Angela Burdon, now Angela Valamanesh, a ceramic artist. They met at the South Australian School of Art and were married in 1976. Their son Nassiem was born in 1978.

Valamanesh maintains allegiance to both countries and both cultures: "I don't find it a very stressed state, I feel very much at home in both parts". Elements from each country form an integral part of his practice. His work is redolent with the culture and memories of his Iranian upbringing, and the ancient poetic tradition in which he was schooled. As for Australia, for him it is a mix of elemental and cultural qualities, including the landscape. "It is rather privileged", he says, "to be able to live here and

breathe the air and have the space, and be contemplating nature and what is already here in the Indigenous land and multicultural society. And then looking at my own memories of Iran, where I come from and all that, it's a very rich ground to draw from.”

Valamanesh's work oscillates between the universal and the cross-cultural, and whether these themes are expressed materially and thematically, they are realised in Calvino's sense with a light abstraction. Elements of Persian sensibility or Iranian references crisscross his work in richly unpredictable ways. *Shades of Green* (2010), is a work referencing political prisoners in Iran. It is made from squares of green fabric arranged in the form of the word “freedom” in Farsi. It was based on the patchwork quilts that Valamanesh imagined the mothers of political prisoners protesting outside of a Tehran prison would want for their sons, the comfort and warmth of home.

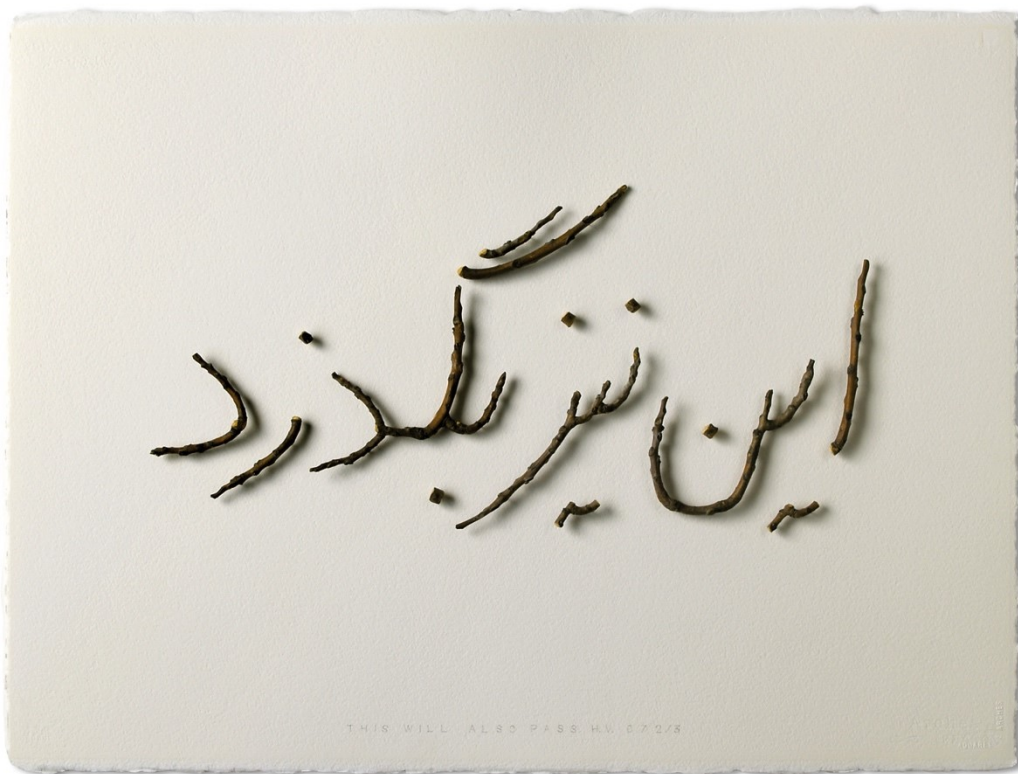


Figure 2: Hossein Valamanesh, *This Too Shall Pass* 2007, ailanthus branches on paper, 58 x 76 x 2 cm, edition of 3. Private collection, Adelaide. Photo: Michal Klvanek

This Too Shall Pass (2007) (from the exhibition of the same name (Valamanesh 2007)) and *This Will Also Pass* (2012) (Valamanesh 2015b) are companion pieces. The former is composed of ailanthus branches on paper, the latter of bronze. Both works exhibit Valamanesh's fascination with rendering the written word in art, that is, the Persian language of Farsi in the Australian material context. For me they are also philosophical meditations on being and time and on the transience of all things, including pain. Another textual and philosophic work, *Still Standing* (2010), is made from grapevine branches mounted on board. It is inspired by a poem by Rumi that ties love to the notion of the interconnectedness of all things.



Figure 3 Hossein Valamanes, *In my mother's hands* 2011, digital print on paper, 75 x 60 cm. Photo: Michal Kluvanek

For Calvino, the quality of lightness manifests in a variety of guises. In his writing he explores it as a physical property, a philosophical concept, an aesthetic style and a literary figure, interweaving these deftly as he crosses between poetry, science – with its “interior study of the minute: cells, neurons, quarks, neutrinos, wandering through space since the beginning of time” – and his own fiction. How is lightness to be valued?

For Calvino, to appreciate lightness is not to disparage the quality of weight, but to explore the role of lightness in literary endeavour. If, as he suggests, Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, approaches everyday life as "a bitter confrontation of the Ineluctable Weight of Living" (Calvino 1988, p. 7), Valamanesh's art, in its clarity and simplicity, touches these same philosophical questions of life and death from a very different place. It does so lightly and effortlessly, and with the serene curiosity the artist as a baby manifests in the work *In my mother's hands* (2011).



Figure 4: Hossein Valamanesh, *The Lover Circles his own Heart* 1993, silk, electric motor, 210 x 210 x 210 cm. Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Photo: M. Michalski and B Wojcik.

Spot-lit and mesmerising, the floating form turns steadily, its creamy silk flaring out into a conical skirt. The electric engine driving it purrs quietly. The work is suspended from the ceiling by a thin cable and spins at about thirty-five rpm. It is human in scale, an abstract piece of dance. On the adjacent pillar is a poem by Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian poet, that has the same title as the artwork: *The Lover Circles his own Heart*.

Nowhere are those metaphysical and cross-cultural qualities more apparent than in the suffusion of Valamanesh's art and practice with the poetry of Rumi. Born in Afghanistan, Rumi (or to give him his full name, Jalâl al-Din Muhammad Ibn Bahâ al-Din Muhammad [1212-1273]) was a Sufi mystic, an exponent of the esoteric core of Islam. His richly allegorical poetry emphasised love over piety (Mannani 2010). Although he ended up in Turkey, Rumi wrote in Farsi, Valamanesh's mother tongue.

* * *

Hossein Valamanesh is giving a talk to a group of people in a public gallery. He is an unassuming and quietly spoken man with greying hair, casually dressed in jeans and black runners. We are seated on folding chairs around his assemblage, *The Lover Circles his own Heart* (1993). He reads Rumi's poem out aloud, and says modestly: "It's been a wonderful journey for me to be here, and to be able to say that I'm a practising artist."

Lightness for Calvino is not something to be disparaged. He associates it with high-level abstraction, with precision and definition, and with "subtle and imperceptible elements," be those trains of thought or psychological processes. Nor does his treatment diminish the importance of weight. "The idea of the world as composed of weightless atoms is striking just because we know the weight of things so well" (Calvino 1988, p. 15). "How," he asks, "can we hope to save ourselves in that which is most fragile?" (p. 6). For inspiration he turns to classical literature, the epic poems of Ovid and Lucretius. There he finds the tropes of atomisation and metamorphosis, in which inheres "the idea of a system of infinite relationships between *everything* and *everything else*". Both of these writers extend a way of looking at the world based on philosophy and science, and Calvino finds there gestures of astonishing beauty.

This atomising of things, this levelling and finding of patterns of continuity and contiguity are also the concern of the great poet to whom Valamanesh turns, Rumi:

*We came whirling
Out of nothingness
Scattering stars
Like dust*

*It sunders
All attachment*

*Every atom
Turns bewildered*

*Beggars circle tables
Dogs circle carrion
The lover circles his own heart*

Rumi *The Lover Circles His Own Heart*

This is the poem that gives the name to the airily floating form described above. Valamanesh originally conceived this artwork during an artist residency in Berlin in the early 1990s. He was commissioned to create a work for an exhibition that was to be held at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Warsaw in Poland. The Centre is located in the ancient and much rebuilt precinct of Ujazdów Castle. The space Valamanesh was allocated evoked something in him. It was “still a ruin, not yet refurbished... a beautiful dirty space... When I was shown this space in Warsaw, I thought this is the place! It has to be the dance; this space needs something animated. I came back to Australia after the residency, made the work, and three years later went back to Warsaw to install it” (Museum of Contemporary Art 2005).

The swirling form he intuited from that beautiful dirty space is a reference to the Sufi whirling dervish. The dervish is the traditional devotional and meditative dance (*Sāma'*) of the Mevlevi dervishes, of which Rumi was the founder. What you glimpse in Valamanesh's comments about that space and its effect on him is a fragment of the creative moment – a moment where the artist's creative imagination and identity and a concrete place ricochet off one another to make art. What you experience as a viewer, too, is a fleeting refracted insight into the dynamics of love, the sense in which feeling is both directed outward yet experienced within.

Like the poem and the artwork, Valamanesh's talk also moves between the material and the transcendental as he evokes the thinking behind the work: "This is the way we are connected together. As I am sitting in front of you talking, there are elements of my body which are whirling around themselves, the camera rolling, the sun is going around, the universe, it gives you some sense of comfort that you are not alone in this madness ..." (Artist talk, MCA, 2013). What do we understand by the term metaphysical? For Calvino it lies in the distance between the immediate and the absolute, for example, infinity as absolute space and time, as against our empirical knowledge of space and time (pp. 63-4). It inheres, in other words, in the relation between the absolute and the particularity of the here and now.

Calvino talks of the atomising of things in science (quarks) and poetry alike, bringing to light the minute and the finest of things. In his poetry of the invisible, says Calvino, the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius grants the "perception of all that is infinitely minute, light and mobile," (p. 9). As an artwork, *The Lover Circles* is a distillation of Rumi's universal insight into a sense of the movement of things, the turning of things. It is a levelling but not a belittling of things. For me the work embodies Calvino's notion of lightness: it is abstract, precise and also cellular and turning. It is infinitely light and mobile.

It also brings to mind an excerpt from the poem by T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*: "At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless/Neither from nor

towards; at the still point, there the dance is..." ('Burnt Norton', Eliot 2014). Eliot's evocation of the perfect state of being in the moment is also distilled in this deceptively simple, elegant, turning, work of art. Rumi, Valamanesh, Calvino, Lucretius, and Eliot, are linked together in a chain of associations, a kind of formal and thematic alliteration and reiteration, articulating, in their own way, an experience that weaves across being, time, and matter.

* * *

Hossein Valamanesh may no longer be religious but Rumi's poetry remains a sustaining influence. His deep knowledge and rehearsal of Rumi also display a lightness and ease. He encountered Rumi at a young age and has continued to read and reread the poet since the late 1960s. "It becomes quite embedded in your subconscious, I think of it and then I start humming it, even for fun and things rhyme. It just becomes sort of really light-hearted. Every now and then it becomes quite profound and deep, and it's fortunate when that happens. The content for me keeps changing, and in that sense I play with it."

An old book of Rumi has accompanied the artist through several rites of passage, including his military service, his phases as "a hot-headed communist" and born again Buddhist, and on his emigration to Australia in 1973. He reads Rumi as a revolutionary, as a great teacher and source of inspiration, finding in his poetry not dogma but "passionate and insightful illuminations in the path of love and freedom" (Knights & North 2011). Valamanesh comments that in the Iran of the 1960s, poetry such as this permeated everyday life and even young children were schooled in it.

"We had a subject in primary school in which we had to learn classical poems by heart and then explain their meaning to the teacher. And it was taken quite seriously, you couldn't help but pick it up. Even my mother, who was only primary school educated, read poems. She had books of poetry that she read as a kind of fortune telling... So you

would just think: 'Am I going to pass that exam? Or are my kids going to become a doctor or an engineer?' And she would open up the book, and it would give you some clues, and that was poetry of the heart. It was very much a part of our culture.”

Sometimes the genesis of an artwork is lengthy, a decade and a half, as was the case with a more recent work. This is a film Valamanesh made in collaboration with his son Nassiem, a filmmaker. Valamanesh has returned to Iran four times since emigrating – when he was married, in 2002, and with Angela and Nassiem in 2009, and again with Nassiem in 2015. During the 2002 visit he was suddenly struck by the complexity and beauty of a typical shopping bazaar. He decided it could be the basis of an artwork, one that captured the central crossroads where the arcades meet under a domed ceiling. “Imagine being able to see four sides at once, as if you had walked into the space. Where they meet, it’s an eight-sided space, four sides being these arcades. And between the people and the space there is this kind of beautiful interaction.”

The idea eventually came to fruition. He was commissioned by the Adelaide Film Festival to make the film, which became a large-scale film installation, *Char Soo* (Valamanesh 2015a). The Sydney producer Bridget Iken offered to produce it. The film was shown at the Adelaide and Sydney film festivals in 2016 and in Perth and in Germany in 2017. The way he and Nassiem went about making it was close to the original idea of “setting four cameras in the centre of this bazaar and recording a day in the life, taking footage of maybe five minutes, every half an hour”. At the time of its inception he was not to know that Nassiem would become a filmmaker, and yet his being so made the project all the more feasible.

The work is shown in the round, with four large screens facing one another. The effect is immersive and intimate. The spectator is both in the gallery and in the pedestrian precinct, both part of and not part of the scene. The work reproduces the rhythms of daily life, shopping and commerce, quietness and busy-ness, transactions and encounters, an infinite web of connections or “beautiful interactions”, as Valamanesh puts it, as people move through and inhabit the space. The passage of a day is

expressed in the transition from empty to crowded and back again, as the business owners open up, conduct their business of the day, close up and leave. At one point a motorbike drives through the intersection. It is as if a cross section of the society of the city is being channelled through a domed conduit. Valamanesh is appreciative not only that the work has been realised, but also that it has involved working with his son.

From the cellular to the social, the interconnectedness we saw in *The Lover Circles* is also evident in this mesmerising work, the same sense of the cycles of time and relatedness of things and the levelling of people as they share the space. The negotiations are not only mercantile but spatial and physical as people touch, hold, look, exchange and bypass each other – all the myriad interactions that occur in a busy thoroughfare. The throng sweeps in and out regularly like the tide. “The weight of matter is dissolved because the materials of the human simulacrum can be many, all interchangeable,” says Calvino.

Lightness, he argues, acts as an antidote to the impression of the “slow petrification” of the world, something he might experience when he looks at the world around him or contemplates his own past. When heaviness overwhelms, he says, he is tempted to “fly like Perseus to a different space” (Calvino 1988, p. 7). One antidote to heaviness is a vocation, and the possession of one is a fortunate circumstance. Valamanesh’s artistic practice can be seen as such, especially in its character of creative play with the simple beauty of the everyday, as seen through the prism of poetry.



Figure 5: Hossein Valamanesh, Installation shot, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, 2015

Often his play with poetry forms the fabric of the artwork itself. Take the work *Hasti Masti (Large)* (2014), for example. It is a calligraphic work on paper in which the artist has inscribed these two words in black, blue and red as infill in a large circle. 'Hasti' means 'to be alive' and 'masti' means 'to be drunk', the terms only distinguishable in Farsi by a single curved stroke. Drunk on life, intoxicated to be alive, the lightness of the distinction conveying a lively metaphysics. These round calligraphy works appeal to the artist on several levels. There is the simplicity and finite nature of the circle as form, and then there is the technique. He executes the calligraphy with a brush. The traditional Persian approach uses a bamboo stylus, but he finds that a brush is better suited for enlarging the words for his design. It does, however, make it more difficult to write from right to left as the brush is not sufficiently rigid, so he ends up mixing the techniques, doing some movements one way and some the other. With its patterned and repetitive nature, the execution itself becomes a form of meditative practice. "It's not like each time I think 'I'm going to do this,' I just do it, it's all given,

you can stop and come back, especially when there are so many words. There is a sort of system.”

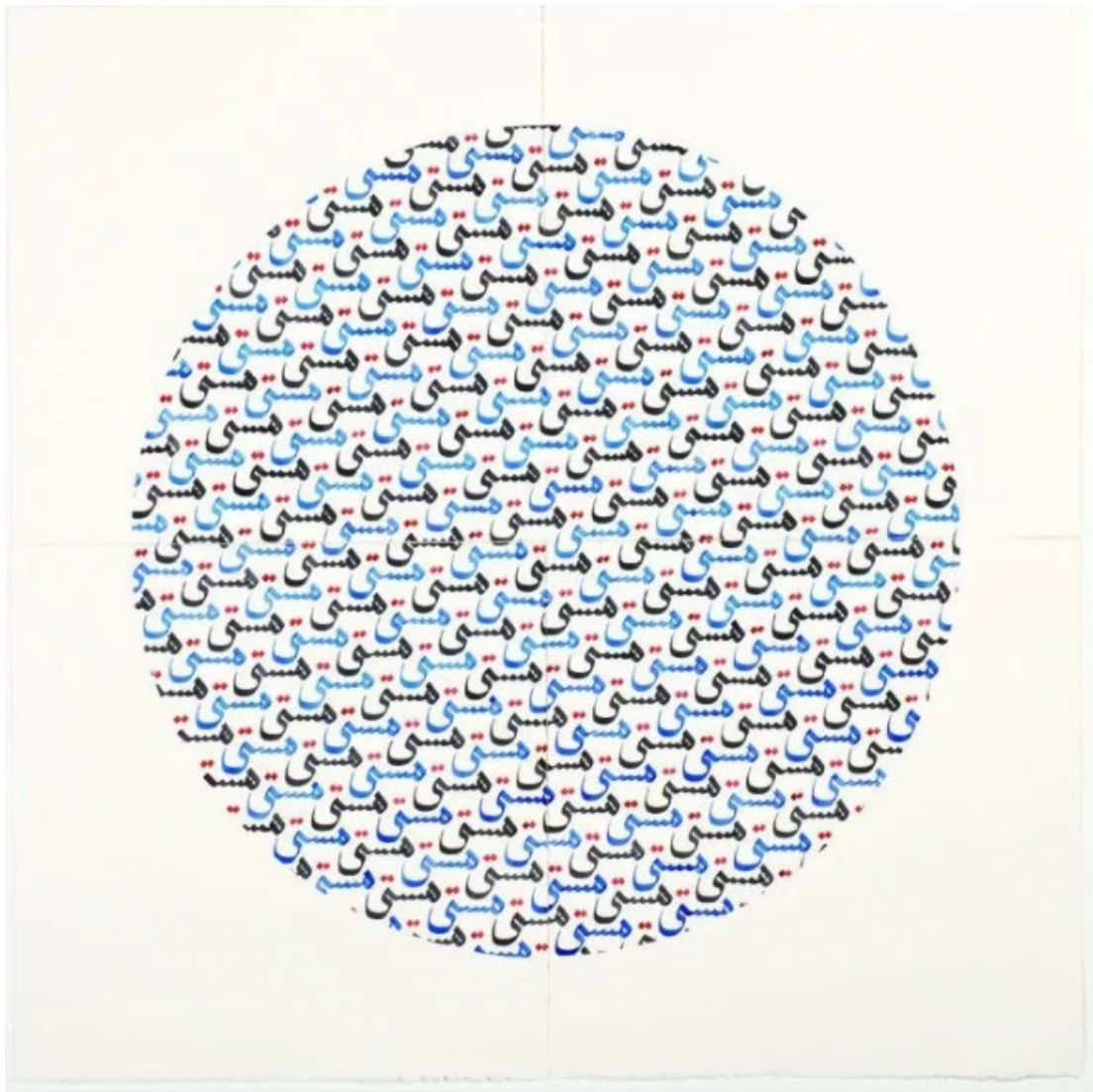


Figure 6: Hossein Valamanesh, *Hasti Masti (Large)* 2014, ink on paper, 4 components, 132.5 x 132.5 cm.

Valamanesh’s art training was a combination of formal studio tuition in Iran, and the progressive art school experience on offer in 1970’s Australia. Add to that his experience of emigration, and an early and comprehensive introduction to western desert Aboriginal art and culture, and something of the multifaceted nature of his story emerges. During his senior high school years in Tehran, Valamanesh did a three-

year art course based on the traditional French Academy model. The course was small and focused, with twenty or so boys taking part. They received studio training in drawing, painting, sculpture and graphic design. Studies of anatomy, perspective and antiquities were undertaken by copying old masters in the museums and galleries, an approach not much changed from that experienced by Matisse and Picasso in the nineteenth century.

The Iranian students were also taught miniature painting and calligraphy: “In high school everybody studied calligraphy. We studied everything! It was an old-fashioned, French style of training, very academic and European – white plaster, Michelangelo, Venus and Hercules... In the mornings we did practical work and then in the afternoons we studied art history, English, literature. We studied technical drawing [for] engineering, anatomy, and even life drawing... Each week we had a different subject: one week was portraiture, the next still life, and then another was the human figure. And we used to have life drawing, although there weren’t that many professional models. We used to have to ask beggars in the street [to model]. Most of them would get freaked out and run away!”

Not surprisingly, the South Australian School of Art in the early 1970s leaned towards the other extreme. Conceptual art, minimalism and debates around theory featured highly on the curriculum, as did artist autonomy and a general air of informality. The atmosphere was experimental and, by comparison with Tehran, hopelessly loose. What it offered Valamanesh, though, was the opportunity to experiment and re-imagine his practice in ways he couldn’t have foreseen. His focus began to shift away from painting. “In Iran you have to find your voice, your expression, and I didn’t have enough time after art school to be in that conducive environment. Being here, with the kind of basic skills I had, I was able to play with materials, with ideas. It was a great three years of playing around!”

He started experimenting with textures and doing low relief pieces, and became aware of other formal possibilities such as installation and earthwork. “Earthy stuff!

We knew about Impressionism up to Cubism, but not much more. We knew about Jackson Pollock, and some Expressionist paintings, but there wasn't that kind of dialogue". In Australia he came across artists like John Davis who were practicing in ways similar to him. He recalls seeing the large-scale installation work of Ken Unsworth and thinking: "This is great!" Turning to Angela, he adds, "Finding her was the best. Or she found me, she says!"

* * *

The transference from art to life and back again is never literal and demands an indirect approach. For Calvino, the quest for examples of lightness in life could easily become an endless *quête*, with this French term alluding at once to a search and an empty begging bowl. To alleviate his sense of the stoniness of life, Calvino engages his fresh modes of thinking and flies like Perseus on his winged feet to another place, that of the indirect approach, and one that Perseus exemplifies: "To cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught on a mirror" (Calvino 1988, p. 4).

What Calvino proceeds to relate is a scene from Ovid about grace and the everyday. We see here how his set of values bridge literature and life, metamorphosis and the simple everyday. Form, theme and practice come together effortlessly. Having slain the Medusa and freed Andromeda, Perseus wants to wash to his hands. This simple act is important. "And here Ovid has lines that seem to me extraordinary in showing how much delicacy of spirit a man must have to be a Perseus, killer of monsters." Calvino then quotes directly from Ovid: "So that the rough sand should not harm the snake-haired head, ... he makes the ground soft with a bed of leaves, and top of that he strews branches of plants born under water, and on this he places Medusa's head, face down" (pp. 5-6). For Calvino such "delicacy of spirit", "this gesture of refreshing courtesy toward a being so monstrous and terrifying yet at the same time somehow fragile and perishable" (p. 6) is the epitome of lightness.

The appreciation of the detail and the indirect action of Perseus wanting to wash his hands together remind me of the idea of finding happiness whilst doing something else, which too may have to do with the transcendental. It also brings to mind the way in which, for many artists, art is not a job undertaken at certain hours of the day, but something that emerges in and through ordinary life – walking, drinking tea, shopping, raising children.

The simple beauty to be found in matters of the everyday is evident in Valamanesh's art. Lifted from daily life, it is lightly abstracted and gains precision, its organic materials still evident. The playfulness of Valamanesh's relationship with Persian poetry is evident in his handling of the everyday things with which his work is often composed. Sticks, leaves, tea and saffron are for him things of beauty, utility and malleability. *Ginkgo Rhythm Round* (2009), like *Crazy Ginkgo Rhythm* (2009) are made from collaged ginkgo leaves. He first spotted these in an Asian supermarket and, as their shape appealed, they went into the mix.

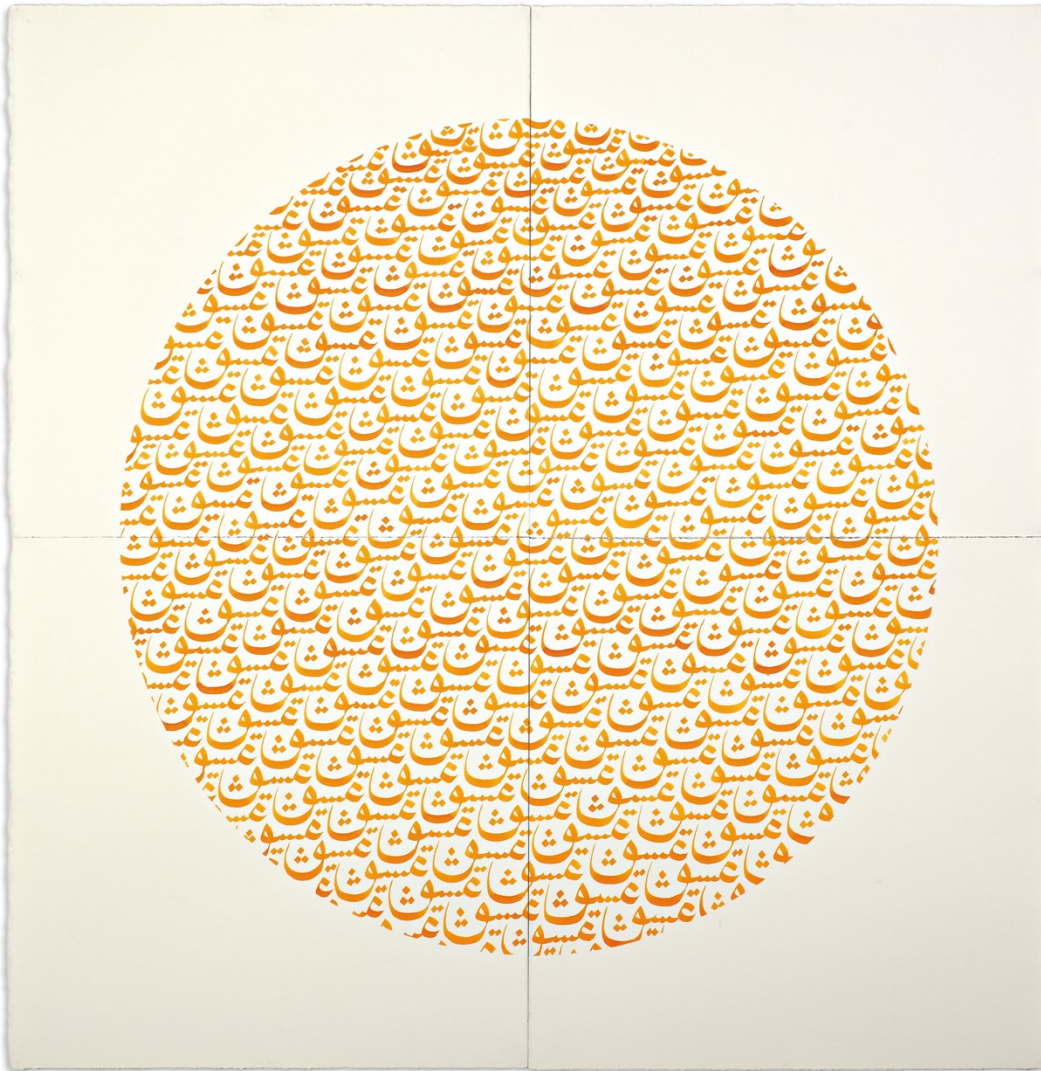


Figure 7: Hossein Valamanesh, *Big Love*, 2009, saffron on paper, 4 components, 150 x 150 cm. Private collection, Sydney. Photo: Michal Klvanek.

Big Love (2009) and *Practice* (2006) are calligraphy works on paper using handmade ink. *Practice* (2006) is a large circular work painted onto twenty sheets of watercolour paper. The enormous circle is in-filled with repetitions of the Farsi word for love ('eshg'). The ink he uses is made with saffron. When I ask him about this he tells me he makes the ink himself. "I grind [the saffron] up, add a bit of salt to make sure it's really ground up properly – not stringy, because then the salt crystals break. I then add a bit of water, depending on how dark I want it. It's a very strong, beautiful dye". He starts with a dense colour in the middle, and adds more water to it as he progresses. The

effect is variegated and impermanent, just like the theme of the work. As you look at works such as *This Too Shall Pass* (2007), or *Big Love* (2009) and you are again fleetingly conscious of the contiguity of materials and subject.

* * *

Smack in the middle of Sydney's historic CBD is a sculptural installation entitled *An Gorta Mór, Memorial to the Great Irish Famine* (1991). A large chunk of the southern sandstone wall of the Hyde Park Barracks has been swivelled ajar to reveal a window etched with the names of four hundred women and children. They are some of the four thousand or so Irish widows and orphans of the famine who were dispatched to live in the colony of New South Wales. A bronze table juts through the wall at an angle. On the inside, it forms a long institutional table reminiscent of an orphanage, with a sewing basket and Bible on a shelf above. On the outside of the wall the table is shorter, suggesting a domestic scene. A three-legged stool sits adjacent to it and on it is a hollowed-out bowl. A shovel for digging potatoes, called a loy, leans against the wall, and on a shelf lie a couple of blighted potatoes, all in bronze.



Figure 8: Hossein Valamanesh and Angela Valamanesh, *An Gorta Mór* 1991, detail, bronze, glass, sandstone
(Image courtesy Phillips/Pilkington Architects)

This monumental work was commissioned by the Historic Houses Trust along with the Irish community, and was created by Hossein Valamanesh and Angela Valamanesh, with a sound component by Paul Carter. The two Valamaneshes collaborate periodically on large public installations and have done so since 1993. They frequently exhibit together even when not collaborating. They also influence each other's creative practice.

What is it like to live and work in such proximity? Angela Valamanesh describes their situation as separate art practices with shared studio spaces and joint projects. Their studio collaborations often begin with one of them “butting into” the other’s play, Hossein Valamanesh adds. That must take, I imagine, a certain openness and generosity. Angela, he notes, was the first to play around with sticks, and the resulting joint work *Forest of words* (2000), featured bent twigs in bronze, grouped to look like words.

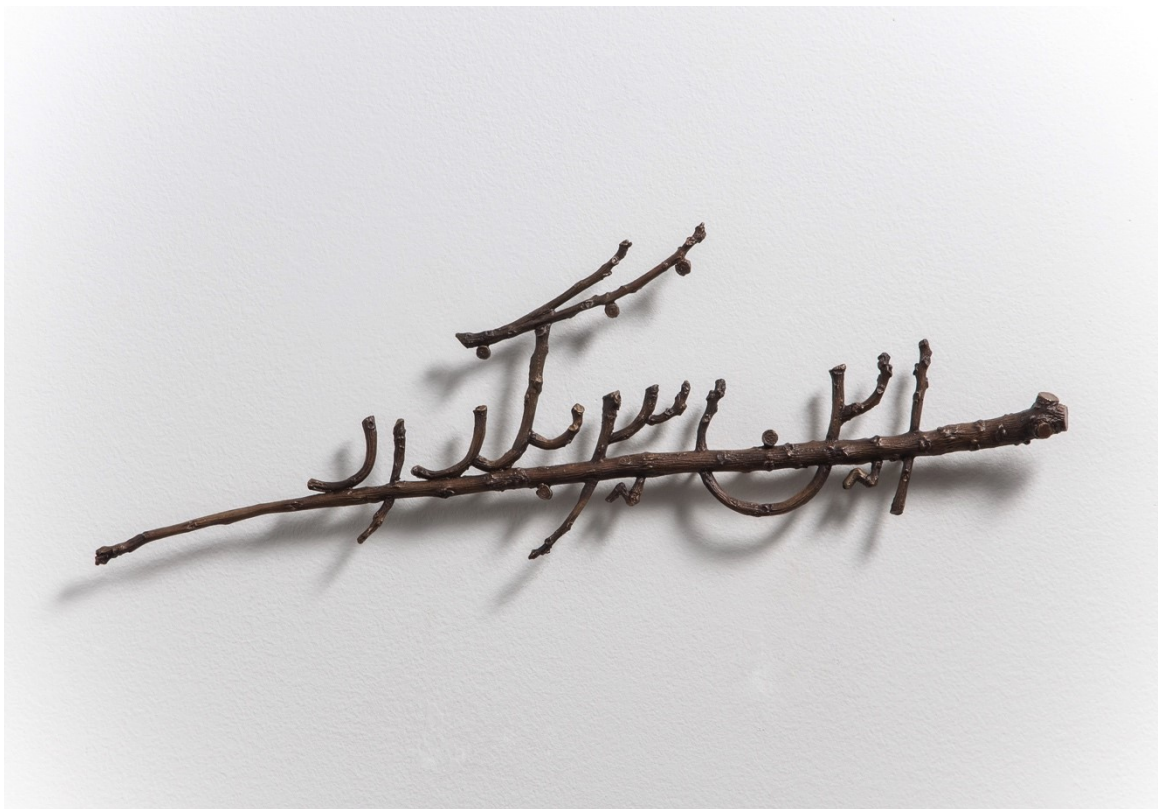


Figure 9: Hossein Valamanesh, *This will also pass*, 2012, bronze, 24 x 70 x 3 cm, edition of 5. Photo: Michal Klvanek

For Hossein Valamanesh, sourcing materials with which to make art is inherently playful and improvisatory. Much of it he comes across in his day-to-day life. He comments that when they walk the dog they find things – a tree on the footpath, sticks – that make their way into the art. He does not attribute significance to the twigs, lotus leaves or the saffron with which he works, other than their piquing his interest and allowing him to improvise and create. “It all comes from a really simple place... I

made this work called *Chai*, it's a Turkish teacup floating in a bowl of water with a light shining onto it. It's kind of ethereal. It all happened when I was doing the dishes. You kind of allow that intuitive image or that thing to rise, and then you play with it and think about it, and if it works, you let it be. You don't question it. Well you question to some extent, but if it has some deeper connection that does not have to do with making sense directly, then you allow it to develop."

I imagine I glimpse an origin – a moment when a work of art begins to emerge or crystallise. The bit about not making sense directly is important. What it does is impart agency to the materials, to the found objects themselves. He doesn't set out to 'make' a work 'about' nature, or 'about' Farsi. Instead the object reminds him of something, jolts a memory, suggests a form. The twigs remind him of words in Farsi, and his history and training kick in. Discovery, object, and idea swirl around and coalesce into artistic form. The result is a work of art or a series of works in which he explores, at the same time, the possibilities of twigs, calligraphy, Farsi and the classical poetry of his upbringing.

The idiom of his work lends itself to the heady abstraction of the metaphysical – time, love, transience, blood – which terms all appear in his titles. I suspect he would see the above statement as overblown, and might wish to reduce the significance of his practice to the joys of playing with the materials at hand. But perhaps this is the point. For Hossein Valamanesh, the spiritual is not something to be hived off from the everyday; it can be found, playfully or even casually, in the everyday. And such a conviction overrides organised religion. Despite the influence of Rumi, he argues he is "not a believer, no. And the whole notion of a monotheistic god is a problematic issue for me... But that doesn't mean that I'm not open to the mystery of the world..." He goes further to suggest: "The poetry actually rejects that itself, I don't think Rumi believed in God."

Creativity inheres in the mundane task, spirituality can be a part of the everyday. But there needs to be an openness, an ability to hear and see what's around you. This is

something artists are good at, and he demonstrates this, along with the capacity to stay with his own train of thought. “The notions of spirituality or metaphysical thinking, its not a separate part of my life, it’s to do with everything, a cup of tea, friendship, love. It’s all very intermingled, and to start separating it – Oh, this is my daily life, this is my spiritual life. What I have found is that I can’t separate it. If you are aware of it, then it makes sustaining this madness a bit easier.”



Figure 10: Hossein Valamanesh, *Where do I come from?* 2013, digital print on canvas, 95.5 x 217.5 cm. Edition of 6 + 1 AP. Photo: Michal Klivanek

In our flight against the weight of the world, Calvino says, we need fresh methods of cognition. He turns to the idea of lightness in Ovid and Lucretius, one that revolves around the equality of all living things, and which is also seen by Cavalcanti as a way of “putting everything on the same level.” We see this egalitarianism in cross-cultural works of Valamanesh’s, some of which reimagine the earth along fantastical patterns of emigration. *Where do I come from?* (2013) and *Where do you come from?* (2013) are companion pieces, both collaged works made from maps of the earth. There is an inherent imaginative reordering that counteracts the realpolitik around migration in the present time. Valamanesh weaves the earth and oceans into a new world order, in the first plaiting slices of land into the oceans to form the words of the title in Farsi, in the second to form a scattered abstract weave. World and word shift and merge as origins and destinations are interwoven both figuratively and literally.

In the Art Gallery of New South Wales there's an artwork by Valamanesh entitled *Longing Belonging* (1997). It's one of his favourite works. An installation, it consists of a photograph on the wall and an antique Qashqai carpet on the floor below. The carpet has a black velvet patch where the central medallion once was. The same carpet appears in the image, this time placed in an Australian bush setting. In the photograph, a fire is burning on the carpet and a perfect column of flame rises about a metre in height from its centre. Initially Valamanesh wanted to use a cheaper carpet but realised it wouldn't work. He decided he would have to sacrifice this precious one of his own. The bush setting is his wife's family property in the Mallee in Victoria, and at a conference he recounts how his wife's mother, resistant to the idea of burning such a fine carpet, refused to give him any matches. It was only on his insistence that it was "for art's sake" that she relented.¹



Figure 11: Hossein Valamanesh, *Longing Belonging* 1997, Persian carpet, black velvet, 215 x 305 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photo: Michal Klivanek

¹ Keynote speech, Iranica Conference, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2016.

As an artwork it functions equally as an installation, an ephemeral environmental work, and the photographic documentation of this. Its significance for Valamanesh is various. The work recalls the Iranian picnics of his childhood, complete with kilim and samovar. It is also about locating the right place to make camp, both literally and figuratively, for Indigenous peoples as well as for himself. It relates to his discovery of a new life and a new love in Australia, and a love of the bush: "So this was my picnic, my arrival in Australia, and of course the consequence of mixing two places together. It creates new opportunities and loss and also the unknown." Other interpretations swirl around too, considering that the central medallion in the carpet has been blackened and burnt, but for Valamanesh that, too, symbolizes possibility rather than desecration.



Figure 12: Hossein Valamanesh, *Longing Belonging*, 1997, colour photograph, 99 x 99 cm (edition of 3 + 1AP). Photo: Ric Martin.

As a young man, Valamanesh underwent two years of compulsory military service in Tehran and elsewhere. Not surprisingly, Valamanesh's politics at the time were socialist, anti-clergy and angry, his art taking the form of 'angry drawing'. Afterwards he spent time in the theatre, both acting and designing sets. An unexpected result of leaving Iran prior to the revolution was that it freed him from the intensity of his earlier social and political convictions, and granted him the freedom and opportunity to explore his thoughts and emotions.

A second repercussion was the way in which his practice would become informed and enriched by Aboriginal desert art. A year after arriving in Australia in 1972,

Valamanesh found work with the Round Earth Company, a community arts group. Funded by the Australia Council, their brief was to introduce multicultural art and music to remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia, a project that seems quixotically idealistic in today's terms: "It was fantastic. I was offered this job to travel in central Australia for three and a half months, and work with Indigenous communities, not just me, but artists, musicians and craftsmen from all over the world. They bought four-wheel drives, trailers and three months' worth of food, and we stayed three weeks in each settlement".

They visited a number of remote communities, including Warburton, the Docker River, Uluru and Papunya. The result was an unusually vital cultural interaction for everyone, for those in the communities and for those visiting. For a recent arrival, this experience had a signal impact on the artist and his vision. He talks of being invited to attend a traditional ceremony in Warburton, and feeling that he had been granted an extraordinary sense of connection to nature and the universe. In Papunya, he "was struck by the early, first dot paintings, which were being done in that community, and the way their painting, life and mythology were so interconnected. I loved the simplicity of the process of this background, the lines and the dots ... It was a very straightforward process. I asked them 'Can I play with you, and paint a picture?' and they said: 'No problem, as long as you tell your own story, because these are all to do with stories...[They are] not about dots and lines but are to do with stories about mythology, about belonging.'" The work he produced was *The Conference of the Birds* (1974), which he based loosely on a poem by the Iranian poet Attar.

The result, he feels, is a capacity to look at the world through two lenses. He tells of how on a recent visit to Iran he looked up at the patterns traced by the bricks in the dome of a mosque in Isfahan: "When I looked at that amazing ceiling – I had never seen it before – I thought I was looking at Indigenous Australian art."

I ask the Valamaneshes what it was like to be two independent artists raising a child. Both were involved in Nassiem's care, but Angela took on the lion's share, especially

during the early years. For the first four years after Nassiem was born they had separate studios, with Angela working at home. To make ends meet they would sell Angela's pots at the weekend markets. She comments: "it was just at the beginning of child-minding, crèches, and they just kind of didn't exist or if they did they were incredibly expensive. When he was a couple of years old that became an option, but it was probably subsidised".

The two of them had stints teaching at art schools, and they also started showing in commercial galleries in the 1980s. They were fortunate to sell work early on. Nonetheless, according to Hossein, they struggled. "We just kept going. It's difficult! I was offered a fulltime job in 1982 for five months in the art school here, to fill in for someone, and I realized it was quite hard work. I decided, okay, this is not going to happen, I'd better go back to the studio. I presumed and rightly, that you have to persist, you can't just give up and go and do something else".

In answer to my question about shared care, Hossein says: "Yes, there were playgroups and I remember him coming to the studio sometimes." Angela says: "Yes, he came to the studio a lot, and yes, it's hard. On the one hand it's wonderful, you can have a child and stay in the studio and keep working, and you do that to an extent. But in reality it's hard to be really focused and do those two things at once. It's like any job really... if you were a teacher or research scientist or dentist, you wouldn't take your child to work with you, really."

Hossein recounts how when Nassiem was in primary school, he asked them for a pair of white sneakers. They didn't realise that all the kids were wearing them at the time, and turned him down. Angela recalls: "We just didn't have a lot of money at the time". Hossein adds, "Yes, we just didn't see the point. And then he turned around one day and said: 'Why doesn't one of you get a job? At least one?'"

* * *

Calvino's chapter on lightness in *Six Memos for the New Millennium* is about the flight from weight, and it is in part a discourse or meditation about the existential role of literature. He locates this idea quite particularly in a scene from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The anecdote concerns the patrician Florentine poet and philosopher Cavalcanti, and Calvino's comment about Cavalcanti could well serve as a description of Hossein Valamanesh. Late one evening Cavalcanti is accosted by a bunch of gilded youths. Cornered by the revellers near a church amidst some marble tombs, the poet retorts: "Gentlemen, you may say anything you wish to me in your home" before leaping nimbly over a tomb and escaping into the darkness. By "your home" Cavalcanti alludes to the grave, the site of death. Calvino finishes the story by deciding: "Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times – noisy aggressive, revving and roaring – belongs to the world of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars" (Calvino 1988, pp. 11-2). For me Valamanesh is an artist philosopher who likewise raises himself above the weight of the world and whose art has the secret of lightness.

The video work, *Passing Time* (2011) is another collaboration with Nassiem. The image in this work is one that possesses an emblematic value – the artist's hands forming and reforming the infinity sign. The viewer must look at it through a black box with a well-like cone, which allows the image to be seen with greater intimacy. It forms a companion piece to the one of himself as a baby held by his mother's hands (See figure 12). The sense of the cyclical nature of life, and of time, is conveyed here with the lightest of touches.



Figure 13: Hossein Valamanesh, *Passing Time* 2011, Video work

At the end of our afternoon, the Valamaneshes offer with characteristic generosity to drive me to the airport. Before we leave, they consult a recipe book together for the fish curry they plan to make for dinner. On the way there, I accompany them into a magnificent seafood shop where they buy the fish, and then I make my way home.

Karla Dickens – Quickness

*I am a Wiradjuri woman, artist, mother
Upheld with the power of my eagle totem
A bowerbird by nature
I have always wrestled with the idea of 'home'
A roof?
A river?
A sky?
...
At times
Feeling trapped and breathless
My home will close in on me
Caged with doors wide open
The 'home' for which my spirit longs
Is that of 'country'
A nest abandoned generations ago
Not by choice
But by force...*

Karla Dickens, Excerpts from *Clipped Wings II* 2015

If Karla played football like she made art, she'd probably be a winger, dancing and sidestepping down the field full of pace and quick, stylish moves. Then again, she might make a better team doctor. Her art, after all, is a vital medicine – for herself and for anyone else who cares to reach into its depths.

Maurice O'Riordan (2011).

There is a magic in telling the truth that draws out the spaces in-between, the spaces and narratives that are usually overlooked and dismissed.

Karla Dickens (Martin-Chew 2015, p. 71).

Calvino takes the quality of quickness in unexpected directions, forging chains of associations across poetry and other literary forms, in particular folk tale. Fairytales and folktales, he argues, are stories of a particular kind, economically told and compressed in nature. Time plays a crucial function in these traditional forms, in the simplicity of form demanded of an oral tradition and in the repetition of themes and motifs. Then there is the relativity of time, which is compressed one moment and expanded the next. Secondly, he suggests, fairytales often feature a magic object at the centre of the narrative, an object governing events and the actions of characters that itself becomes a protagonist, as in, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*. Karla Dickens makes art that is lodged in stories, and in her work we can see all of Calvino's elements in play – motion, time, story and object.

Firstly motion – Karla Dickens works fast. She is a prolific artist, with hundreds of works and many exhibitions to her name. Her distinctive style of contemporary Aboriginal art is a many-layered exploration of her own and others' experience. It exhibits a kind of functional economy and symbolic compression deriving from its distillation of personal and historical narratives, events and objects. She is driven, her inner energy directed towards her work in ways that have to do with her history and identity as an urban Aboriginal artist.

Dickens' heritage is Wiradjuri. Born and bred in Sydney, she now lives in Goonellabah, on the outskirts of Lismore. In Dickens' distinctive, embellished aesthetic, brutal truths are expressed in raw works of beauty and dignity. In collages, sculptural assemblages, wall works and film and video, we see the past emerge through the interplay of narrative and symbolic representation. Her work achieves a remarkable repatriation to the record of those whom such policies were designed to quell, a reclaiming of the past but also a cultural affirmation in the face of cultural dispossession (2017).

Motion: impetus and urgency

Two types of impetus drive Dickens' work – one political and the other personal, and they are interlinked. On the one hand her art is urgently and unashamedly political. There is an intensity and straightforwardness to the message, as if to make up for lost time and public indifference. Her work creatively references stories and events from the past, acknowledging and rendering the experiences of people who have suffered under Australia's colonial policies and race relations (Attwood 2005). Her work is like an outpouring, consistent and persistent in its creative drive to reclaim and repair past injustices. This huge output is also in part due to her practice of keeping busy, maintaining balance and calm in the face of a history of drug addiction and depression. Art for Dickens is a daily therapy.

Her art also relates to place, with a number of works conceived around the relationship between Indigenous history, her personal past and particular locations.



Figure 14: Karla Dickens, *Never Forgotten* 2015, site specific performance work, cloth, fire, wire fence.

Never Forgotten (2015) is a site-specific text and performance work Dickens made in Blacktown. The location is the original site of the Blacktown Native Institution, which operated there from 1823 to 1829. The work was a sculptural installation, for which

the artist and assistants wound cloth around a cyclone wire fence to spell out the phrase 'loving memory.' The Blacktown Native Institution is one of the institutions in which stolen generation children were placed. The Institution was closed in part due to the difficulty of containing the children, many of whom would escape and return to families camped nearby. The work culminated in a performance in which the artist set fire to the cloth, resulting in the phrase being burned into the fence (Museum of Contemporary Art 2016).

Time present and time past

Reclamation is a central contention of Dickens' work, and it relates to the interwoven issues of memory and of gaps in the historical record, to people whose existence and experience were never marked beyond a name or number in a register. What Dickens' art does is bear witness from the perspective of an urban Aboriginal artist. The decades-long government policy of forcible removal of bi-racial babies and children continued into the 1970s. Dickens' great-grandmother, Mary Anderson, was one such. These children were placed in government institutions or with non-Indigenous people to be reared away from their families. The policy was one based on the principle of assimilation with an undertow of genocide. It resulted in maternal and paternal grief, intergenerational trauma, and loss of identity for those involved, along with and the (often intended) dispersal and dissolution of traditional culture and language (AHRC 1997).

Dickens' art and poetry address the vacuum that many Indigenous people experience: what it's like to be descended from the stolen generations, and how you negotiate Indigenous identity in the absence of ties to country, culture and lore. In the poem quoted above that accompanies the work *Clipped Wings II*, Dickens mourns this lack, the sense of grounded-ness that she feels country and traditional culture might generate. In the absence of connection to country she crafts an art that extends to identity. This is art with purpose. Her urban art bears not only its thematic ties to the

past but material ones as well, replacing those connections with other types of memory and testimony that bring to the fore layers of cruelty, loss and pain.



Figure 15: Karla Dickens, *Clipped Wings II* 2015, rusted steel, chains, feathers, string, text, 200 x 45 x 45 cm.

Clipped Wings II (2015) is like much of Dickens' work, unflinching. It comprises a suspended iron cage, with horizontal metal bands in the shape of a torso. Within it there is a cascade of coloured feathers, chains and knotted strings. The work alludes

to the practice of suspending prisoners from trees in constraints, often to be molested by members of the public or preyed on by birds. It is beautiful and haunting: “The haunting is looking at what the past has created, the damage done, and the mountains and oceans of hard work needed to heal and rebuild a mutual respect and true sense of harmony” (Martin-Chew 2015, p. 73).

Almost all of Dickens’ work opens out into stories that are grounded in history. Her art functions like oral narrative in the urgency, quickness and economy of its message, and in its status as record and commemoration. The appeal of folktales and fairytales, Calvino suggests, lies “in the economy, rhythm, and hard logic with which they are told” (Calvino 1988, p. 35). He points to the compressed nature of the genre, and the way stories are condensed and repetitive so as to be easily passed down as oral narrative. Oral narratives also involve an expanding and compressing of time and a magic object at their centre. The hard logic and symbolic weight of Dickens’ work is located in the resonance between the found objects with which she works and the historical objects and practices to which her work alludes. Her work is crafted from traces and materials of the past and produces a kind of reckoning in its grappling with the realities of past and present injustice. It has a quality of material judiciousness, an objective congruence that can be disturbing. Her art possesses a symbolic compression of obscure truths passed down from one generation to the next.

For *Grounded: Contemporary Australian Art*, an exhibition at the National Art School Gallery in 2017, eight artists were commissioned to make works that reference the location, including its former use as a gaol. Dickens’ work *Hung Strung and Quartered* (2016) alludes to the brutal colonial regime of the gaol, particularly with regard to the male Aboriginal prisoners. This three-part artwork tells the story of what happened to the Indigenous men imprisoned there.

The first section, *Hung*, consists of a series of neckties hung on the wall, a reference to the executions that took place there. *Quartered* is another series of wall works, six decorated penis gourds, each featuring two red cricket balls. Intricately constructed,

they refer to the practice of castrating Aboriginal prisoners. *Hung, Strung and Quartered* (2016) is the big central piece with the Union Jack, the emblem of colonial power, accompanied by various horsehair motifs, shells in a circle and looped and knotted string.

Her art links these stories and practices, past and present, functioning like the magic object of Calvino's evocation of the fairytale. As in Calvino, the object in her work is always part of a narrative and therefore sits at the centre of a web of social relations. Quickness in her work relates to its urgency, in the driving need to tell these stories and the urgent need to be heard. At the heart of her work we find the object of brutality, the historic instrument of oppression or the evidence of oppression, an abject object transformed into a work of art. It provides for the spectator a flash of enlightenment as to the cruelty and viciousness of historical practices. On the other hand, there is the object of beauty and redemption, and sometimes these coexist in the one work.



Figure 16: Karla Dickens, *Quartered I, II, III, IV, V, VI* 2017, mixed media, found objects.

This dialectic, a paradoxical conferring of artistic beauty and dignity on a terrible past, she posits as a form of “reclaiming and restructuring” (Martin-Chew 2015, p. 73). The predominant forms her art takes are collage, sculpture, and sculptural installation. In a process akin to bricolage, she builds up individual works of art from a myriad of materials and objects, mostly found or sourced. Some of these found objects she uses in their original form, others she reworks and decorates. For the most part her work is heavily adorned, which seems to suit its compression. The *Quartered* pieces above, for example, are fabricated from chain, fabric, woven and knotted string, and, as is Dickens’ wont, individually embellished, this time in ceremonial fashion, one with a bark-cloth kangaroo, another a snake skin, a third a large butterfly. Others exhibit beaded appliqué, painted plastic with Indigenous motifs or teeth of some sort.

In her work, the historical objects are in conversation with the new context of the art. A tension is generated between the motif and the (found and reworked) object

including its original usage and provenance. Traces of the past are everywhere in her art, whether in the rusty horseshoes and kitchen utensils, the toys or the cricket balls. In *Strung* the cricket balls speak to the male scrotum. Culturally cricket refers to the colonial past and to the present Australian game, a typical sporting arena of masculine nationalism. The juxtaposition of the two in the work – sport and the idea of castration – is all the more terrible for the breeziness of the red cricket balls, their colour a signifier of their symbolic status.

Such a brutal policy was no doubt practised under the specious pretext of knocking out criminal blood, but the subtext in Australian colonial policy is one of genocide, official attempts to undermine the Indigenous people as a race, to lessen procreation, to hasten what some voiced as the gradual and inevitable decline of the race. And yet the jubilant decoration grants these figures a posthumous status, pointing to another identity, that of masculine power and authority in the adorned costumes of peoples who are hunters and gatherers.

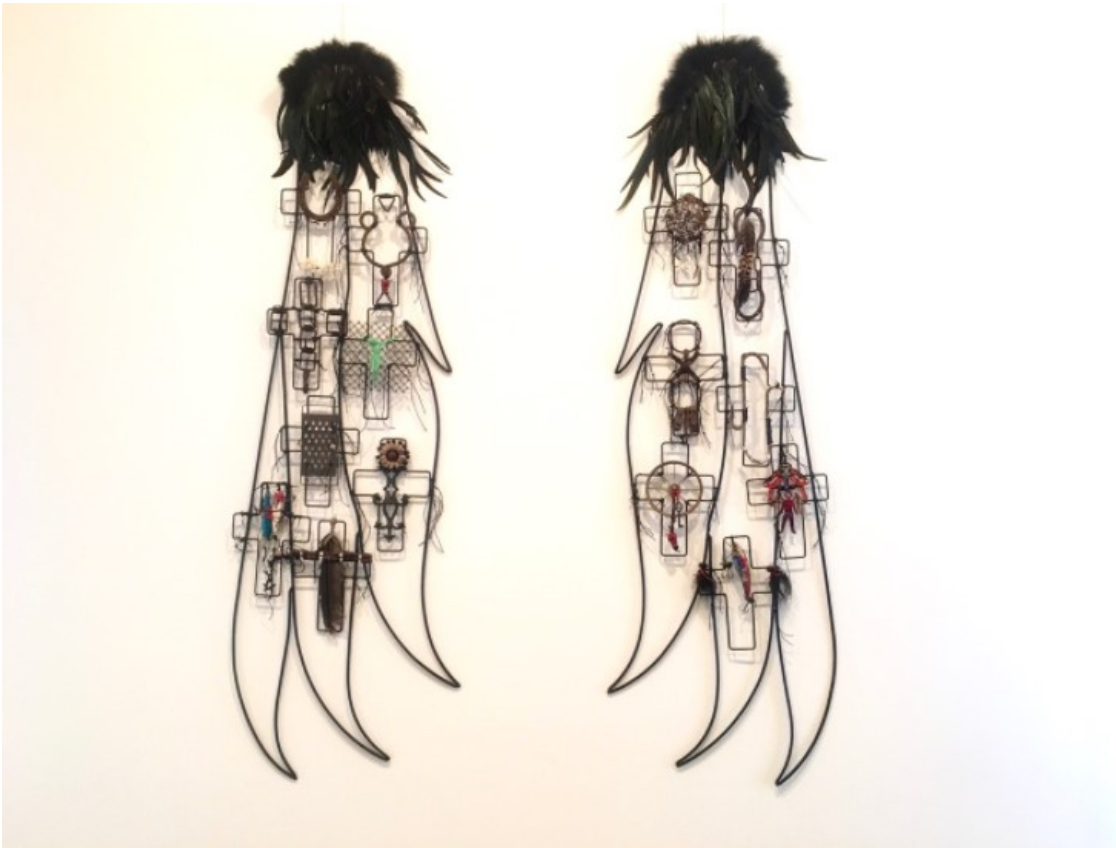


Figure 17: Karla Dickens, *Songs of Sorrow*, 2015, metal, feathers, found objects.

Another work, entitled *Songs of Sorrow* (2015), consists of a pair of forged metal wings. They are decorated with large greenish feathers at the top, and include black rust pieces, hooks, an old grater, buckles, pliers, horseshoes, fishing tackle, string, a plastic Christ on the Cross and various other icons, a monkey, plastic flowers, an old pram wheel, bits of leather and teeth.

The poetry that accompanies much of Dickens' work is written by the artist herself. It often takes the form of an interwoven private and public lament, a search for answers welling up in the face of the sheer weight of historic injustice. In the poem that forms part of *Songs of Sorrow, I,II* (2017), each stanza finishes with a brief imperative command, a kind of condensed version of what it must be like to live amidst and encounter racism on a daily basis, whether in the past or in the present: "Be brave, Be careful, Be scared, Be smart, Be quiet, Be good, Be absent, Be gone."

Dickens sees her work as symbolic of the resilience and persistence of Aboriginal people with regard to what she terms “the suffocation of injustices” (Martin-Chew 2015, p. 74). In Dickens’ hands the magic object at the centre of the story may well be rendered as the telling, even terrible, object. The residue of meaning infiltrates here too. One wall work is made from the leather yoke of a harness – the equipment that went around the horse’s neck in the days of horse-drawn transport and haulage. The yoke is stuffed full of sharpened cricket stumps, and around the base is decorative wrought iron. On the wall is an accompanying poetic text by Dickens comprising a typical list of outback pastoralist possessions: cattle, horses, gin – the latter the vernacular term for Aboriginal women in servitude. The artwork is *Work Horse II* (2015), and it is made in reference to the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women and girls corralled into unpaid domestic and sexual servitude. The work is unflinching.



Figure 18: Karla Dickens, *Workhorse II* 2015, found objects, text, 86 x 60 x 38 cm.

The exhibition in which this work appears is *Sixth Sense* in 2016 which has been guest curated by the Aboriginal writer, curator and activist, Djon Mundine (Mundine 2016a). The exhibition comprises a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art and artists. The sixth sense, Mundine says, is the domain of the mind, of “imagination, a feeling beyond the physical, and more to do with memory and creativity” (Mundine 2016b). We see this in *Work Horse II* (2015). The synergy between the horse’s yoke and the vagina is chilling, the work made all the more shocking for its similitude of form.



Figure 19: Karla Dickens, *Warrior Woman XX*, 2017, cast aluminium, mixed media, found objects, 30 x 18 x 10 cm.

Warrior Woman I-XX is a series of pieces that refer to the experience of women and girls in the history of the Darlinghurst Goal, the site occupied by the National Art School where Dickens underwent her artistic training. It too was exhibited as part of the exhibition *Grounded* in 2017 (Blackall 2017). Dickens' work consists of a double line of wall works, each comprising a pair of ornate cast aluminium underpants. Each has its own aesthetic with diverse materials including beads, tassels, teaspoons, beads, teeth, knotted string, even the portrait of a cat. The historical reference is the routine molestation and rape of the young female prisoners by the prison guards. The aluminium underpants Dickens had cast by technicians in Indonesia. They are all small, a detail that is both poignant and abject. And yet the sheer vitality of the work,

with the different decorations expressive of the individual identities of the young women and girls, gives it a brave beauty.

Karla Dickens grew up in Mascot in South Sydney and lives in Goonellabah, a suburb of Lismore in New South Wales. I fly there for the day to interview her in her home studio. It's a late-winter day, sunny, cool. She picks me up from the airport in her utility. Her black and white dog, Jerry, is in the back. She gives me a warm welcome despite our not having met before. As a person she's small and quiet, with brown hair and a friendly smile, her appearance belying the heft of her work. We drive to her house where she lights her wood combustion fire and kindly proceeds to give me lunch.

Her house is full of art and found objects, some on the floor, some on the walls. The atmosphere is colourful and tactile, and the sun floods in onto her dining table. She shows me a piece she's working on. It's a textile work in the form of a canvas straitjacket, which she is embroidering. It's in homage to her great-grandmother, Mary Anderson, who had been committed to the asylum at Callan Park in Sydney's Rozelle. She died there in the 1950s. The Georgians built their penitentiaries well; like the Darlinghurst Gaol, Callan Park is another generously proportioned, nineteenth century sandstone precinct. It became the site of the Sydney College of Art, one of the art schools Dickens has attended. Mary Anderson was a Wiradjuri woman and a member of the stolen generations. She was removed from her family as a child and sent to work as a domestic servant. *Work Horse II* is one of the works that references her, as does the black crow in *In Loving Memory* (2008) and the firework, *Never Forgotten* of 2015.

Dickens reveals that the curator, Djon Mundine, has commented to her that her work is too dark, and that she needs to lighten up. She concurs, quipping that it's so heavy it's making her back hurt. Apart from her daughter, she adds, it's her *raison d'être*. "I honestly try not to haunt or confront the darkness in white Australia, yet, as long as I breathe, Jack from *The Shining* will remain scary, as will the history of this country"

(Martin-Chew 2015, p. 73). It becomes evident that Dickens' life as a woman who is Indigenous, gay, a former drug addict with mental health issues, and a single mother, is representative of a breadth of experience and hardship on several fronts. Her family and her Indigenous heritage form the chief focus of her work.

Karla Dickens was raised primarily by her grandparents whilst her parents worked. Both grandparents had had traumatic pasts. Her grandmother and great-grandmother were Wiradjuri women. Her great-grandmother left country and came to live in Sydney, in the humpy community then situated behind the airport in Mascot. Her grandmother was born there in 1913. Her grandfather was a German man who was living in the caves at Maroubra when her grandmother met him. She agreed to marry him on the proviso that he buy her a house in Mascot. He found work, and saved enough to buy one. Dickens comments that her grandfather worked in a foundry for five decades, and that when he left, his position was automated.

Dickens spent a lot of time in that house as a child. It was a safe place, and it became her spiritual home. Her grandparents' life was simple, she says, they had no phone and no car. They were reclusive, she adds, and kept to themselves. Both her grandmother and her great-grandmother were members of the stolen generations. Her grandmother's early life had been hard, and she had suffered at the hands of a violent stepfather. She comments that the times generally were unsafe for Aboriginal people, living, as they mostly did, on the fringe. People now choose to inhabit that past, Dickens comments, they look into the pain and injustice, the intergenerational trauma, and discuss it. At the time, though, the tendency was to stay quiet and soldier on. Her grandmother chose not to talk about the past, and maintained her stoicism right up to her death at ninety-four. "She was forever on my case to let things go."

"My work as a writer", states Calvino, "has from the beginning aimed at tracing the lightning flashes of the mental circuits that capture and link points distant from each other in space and time" (Calvino 1988, p. 48). One body of work showing an array of objects and ideas in close communication is Dickens' *Lucky Country* series (2017),

which she made in reference to the famous book and argument by Donald Horne (Horne 1964). This work is a brilliant flash of association in the manner that Calvino describes. Horne wrote the book in the mid-1960s as a polemic, an indictment of a complacent provincial culture still yoked to Great Britain. In the vernacular the term lucky country is used uncritically in the straightforward sense. In her complex of pieces, Dickens lifts Horne's critique of the country as 'lucky' and applies it directly to Aboriginal Australians in a complex and ironic play on racism and on the book. In their treatment of race and class these artworks are rich with intersectional significance. One work takes the form of a canvas straightjacket, this time black. Dickens has painted yellow and white horse shoes down the centre of it, each with 'lucky bastard' inscribed on them and 'lucky, my black ass' across the bottom. Another work comprises two square wall pieces with rusty kerosene lids cut out and applied to them. Bright yellow and black letters spelling out 'unlucky' are scrambled and scattered across the canvas. Next to an enormous 'U' shape she has painted in the 'N' and 'lucky'. Dickens paints whole phrases and quotations from the book directly onto the art, including the following: "Australia is a lucky country run by second rate people who share its luck. It lives on people's ideas and its ordinary people are adaptable. Most of its leaders so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise. A country manacled to its past and to its colonial past in blinkers".

What this work does is shift Horne's debate, by playing on Horne's ironic sense of a tainted luck, whilst expressing the idea that it is in fact the Aboriginal people who are downright unlucky. These pieces offset the historic culture of racism with the literal 'unluckiness' of the Aboriginal nations, the people who happened to be inconveniently in the way of England's penal problem. This was a population who, in the 1960s, did not as yet have citizenship status, nor were they recognised in the Constitution. They rate only a small mention in Horne's book.

The blokey Aussie terms of endearment painted onto the art – 'ya bastard,' 'lucky bastard' and the 'Lucky, my black ass' – operate as both racism and as a kind of ironic

reverse racism. Elsewhere on the work she writes, leaving Horne’s text to speak for itself: “Horne became critical of the phrase being used in the vernacular for Australia: ‘I’ve had to sit though the most appalling rubbish as successive generations misapplied this phrase.’” Horne’s word proved prophetic, as Dickens quotes: “the

alternative to being a clever country is to be a stupid country.”

Dickens herself has had her fair share of hardship. She began using drugs at the age of eleven, and struggled with drug addiction throughout her teens. She went into rehab in her early twenties, and when she came out at the age of twenty-four, she went to art school. She regards her practice as her life’s work, a form of therapy and a processing of the past, her family’s and her own. On her website she writes: “The making of art gives me long periods of solitude and self-actualisation. Finding the zone beyond thought has given my life balance and peace. Creating art connects me to my spirit, and it’s my job to nurture my spirit.” In conversation, she characteristically points out the ironies this opportunity poses: “They [her forebears] didn’t have time to sit around and divulge parts of yourself, or [enquire] why you act a certain way.”



Figure 20: Karla Dickens, *Unlucky Bastard*, 2017, canvas straightjacket, embroidered patches, acrylic paint, mannequin torso, 150 x 60 x 25 cm.

Dickens’ daily routine is arranged around the needs of her daughter. During the week, she tells me, she gets up at 6 o’clock and attends to planning and emails. After breakfast with her daughter she drives her to school, and then returns to work in her

studio until 2 in the afternoon. After a “nana nap,” she picks up her daughter, cooks dinner and then works until bedtime, which, she tells me, tends to be on the early side.

On weekends, she and her daughter routinely scour the local garage sales, markets and the tip, buying collectables and the old iron stuff that she calls “rust.” I comment on a large pot of metal horseshoes by the back door, a load of rust she has picked up. She mentions that her daughter (aged nine at the time of the interview) has just made her first garage sale purchase, apologising for not being able to pay for it herself. Her mother reckons proudly she has a good eye. The father of her daughter, who is a close gay friend of hers, has moved into her downstairs flat, and the two of them are raising their daughter in close proximity.

Dickens’ interest in making art began early: “As a small child I was always armed with scissors and glue. I was forever chopping up Dad’s newspaper.” An affinity with the natural world was already in evidence, together with an early sensitivity to the fact of mortality. As a child she recognised the importance of a ritual observance of the dead, and created a pet cemetery. She made tiny beds for creatures that had died and in it went everything she could find – insects, frogs, birds – each marked with a little cross and for which she would hold services. Now, she says, there is always a dog in her work, always a black dog. The black crow is in attendance too, an intimation of her elders, and in particular, her grandmother.

Dickens’ work drive is inexorable; ideas and art pour out of her. I suspect it’s partly her obsessive *modus operandi* and partly to do with her past – staving off the darkness through creative material inquiry and creating a more expansive identity that links into the deep past. We all embody our family history; it is passed down to us not only in the form of stories or jokes but at a behavioural and cellular level. For Dickens, history is the point of departure for her artistic practice, and its driving force.

Interlinked histories and narratives permeate her art, including the experience of Aboriginal people in the nineteenth-century justice system, and the harrowing stories of injustice and brutality. As someone who mourns the lack of a material connection to

country and the culture it represents, her art is about forging a contemporary Aboriginal art and an Aboriginal identity for herself and for others. “Not many Aboriginal Australians,” she says, “have the privilege to live on Country, connected to culture, free from expectations and assumptions” (Martin-Chew 2015, p. 73). The exigencies of Aboriginal heritage, where so much has been lost, intertwine with her family story, with South Sydney and Redfern culture, with her art school experience and significant locations in the history of race relations.

History is also evident in the found objects with which she works. The practice of collecting and recycling is key to her work and was originally prompted by thrift. Djon Mundine argues that this material retrieval and revitalisation has, for Indigenous people, become symbolically charged. It is a “bristling shimmering spiritual” embodiment of what has been lost culturally through dispossession (Mundine 2010, p. 3).

This quick double movement of loss and renewal, interrogating the past and celebrating the present, plays out in Dickens’ art in just such a way. Her work is an instance of the way in which Aboriginal women are working both to preserve and foster Australian Aboriginal culture as a vital and living force, one grounded in the past but reiterated and extended in the present (NAS 2017). As I’m about to leave, Dickens gives me a greeting card. On it is one of her Black Madonna works, *Black Mother 1* (2009), printed in ochres with a framing swathe of dark blue and touches of pink. The central circular motif is the mother and child. They are conjoined in a graphic style reminiscent of Matisse’s cutouts. As with Matisse, coloured fabrics provide patterning in a composite of layered designs. The dotted infill is a classic Aboriginal art motif continued in the small-scale patterns in the fabric immediately surrounding the figures. At the heart of the image, on the lap of the mother, lies a small remnant of fabric showing a bunch of flowers, and the two heads incline towards it. The card is exquisite, the sort of thing that can make your day.

A vital part of Dickens' art is the creation of images previously unrepresented, figures and images that carry within them stories of affirmation and creative resilience. They also carry with them a sense of magic, whether as magical object or mystical figure. One of these involves the embrace of the self as deemed other, as Indigenous and gay. Artistic vision is something artists are often said to possess, but something can also come into their field of vision in a more circumstantial way, something with which they then become captivated (Hawkins 2006, p. 75). In 2010, Dickens' work took an unexpected direction when she entered and won the National Indigenous Art Award. Her winning proposal involved a body of work around the NSW rugby team the South Sydney Rabbitohs, the game and the team having been central to the culture and community of her youth. One of her aims was to create a link between the sport and art.

The idea for her work originated when she started to notice the running rabbit logo of the Rabbitohs while travelling around and about in Sydney and on the drive home to Lismore. She became aware of the extent of the support the team garners in the city and in her own region, where the games would be broadcast and the results read on the nightly news. The result was *Home is Where the Rabbit Lives* (2011), a diverse body of work that includes collaged prints and paintings, photomedia works and a video installation entitled *The Honey and the Bunny* (2011).

In 2014, *The Honey and the Bunny* was exhibited as part of *Courting Blakness*, a ten-day art installation, and research and staff training initiative, held at the University of Queensland (Foley, Martin-Chew & Nicoll 2015). The year was auspicious – 2014 was the first time the Rabbitohs had won the grand final in over forty years. The video is a narrative starring an unlikely couple: Reggie, the rabbit mascot of the Rabbitohs, and Destiny, a Widjabul/Bandjalung Aboriginal drag queen. The two figures – a short man in full green and red striped bunny regalia with ears, and Destiny, in a red latex bodysuit and towering blond beehive – wander in the moonlight through significant sites around Redfern including the park, the oval, the railway station and the Block. Still photographs of the two figures are spliced into the footage.



Figure 21: Karla Dickens, *The Honey and the Bunny*, 2011, video still.

The work is a new narrative, part love story and part fantasy, featuring an Aboriginal drag queen in the company of a cartoon symbol of sporting culture. The one is representative of the dominant culture, the other, not one but two minority groups. Dickens sees it as a queer fable, and a celebration of community grassroots, including the diversity of her childhood in South Sydney (Martin-Chew 2015, p. 72). It is a “cultural collision,” she comments, that has been made possible by the inclusiveness of the Rabbitohs culture as a sporting club. The sound component comprises the Christian hymn ‘Glory Glory Hallelujah’ a throwback to Dickens’ Christian youth and of course to the Rabbitoh’s club song, ‘Glory Glory to South Sydney’.

The still photomedia shots are set in Redfern, a piece of Sydney turf that is an indelible part of Aboriginal history, home of ongoing claims for Indigenous rights, land rights, and self-determination. And since 2009 it has also been the training ground of the Rabbitohs. In the film are photographs of players training, their outlines blurry against the evening sky, and one of a football mid-air. Alongside these are other shots

that introduce the motif of the running bunny into the locale. Glimpses of the rabbit logo appear in semi-industrial or streetscape images shot at night in saturated colour.

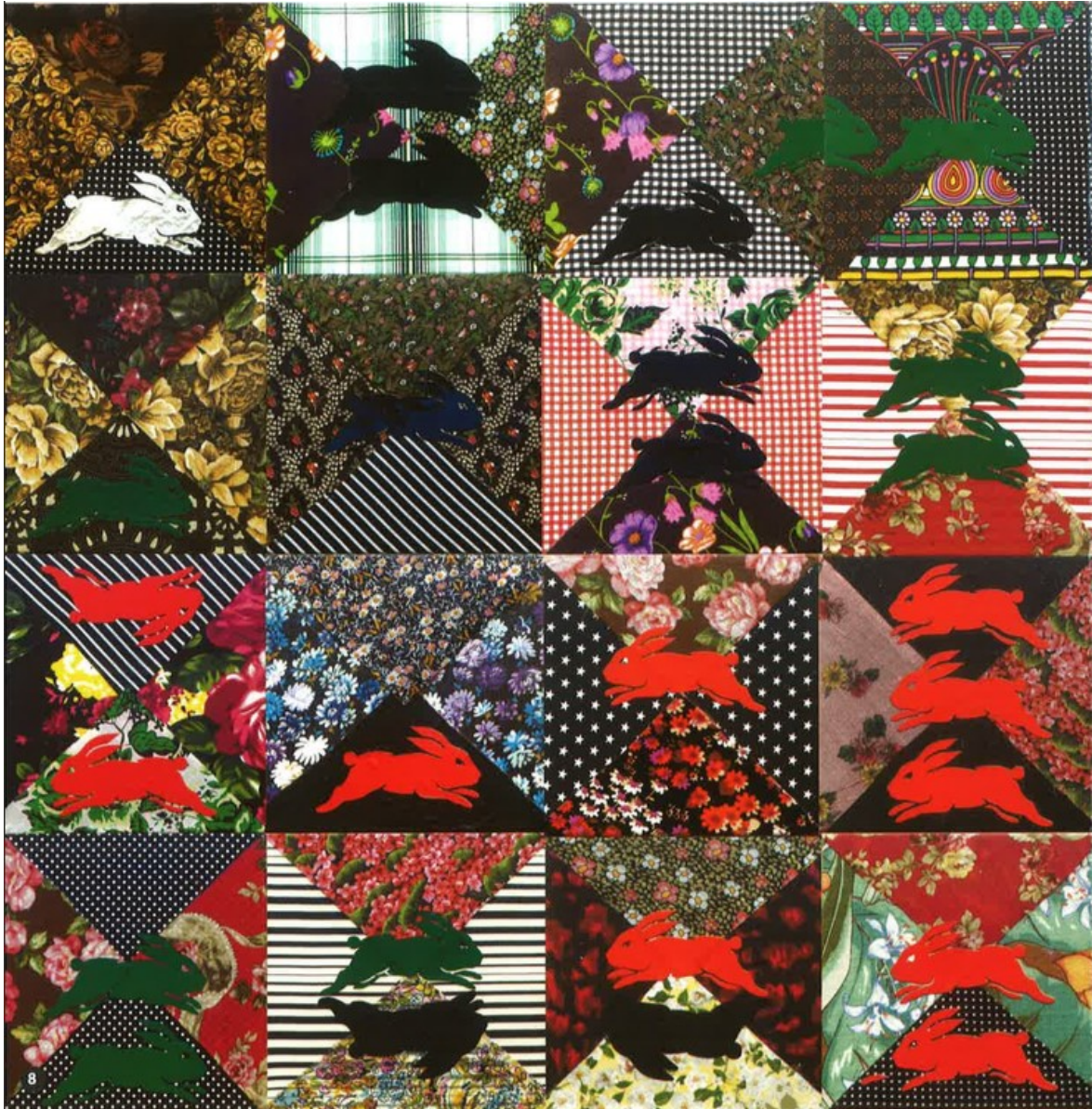


Figure 22: Karla Dickens, *Home is Where the Rabbits Live*, 2011, mixed media on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.

A second celebratory group of works in this series, consisting of painted textile collages sees the Rabbitohs logo transformed into a mandala-like object. Here against a cloth patchwork backdrop we see stencilled bunnies flying across the grid composition, some in vertical formation and some in mirror image. Going further still

towards abstraction are more mandala-like images, with central dotted circles reminiscent of desert art motifs, and a hallucinatory blur of rabbits at the circumference. In this one exhibition, her work embraces everything from photographic realism, to cinematic fable, to graphic psychedelia, to something domestically mystical.



Figure 23: Karla Dickens, *Rabbit Hole 1-4* 2010, mixed media on canvas, 50 x 50 cm each.

Restoring and repairing

We can see a movement back and forth in time in Dickens' work, beginning with the way she uses her own life and experience as a starting point to generate energy and direction. This is particularly the case with the works she has made that reference both her own training as an artist and the experience of Indigenous people more generally. As we saw in *Warrior Woman I-XX*, the work referring to the girls and women in the Darlinghurst Gaol, the beauty of her work resurrects the story for the present. In this work, Dickens has taken these benighted figures and given them the dignity of another identity. Each individual pair of decorated aluminium underpants is transmuted into an adorned ceremonial outfit worn for identity, pride and resistance. This element makes of this artwork a creative reparation, something foregrounded in the work's title.

Much of Dickens' work might be preoccupied with histories of oppression, but another strand establishes new narratives in new contemporary art forms. This is art that is celebratory. In 2009, a few years after the birth of her daughter, Dickens produced an intricate set of works on the theme of the Black Madonna. The works are made from painted and collaged fabric and display her characteristic decorative and textured aesthetic. Drawing on medieval traditions of Marian imagery, Dickens has established a new form of contemporary Aboriginal iconography. Some of these medieval representations of the Virgin with dark skin are thought to be culture specific, cross-cultural figures created through religious syncretism, who symbolise resistance to oppression (Remensnyder 2013). The figure of the Black Madonna is also thought to derive from the worship of pagan earth goddesses, with the earliest Christian churches in Rome being built on the site of ancient pagan temples (Benko 1993).

Dickens herself had a Christian upbringing, and she taps into this tradition whilst drawing on the graphic motifs that feature in classical Aboriginal art. Like much of her

work, the Black Madonna works effortlessly to combine aspects of her own life and experience with cultural elements that are far older. “*The Black Madonna* is Karla’s revisiting of a subliminal, historical, and spiritual memory,” says Djon Mundine (Mundine 2010). These works are poised across three traditions: the orthodox image of the Madonna – the central haloed figure of the Virgin holding the infant Christ – the medieval tradition of the Black Madonna; and a contemporary rendering of Aboriginal spiritual imagery that recognises both the importance of Christianity to Aboriginal people post colonisation, and the existence of ancient forms of worship intrinsic to specific Aboriginal nations and cultures.



Figure 24: Karla Dickens, *Black Madonna VI*, 2009, fabric, acrylic paint, mixed media on canvas.

These are powerful and beautiful collaged works, both for their exuberance, and for the symbolic resistance they pose to the sheer weight of political and cultural exclusion for Indigenous Australians. *Black Madonna VI* (2009) is a work that is redolent with power. The dramatic composition is a reference to the stolen generations. The majestic Madonna is a dotted figure surrounded with dramatic motifs of clouds and lightning. Both she and the child are crowned, and the infant crouches within her, holding aloft the twin motifs of a pineapple and a waratah. The figures are framed by the British Royal coat of arms, a symbolic accession to power. Through its use of the lion and the unicorn and the motto *Dieu et mon Droit*, however,

the work can be seen to pose a challenge to white sovereignty. It is a multilayered work, an educative image that also asserts the right to sovereignty, and which urges viewers to recognise this.



Figure 25: Karla Dickens, *Holy Mother 1* 2009, fabric, acrylic paint, mixed media on canvas.

Holy Mother 1 (2009) is a complex work that depicts a larger God-like figure in outline with a Madonna and child situated icon-like in a small circle at the centre. The touches of vivid blue recall the traditional blue in which the Madonna is robed in the Western religious art. The baby is clothed and is held by the mother around the stomach in a protective hold, with both small arms out in front. The infant is represented as a 'gollywog' figure. Dickens talks about taking back a figure deemed culturally inappropriate, in particular because of her fondness for her own gollywog as a child. The contemporary nature of the gesture lifts the composition out of the traditional into more contemporary mode. The Madonna bears the traditional halo whereas the

larger figure has the dotted white halo reminiscent of the haloed and mysterious Wandjina figures. The bone-like upturned arms on either side are also suggestive of such motifs to be found in Indigenous bark paintings of the Northern Territory.

The background of this collage is black, offset by brilliantly coloured sections of patterned materials overlaid by individual fabric flowers. They curl in tendrils around the perimeter of the central design with a kind of verdant lushness. In an online video Dickens points out the embroidered red roses in one work and the almost Bollywood flavour of the white flowers, acknowledging the simple pleasure she and others can take in these things. She also pays tribute to her grandmother and her love of materials, and you sense that many of these fabric works have been made partly in her memory.

* * *

Dickens' grandmother reappears magically in 2016 at Vivid, Sydney's autumn festival of light and music, where the old French idea of the 'son et lumiere' show is having a contemporary reincarnation. That year the Opera House is the venue for a series of light works by Australian Aboriginal artists. The title is *Lighting the Sails – 'Songlines'*, and it has been curated by Rhoda Roberts (Roberts 2016). These multi-media works are projected hugely onto the vast sails of the Opera House. Dickens' work is an animation, and forms part of a series on a loop, together with works by Djon Mundine, Gabriella Possum Nungurrayi, Reko Rennie, Donny Woolagoodja and the late Gulumbu Yunupingu.

Dickens' piece is awash with gorgeous colour: high above the harbour, gigantic flowers appear and disappear, a dog makes its appearance and the black crow perches, cawing its song of discontent. Or perhaps it's territorial, a song of belonging. This art dealing with racism is beautiful. Dickens tears up when she recounts what it was like to be there with the other artists at the work's opening, listening to the music and to the elders singing the show in.

Elizabeth Gower - Exactitude

There is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order
Walter Benjamin (2009, p. 3)

In his chapter on exactitude, Calvino sets in tension a series of terms, essaying notions of order and disorder in a variety of guises. Exactitude, he writes, is the scientific impulse, and a way of bracing oneself against the infinite and against the diffuse and the indefinable. It is the “comb of lucidity and analysis” that balances logic and imagination (Calvino 1988, p. 67). The most poetic of the juxtapositions he comes up with are two sixteenth-century symbols, the crystal and the flame. The first is an emblem of geometric rationality, the second of the entanglements of human lives. One such juxtaposition plays out in the art and practice of Elizabeth Gower.

Elizabeth Gower’s collage art makes me smile. Which of its elements is the cause? Is it her use of pattern, or is it the fact that she makes her work from tiny slivers of junk mail? There is a delightful irony in the fact that Gower’s geometric art derives from the waste paper of consumer society, that she transforms the throwaway into something of symbolic value. I like the fact that her work swings the onlooker back and forth between these poles, between pattern and source, abstraction and the messy everyday. Here is an artist who makes immaculate art from unlikely materials using a painstaking technique. Her story is one that encompasses a home studio, two children, now adults, an artist husband and a black cat.

Prior to meeting Elizabeth Gower in 2013 I had arranged to interview her at her home. Her dealer had recommended her as an artist who pursued a career after having children at a time when it was less common to do so. Gower’s home is a renovated warehouse in the inner Melbourne suburb of Collingwood. It is an old suburb that still

exhibits traces of its working-class origins, and for me, a former Melburnian, it conjures up the football team of the same name.

Gower is a quietly spoken woman with a slightly deadpan Aussie delivery. We sit in the living room of her home where the décor is bold mid-twentieth century. Jazz is playing quietly in the background and a black cat, Nero, keeps us company. Her partner, the painter John R. Neeson, is working in his studio somewhere in the house.

Collage

Elizabeth Gower is a collage artist. That the materials she works with are pieces of found paper is not necessarily apparent in reproduction. Such is its precision that to see that her work has been collaged, and to appreciate the fact that it's made out of waste paper, you need to look closely. Collage is a form of assemblage, involving the sticking of materials onto a flat surface. Her gravitation toward collage is interesting given that at art school (Pahran College TAFE, which she attended from 1970-1973), she initially trained in painting. She also lectures in painting in the Visual Arts Faculty of the Victoria College of the Arts (VCA).

The dynamic of Elizabeth Gower's collage art moves between the crystal and the flame, that is, between the geometric precision of pattern, the ethic of the handmade and the messy domain of detritus. She builds her patterns by cutting out bits of paper with scissors by hand, taking the fragments from ephemeral printed material such junk mail, glossy magazines and advertising brochures, and sticking them onto a supporting surface. These papers might be pictures, motifs or strips of colour or text. At first glance this might seem like an unlikely technique with which to think pattern.

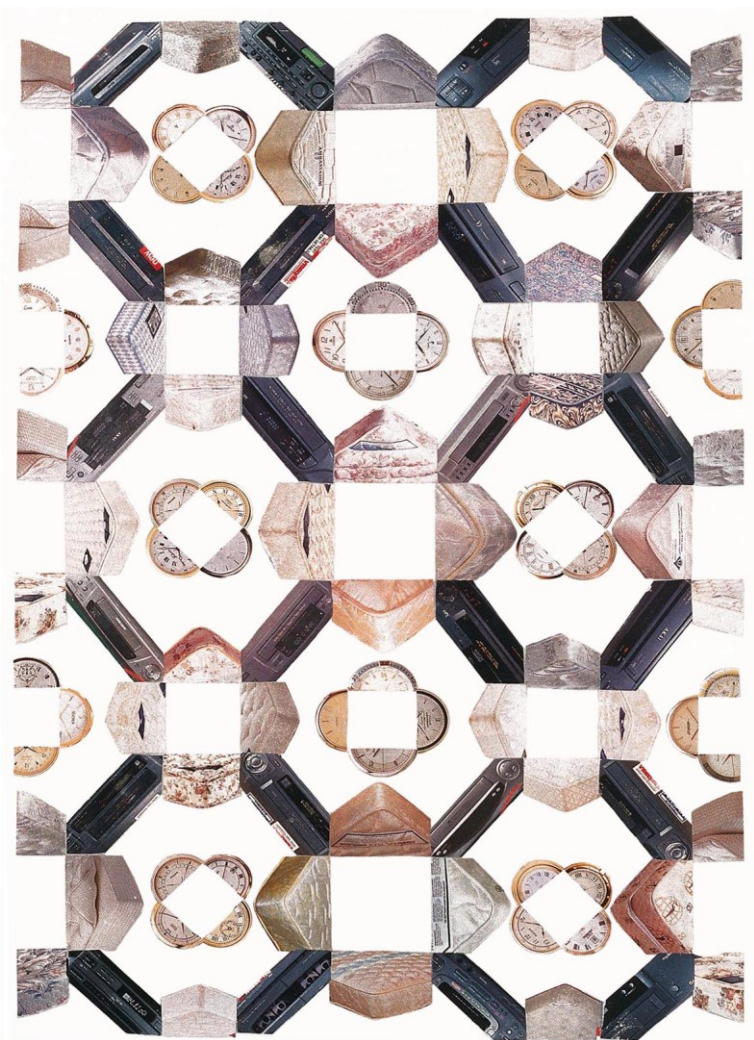


Figure 26: Elizabeth Gower, *Cuttings (from Barcelona)*, 2000-2001, paper on drafting film

She works on board, which she primes, and sticks down the papers with acrylic glue. The papers are sometimes crumpled, and she likes that they are. “I actually like the wear and tear, although by the time the works are finished they often look a lot slicker than they actually are close up. They are found papers but it’s very subtle, because I do tend to cut a straight line.” If Andy Warhol wanted his artistic production to resemble that of a factory production line, Gower’s art is resolutely handmade: “I like the humanness of cutting out, sticking down. Because you could do this work digitally but there doesn’t seem to be any point really. The idea of cutting it out and constructing it by hand is much more interesting to me. I like the primitiveness of it.”

Couldn't it be argued that all art is 'handmade', in the sense of being the product of the hand of the artist? Well, yes and no. In a contemporary art world characterised by found objects, post-object art and conceptual art, art no longer need bear traces of the hand of the artist, despite the fact that the work bears his or her name.¹ The Western art tradition has for the most part held the work of art to be the product of the hand of the artist, or at least in the style of the artist, with the artist defined as an exemplary talent. This model lasted until the early twentieth-century, when Modernists such as Marcel Duchamp challenged the premise that the artist executes the work. Duchamp completely broke the link between the artist and artistic execution with the "readymade", for example, *Fountain* (1917). With this work, having purchased a men's urinal from a plumbing supplier, Duchamp submitted it under the name R. Mutt to an exhibition mounted by the American Society of Independent Artists, where it was duly rejected, only to be reinstated later as a ground-breaking new model of art (Galenson 2006, p. 9).

By the 1960s, movements such as conceptual and performance art no longer even required art to be an object. Instead, art began to take the form of a performance, an intervention or simply an *idea*. For conceptual art particularly, the idea took precedence over its material realisation or manifestation. Today in the field of contemporary art, it is common for the artist to be credited for a work they have conceptualised, even as the fabrication or realisation of the work is achieved by someone else. Contemporary creative practice has in part become creative intellectual property, of which the artist owns the copyright (Forkert 2013).

I first became aware of Gower's work when I saw a beautiful pattern composed of butterflies, from her early body of work *Chance or Design* (1993-95). This series with its Darwinian undertones concentrated on flora and fauna, images of things and creatures from the natural environment. Interestingly behind this work lurks the image of the collector. I think of the Victorians and their drawers full of collections of natural objects, carefully pinned into place.

To understand Elizabeth Gower the artist, we also need to consider her habit of collecting. Collecting is “the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use” (Belk 2013, p. 67). It is distinct from the general attachment to material stuff that characterises contemporary society. Collecting can resemble a drive or compulsion and collectors are passionate and discriminating in their pursuit of it. Collected objects allow themselves to be “personalised and catalogued” says Baudrillard, for whom its very fanaticism grants it something akin to sublimity (Baudrillard 1994, pp. 9-11). Belk sees the selection and ordering of objects in a collection as a “self-expressive creative act” (Belk 2013, p. 89) and, as a “discourse of subjectivity,” (Baudrillard 1994) it produces an expanded sense of self (Belk 2013).

Collecting is integral to Gower’s artistic practice. She collects junk mail catalogues, advertising brochures and product labels, and from this printed material she harvests found images, bits of text and strips of colour. She also has a collection of over six hundred individual coat hangers. She collects visual patterns, architectural and design patterns that she comes across in the built environment. All these sources she uses and reuses in her artistic practice through the technique of collage.

practitioner, he suggests, is to stave off and organise the disorder of the world. And what better way to do this than by transposing the flame into the crystal and transforming a mass of rubbish into art.

Collecting involves not only handling and substitution but also play. Material play and material thinking are fundamental to contemporary art practice. A relationship between objects and time develops. For Baudrillard, collecting even abolishes time, with “the perpetual fresh beginning of a controlled cycle” (Baudrillard 1994, p. 16). As both artist and collector, Gower could be said to possess a double imperative to play. Clearly Gower’s childhood play prefigured her artistic practice, and we can see this in her account of her childhood interaction with her collections. The difference between lining up the labels and arranging them in patterns is one of aesthetics. Creative recycling, you could say, is Gower’s subject and it would prove to be significant both for her future career as an artist, and also in the postgraduate research she would much later undertake. She has recently completed a PhD, and her topic concerns the use of detritus in twentieth-century art. In the interplay between collecting, the environment and her art, pattern is key.

People make inventories of and display their collections and Gower does both of these things. She has a series of works on her website that she calls Inventories. To my mind these fall somewhere between ‘work of art’ and ‘archive’. Collecting, along with the practices of cataloguing and recycling all temper Gower’s art and this becomes evident when she explains the layout of her studio.

The studio

The studio [is] a location where words count less. Where something comes of nothing; sound from silence. Action from impulse.

Phillip Zarrilli (Hoffmann 2012).

Part way into our interview Elizabeth Gower takes me into her large studio and shows me around. This is no inundation of rubbish however. The studio of this collage artist is carefully organised and systematised, with a mass of printed material sorted into bins according to colour or image.

What happens in a studio? One way in which artistic practice can be gauged today is in the way artists conceive of their relation to the studio. Over the last five decades or so, many artists have chosen to dispense with a studio. The 'post-studio' practice can take several forms. It might involve the artist choosing to work outside with the environment itself (as in the work of Andy Goldsmith and Robert Smithson).

Increasingly the studio is a laptop, a digital platform that is a composite of medium, platform and space, where work can be simultaneously generated, stored and disseminated (Jones 2012, p. 121). In contrast to these developments, Gower's artistic practice takes place in a traditional studio. Her current one is a space in her home devoted to her practice, with materials and equipment at hand. She has worked in this home studio since she and her family moved to that house in 2010. Prior to that, Gower has had a variety of studio situations, some at home, others not.

The studio is a "space of possibility;" it allows not just "how" but "what if?" (Hoffmann 2012, p. 105). It is also a place where inventiveness is an inventiveness of matter as well as ideas, a process Paul Carter designates as "material thinking" (Carter 2004, p. xii). Carter argues that the artist's gift of invention is the bringing together of

disparate things to embrace new possibilities (Carter 2004, pp. 7-8). The artist, through a capacity to “perceive analogies existing between matters far apart and, apparently, most dissimilar, *mythopoetically* creates poetic wisdom” writes Paul Carter, transposing the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico’s point about the philosophical enquiry to art (Carter 2004, p. 7). Ongoing experimentation entails persistence and commitment, however, and artists have to be able to tolerate frustration and failure. The studio is a place where it can be safe to fail.

In 2013, Gower mounted an exhibition called *The Cutting Table*, which comprised an installation that mirrored her own studio. It consisted of a long table on which she placed a series of boxes filled with her source materials, the waste paper cuttings she uses in her collage practice. The papers were colour coded and the boxes themselves were arranged in a rough grid formation. The result was a kind of contained chaos with an informal symmetry.

The artist’s role is daring and exclusive. The paradox of artistic practice is that artists create something that wasn’t there before. Its substance may be material or it may constitute an idea or most commonly a mixture of the two. The latter involves the dual labour of imaginative innovation and technical or procedural knowhow. “I can spend all day just fiddling around moving one piece of paper, spending all day deciding whether should I put it there. And I’ll try another place and another place, searching for little things. It can become quite intense.”

But what is evident here is the way creative practice interweaves creative decision-making with play. At times Gower has to make larger decisions, such as the move from image-based works to colour-based ones, or from collage to installation. But many of her creative decisions concern compositional detail. What we see manifested in her practice is a playful experimentation within self-imposed limits.

One of the fascinating arguments to have emerged in continental philosophy has to do with the influence the material world has over us. Rather than seeing our relationship

with materials as purely instrumental, new materialist thinking credits materials with the power to shape our actions (Bryant, Srnicek & Harman 2011; Coole et al. 2010). This idea emerges repeatedly in relation to Gower's work, in the location of her studio and in the way her materials come to dictate the form of her work. For example, not only does she collect her source materials for her art from particular places, but also her patterns. The incidental patterns that can be found in cities and suburbs provide inspiration for her work. In this way her work and her collecting are site-specific, with the structure deriving from the source.

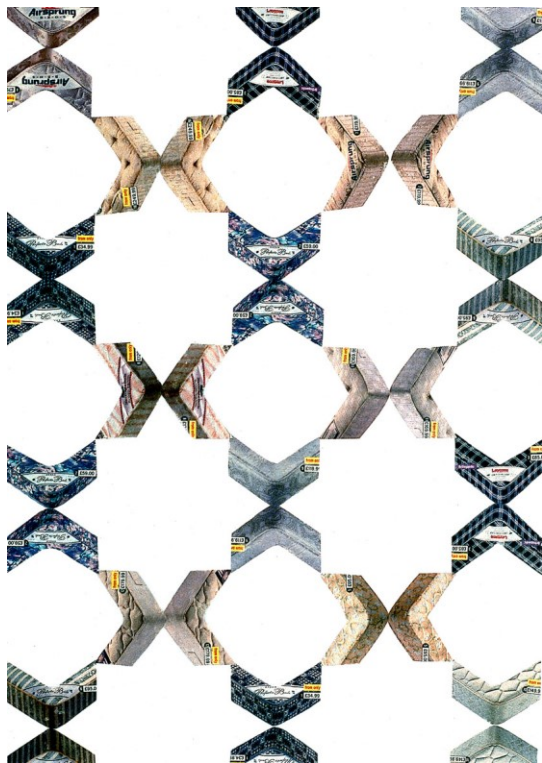


Figure 28: Elizabeth Gower, *Cuttings (from Barcelona)*, 2000-2001, paper on drafting film

The influence of materials is also apparent when you delve down into the detail of her practice. Comparing different types of medium for the substratum of collage, she comments about the transparency of drafting film: "I like its quality because there's a lightness, and the negative space kind of disappears or comes forward. [The notion of negative space in an artwork is a reference to apparently unoccupied space in the work, for example the space between volumes in a sculpture, or the space left blank in

a painting]. I don't have to worry about it, I can just let it be. Whereas when I am working on canvas or board, I have to fill in the entire thing and then it's a different kind of pattern, a bit more quilt-like."

For Gower a fixed board *demand*s to be filled with pattern. And it invites a *quilt* pattern, the type of field pattern with the capacity for infinite repetition. Drafting film, on the other hand, invites her to *leave space*, blank or negative space not being such a concern in this instance. And the pattern here is the motif or *icon* pattern. These are things she is called on to do. "By this stage I'm pretty much doing them automatically, because I've got a thousand. I've been accumulating all these structures and patterns for quite a long time, so it comes fairly easily now." I am struck by Gower's use of the word automatically, and realise that I have assumed that creativity is not automatic but always focused and driven. The everyday as a concept first came to be theorised in the 1930s by the French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre. He talks of the everyday as a place where routine and creativity confront each other. He saw the everyday as a contradictory space, a place where we become alienated, but also a place of democratic and creative possibility (Lefebvre 1991). The studio is a heightened example of this.

Access to a studio and the size and whereabouts of that studio, are variables that have also impacted directly on Gower's art, an instance of the material context determining the form. As Gower suggests, space, time and children are hugely determining factors for an artist's work, indeed for all the artists in this book. These affect not only the way Gower works but the materials she employs and the scale of the work. Depending on the city she is living in, location of the studio and its proximity to home and the way in which she travels there, the studio has a direct role in shaping her art. "And the St Kilda series – I had a studio away from home and would walk there from my place and collect all the stuff from the side of the street. They were always throwing out."



Figure 29: Elizabeth Gower, *Cuttings (from St Kilda)*, 2004-2005, paper on board

That St Kilda period proved to be a very productive time for Gower, with the studio enabling her to produce a number of key works. “It was good because I could just walk out of the door, forget about everything and not get distracted by the washing and so on. But you really had to force yourself to leave, because it was so easy not to. The trouble with the studio away from home when you’ve got children it’s got to be really close to where you’ve got to be, or you have to have someone else who can pick them up.”

The whereabouts of a studio though is not the final determinant of her work. Gower has found that even when she had no particular project in mind, circumstances could provide one. In 1997, Gower’s partner, John R. Neeson, was awarded a Samstag fellowship. This involved an artist residency at the Royal College in London, along with studio space at Gasworks in Kennington in South East London. Gower didn’t have specific plans for her own practice at the time and together with the children accompanied him to London. “I was actually quite happy just to be at home for a while

and not have to go anywhere – to have a bit of headspace and the warmth of the heater. Then I ended up having a show in London and doing all this work.”

The body of work that Gower ended up making in London was *Amor Infiniti* (1997-1998), which was exhibited both in London and in Melbourne. Interestingly it was based on the symbol of the crystal. The work comprises a series of white paper plates, all of which she meticulously cut out to form variations on the snowflake crystal. She had transformed these modest materials into a set of exquisite, snowy, low relief sculptures. Arrayed on a background of duck egg blue, as they were in London, they rise above a Wedgewood lustre.



Figure 30: Elizabeth Gower, *Amor Infiniti*, 1997-1998, paper.

Pattern and place

If you Google Gower's work an exuberant array of patterns pops up – small scale, large scale, multi-coloured, monotone, abstract, figurative, intricate or simple. Yet to say that her work is about pattern or is a celebration of pattern is to overlook a distinctive dimension of her practice, which is that the patterns in her work are grounded in space and time. Gower's art relates to places that are meaningful to her, cities where she has lived or stayed and which have influenced and affected her. This is made apparent by the titles she gives to various bodies of work: *Cuttings (from New York)* 2010; *Cuttings (from Paris)* 2007-2008; *Cuttings (from St Kilda)* 2004-2005, and *Cuttings (from Barcelona)* 2000-2001. The black and white lattice patterns in *Monochrome* (2010) also originated in St Kilda. I love the way that St Kilda, that bohemian Melbourne bayside suburb, makes it into the international league.

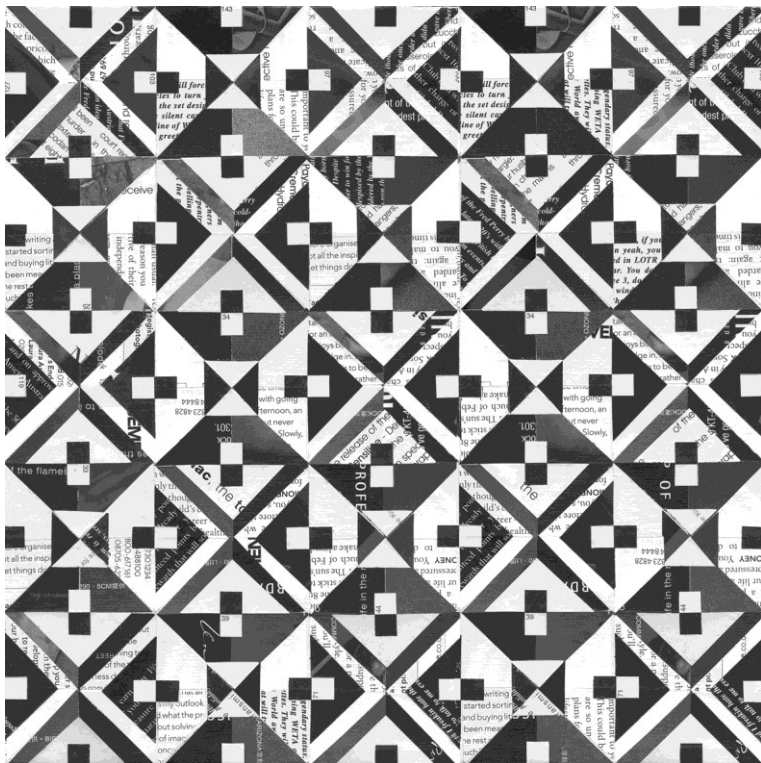


Figure 31: Elizabeth Gower, *Monochrome*, 2010, paper on board.

Elizabeth Gower has an eye for patterns, particularly those in the built environment of the city, and these are things she has also collected. The time she finds them is when she is on the move, when the quality of attention is different. (Walter Benjamin has commented that his best finds have been when he is travelling (Benjamin 2009, p. 5)). Gower has photographed balustrade patterns in Paris, floor patterns in Italy and tile patterns in Barcelona. By photographing these design or architectural elements in situ, she has amassed a bank of pattern templates, many of which evoke the character of a place. By drawing on this archive to structure individual works she establishes a lived relation to the abstract language of pattern.



Figure 32: Elizabeth Gower, *Cuttings (from Paris)*, 2007-2008, paper on drafting film.

Gower's interest in patterns can also be traced back to her childhood, when she would arrange items in her various collections into patterns. And straight out of art school, the newly fledged artist hung lengths of patterned fabric in the studio/living space she established with her then boyfriend, the artist Howard Arkley. "We had these long windows, four of them, and we had a different patterned fabric hanging up on each window. One of the patterns was taken from a 1960s material that my mother had had, and another, an absolutely classic 1960s futuristic pattern, came from the cushions in my father's den." The studio space was the top floor of a large empty Victorian terrace above a liquor store in Chapel Street, South Yarra. The building, with its generous proportions, abundance of light, balcony and rooftop access was a perfect space for an artist's studio. In deference to Arkley, Gower took the smaller space.

The two were part of the burgeoning Melbourne art and music scene of the 1970s and their place became something of a social hub. The artists Jenny Watson and John Nixon lived and worked close by, and at the Seaview Ballroom in nearby St Kilda, Nick Cave's early band, the post-punk *The Birthday Party* played. Arkley and Gower had met at art school at the Prahran College of TAFE. They were married in the Fitzroy Gardens in 1973, and their relationship lasted for eight years. Edwina Preston comments that their marriage was unconventional for the time, based as it was on mutual respect and support for each other as artists rather than the premise of settling down and having kids (Preston 2002, p. 57).

In 1977, thanks to a grant from the French government, Arkley and Gower spent six months travelling and making work in the United States and Europe, where there was an artist residency for each at the International Cité des Arts in Paris. It was the first time either of them had travelled overseas and the trip was a formative experience for them both. Their primary objective was to steep themselves in art, and Gower evokes the excitement and intensity of that time. "We went to every single museum and saw everything for the first time. And it was very poignant. I don't think you can ever capture that again."

It was during this trip that they began to appreciate the welter of decorative detail to be found in these cities. They photographed doors and cast-iron balconies, discovering generative possibilities for their creative practice in these incidental architectural features. Such patterns were to find their way into both artists' work albeit in different ways and at different times. "In their own ways", says Preston, "both Howard and Elizabeth were simply storing up the experience of being overseas – not soaking it up, actively collecting it, in bits and pieces, for later reassembling, to be worked on when they got back. The Postmodernist impulse *en plein air*" (Preston 2002, p. 69). For Arkley this trip marked a turning point in his art and a growing awareness of pattern, evident even in the modest suburban homes of his childhood. Abandoning the abstract minimalism that had preoccupied him until that point, he changed his focus to pattern and figuration. One of the first series he produced was the decorative door panels series, the patterns deriving from the photographs the pair took of the screen doors of Melbourne houses. Arkley subsequently developed his iconic pop art portrayal of the mid-twentieth century Australian suburban house. Shot through with decorative pattern, these airbrushed paintings bear the legacy of that time and that trip.

Gower was a member of the women's movement of the period, and had some involvement with the feminist magazine *Lip*. Along with Jenny Watson she gave talks at the Women's Art Register at the Ewing and George Paton Gallery at the University of Melbourne (Preston 2002, p. 57). Women's art in second wave feminism championed the domestic and personal as political. Women were making art that was domestic and decorative, in part as a celebration of women's traditional craft pursuits. Gower suggests that along with their Paris photographs this rich milieu also was to influence Arkley's practice.

For Gower, however, the full legacy of that trip didn't surface for a while. At the time she was working on fragile and transparent object-based installations, such as her series of paper hangers, but she was conscious of a desire to make work based on that experience of Paris and New York. "I'd go back to Paris every ten years or so just to take more photographs of the same things I'd photographed the first time I was there.

In the end I thought: ‘I’ve just got to do those works I’ve always been meaning to do all these years’. And then I had the opportunity to go back.”

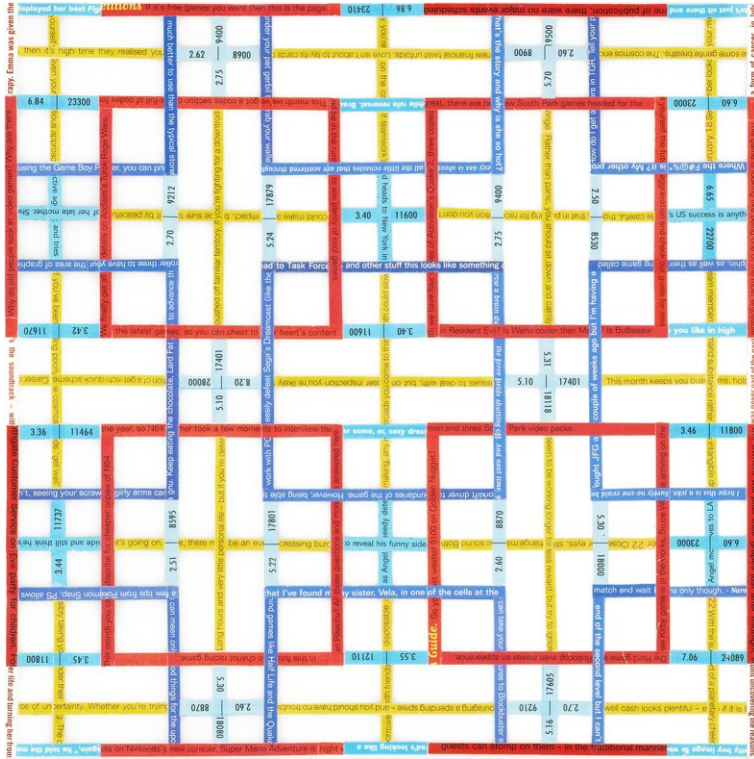


Figure 33: Elizabeth Gower, *Cuttings (from New York)*, 2010, paper on drafting film

Gower also might not have used that stimulus at the time because Arkley was already doing so. “In a sense I never claimed [those patterns], because he did. But it was interesting to go back to the same place and have the same opportunity to do some work – treading some sort of cycle in your life”.

What is pattern and what makes it so appealing? Pattern involves the play of abstract formal components of line, shape, space and scale, which are organised according to the principles of repetition and rotation (Field & Golubitsky 2009). Some patterns we associate with décor or domesticity – fabric, quilts, wallpaper, curtains. Other patterns are more mathematical, bringing to mind research graphs and computer graphics. A key element in geometric pattern is symmetry. Pattern offers a mix of aesthetic

pleasure and optical play. For Alfred Gell the pleasure of pattern lies in the perceptual challenge it poses. Patterns “slow perception down, or even halt it, so that the decorated object is never fully possessed [or grasped], but is always in the process of becoming possessed [which generates] an ‘unfinished exchange’ between pattern and the viewer” (Gell 1998, p. 81).

In his chapter on exactitude, Calvino invokes the sixteenth-century emblems of the crystal and flame, which he suggests inform categories, styles and forms of beauty as well as arrangements of matter. Broadly speaking, they represent mathematical exactitude as against the chaos and imprecision characteristic of human affairs (Calvino 1988, p. 109). We can see these two poles play out in the work of Gower and in definitions of pattern itself. In Gower’s case the crystal and the flame pertain to the tension in her work between pattern and the immanent messiness of waste. With regard to pattern, symmetry plays a part in the two fundamental types of pattern: the symmetric icon, which is complete or finite within the image frame, and the repeating pattern found on quilts, which is infinite in form (Field & Golubitsky 2009). Icon patterns involve two operations of symmetry, those of rotation and reflection, whereas repeating patterns like quilts also involve translational symmetries and glide reflections. The perfect instance of symmetry is the circle and yet perfect symmetry is something we find boring. Much more interesting is broken symmetry, or a mixture of symmetry and dissymmetry. It is less homogenous and therefore creates a dynamic point of contrast. This idea has a parallel in the sciences, where points of scientific interest may occur where there is dissymmetry (Darvas 2007, p. 23).



Figure 34: Elizabeth Gower, *Matrix*, 2015, paper on board

This tension is evident in the detail of Gower's work. The *Matrix* (Gower 2015) works, for example, present from a distance a unified symmetrical pattern. Up close, however, what your eye is drawn to is the variation provided by the cuttings from waste paper mail catalogues from which these works are made. These provide a crystalline flickering of form and colour, with the colours adhering to the principles of rotation and reflection, whilst the randomised fragments of letters serve as a reminder of the works' material origins – the crowded world of products, marketing and paper ephemera.

Alongside its play of order and disorder, the provenance of the pattern in question is also at issue. *Cuttings (from Paris)* (2007–2008) embodies the decorative nature of the French capital, in particular the ornate balustrades and wallpapers with their curves and arabesques. “The structure of the work was completely like a Parisian indulgence,

[and was something] I'd been wanting to do for ages." The wallpaper she referenced from the Musée Carnavalet.



Figure 35: Elizabeth Gower, *Cuttings (from Paris)*, 2007–2008, paper on drafting film

“What makes Paris look like Paris?” Doersch et al. ask, suggesting that the “look and feel’ of a city rests not so much on the few famous landmarks (for example, the Eiffel Tower), but largely on a set of stylistic elements, the visual minutiae of daily urban life” (Doersch, Singh & al. 2015). So the Paris of Gower’s work is evoked through the patterns of its cast-iron balconies, and likewise her Barcelona is brought to life through the Moorish patterns of its tiles. It distils a sense of place through the pattern, and the differing origins of the patterns accounts for the variation in her art. The New York works, for example, play out the grid form of the city, reflecting the geometry of its street plan. “[Mondrian] captured it, you know? Because Manhattan is so gridded,

everything's gridded. You can't actually do a curved line, you know, in New York, whereas in Paris everything was curved."

Collecting and memory are intimately related, and in this relationship too we see Calvino's forces of order and disorder played out. In his whimsical piece on unpacking his library, Walter Benjamin revealed how central memory is to the relation between a collector and his or her collection. Any account they give of it is a way of shoring up the sheer volume of memory attached to their collection (Benjamin 2009, p. 2). Pattern then becomes an aesthetic reminder of place in Gower's art, a pattern memory, and a memory of the time she collected that pattern. The association is a personal, spatial and aesthetic. "And you think, my god, because you are carrying all this memory with you, of the temperature, the colour of the sky – subliminally carrying fields of pattern." Benjamin adds, "This or any other procedure is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions. Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders the chaos of memories"(Benjamin 2009, p. 2).

Waste and the everyday object

"I did a show called *Cuttings from Paris*, made from the papers I had collected from the recycling bin at the Cité ... Everyone was buying all these fantastic French magazines and then throwing them out." The idea of Elizabeth Gower in Paris, on an artist residency, raiding the recycling bins for source materials is wonderfully counter-intuitive. But Gower mines the everyday for her art, and nowhere is this more apparent than in her use of ephemera. The Cité des Arts is a place that provides short-term accommodation and studio space for artists from around the world. The rubbish, however, is still Parisian.

The use of rubbish to make art actually originated in Paris. Recycling became a Modernist art practice long before its current environmental incarnation. In 1912,

during his Cubist phase, Picasso started gluing pieces of newspaper, matchboxes and so forth, onto his oil paintings. Along with fellow Cubist Georges Braques he was experimenting with 'found objects', as they came to be known, and conducting explorations in form between painting and sculpture. Together they pioneered the new art forms of collage (*papier collé*) and assemblage (arrangements of larger, more sculptural found objects). Other artists were quick to adopt these forms. Dadaist artist Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948) incorporated all manner of things into his assemblages, including the broken wheels, funnel and toy train that appear in the delightfully named *Construction for Noble Ladies* (1919). These things he might or might not have chosen at random, but he nonetheless arranged them in accordance with the principles of Cubist composition in a diagrammatic demonstration of structural properties and forces.

Found objects carried a variety of resonances for Modernist artists. At one level the Cubists' use of newspaper cuttings was a reference to the universality of the printed word and image in early twentieth-century society (Kachur 2009). But Picasso employed collage more profoundly to "disrupt the representational and material cohesion of his work" (Green & Picasso 2005, p. 8), resulting in a destabilisation of both artistic form and perception. The often-damaged objects in Schwitters' assemblages – things he had found on the streets of Hanover in the aftermath of World War I – served to symbolise the futility of the war (Gale 2009). On the other hand, in works such as *Construction for Noble Ladies*, Schwitters wanted to "redeem the beauty and history of everyday items" (Gale 2009).

The found objects in Elizabeth Gower's work – the discarded magazines, junk mail catalogues and labels – are the materials from which she builds her art. Depending on the particular body of work, she cuts out from them pictures, colour strips or bits of text, which become the basis of her pattern aesthetic. In *Artefacts of the 20th Century* (1995-1999), for example, tiny pictures of consumer objects such as shoes, cars, irons or office chairs provide the scaffolds for each pattern.

Like Schwitters, Gower reads the city in part via detritus. Her art is partly a product of the way she moves through the city, collecting things as she goes, helping to create order from the surrounding disorder. She navigates the city, any city, with a creative as well as rational intent, an instance of the personal “migratory or metaphorical” city that underlies the observable one (de Certeau 2011, p. 93). “The street tears from obscurity what is hidden,” wrote Maurice Blanchot in 1962 (2008, p. 39), and what a society throws out reveals a great deal about that society, including its material wealth, its everyday domestic practices and its values. The stuff we discard and rubbish we generate is testimony to the amount of stuff we own, the types of objects we once desired and their obsolescence (or not). It is also indicative of our attitude to the environment.

Gower’s art characteristically exhibits unexpected juxtapositions of tiny pictures of mass-produced objects that at times verge on the Surrealist. (Extreme juxtaposition was a tactic the Surrealists employed to disrupt everyday thinking, as in Meret Oppenheim’s *Fur-lined Teacup* of 1936.) From a distance, one image of Gower’s resembles 1960s wallpaper. Up close, however, it reveals itself to be a batty combination of tiny couches, tables, pens and diamond rings. Another image from *Urban Artefacts* (2003-2005) displays a racy combination of tiny bottles of wine and large lipsticks. These objects, which through a play on scale are much the same size, form the pattern components of each of these works of art.

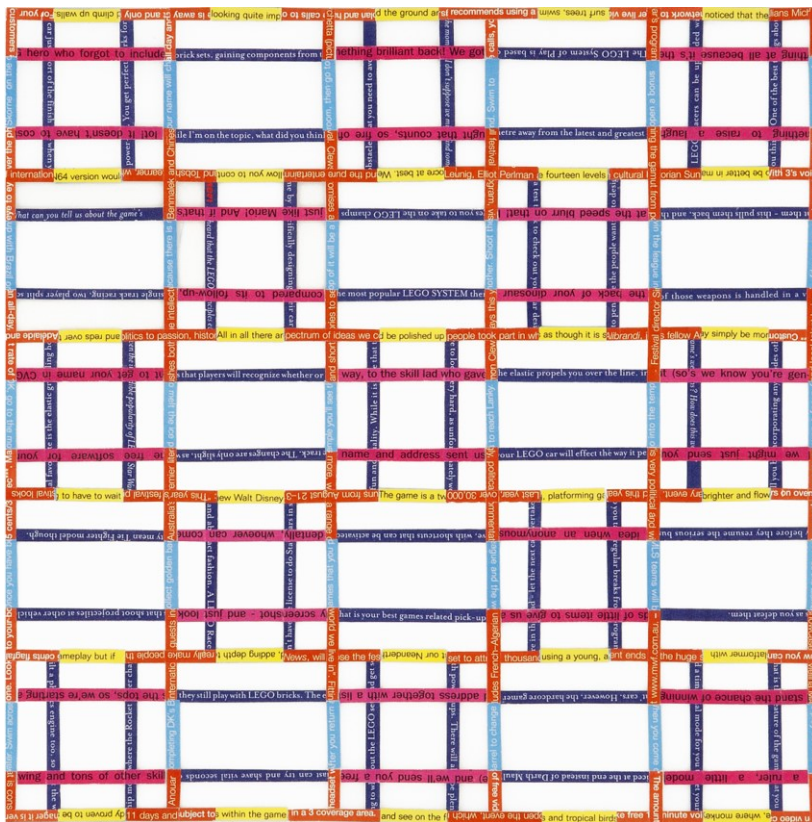


Figure 36: Elizabeth Gower, *Cuttings (from New York)*, 2010, paper on drafting film

Cuttings (from St Kilda) (2004) comprises a dozen or so pattern images that Gower has created using tea-bag labels. By contrast, the grid works of 2010's *Cuttings (from New York)* (Gower 2010) are built up from strips of coloured paper with bits of text that include the word 'Lego'. How do we experience these works, and what do we take away from that experience? Or to ask the question differently, how do these works of art ask us to respond? The play of scale in Gower's work is key here. From a distance we recognise an abstract work of art that consists of a pattern. This is the structure of the work. We can appreciate those patterned works for their aesthetic value or their optical play or their cultural or historical associations. But when we lean in and take a closer look what comes into focus is her source materials – printed matter from the realm of advertising and consumerism – stuff that is completely familiar to us outside of the realm of art. Leaning in closer we realise the little images, the labels and bits of text are collaged, not digitally printed.

Junk mail and packaging are part of our day-to-day living, although now reduced in the digital age. They are our shared experience of the everyday, usually that boring insignificant space that remains, for the most part, beneath our notice. The everyday is a place where nothing happens yet everything happens. It is a place where tea is drunk and toys are bought, where mail is delivered to the post box and the inbox, magazines are read and thrown out and junk mail is discarded. Maurice Blanchot, following up on Lefebvre in the early 1960s, saw the everyday as both banal and important, important insofar as it leads us back to lived experience in all of its unharnessable spontaneity (Blanchot 2008, p. 36). And in his epic two-volume work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (2011), Michel de Certeau mapped the myriad practices that occur in this space.

So what is the nature of Gower's artistic commitment to the everyday? For the viewer there is an ethnographic dimension to her work – it acts as a playful taxonomy of the stuff and the relations that makes up our lives, the flame as against the crystal: the things we own and use, and the practices around them, such as drinking tea, going shopping, throwing stuff out. This everyday dimension of her art reminds us of who we are, the small things and rituals that make up our lives at the most ordinary level, like tea.

Her work also possesses an environmental thrift. We might see it as a critique of consumerism and the “churn of consumption” as the journalist Jacques Peretti calls it (2014). Contemporary society may be in the thrall of accelerating consumption, but here is an artist who makes beautiful work from advertising. The sheer exuberance around the object that her work expresses is in some ways reminiscent of 1950s advertising. It speaks to the desirability of objects and the fun of going shopping.

Be it environmental, habitual or psychological, her interest in the everyday is that of the artist collector. Gower rescues objects from the anonymity and obscurity of the everyday, lifting them back into our consciousness in the form of art. And as a collector, the everyday in her work has a powerful connection to memory. It might be

the amount of tea drunk by the artist at a particular time in her life; the avalanche of stuff that came with having children; the things she photographed in Paris when she went with Arkley and then, later, when she returned with her family; or the time she recognised a pattern or synchronicity between her childhood, her artistic practice and the French realist artists of the 1980s.

“There is nothing like having children to make you, anyone, appreciate the value of time, and to learn how to use it wisely,” she suggests. The rhythms of work are something that artists have to establish themselves. No one is standing over them demanding that they get to work. A mark of a successful creative person is her discipline and her ability to establish and maintain a work practice, whether routine or not. For women with children, this often means working at night or very early in the morning. Gower usually gets to her art practice by late morning or early afternoon, after making telephone calls and attending to emails. The best time for her to work is at night when, if not teaching the next day, she will work until one or two o’clock in the morning. Even when her kids were young, she wouldn’t go to bed before midnight. “I seem to get a bit of a run on at night. I think that’s been my saving grace in a way, because I’ve had the energy to work at night. It’s quiet, there are no phone calls, no one can contact you, you’re settled.”

Children

Elizabeth Gower is, I imagine, one of the few people ever to have photocopied a pram. In the early 1990s she took her son’s pram into work, lifted it onto the photocopier and pressed the button. Even Mary Kelly (an American conceptual artist best known for her groundbreaking and influential 1970s work, *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) did not do that. A material distillation of the first six years of her son’s life, the work looked at her son’s development and acquisition of language, and her own maternal experiences, through the lenses of feminist and psychoanalytic theory).

When she first had children Gower recalls being struck by the sheer amount of clutter that ensued. “This sort of tornado came into the house – the high chair, the bottles, the bibs, the toys, the little shoes, the booties, the jumpers – and then seemed just to disappear.” For Gower these things were not merely baby paraphernalia, but interested her as objects. She proceeded to make an inventory of this stuff, sneaking it into her workplace to use the technology du jour. “I photocopied everything: every bib, nappies, the pram, the cot – all those fragments. The only thing I didn’t do was the cot, because I couldn’t get it in there!”



Figure 37: Elizabeth Gower, *Thinking about the Meaning of Life*, 1990, detail, paper on drafting film.

Due to the nature of the photocopy, only those features touching the photocopier, such as the wheels and spokes of the pram, were in focus. The rest of the objects were barely discernible. This flattening of the image appealed to Gower. She would photocopy the large objects such as the pram section by section, and then piece the photocopies together to form two-dimensional life-sized pictures. The result of this

surreptitious photocopying was *Thinking about the Meaning of Life* (1990), something you tend to do, she suggests, when you have children.

It is an imposing work, on the large side for Gower (288 x 787cm), and consists of a horizontal rectangular work with two smaller red squares on either side. The overall effect is one of geometric abstraction, of layered blocks of red and yellow colour to suggest a cross-configuration. The material derived from the photocopies forms a monochrome figurative substratum on drafting film, its busy swirls from a distance forming an indistinct maze. It has the stark simplicity of a flag, or a work of Russian Suprematism. It is only up close that the black and white filigree becomes recognisable as the mundane domestic rendered by Gower into a kind of hazy, crazy pattern, a distillation of the mad clutter and incessant domesticity. It also brings to mind an important painting of Howard Arkley's, *Primitive* (1981), the dense, swirling monochrome work that heralded his engagement with figuration and which she witnessed being painted.



Figure 38: Elizabeth Gower, *Thinking about the Meaning of Life*, 1990, 288 x 787 cm, paper on drafting film

In the early 1990s, Gower wanted to curate an exhibition about the influence of children on artists' work. She approached the then director of Melbourne's ACCA (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art) with this proposal, which was realised in 1992 with the show *Inherited Absolute: Artists with Children* (Gertsakis 1992).

Gower had two artworks in that exhibition. The first was *Thinking about the Meaning of Life*. The second was *First Year* (April 06, 1986 – April 06, 1987). The inspiration for this work came from the fact that the birth of her son happened to coincide with the nuclear disaster that befell Chernobyl in 1986. Gower comments that this event was something she retained awareness of, even as her world shrank to that cocooned sphere of mother and new-born baby. "I did deliberately collect the newspaper, because I knew that all this stuff was happening in this external world, but I was obsessed with this internal world, with breast-feeding and mashing up the food."

Reflecting on Chernobyl, she ended up making a work that juxtaposed this public disaster and its existential threat with the intimate day-to-day realities of caring for a baby. She established this juxtaposition in the work's form by collaging the domestic details onto the front page of the newspaper. "I embedded it into the text and then I photocopied the whole page again so it was like one piece." The work started with breast-feeding, bibs and extracts of text from the baby manuals, and developed along with her son as he grew.

This splicing of the infant-centred domestic space, with its daily routines of care, into the media agenda of disaster and danger, acts as a kind of riposte to those broader public agendas. The juxtaposition is political, and exemplifies a key feminist principle that 'the personal is political'. Gower sees the women's movement in the Melbourne of the 1980s as a factor in the artworld's embrace of the personal. "What the women's movement did was free up not just female artists, but a lot of male artists of that generation. You could respond to your personal life and your personal environment."

It seems to me that the everyday speaks to Gower, the artist and collector, in a different way. She is able to identify, perhaps with a kind of artistic clairvoyance, the creative potential in things that for most people are indubitably mundane. A newspaper review published at the time of the 1992 exhibition suggested that these artists had achieved a kind of synthesis of the dependent neediness of children and the creative freedom of the artist (Freeman 1992). Bridging the yawning gap between the routine nature of childcare and the libertarian existence of the artist might seem impossible. But for Lefebvre, the everyday is the place of ordinary things and boring repetition, but it is also the place where the seeds of creative endeavour are sown (Lefebvre 1991, p. 44).

For Gower, having babies not only meant incorporating their material world into her art, but also having to adapt her artistic practice to their demands. The constraints posed by children were to join those archetypal ones of time, space and money. We all

have stories concerning near failure to meet work deadlines, but those concerning children can provoke an empathetic wince of pain from fellow parents. The following is one such example.

“It was my first show at Sutton [Galleries] and the kids were in early primary school. I’d already worked out through experience never to have a show during the school holidays, and never to have one the February after the summer break. I had this show lined up for two weeks after the holidays. It was bad timing, I knew, but I was organised. About four weeks before the school holidays, however, one of them got chicken pox and was home for two weeks. Then, at the beginning of the school holidays, the other one caught it. It was a nightmare. I had a studio away from home because I was doing large-scale work. John was teaching part-time, so he would come home, we’d have dinner and then I’d go to the studio. I’d stay there until 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning, and then come home and sleep during *Playschool* and *Sesame Street*, with one of them in the bed with me from 9 till 11. Then I’d sort of sludge around the house looking after them, saying “Isn’t it time you had a nap?” so I could try and catch up on sleep with them in the bed. It wasn’t a very good show. I think it just made it, but it wasn’t a great show.”

For countless women, having children means giving up, or scaling back, on their work, only to find that, in the aftermath, they have lost their career, or at the very least their career path. Being an artist often involves financial hardship but it offers other rewards, ones that help to sustain artists in various ways. As Bourdieu expresses it, artists are rich in cultural and social capital, and these can be parlayed into financial returns, even if not the most lucrative (Bourdieu 1986). For Gower, having children didn’t stymie artistic practice, nor undermine her passion. She attributes this to various factors, including her relationship, her flexibility and her access to ongoing paid employment. She even credits her innate energy, commenting that having always worked at night, she was able to continue to do so after having children.

Gower ultimately attributes her ability to continue her artistic practice as a mother to the fact that she and Neeson have always acted as a team. As artist-parents they juggled responsibility for the kids and negotiated studio time with each other. She believes that most artists with children are in fact reliant on some form of teamwork, particularly if they have second jobs and don't have an extended family to assist with raising the children. And whilst having children with a fellow artist might not be the most lucrative situation, it does mean that your spouse understands the ebb and flow of creative practice.

Far from causing her to become discouraged about her artistic practice, Gower found that becoming a parent gave her a newfound resolution. Where she previously might have spent hours "positioning one piece of paper," having children, she says, "made me finish work, made me get on with it and say to myself: 'I've only got tonight, I've got to finish it tonight'".

* * *

In many ways Gower's collage art is of its time, and that time is passing. The mass of printed material that used to choke our letterboxes now floods our inboxes, where it either languishes in cyberspace or is disposed of with an efficient click of the mouse. This makes her work both current and nostalgic at the same time. But in a further development, the intimate scale of her work is matched by a large-scale equivalent. Gower's work has been commissioned for large public buildings, and appears in the Melbourne Cricket Ground, the Sydney Olympics Superdome and the Melbourne World Trade Centre.

In his chapter on exactitude, Calvino tells us of his tendency as a writer to alternate between two different literary impulses, one that manifests a "bodiless rationality, where one may trace lines that converge, projections, abstract forms, vectors of force" and a second path, one that "goes through a space crammed with objects and attempts to make a verbal equivalent" (p. 74). Transpose this model to art and it expresses the

principles of order and multiplicity, of geometry and human affairs, at play in Gower's art and practice. Now that her children have grown up and she is teaching a few days a week, Gower says she relishes her home-based studio. "Either way," she says in conclusion, "I can't not do anything."

Polixeni Papapetrou – Visibility

The imagination as a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical, of what does not exist and has never existed is indispensable to any form of knowledge.

Italo Calvino (1988, p. 91)



Figure 39: Polixeni Papapetrou, *Moving Under Skies*, 2015, pigment ink print, 105 x 105 cm.

One of Polixeni Papapetrou's photographic works from 2015 shows a young woman dressed in black, running through a glade in the Melbourne General Cemetery. The figure is Olympia, the artist's daughter. She is dressed in a black dress and nineteenth

century bonnet and is carrying a bunch of fronds from a peppercorn tree, all Victorian-era signs of mourning. *Moving Under Skies* (2015) is a fiercely beautiful gothic image, with the unconstrained movement of the grieving young woman positioned at the bottom of the frame with the weight of foliage above her. My thinking about this artist and her work might be said to culminate in this mysterious image. Papapetrou's art traverses what Natasha Bullock has called "the variegated terrain of love's language...joy, elation, longing, loss, melancholia and memory" (2013, p. 9).

We might normally associate the idea of visibility with things seen or not seen in the world around us. But in *Six Memos for the New Millennium* (1988) Calvino approaches the idea of visibility from the perspective of fantasy, and the images that reside in the mind's eye. This perspective provides a valuable way in to the work of photomedia artist Polixeni Papapetrou, whose work comprises meticulous images from the realm of the imaginary that are characterised by ambiguity and performative play.

That the model for the figure in *Moving Under Skies* should be the artist's daughter is fundamental to her practice. Papapetrou has been making work collaboratively with her children, now young adults, since they were young. *Moving Under Skies* was exhibited as part of the exhibition *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, which was held at the Melbourne Centre for Contemporary Photography in September 2015 (Cass 2015). The curator, Naomi Cass, commissioned three artists, Papapetrou, John Gollings and Jane Burton, to create a series of photographic works that responded to the cemetery as an historical precinct. The resulting images were made available for sale as part of a fund-raising initiative for the cemetery. Papapetrou made three other pictures for the exhibition, still lives of fading white flowers set against her trademark velvety backdrop. One ominously entitled *I wove me a wreath* shows a circular arrangement of lilies, roses and leafy tendrils shot from above and exquisitely lit.

The idea of death inflected Papapetrou's work since she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008. She had an immediate double mastectomy, and for the following five

years or so the disease went into remission. 2008 was significant in other ways. She had just completed a studio PhD examining the basis of her practice. In addition, her work had come to the attention of a wider public when she became caught up in the ugly contretemps around the work of fellow artist, Bill Henson (Marr 2008).² A decade later, after ongoing treatment for cancer that had metastasised, Polixeni Papapetrou died in April 2018.

* * *

Papapetrou's art takes the form of the figure study, comprising a unique and mysterious type of portraiture. In it we see costumed, masked or camouflaged figures photographed either in the studio or outdoors in a variety of landscapes. These are formal posed studies, and their power lies in their playful ambiguity. We might be assailed by images all the time, but these are pictures with presence that demand our attention, giving credence to T. J. Mitchell's contention that "pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively; or they look back at us silently across a gulf unbridged by language" (Mitchell 2005, p. 30).

Haunted Country (2006) is a body of work in which Papapetrou's children and some of their friends pose as nineteenth-century children alone in the landscape, an expression of the powerful Australian myth of the lost child. In other series the children wear masks and carry props, adopting characters and poses seemingly derived from narrative or from the stage. What do we make of these phantasmagorical scenarios, and where do they come from?

² <https://www.polixenipapapetrou.net/essay/analysis-art-monthly-australia-controversy/> (Accessed 28/05/2018).



Figure 40: Polixeni Papapetrou, *Whroo 1855* 2006 pigment ink print, 105 x 105 cm. Edition of 6

Papapetrou's work functions as both portrait and performance. Her scenarios are lyrical, the characters posed with a theatricality suggestive of the stage. In her work figures assume the guise of characters from stories or fable, with these narrative scenarios often suggested by the works' titles. The themes are loosely drawn from a range of sources, including folklore and Australian and European art history. Her practice was influenced by such nineteenth-century photographers as Julia Margaret Cameron and Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), with their use of the convention of the *tableau vivant*, and also by the twentieth-century photographer, Diane Arbus. Papapetrou found herself attracted to the way the nineteenth-century photographers deliberately constructed their images. She also liked their play with narrative:

“Photography for the Victorians was about symbolism and allegory and narrative. It wasn’t about a representation of the real. We think that photography is a representation of the real but the Victorians *used* photography. They were great storytellers.”

To fantasy there attaches a narrative. Fantasy involves a fully formed story that takes place in the mind’s eye, furnished with detail and rich with association. For Calvino, the link between visibility and fantasy rests on the role of this imaginative imaging in relation to we ourselves. In his discussion of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, says Calvino, “I will start out this evening with an assertion: fantasy is a place where it rains” (p. 81). He is alluding to the mysterious nature of the mental images that people our imagination. The question of where they come from he later establishes as, according to the historical period in question, either the wisdom of “God” (fourteenth-century Italy), “the unconscious” (in the Freudian twentieth-century), or “the epiphany” (in the present secular age).

Its theatrical elements, in particular mask and masquerade, lift Papapetrou’s work to the level of allegory and fantasy, a place where tension is created between what is seen and what is hidden. We see this played out in various ways, with Olympia portrayed as Alice in *Wonderland* [2004], or masked as a series of archetypal figures – Indian brave, sailor, court lady, merchant – in the series *Phantomwise* (2002-2003), or with Olympia and Solomon posing as characters from fairytales (2004-2014). Papapetrou’s work is a cross over between imaginary worlds and the archetype, the latter often as fanciful as the former. One recurring theme is the imaginative world of child’s play through which Papapetrou layers these cultural archetypes and folkloric themes.



Figure 41: Polixeni Papapetrou, *Indian Brave*, 2002, selenium toned gelatin silver print, 100 x 100 cm. Edition of 6.

Also expressed, beneath the costumes and masks, is the presence of her children themselves. And whether masked or not, these children of the artist often gaze back directly at the viewer, creating an exchange of gazes that possesses a particular charge. In his discussion of visibility, Calvino argues that we need to construct an idea of visuality adequate to the lived being of pictures. Vision, he argues, plays a role along with language in mediating social relations, and Papapetrou's work exhibits an unusually rich network of social relations. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes' work on

photography, he points out that there are three actions with photography: to do, to undergo, to look. These represent, in order, the positions of the photographer, the subject and the viewer (Barthes 1981, pp. 9-10). This relationship between the three is set in motion by Papapetrou's work and it comprises four elements that shift between those three photographic positions: the children, the notion of the other, Papapetrou's illness, and the artist and mother herself.

Roland Barthes has said that cameras are clocks for seeing (Barthes 1981, p. 15); they freeze a moment in time, capturing something never to be repeated. As Roland Barthes would say, where time is at issue in photography, so ultimately is the idea of mortality. The story of Papapetrou's artistic practice is ultimately about time; about time spent collaborating with her family making pictures, and the irrecoverable nature of those moments frozen in time. Papapetrou collaborated with her children from when they were old enough to be involved. Their participation came about, however, in part due to chance. Papapetrou had to discover the subject of the work that was to follow, and what she found was subject matter that simultaneously created a living record of her children's growth and development. And she did this in part by careful planning and preparation, and also by taking her cue from her children.

* * *

I am curious to know how and why Papapetrou became an artist. Was it a calling? A 'calling' was a term that once referred to a religious vocation, (derived from the Latin 'vocare,' 'to call'). Her reply is ironic: "When I was doing my [Law] Articles, I had to give a talk about myself and my interests. I didn't have any interests, because I had been a hardworking student, a conscientious and hardworking law student. When I was talking about myself, I wanted to appear more interesting, so I said that I did photography – I was then asked to photograph a function! I bought myself a camera that week and started to educate myself about photography. I bought a 35 mm (Rolleiflex) camera. It gave me something to do. You see when I started practising law,

I would come home at night and there was nothing to do, because I didn't have any interests. And when I started studying photography, I made notes..."

Why would a young woman like this not have interests? The answers lie in her upbringing. It's the classic story of the conscientious child of post-war immigrants. Her parents emigrated separately from Greece to Australia after World War II. They met and married in Melbourne. By continuing to both work fulltime, they managed to generate sufficient income to send their three children to private schools. Given the opportunity of a very good education, Papapetrou was expected to work hard and she did. She revealed how the desire for education had been thwarted in earlier generations of her family. "My parents are working-class people and they sent three children to an Anglican grammar school. My Dad worked two jobs. They didn't have holidays, they didn't go overseas. [Dad] believed in education. His dream was to educate his family. My father didn't have the opportunity to study because of World War II and then the Greek Civil War. His father was a priest and trained in theology but he himself didn't have that opportunity."

Her decision to study law at university wasn't due to any particular interest in the field. "I wanted to get into the hardest course at Melbourne [University]. In 1979 the hardest course to get into was Arts/Law". The manner in which she applied herself to her newfound interest of photography was characteristically methodical. She took a course at the Council for Adult Education (CAE), made notes (which she still has), and studied the work of well-known photographers, including that of Diane Arbus. And in the person who ran that CAE course, Les Walkling, the Head of Photography at RMIT, she found a mentor. She would henceforth work with him in the postproduction and printing of all her work.

The way in which Papapetrou worked involved a delicate balance between preparation and chance. On the one hand she designed and planned her work in a manner akin to a film director. In her home office she researched each new series, which might perhaps have been inspired by masks she already owned or an idea

received via her children. She built each character by looking through books to find costume and mask ideas, often helped in this by Olympia. She would purchase costumes online, or sift through racks of second hand clothes in charity shops, or ask for her mother's help in sewing them. She scouted for locations, which involved trips into the countryside or to the coast, taking location shots as she went.

She would storyboard or mock up each image by photographing the children in costume, and then photoshop them into two or three backgrounds to see which would work. Only when all this was in place would she organise the shoot on location. The shoot was also semi-cinematic, her crew typically consisting of her husband Robert Nelson handling the lighting equipment, (a small flash and/or reflectors), her children and their friends as the talent and she herself operating the camera. Her equipment of choice initially was a traditional Hasselblad camera on a tripod, using medium-format film. She would then scan the negatives into digital files. In 2014 she turned to a digital Nikon. "When you have a camera in front of your face it obscures your vision, whereas to look down into the camera, and see a world on the other side, [is] really fascinating". In a digital age she took her time to adopt a digital camera ("I like the idea of not knowing what I have"). It is as if she allowed the camera to find the perfect shot. Her nervous excitement at the prospect of seeing the proofs was such that she always asked her husband to collect them from the printer and be the first to check them.

At the shoot, she attempted to set the scene by giving copious directions to the kids. It was, however, the more impromptu moments that tended to be fruitful, when the children had the freedom to inhabit the characters and offer up their own interpretations for her to capture. She explained that early on she would become frustrated when trying to specify a pose for her daughter: "She's the one in her body... I mean in the same way that she made *Gatsby Gal* (2002), she knows, she has an intuitive sense of what to do. It's not because she is some great actor, but children have this ability, we all have this ability and she's allowed to express it." Papapetrou emphasized that from an early age Olympia was involved in making decisions about the subject and composition of images. The series *Phantomwise* arose out of play with

Olympia, and *Dreamchild* (2003), was really Olympia's idea because she had seen a picture of Dodgson's *Alice Liddell as 'The Beggar Maid'* (1858) and she wanted to dress up and be photographed in that way."

This combination of Papapetrou's artistic vision and her children's performative interpretation is the crux of her work: "The children self-direct because they are in their bodies, in the costume and in character; they know what they need to do. I often wait and watch the children to see how they relate to one another. In the process of looking the picture will emerge. They are so comfortable before the camera and I want to photograph their ease, that fluidity and suppleness that reflect an empathy with the subject" (quoted in King 2012).

This ongoing collaboration between mother and child is extremely unusual and also multidimensional, a form of play, a form of work and a record. That this artist depicted children at all is one of the reasons I became interested in her work. When I first encountered Polixeni Papapetrou's art in the late 1990s, I myself was a new mother. Her exhibition *Olympia's Clothes* opened at the Stripp Gallery in Melbourne in March 1999 (Papapetrou & Nelson 1999), at a time when my own two children were three years and eight months old respectively. The exhibition piqued my interest because it concerned, of all things, baby clothes. I was thrilled that someone had been able to say something creative about the immersive world of mothers and babies. For this series, Papapetrou had meticulously photographed all the clothes in her two-year-old daughter's wardrobe, from pastel baby suits to bright toddler ensembles. Laid out and shot individually on a black background, this series amounted to a hundred and thirty-five photographs. The owner of the clothes, Olympia, is absent, but some of the outfits suggest the space that her body inhabits. In her absence, the work possesses a kind of talismanic quality.

On the catalogue that accompanied *Olympia's Clothes*, the small owner of the clothes does appear, but in a separate work – a triptych of photographs entitled *Infant/Infanta* (1999). In the centre is a photograph of Olympia as a baby, sitting

holding a rattle. She appears to be about nine months old, and is wearing a traditional full dress of white lace and cap. There is something arresting in her gaze, the way she looks directly at the viewer, her dark eyes large and serious. Behind her on the floor is a woven cushion featuring the equally dark-eyed Mona Lisa. On either side of this image are two photographs of paintings of aristocratic children by the seventeenth-century Spanish artist, Diego Velázquez. On the left is the Infanta Margarita, and on the right, her little brother, the short-lived Prince Felipe Próspero. Still very young, they are richly dressed in elaborate, floor-length gowns, and are depicted standing and holding onto ornate pieces of furniture.



Figure 42: Polixeni Papapetrou, *Infant/Infanta*, 1999, selenium toned gelatin silver print, colour print.

In this work, Papapetrou grants her own daughter the royal, dynastic status seen in the royal portraits, in a reminder that our children are our legacy and mark our succession. The title, *Infant/Infanta*, is a play across languages. It refers to the baby who is yet to learn to talk – from the Latin term *infans* – as well as being the Spanish term for princess, or daughter of the king. This work plays on the Freudian notion that many of us bestow royal status on our firstborn, and with the range of platforms now available we all create innumerable portraits, a privilege once available only to the wealthy.

Papapetrou's artistic practice was driven by a deep involvement in the imaginative play of children. Children's play is characterised by an imaginative licence and freedom from reason and the laws of physics, an *unboundedness* that the artist maintained we lose once we enter adulthood. One photograph in particular distils this idea. In *The Players* (2009), two children charmingly dressed and masked as anthropomorphic horses play out a scene in a suburban backyard. One horse curtsies in her frock before the other horse, who, hand on chest, inclines her head in a little bow. With its counterpointing of horses, imaginary play and greetings from a distant past, the scene is sweetly bizarre. For Papapetrou this is a world that is, in effect, inaccessible to adults. "I see children as being between two worlds, between infancy and adulthood, and it is this between space that makes them other. So let's make them look really other, and question what we are seeing."



Figure 43: Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Players*, 2009, pigment ink print, 105 x 105 cm. Edition of 8.

The Players, from *Between Worlds* (2009-2012), turns out to be emblematic of Papapetrou's artistic practice in more ways than one. Two of its features – its accidental origins and its focus on the mystery or otherness of children's play – are key to unlocking her work. Otherness is something she herself experienced as a child: "Being a child of immigrant parents in Melbourne in the 1960s, I felt that I didn't belong in Anglo culture. When I started school I didn't speak any English, and felt like an outsider. I started looking at people who didn't belong, and I identified with them. We were cut from the same cloth" (King 2012).

The ongoing collaboration between mother and child began very early. She initially came to involve her children in her artistic practice more or less by accident. “I had never really planned to make work about my children. It arose out of the relationship that we have.” Like many parents, she often photographed her small children playing dress-ups. One such example was a series of shots she took of her daughter Olympia dressing up in her grandmother’s jewellery: “She was very young and she had dummies, and I photographed her with her dummies, and she wanted to wear my mother’s jewellery. She just wanted to be photographed like that and [these pictures] were never meant to be shown. One day a curator was here, and I was just going through my pictures of Olympia and the curator stopped at those and asked to exhibit them. A second curator picked up on those same pictures.”

Recalling how the first pictures were made in what would become *Phantomwise* (2002-2003), she said: “We had been watching a film, *Pocahontas*. The next day it had been raining and [Olympia] was unwell and had to stay home, and she said ‘Mum, can we play dress-ups. I want to look like the Indian brave’. And I said: ‘Actually Olympia, I have some masks...’ I photographed her as we were playing. I just wanted to record those moments. I think I was very curious about play because I didn’t have a lot of it growing up. I grew up in a migrant family. Both my parents worked and I was expected to work quite hard around the house, and I was very studious. There was not a lot to dress up in. I just used to move furniture around as my way of creating an environment. I actually entered the world of play, the world of imagination, through Olympia.”

An epiphany, suggests Calvino, involves processes that transcend our individual intentions and control (p. 87). In Papapetrou’s practice, we see a similar transcendence of the individual in the emergence of her work, in which interfamilial, artistic and material processes converge to create the art. One element in the mix is the found objects with which she worked, often the masks themselves. She explained that she had bought the masks that appear in *Phantomwise* in the 1980s because she liked the look of them. She goes on to relate how this playing around with dress-ups

and photography became the beginning of a new artistic direction. “I think we made three photographs that day; we were just playing really and I just happened to photograph her while we were playing. It was not meant to be an artistic project. So *Indian Brave* (2002), *Chinese Lady* (2002) and *Court Beauty* (2002) were all made on the same day, very quickly, because we were dressing up and she loved these masks. She was four years old. Then I got the pictures back, and I thought: ‘goodness, I think there is something here.’”

Once she realised the potential of these pictures, she started planning them. So [with] pictures like *Gatsby Gal* (2003), there are more props, so that’s when I started staging Olympia...” *Phantomwise* was exhibited in a solo show held at Monash University in 2004 (Papapetrou 2004). The black and white prints have a velvety background and are in her characteristic square format. Unlike the animal masks of *Between Worlds* (2009-2012), these are half masks of adult figures, each with its own elaborate hairdo or hat extending above the face. They form a curious set of cultural types. There are two Orientalist figures, *Chinese Lady* (2002) and *The Beauty of the Harem* (2002), European stereotypes including the *Winter Clown* (2002), *Dutch Girl* (2003) and *Court Beauty* (2002), the historical figure of *Elizabeth I* (2003), general figures such as Legal Counsel (2002) and Chef (2002) along with American types *Indian Brave*, *Pilgrim Quilting* (2003) and *Gatsby Gal*. What we see of Olympia is her mouth – mostly serious – and her pose. The disjunction between the partially visible child – the chubby hands, feet and body of a small child – and the persona she is assuming grants these images poignancy. It is this disjunction between child and character that gives Papapetrou’s work its charge.

If *Phantomwise* was Papapetrou’s first exhibition to depict a masked child, children’s imaginative play became thereafter a recurring motif in her work. Questions of otherness and identity began to coalesce around the image of the child, and around the notion of children’s play itself. This mixture of play and work became an ongoing fixture in their lives, with younger brother Solomon choosing to join in once he was old enough to take an interest. At this preschool age, Papapetrou said “they have

language, they are not writing and reading but they have language, they are talking and asking a lot of questions and that is very powerful". *Phantomwise* wasn't of course the first time she had photographed her daughter playing, but it was the first time she had consciously realised the artistic potential of this approach. An earlier image of Olympia included in the traveling exhibition *Changeling: Childhood and the Uncanny* (Foster 2004-2007) had been selected by the curator. It was only with *Phantomwise* that private play morphed into play and work, when mother and daughter began to create pictures together in an ongoing collaborative process: "So that [was] the time my project with Olympia [began], and it changed my life... We had so much fun. I just loved those early years, it was fantastic."

Their collaboration was such that when Olympia began to offer ideas about the way in which a particular image should be shot, Papapetrou listened: "We used a scenic backdrop such as the Victorian photographers used. And when we were making this work, [the *Dreamchild* restaging of Dodgson's *Alice Liddell as the Beggar Maid*] she is meant to be small. I said to her: 'I'm not happy with this work because you look big'. And she said: 'Mum, why don't you just get up on a ladder, and photograph me from above?' And I said: 'Oh', and I did."

Papapetrou has been criticised for including her children in her art several times throughout her career. *Changeling* was travelling exhibition mounted by the Australian Centre for Photography and one of the places it toured to was Gosford. There police received a public complaint about Papapetrou's work and the exhibition was closed down. Papapetrou was at the time in transit and unable to be reached for comment, and the story died down almost immediately. The work in question is a naked torso shot of the four-year-old Olympia wearing her grandmother's ornate costume jewellery, both necklace and earrings. She is standing at an angle to the camera, with her hands on hips, and interestingly is looking straight at the camera. She exhibits the same, almost fierce gaze she showed as a baby in *Infant/Infanta*. Papapetrou commented on the later work: "That's when I first became aware of her direct gaze, and it scared me. I thought: 'Wow!'"

Further criticism was to follow. In a review of the Citibank Portrait Prize on the newly established art blog *The Art Life*, the reviewer suggested that Papapetrou be reported to the Department of Community Services for photographing her daughter in that way. And in 2008, during a period of pronounced anxiety in this country about the sexualised imaging of children, Papapetrou, like fellow artist, Bill Henson, suffered vilification at the hands of a conservative Australian media and public. Shortly after the furore surrounding Henson's work in 2008 (Marr 2008) and as a riposte to the Henson affair, the journal *Art Monthly* decided to do a special issue on the depiction of children in art.³ The editor at the time asked Papapetrou for permission to put a work by Papapetrou on the cover: *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs* (2003). This was from the 2003 series *Dreamchild*, for which Papapetrou and Olympia had restaged a number of historic images from the work of Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll, including his photographs and also illustrations from his stories. This work had already been published several times, in an exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW, in *The Australian* newspaper and in a Christmas card sent out by the company Citibank. The result was a sustained attack on her artwork from conservative quarters (Marsh & Whyte 2010).

This mental cinema is always at work in each one of us, and it always has been, even before the invention of cinema (Calvino 1988, p. 83).

Whether costumed, masked or in camouflage, many of Papapetrou's fantasy scenarios possess a Gothic flair, and this might also have contributed to the unease felt about her work. We see this in the archetypes derived from fairytales suggestive of legend (the lost child; spirit of place), the circus or in the works from Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. One way of seeing these works is as a "fantastic iconology," a term Calvino uses to describe his own works centred on the theme of the tarot (p. 94). As an aesthetic, the Gothic crosses both visual style and thematic and is lodged in or

³ *Art Monthly Australia*, July 2008, Issue #211.

suggestive of, narrative. Gothic tales characteristically feature the binary trope or play of opposites (Williams 2007b). This play with binaries characterises Papapetrou's art, as in the works that juxtapose children with animals, the young with the old, the sad with the clown. The more bizarre juxtapositions are often offset by the beauty of the composition or the fact of the children's presence as models.



Figure 44: Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Wanderer*, 2009, pigment ink print, 105 x 105 cm. Edition of 8.

Calvino suggests that the imagination itself is anthropomorphic (p. 90). The series *Between Worlds* (2009-2012) might almost be seen as a study of anthropomorphism in children's performative play. *The Wanderer* (2009) shows a child in a stripy dress,

her head enclosed in a deer mask, standing on a high grassy bank overlooking a distant mountain range. Her hands are resting on a walking stick, and she is offset by the glorious blues and purples of mountains and sky. The picturesque mountain scenery is like something out of *The Sound of Music*. The picture has something of the same joie de vivre, the same combination of innocence and kitsch of that famous film and the deer mask is open mouthed, perhaps it is singing.

Oddity and sweetness are also to be found in *The Debutantes* (2009), which shows two children dressed as a boy and a girl, each wearing a lively dalmatian mask. They are posing in a formal garden, greeting each other with an old-fashioned curtsy and bow. Their crisp outfits and the trimmed box hedges create an antiquated scene rudely interrupted by the gleeful expressions of the dogs. It's a colonial tea party with a shot of Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. With *The Harvesters* (2009) we move into the realm of folktale. Prettily dressed in gauzy pink tulle, the children enact the three little pigs busily gathering straw in the middle an Australian wheat paddock. In the surreal *The Caretaker*, a child in a black gown and gorilla mask sits on a chair in an area of bush blackened by bushfire. Armed with a large set of keys, she sits like some sour Dickensian crone guarding a thriving Xanthorrhoea that has re-emerged unscathed from the ashes. An altogether sadder image is *The Loners* (2009), a mother and child rabbit juxtaposed against dark seaside cliffs.



Figure 45: Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Caretaker*, 2010, pigment ink print, 105 x 105 cm. Edition of 8.

The incongruity at the heart of many of these images makes for funny and at times disturbing work. The games and scenarios that the children are enacting have an air of comedic mystery that is heightened by the animal nature of the masks. In meshing the children with animals, also 'other', she has created hybrid creatures, and hybridity breeds enigma. So, too, do the figures sitting incongruously within the landscapes. This is work that is charming one moment and disconcerting the next. Like the folktales these images remind me of, these pictures alternately frolic and brood.

Where, asks Calvino, do the images of fantasy that rain down into our minds come from? They are processes that go beyond our control, he suggests. Depending on the

era, writers have attributed them to god or to “earthly transmitters” such as the individual or the collective unconscious, time regained or to epiphanies, “concentrations of being in a single spot or point of time” (Calvino 1988, p. 87). In its deliberate staged artifice, Papapetrou’s work becomes a study of characters and of the imaginative play of children with its roots in Australian, European, and American traditions. Papapetrou’s imaginary pictures also have composite origins in that they derive in part from the props themselves, which in the main found objects that have suggestive powers of their own. Her choice of masks varies across her bodies of work and they possess a range of overtones and references, including theatre, circus and carnival, European folklore and even the tradition of popular spectacle such as the *Commedia dell’arte*. There is also the role of her children as they collaborate with her to bring to life the characters their mother has envisaged.

Themes of performative identity, otherness and transformation were in evidence from the outset of the artist’s career. From the mid-1980s onwards, Papapetrou photographed subcultures such as Elvis Presley fans, drag queens, Marilyn Monroe impersonators, body builders and circus performers. Sometimes shooting in black and white and sometimes in colour, these are portraits of people who are all crafting alternative identities. “I’ve always been interested in boundaries and identity, and what happens when you cross or transgress boundaries.” Some of these photographic series extended over long periods of time, with the artist forging an ongoing relationship with her subjects. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Papapetrou would go to the San Remo Ballroom in Melbourne each year, and take photographs at the *Miss Alternative World Ball* (1988-1995), for example. Likewise, each year on the anniversary of the death of Elvis Presley, she would go to the cenotaph in the Melbourne General Cemetery and photograph fans as they gathered in full regalia to commemorate their idol (*Elvis Mortal*, 1987-2002).

In 2002, Papapetrou decided to undertake doctoral studies and she chose for her subject the work of a nineteenth-century Victorian photographer, Charles Dodgson. Dodgson was the real name of the children’s author Lewis Carroll. Papapetrou

discovered his work only once she was a parent, and it became influential in her art. Lewis Carroll published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865 and its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass And What Alice Found There* in 1871, along with other stories and poetry. Something of a polymath, he lectured in mathematics at Christ Church College, Oxford, for twenty-six years. He was also an inventor. He took numerous photographs of children and also photographed some of the great cultural figures of the day, including the actress Ellen Terry, the pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. Many of his photographs were narrative shots in which the children or adults posed as characters from fairytales or myth. The model for the character of Alice was Alice Liddell, the daughter of his close friends, the Dean of Christ Church and his wife Lorina, whom he also photographed.

Papapetrou's doctorate was a study of performative identity in which she compared Dodgson's work with that of other Victorian photographers including Julia Margaret Cameron. (Julia Margaret Cameron was the subject of a 2013/14 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. She has been described not only as an early Postmodernist but also as the Cindy Sherman of the Victorian Era). Papapetrou also produced two artistic bodies of work, *Dreamchild* (2003) and *Wonderland* (2004).



Figure 46: Polixeni Papapetrou, *I'm not myself you see*, 2005, type C print, 105 x 105 cm. Edition of 6.

The second person with whom Papapetrou collaborated for much of her career was her husband, Robert Nelson. Nelson painted the backdrops that appear in many of the character shots in these and other series. These usually comprise a vertical backdrop and a horizontal painted ground on which the figures stand. With Nelson as collaborator, Papapetrou researched and restaged versions of some of Dodgson's photographs of Alice Liddell. They also reproduced John Tenniel's illustrations in the 1907 edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The title of her Monash exhibition, *Phantomwise*, was likewise derived from Carroll, in particular the poem at the beginning of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* "she still haunts us phantom wise."

I have always sought out in the imagination a means to attain a knowledge that is outside the individual (Calvino 1988, p. 91).

To fantasy there attaches a narrative and, as in dreams, the subjects of fantasy tend to be ambiguous and unruly, often underpinned by desire or fear in relation to the Other. In psychoanalytic theory, the Other is a complex and powerful projection, in particular

an avenue for negative projections inspired by fear and threat. Papapetrou's work revolves around the notion of the Other, whether in its depiction of childrens' play or its superimposition of age onto youth. This is in line with her Gothic style, the Gothic tradition often involving the pairing of things that should not by rights be brought together.



Figure 47: Polixeni Papapetrou, *Mystical Mothers*, 2012, pigment ink print, 105 x 105 cm. Edition of 6.

The Dreamkeepers (2012) moves into the realm of radically mixed categories. The children wear the masks of old age to create a variety of personas, amongst them aged and sad clowns and old babies. There are the eccentric twin mothers, their twin-ness reproduced in their simultaneous motherhood, who have identical babies with

strangely old faces. In *The Wave Counter* (2012), an old man in his pyjamas stands on a cliff holding onto his Zimmer frame. The stiff observant stance of the old man leaning into the wind has been captured with uncanny verisimilitude by the boy behind the mask, Papapetrou's son Solomon. Again, compositional elements along with the exhibition's title act as a counterpoint to the masks, suggesting a richness of culture preserved in old age. The confronting nature of the masks suggests otherwise, however.



Figure 48: Polixeni Papapetrou, *Study for Hattah Man and Hattah Woman*, 2013, pigment ink print, 100 x 150cm. Edition of 8.

Various bodies of Papapetrou's work have been influenced by her children at various stages of their development, with the notion of imaginative play still underlying Papapetrou's work well into their teenage-hood. The idea for *The Ghillies* (2013) came about when Papapetrou's son Solomon was playing a video game about camouflage and asked her to help him make a camouflage suit. This series of images was exhibited at the Benaki Museum in Athens in 2016 as part of the European Month of

Photography. Photographed in a range of landscapes, including Point Lonsdale and the Wimmera in Victoria and Mungo in New South Wales, it shows figures in the landscape draped and disguised in the vegetation of the region. The sculptural forms morph into the landscape or emerge from it with a kind of mythic quality, rather like a spirit of place. Their form and posture are reminiscent of classical sculpture, inclining heads and leaning forms suggestive of otherworldly presences.

It's All About Me, an exhibition from 2016 (Papapetrou 2016), references sexual politics in contemporary youth culture. As a viewer you get the sense that it was driven by the shared social concerns of mother and daughter. In 2013, Olympia Nelson, then a Year 11 student, published an opinion piece in *The Age* in which she discusses the potential harm that teenage girls do themselves and each other in a competitive selfie culture (Nelson 2013a). *It's All About Me* depicts a masked young woman wearing a series of statement t-shirts with slogans ranging from the narcissistic to the rampantly sexist. This is a body of work that suggests that young women may become trapped in and even complicit in dangerously sexist codes to do with the sexual availability of young women generally. Nelson subsequently published two further opinion pieces in which she argued that the desire to control and punish young women's self-sexuality is more damaging than the images in question (Nelson 2013b, 2013c).

As the children have grown they have also decided to what extent they wish to be revealed in the work. *Haunted Country* from 2006 contains few shots of Olympia's face, which she chose not to reveal at that point in time. *Games of Consequence* on the other hand, a body of work shot two years later in 2008, includes a number of works including the powerful *Miles from Nowhere* in which Olympia gazes directly and uncompromisingly at the camera.

October/November 2007 would turn out to be a momentous month for Polixeni Papapetrou when several fundamental aspects of her life collided. Two of these were her PhD graduation and a medical diagnosis. A lawyer by training, the higher degree

was in fact Papapetrou's way of making the transition to being a fulltime artist. For some years after the birth of the children she worked part time at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal in Melbourne. "I really loved the law but I didn't love the environment I sometimes found myself in. And it was very hard to be myself, because I was a little bit different too. I was a curiosity, I just didn't look as straight as some other people." The combination of her discontent, the sense of her own difference and turning forty proved to be the catalyst for a complete change in career direction. She decided to give up her job, both to concentrate on the children while they were little, and also to devote herself to her artistic career.

That Papapetrou chose to undertake doctoral studies as a way of making the transition to being a full time artist is significant to her story. Despite the fact that a studio doctorate is increasingly found on the curriculum vitae of contemporary artists, it is not a path that artists in the 1990s necessarily took. The decision to abandon a stable and lucrative career can't have been an easy one, leaving behind the regularity of pay and of work itself and the professional identity and social contact that accompany it. The week in which Papapetrou's graduation was scheduled, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Not only did she need a bilateral mastectomy, but it also needed to be done quickly. "I had to pull out of the graduation ceremony because the operation was scheduled for the next day. But because I was going to have a reconstruction, and my plastic surgeon was overseas and we had to wait for him to come back, I was able to graduate. But my name doesn't appear on the list. It doesn't matter." The disavowal didn't entirely disguise her sense of disappointment.

The third event to occur that month was the arrival of an invitation from the National Arts Centre in Tokyo to mount an exhibition of her work. This meant a solo show in a national arts organisation in the biggest city in Japan, a country that takes Western contemporary art extremely seriously. Two large crates of her work were freighted to Japan. To have these three events coincide – international recognition, a PhD, and cancer – would be almost laughable if it were not so frightening.

From 2014 Papapetrou's work starts to become more elegiac. *Lost Psyche* (2014) was made, during the metastatic phase of her illness, with her new Nikon digital camera. It reflects on historical figures, cultural archetypes who produce and safeguard culture. We see a storyteller, a troubadour, a poet, a daydreamer, a summer clown and an antiquarian depicted along with their patrons, the duchess and the merchant. The characters pose against painted thematic backdrops painted by Nelson. All these



Figure 49: Polixeni Papapetrou, *The Story Teller*, 2014, pigment ink print, 100 x 150 cm.

figures are modelled by the teenage children, and the suggestion is that in contemporary society such keepers of the culture are becoming conspicuous by their absence. The series *Melancholy* dives deeper into the shadows, invoking states of mind and being that bring to mind the humours of medieval thought. In Papapetrou's various iterations of the clown and court jester we see Despondency, Grief, Sombreness, Pathos, Sorrow, Decrepitude and Melancholia itself.

Papapetrou gives the title *Eden* to an exhibition from 2016 (Papapetrou 2016). This beautiful and complex body of work bears a number of constructions. It comprises ten prints of young women in images that reveal a profusion of flowers and floral fabrics layered one over the other. The various young women modelling for this series wear floral dresses and are posed against floral fabric backdrops. They also wear or hold a variety of floral arrangements: a coronet, wrist corsages, a lei. There are also three wreaths, one of them heart-shaped. The fabric backdrops are bark cloth, and each work has a coordinating colour, flower and fabric scheme.

Eden is the biblical site of idealism, a garden where the great drama of innocence and experience is played out. At one level this series represents this ideal of youth and beauty. The titles Papapetrou gives the pictures reveal a number of mythological associations underpinning the series. They include the names of flowers and goddesses: *Rhodora*, a flower and also a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson; *Amaryllis*, a flower and a shepherdess in Virgil's pastoral poetry; *Amaranthine*, a colour and an imaginary unfading flower; *Flora*, the Roman goddess of flowers and of nature; and *Psyche*, the Roman goddess of the soul. There is also *Delphi*, the site of the ancient Greek sanctuary of Apollo, *Spring*, and *Eden* itself. These are gorgeous works, portraits of young women on the cusp of adulthood in a celebration of youth, beauty, abundance and pattern. It is also a recuperation of the idea of Eden, not as imminent fall but as a transition, a liminal space for these young women.



Figure 50: Polixeni Papapetrou, *Heart*, 2016, pigment ink print, 150 x 100 cm.

The suggestion of a fall, if it can be called that, lies not in the full biblical sense but in the intimations of mourning. The loss is our mortality. In 2017/18 some of these works appeared in the exhibition *The Cancer Puzzle: Patterns, Paradoxes and Personalities* at the Medical History Museum at the University of Melbourne (Melbourne 2017-2018). Papapetrou's story was one of those featured in the exhibition and in its catalogue. Eden is the first time that the symbolic presence of the artist herself comes to be felt in the work. One work shows a heart-shaped yellow and

white wreath being held aloft by her daughter. This work is called simply *Heart*. A second work in which Olympia appears is *Blinded*, and it shows her daughter wearing a mask of flowers that obscures her eyes. A second wreath, *Flora*, also made from a profusion of yellow and white flowers, is subsequently echoed in the one that would be placed on Papapetrou's coffin at her funeral in 2018.

* * *

In literature, says Calvino, "images develop their own potentialities" (p. 89) and lead the writer in various and unexpected directions. This is also the case for the viewer of art, and combines with our cultural disposition to interpret images symbolically. I see in the Eden series a meditation on mortality with the artist reflecting on her illness and on her love for her daughter at this signal moment in Olympia's life. For Roland Barthes, photography itself is a *memento mori*. The very act of capturing something on film generates a moment frozen in time, a never to be repeated instant that ultimately signals the mortality of us all. In Eden, the pressure of time is expressed as well as the presence of love, the instantaneity of the moment offset by the carefully composed nature of the images, for art is of course destined to outlive us all.

Towards the end of Papapetrou's career, the hidden other turns out to be death itself, her own in the face of terminal cancer. For Calvino the imagination is a source of knowledge, a universal truth to the world or a Jungian communion with the world soul. This notion of world soul, it seems to me, pervades Papapetrou's work in its representation of fantasy and masquerade, child's play and the archetypes she so vitally captures. It is also there in her oeuvre as a version of motherhood, one in which the artist mother plays with her children while she works. As an artist, she has said, she did not make the children, they made her. I began this chapter by asking what it is that her work wants of its viewers. In piquing our imagination and eliciting our sympathy, I suggest that what it wants is a recognition of the imagination as world soul. What does the artist want? Amongst many things she would want us to recognise her relationship with her children as being one of love and profound respect.

As early as 2008, the effect of her illness was to make Papapetrou more courageous and determined in her practice, and we see this reflected in her last exhibition, one she curated as a survey of her career and her relationship with her daughter. The title of the exhibition, *My Heart – Still Full of Her* (Papapetrou 2018) refers to Olympia and perhaps also to herself as she once was. This series is a paean to her daughter, expressed in titles such as *Muse* and as *My ghost*. The intimate twinning of mother and artist *The gaze* and *T[og]ether* reveals the symbiosis and identification between mother and daughter, and the depth of their relationship in the mother's eyes.

For the first time since having children, Papapetrou reveals herself in these images. They also include several self-portraits from the period before she had children: *Curtain, I once was* and *I am a camera*. The latter shows an artist already cognizant of the play of gazes that photography unleashes, that of the photographer, that of the camera itself and that of the subject. The field of the gaze between mother and daughter has been there incipiently all along but is now brought to life in this little maquette study in which Papapetrou sets up two dolls as photographer and subject. The seriousness with which Olympia has always been able to return her mother's and the camera's gaze is a sign of trust, and also reveals the way in which the art and the practice belongs to them both. Not for Olympia a recomposing of her features as for social media but instead a commitment to the process as a creative undertaking. In *Eden* we see the face that has been variously visible and hidden in the past now framed by the heart shaped pink and white flowers. In *My Heart – Still Full of Her* we see Olympia honoured as both beloved daughter and collaborator.

By 2014 Papapetrou's cancer had returned, this time having metastasised. She embarked on a series of drug trials over the next four years that would see her go in and out of hospital in various states of ill health interspersed with some periods of relative wellness. Pain was a constant but she kept working nonetheless, researching and making calls from her bed if necessary.

For Calvino there is no exact relationship between the three worlds of imagination, experience and literature [or art] (p. 97). Instead what he sees is a layering of order and disorder from which we make and remake meaning. Papapetrou's art embraces the notion of the other, depicting it in all its potential oddity with empathy and compassion, in the recognition that the other is part of ourselves. The story of this chapter is one about the making of fantastic pictures, about time, about a family endeavour and ultimately about death. When Polixeni Papapetrou died in 2018 the exhibition, *My Heart – Still Full of Her*, was showing in Sydney. She credited the cancer in part for her clarity and sense of purpose: "When I was diagnosed with cancer, one thing became crystal clear to me – and that is probably the biggest revelation – my children would have this record of their early childhood, and they'd know how much I loved them, and how much we played together when we were making these pictures. They would have this legacy."

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro – Multiplicity

Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.

Italo Calvino (Calvino 1988, p. 124)

Things you ardently wanted and then did not.

Gay Hawkins (Hawkins 2006, pp. 71-2)

Calvino's chapter on multiplicity concerns the novel. It is here that we see an extended discussion of his own craft as a writer of fiction. The discussion encompasses what he calls the encyclopaedic novel of the nineteenth century, represented by Flaubert amongst others, and the hyper novel of the twentieth-century, which he discusses in relation to Perec, Borges and his own work. These two literary forms, he suggests, project a vision of the world characterised by networks and systems. The encyclopaedic novel represents the world as an infinite web of connections between things, and the hyper novel invokes infinite possibilities that often relate to time (p. 120).

Calvino posits the relationship between object and network as transitive. Networks radiate out from every object, he argues, connecting it with people and events. Both types of novel portray the world as a "system of systems' where each conditions the others and is conditioned by them" (pp. 105-6). He gives as an example the fact that Gadda inserts a recipe in one of his novels for 'Risotto alla Milanese,' a recipe that begins with the rice still partly in its husks. Multiple possibilities present themselves at every turn in a kind of field of inter-changeability. Vectors and force fields, as he puts it elsewhere, abound.

For Calvino, novels such as these present multiplicity as a way of looking at the world. What happens if I take Calvino's argument about multiplicity in fiction and transpose it to the multi-layered work of Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro? The connectedness of things in their work comes to the fore, as does the way it traces networks and systems. Their art exemplifies the idea of multiplicity at a number of levels, not least because of their wholesale collaboration with each other, a professional collaboration that merges into their relationship as a couple. A key subject of their art is the phenomenon of globalism, and through their practice they subject it to both material and critical enquiry. This artistic engagement with globalism is focused on its systems – material, social and digital. Add to this sculptural assemblage, the art form their work frequently assumes, and the pairing of their work with thinking on multiplicity becomes a fruitful one.

We live in an interdisciplinary age, where the complexities of the contemporary world demand interdisciplinary approaches and solutions, be they biotechnological, socio-digital or socio-scientific-environmental. These complexities are a product of a globalised world, itself in part formed through the combined ideologies of market economics, communications technology, digitisation and quite possibly neo-liberalism. Calvino sees a role for literature in this scenario. Alongside science, he argues, “the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various ‘codes’, into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world” (Calvino 1988, p. 112).

The world is a ‘system of systems’, where each system conditions the others and is conditioned by them.

Calvino (1988, pp. 105-6).



Figure 51: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Master Bedroom – Deer*, 2014, Lego, IKEA chairs, paper roll, plant, 179 x 170 x 130 cm.

At the opening of Healy and Cordeiro's exhibition *Venerable Architecture* (Healey & Cordeiro 2014), one of the works was positioned in the stairwell leading up to the gallery. It was a sculpture of a deer made from Lego, a buck no less, about three-quarter size in scale, its blocky multi-colour form pixelated against the white walls like a computer image. The creature was accompanied by a selection of home-wares: two black chairs, a pot plant and a kind of paper roll made of wood. Inside the gallery were ten or so other Lego creature sculptures arranged around the space. They included a penguin, a chimpanzee, a seal, a python, a manta ray and a lion, each likewise incorporating various homewares. Framed pictures also made of Lego completed the exhibition. This is sculpture but not as we know it. To begin with, it is not the single object of traditional sculpture crafted from the one medium, but a collection of disparate things, an assemblage of component parts, including the Lego, that the artists have amassed and pieced together. The various objects added to the mix included a footstool (the seal), a baby change table (the lion) and a chair (the penguin). Most of the works also featured an artificial pot plant.

There is something humorous and playful about this work. It has to do with the design of the animals and the fact that they have been constructed from that quintessential child's plaything, Lego. Then there is the decorative colour scheme of each assemblage, which has a kind of interior design appeal. The impression of home deco is also reinforced by the titles of the works, which together describe the plan of a house. The fact that the artists have sourced the furniture and other homewares from the global giant, IKEA underscores the effect.

So the seal becomes *Kitchen/Pantry – Seal*; the penguin is *Upstairs Study – Penguin*, and the lion *Bedroom 3, Baby's Room – Lion*, the deer being, of course, *Master Bedroom*. We begin to understand the relationship between the household goods and the animals, each designated a room in the house. The benign nature of these artworks is, however, undermined by a disturbing structural feature: the furniture and homewares aren't just adjacent to the creatures, they are embedded in their bodies. A further unusual note is provided by the pictures recreated in Lego. They turn out to be stills from pornographic films that also happen to feature IKEA furniture.

In the company of these animals, I think about the various things occurring in this exhibition, the nonchalant offsetting of sex by Lego and the invocation of sexually transmitted disease through the exhibition's title, *Venerial Architecture*. This strange fusion of opposites animal/object, nature and the domestic, Lego/sex, creates a dissonance with the sheer ontological distance of these things from each other. What is this art doing, with its animals impaled by IKEA and its Lego porn?

You do not expect to see Lego or IKEA in a gallery, even today, when almost anything goes in contemporary art. The everyday utility of these objects, combined with their status as commodities seems to put them at odds with the gallery space, especially the 'white cube' atmosphere of Roslyn Oxley9 ('white cube' is a phrase used to describe the contemporary art gallery in which sensory information is minimised in order not to detract from the experience of the art (See O'Doherty 1999)). It seems to me that

there is something peculiarly fitting about Healy and Cordeiro's art, which is not to suggest it is safe or anodyne. It has to do with the way things *fit*, literally and figuratively, in their artistic practice. We can see this in the mathematical logic that underpins much of their assemblage work, their technical preoccupation with calibrating and ordering material units (Judd 2009). But additionally it is there in the relationship in their art between objects and concepts, art and social practice. The fit is designed to be disruptive and even uncanny, and it is the intention of this chapter to try to tease this out.

When I interview the artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro at their home, the couple's two children are playing in an adjacent room. Now and then they wander in, or one or other parent disappears briefly to attend to them. I notice the way the parents' interaction with the children is threaded through the fabric of our conversation. At one point the kids run in announcing 'Pizza Delivery!' and flourish a box under our noses. After due payment, we all receive a colourful piece of pizza made of felt. Some way into the interview Cordeiro starts playing the Japanese wood block game, Jenga, with the kids. He reminds them to "Tessellate [the blocks], tessellate them!" as the children, aged five and three, take it in turns to carefully remove a block from the body of the tower and place it on top. There is some negotiation around the fact that the younger child is using both hands instead of the required one, because she is, after all, three.

Reflecting later on this lovely scene I'm struck as a parent by the facility of these children, in particular their spatial and motor coordination, not to mention linguistic sophistication. It strikes me that this expert tinkering with Jenga could be a microcosm of the artists' practice. Rather than employ traditional sculptural techniques of modelling or casting, Healy and Cordeiro work primarily with assemblage, creating works of art from component parts. These children of sculptors are familiar with what their parents do for a living because they have witnessed their parents doing this kind of thing all their lives.

There is something else at play here though, to do with the dynamics of our interview, and the easy grace with which the couple relate to the children whilst chatting to me (and each other) about their work. This, too, I suspect is illustrative of the way they work. These two are collaborative artists who work together to make art that bears both their names. The pair met at art school, at what was then the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales, where each was doing a Masters degree and had an individual art practice. After helping each other on a series of projects they started collaborating officially in 2001. They have maintained their joint practice over a period of time approaching two decades.

One of the things I find interesting about their situation is the way their art arises through their creative interaction. Their partnership provides not only a synthesis of skills and outlooks but also the opportunity to develop ideas and projects together along the lines of a dialogue. Given that their collaboration is both personal and professional, they have an intriguing way of managing it. The two may not always agree with each other's ideas but they nevertheless write everything down in a 'little black book'. This book acts as a mediating resource, in not only preserving ideas for future reference but also circumventing fluctuations in the dynamics of their relationship. As might be guessed, there is also a fair degree of mutuality in their lives. Like many contemporary artists they read a great deal, but they try to read the same book at the same time. They laughingly mention their different bedtime reading habits, with Claire falling asleep over her book almost immediately whilst Sean reads faster and faster in postponement of the inevitable.

Healy and Cordeiro exhibit an unusually tight integration of life and work. Their artistic collaboration is fundamental to this, but it's not the only factor. They also draw inspiration for their art from their international lifestyle. As global artists, these two have spent the best part of twelve years living and working overseas. They have done this in order to take advantage of international fellowships, artist residencies and exhibition opportunities, as the recipients of a number of grants (from funding bodies such as the Australia Council) and scholarships (such as the Anne and Gordon Samstag

International Visual Arts Scholarship). Between 2005 and 2010 they lived between Berlin and Australia, which included a year-long artist residency in Germany. They have been to Switzerland, and have had several stints in Japan, including a residency on the island of Teshima located in the Setouchi inland sea and, in 2012-2013, they spent a year in Malaysia.

For Healy and Cordeiro, travel throws up creative possibilities that might bypass the rest of us. Both artists have Masters degrees in Fine Arts. This demanding higher degree is one that many artists today undertake and it calls for both artistic and intellectual capacity. When their individual proclivities and outlooks are added to the picture it becomes clear that by working together Healy and Cordeiro multiply their pool of skills along with their cultural capital (Bourdieu's theory of 'cultural capital' refers to the ways in which social relations of inequality are produced in and through the education system (Bourdieu 1986)). This combined critical acuity and practical knowhow is something they take with them across the spheres of work and everyday life, including travel and relocation.

Calvino argues that the contemporary novel can be seen as "an encyclopaedia, a method of knowledge, and above all as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world" (p. 105). This polyvalency, in which the drive for knowledge sits alongside a networked model of how things work, is central to Healy and Cordeiro's art. The artists' experience of relocation and itinerancy, amongst other things, has generated for them an artistic interest in the systems and machinery that exemplify globalism. These include the movement of people, goods and information, involving travel, freight, logistics and marketing. Cordeiro comments that as sculptors, they are already invested in questions of mass, form and space. Once mobility was added to the mix of concerns, they began to identify links between, transport, commerce and aesthetics.

As well as providing inspiration, the machinery of globalism has also furnished the raw materials for their art. Euro pallets, cable binding, gaffer tape, global products and

even aeroplanes can be found in their art. These materials the artists have found, purchased or otherwise appropriated. Once in possession of them, their approach typically involves analysing and dismantling them, before assembling them with “a careful eye to their aesthetic composition” (Davis 2012, p. 9).



Figure 52: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Par Avion* 2011, 70 cut pieces from a Cessna 172 airplane, gaffa tape, dimensions variable.

Par Avion (2011), for example, is a work that featured in the pair’s solo exhibition of 2013 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (Davis 2012). It is a wall installation made from a small plane that has been sectioned into 70 pieces. The pair obtained the plane – a Cessna 172 – in the Queensland town of Roma. On close inspection you see that each piece of the installation is wrapped and displays airmail stickers, with each one being of regulation postal size. It transpires that the whole plane was posted by the artists, piece by piece, to the destinations where the work was to be exhibited, firstly San Francisco in 2011, and then Sydney in 2012.

There is flexibility in the way an artwork such as this can be exhibited. In San Francisco the work took the form of a floor installation. In the larger spaces at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, however, the artists were able to install the

work on a wall. They positioned the plane vertically and nose down, making for the suggestion of a perilous flight path. They chose to leave gaps between the pieces through which the white wall appeared, giving the work an attenuated elegance suggestive more of the idea of a plane as much as its actuality.

What we have here is not only visual art, but art as logistics. The work is a witty play on the logistics of global consignment. The viewer's appreciation of the work is enhanced by the understanding that this is a real plane, which, having been cut into pieces, has been sent as air freight. In the end it is the material and conceptual inventiveness of this work that appeals to me. The work sets up a creative interplay between objects, real world practices and ideas, between the plane and global systems of consignment. In its play on the term *par avion*, its condensation of flight and freight, the work performs a kind of excess, which sets up a question about the possible meaning of excess in relation to these practices in the real world.

A found object, then, is a deeply poignant piece of someone's repurposed trash...still pregnant with prior use.

(Diaz 2007, p. 207).

These days audiences of contemporary art are used to walking into galleries and seeing art made from everyday objects and even rubbish. After all, these practices are hardly new, the found object in art dating back to the Modernists' experiments of the early twentieth century. What we see in these various types of assemblage are the connections between objects and ideas and between objects and people that Calvino locates in the novel. Objects can possess a particular charge and generate a powerful attachment. They can be a source of vitality for people (Turkle 2011). Found objects in art assume artistic (and often personal) resonance for the artist whilst retaining vestiges of their former use and significance. What is at stake in assemblage is the nature and provenance of the found object, and how it plays into the new context of the artwork. The motivation for its inclusion may be formal, symbolic, political, or highly personal and passionate.

For Marcel Duchamp, the found object was subversive and strategic, a way of bringing into question established artworld thinking, particularly the premise that art show evidence of the hand of the artist. By declaring art to be whatever the artist claims it to be, he was redirecting attention to the importance of ideas and the artist's thinking. Schwitters' assemblages were composed from a singular, even bizarre mix of personal possessions and found objects. He called them 'Merz pictures', a reference to Kommerz, the name of a bank. His work took on the status of a material philosophy, a response to the irrationality and darkness of the times, in line with Dadaism, an art of cultural and psychological disturbance that mirrored the horror of the First World War (Foster & Krauss 2012).

In their artistic practice, Healy and Cordeiro sometimes utilise the found object as is, but will more often than not transform it. You could see their work as a partial reinstatement of the hand of the artist whilst maintaining the effect of the found things. Early in their career, Healy and Cordeiro made assemblages from stuff they found in the art spaces in which they were working. *Takadanobaba* (2005), for example, is an installation Healy and Cordeiro created with the entire contents of the artists' residency they had been allotted in Tokyo. For this work they took everything they found in the space – desk, chairs, files, bedding, laundry basket, heater, boxes, fire extinguisher etc. – and stacked it carefully against one wall of the space. The work covers the wall and becomes in effect a wall work. The result is a neat geometrical arrangement, a condensation and ordering of objects in harmony with the nature of the space, a small traditional tatami room. The work aligns with the principle of economy, both of space and of décor, that is a feature of traditional Japanese culture and also a result of urban congestion.



Figure 53: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Takadanobaba*, 2005, found objects within artist residency in Tokyo, 147 x 119.

The French have a term for making something using only what is at hand – *bricolage* (Wilson & Lack 2008, p. 41). Bricolage as a DIY activity is not limited to artists but is something we all engage in at some point in our lives. Playing with, arranging and making things can be seen as an extension of the kind of concrete thinking that

children engage in and, according to Sherry Turkle, bricolage remains a passionate practice (Turkle 2011, pp. 5, 309). Healy and Cordeiro display a propensity for bricolage of a particular kind in an artistic practice that leans toward order, calibration and units. Random found objects can have an intransigence of form, and although Healy and Cordeiro treat them differently depending on the work in question, their version of assemblage is based on a mathematical logic: dismantle and arrange things in a kind of orderly geometrical manner, using the techniques of stacking and compression. The conceptual links with travel and the need for economy of space are both evident.

Bricolage also exemplifies a form of making do. Healy and Cordeiro's propensity to use what is at hand is an expression of a broader ethos. It is a philosophy that is apparent in their art and in the way they live. It is a mode of proceeding that runs counter to consumer capitalism with its economic growth based on maximising the turnover of goods and services. Their work demonstrates what we are in danger of losing in the digital consumer age: the ability to work with our hands to make things, to fix things, and to make do with less. Not only is their art made from repurposed objects but it also embraces downright rubbish. One of their most recent works, *The Ugly Stick Orchestra* (2017) is a floor work. What we see is a sculptural effigy of a eucalypt, the shape of the tree having been carved into a constellation of roadie's boxes, the sort of case bands cart their equipment in. This hollowed out form has then been filled with beer bottle tops. The work is a reference to the lagerphone, a rudimentary home-grown instrument created by nailing bottle tops to a stick. Despite its humble materials and origins, the work is surprisingly evocative, especially when spot lit from above.



Figure 54: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *The Ugly Stick Orchestra*, 2017, beer bottle tops, roadie cases, gum tree, 6.5 x 5.4 x .47 m.

Early in their collaboration, the pair embarked on the artistic transformation of a huge found object – an entire house. It was a monumental task of dis-assembly and re-assembly. The house in question was slated for demolition, and they were able to requisition it free of charge for creative purposes. Even so, the project, entitled *The Cordial Home Project*, posed a logistical challenge given that they had limited funds. In 2003 they had the house demolished by professionals and the materials were then transported by truck to Artspace, an exhibition space in Sydney's Woolloomooloo. Then over a month and with the help of a community of family and friends, the artists re-assembled it in layers to form an assemblage.



Figure 55: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *The Cordial Home Project*, 2003, entire house deconstructed and layered. Photo: Liz Ham (estimation) 7 x 7 x 1.65 m

The resulting work forms a slab of stacked or flat-packed materials wedged between vertical joists. Layers of like materials are compressed and sandwiched together to form neat patterns. It is a quintessential example of their proclivity to stack and condense raw materials. It is an abstract work, based on the cube and grid format, two key motifs of Modernist art. As such, it exhibits a satisfying patterning and symmetry, and for me is reminiscent of the Cuisenaire rods used to teach children mathematics in the 1960s.

But this is not only an abstract work. Its fabrication also describes a wonderful movement from house to detritus to abstract sculpture. The compression of the house is mirrored in the notion of cordial in the title. As the artists point out, cordial is a distillation and also a reference to sociability and the type of welcome you might receive on visiting someone at their home. And despite the change of form and context, the material qualities of the original house are still readily apparent in the installation.

Part of the visual satisfaction the work affords is tracing the various materials back to their original usage in the house.

Healy and Cordeiro's work also throws up playful conceits. In his essay on *The Cordial Home Project* work for the exhibition catalogue, the artist/writer David Burrows concocted a flight of fantasy in which a real estate agent would be invited to come and value a property for sale, only to discover that it had been demolished and flat packed as a work of art. And a previous work by Healy and Cordeiro, *Location to Die For*, involved the fake sale of an art gallery as a piece of real estate.

Inspiration for *The Cordial Home Project* grew from the couple's conviction at the time that, like many of their generation, they might never be able to afford a house. They might be rich in cultural capital, but were definitely cash poor. In raising questions about the relative value of art and real estate, and by implication society's priorities, the project also pointed up discrepancies between their vocation and its low remuneration. The degree to which art is prized is rarely commensurate with an artist's earnings, international stars in the world of contemporary art such as Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor or Jeff Koons are rare exceptions. That, however, is another topic.

The Cordial Home Project did a number of things at once. It highlighted the particular significance of the house as found object for the artists, and acted as a broader symbol within the context of social critique, a political statement about the prohibitive cost of housing in the Sydney region for first homebuyers.

It is a measure of their (international) success that Healy and Cordeiro have been able to garner sufficient institutional support and sales to devote themselves to their artistic practice, obviating the need for a second job. This is in marked contrast to many visual artists, who need to subsidise their art practice with other employment (Throsby & Zednik 2010). A career path such as theirs demands a fair amount of administration. A contemporary art practice is comparable to running a small business. In addition to making art, artists regularly apply for grants and residencies.

Art funding is extremely competitive, limited and short-term. It needs to be repeatedly sought after and applied for. Like many artists, Healy and Cordeiro manage these bureaucratic measures and international travel and relocation arrangements alongside their art as well as keeping up with the usual professional commitments to do with dealers, art galleries, publicity, speaking and writing.

Healy and Cordeiro are no strangers to frugality. As global artists, they are members of what the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk has called the 'jet set proletariat' (Lally 2011, pp. 113-4). The economics of this are interesting. People in this position are flown around the world and provided with accommodation, but when the fellowship or residency comes to an end, so does the funding. It is remarkable how the couple has continued this lifestyle with not just one child, but two children in tow. As infants, the children would seem to have fitted into their parents' lives without rending the fabric of their artistic practice.

Healy and Cordeiro are resilient; their approach to parenting is not just relaxed but positively adventurous, as Cordeiro intimates in his account of work trips they took with their infant son: "It was very busy/pretty go go go when Jonah first came along – he flew to about seven different countries by the time he was six months old. And then at around that point, we spent three months in Japan." I envy the insouciance with which Healy tells the story about installing their work for the Venice Biennale of 2009 whilst heavily pregnant with their first child: "I think I was really fit because of the work we did in Venice (*Life Span*, 2009). I totally forgot at the time that I was even pregnant – I was just so focused on the work. Even the people who were working with us, a bunch of girls, were used to me. I wasn't going up ladders – I knew my limits. But Marissa said to me at one point: 'You'd better not go into labour after lifting that pallet!' and I said 'I'm fine!' There were moments, though, when I thought: 'I shouldn't have done that!'"

It is not uncommon for artists on this career path to research and plan projects two years in advance, and this is where things can get messy once children enter the

picture. Healy and Cordeiro's original application for their Japanese residency was submitted prior to Healy falling pregnant. They obtained it after applying again for the second time the following year. When the particular arts body found out they had a baby in tow, Healy recounts that a moment of bureaucratic madness ensued: "At first they asked us to leave the baby at home! And we said: 'No, sorry. Still breastfeeding!'"

What we see is a nexus between Healy and Cordeiro's art and their experience. A combination of circumstance and force of necessity inspires artworks that reflect on everything from mobility and global marketing to ideas of house and home. And it is in part their collaboration that has enabled such a nomadic lifestyle, which in turn has generated a kind of nomadic thinking. This is not a connection between art and life conceived of in familial and psychoanalytic terms so much as in material and practical terms. The couple has actively embraced nomadism for both creative and personal ends, relying on "a combination of nomadism and permanence to achieve the best situation to create work and live" (Healy and Cordeiro in Hanru 2012, p. 77).

Nomadism can be taxing in its repeated packing, relocating and establishing of a temporary home. And it can be confronting, say the artists. "Nomadism not only offers an expanded vision of the world, it also involves culture shock, alienation and loneliness. The story of the modern nomad is the quest for comfort and familiarity. In this sense, the ghost of Howard Hughes haunts our practice" (Healy and Cordeiro in Hanru 2012, p. 74)

* * *

The world expands until it can no longer be grasped, and knowledge, for Proust, is attained by suffering this intangibility (Calvino 1988, p. 110).

As opposed to forms of casual recycling, the found object is a form of historical recovery that activates highly charged aspects of the past in the service of the present (Diaz 2007, p. 207).

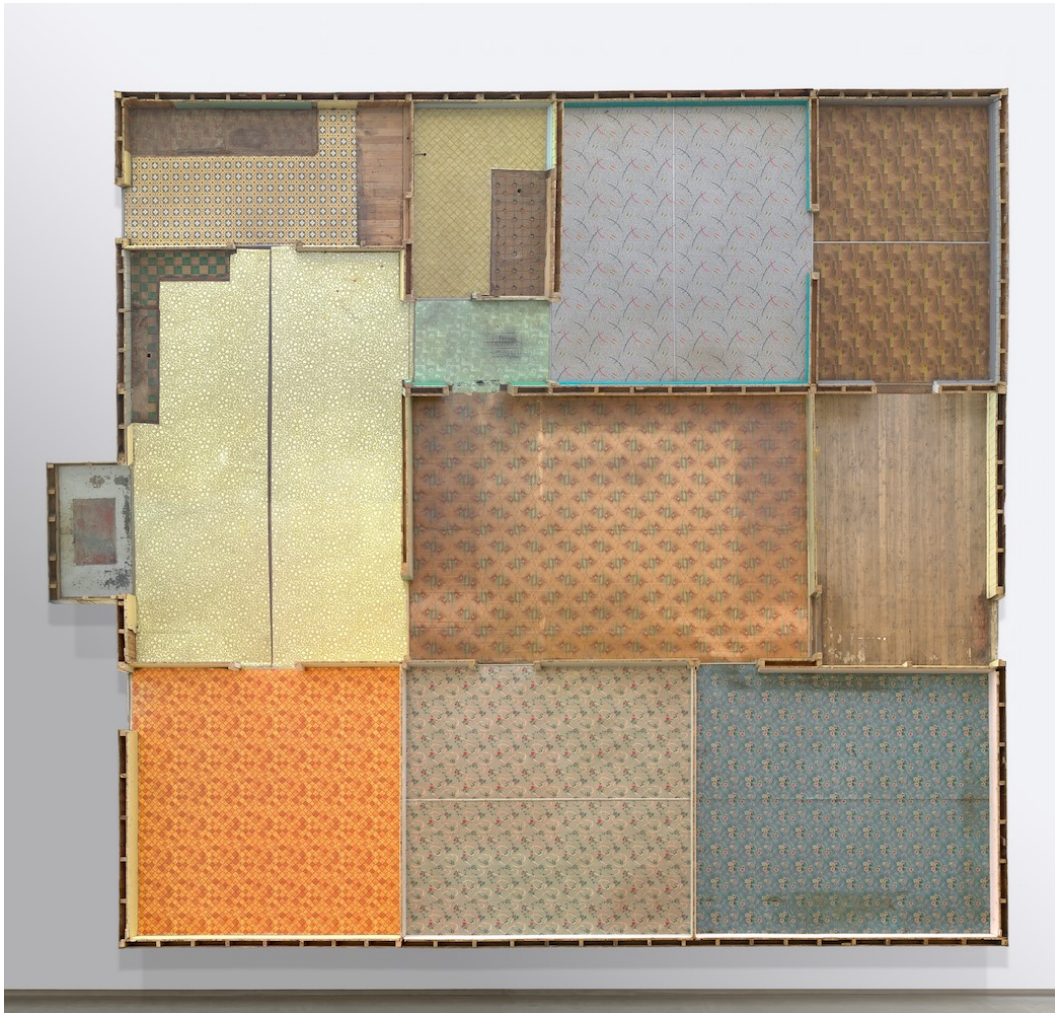


Figure 56: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Not Under My Roof* 2008, found flooring from farm house, 11 x 12 x .3 m. GoMA, Brisbane.

In 2009, the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane exhibited a monumental wall work by Healy and Cordeiro entitled *Not Under My Roof* (2008). The work is roughly square in shape, and comprises a geometric grid divided internally into smaller rectangular and square shapes, each with its own decorative pattern. Measuring 11 x 12 x .3 m., the work dwarfs those standing in front of it. As a play on form and pattern, it resembles a giant jigsaw puzzle. In some ways it is a Modernist work, impressive and satisfying in its scale and abstraction. But this artwork is also a massive found object, the floor plan, in fact, of an old Queensland farmhouse. In another major logistical exercise, the artists salvaged the floor of the house, transported it to a gallery in pieces on the back

of a truck, and installed it for exhibition. The old linoleum on the floor of each room accounts for the patterns in each section.

In so doing they transposed this remnant into art. But what is this magical transformation and, given that this is a found object, where does it take place? In their characteristic way, the artists analyse and dismantle raw materials and reassemble them as art. The transformation takes place in the minds of the artists, in their recognition of the potential of the abandoned farmhouse and their identifying the abstract aesthetic underlying the domestic form. It also lies in their handling of the objects, their decisions about what and where to cut and what to leave out. Thirdly the magic lies in the materials, in this case the house itself. The artistry lies in the nexus between vision and object, between the idea and the particular call that certain elements of the material world have on the couple. It is a readymade in the Duchampian tradition, one that like any readymade involves material and lateral (and in this case, vertical) thinking.



Figure 57: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Not Under My Roof*, 2008, 11 x 12 x .3 m, GoMA, Brisbane, Installation shot, 2009.

The particular appeal of this artwork lies in the combination of its sheer scale, its provenance and its aesthetic, its double identity as both aesthetic and domestic object. The floor plan – the raw material of the work – is familiar and modest just as the house is relatively small in size. Its timeworn nature speaks of history, of country life in rural Australia and the everyday nature of domestic life. The accompanying photograph of the house in situ reminds us that farm life is isolated and challenging, and that smallholdings are disappearing. The outline of each room and its relation to the others evoke the passage of daily life and the small repetitive journeys we take

around the house. The beauty of shape and pattern somehow bleed into modest human existence, whilst the material origins of the floor lend the final abstract artwork gravitas and grit.

People sometimes talk about types of contemporary art as being 'hot' or 'cold'. *Not Under My Roof* is not cold in the tradition of Pop art, nor is it hot in the sense of being provocative or overtly political. It is warm; there is something humane going on here. Many of Healy and Cordeiro's pieces enact this kind of metamorphosis of everyday objects in a manner that seems breathtakingly simple. But uncovering the potential for art in the everyday, imagining the potential for a work of art in an abandoned house, or in IKEA and Lego, is by no means simple nor obvious. Their practice, in its concern with the material infrastructure of our society, goes beyond art into social critique. For that reason it errs on the side of being hot.

Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function (Calvino 1988, p. 112).

Where does the impetus for art come from? In trying to answer that question comes the realisations that multiple factors determine art, no more so than in the case of these two artists. Some things that affect the practice of these two artists are not necessarily under their control. Take the circumstances around the genesis of *Venerable Architecture*, the body of work with which this chapter began. Healy and Cordeiro made this work during their Malaysia residency. Their studio was in a remote compound in semi-rural Kuang, Selangor, about two hours journey from Kuala Lumpur. The area comprised a kind of botanical garden in the jungle. During their stay, the region was experiencing a period of drought, an unusual climatic pattern for the tropics. Not only was there water rationing and cloud seeding, but all sorts of creatures invaded their home in their search for water, including rats, monitor lizards and the odd snake. One of the questions the artists were interested in exploring was the rather intense reality of sharing space with nature.

This particular project had had to be planned well in advance, as part of the original residency application. As a result, a number of decisions about the design and management of the work were made on a pragmatic basis. They had to ensure, for example, that their chosen materials would be readily accessible, and Lego and IKEA appealed as materials the availability of which could be guaranteed. The choice of materials was also crucially influenced by the presence of the couple's children and their relative isolation. Unlike past projects for which they were able to draw on the assistance of others, this body of work was conceived in such a way as to allow it to be realised without outside help. The small and light units of Lego also meant that they could 'tag-team', as they call it, with one working in the studio whilst the other looked after the children, and vice versa. And, as Healy stresses, the parent at home would be working, too, in and around the children's routines.

Furthermore, at this point Healy and Cordeiro were interested in challenging themselves, sculpturally, in the building of 'crazy forms', as they hadn't before attempted representation in 3D. To this end, they bought a book called *The Unofficial Lego Builder's Guide* (Bedford 2012). For the series Venereal Architecture, the artists first created a three-dimensional digital model of each creature, and then following this template, they constructed each sculpture from the ground up. As a result, the making of these Lego sculptures became an experience more akin to model building than improvisation. The process involves a lot of counting, which Healy, likening it to cross-stitching, remarks that she finds quite meditative.

How does this artistic juxtaposition of Lego and IKEA pan out? The strategy of juxtaposing disparate found objects in art was employed to enormous cultural and critical effect in Dadaism and Surrealism. Indeed Dada's troubling and dissonant art constituted a deliberate policy of culture jamming, in a kind of reproduction or mimesis of the psychological madness induced by the conflict and chaos of the age (Foster 1996). The appearance of these products in this art invites us to reflect on their nature not only as source materials but as merchandise and, by implication, the business models underlying them. IKEA is the biggest furniture retailer in the world.

In 2014 it had 361 stores in 30 countries, and its global revenues were in excess of 29 billion Euros.⁴

For Healy and Cordeiro, IKEA and Lego share key characteristics – both are products that require assembly, and both are aspirational, playing in to the desire for a ‘perfect home’. They possess cachet not because they are exclusive but as classics of their type. People buy IKEA because it is, on the whole, well designed and well marketed and, crucially, economical. Trips to IKEA combine the pleasures of shopping with those of homemaking, planning and fantasising about the future. Healy also recalls with evident pleasure the shopping trips the two of them made to IKEA to choose the homewares for each artwork. The artists go further, however, and suggest that there is actually something quite sexy about the trip to the megastore: “When you travel to IKEA, everyone’s getting things for their nest. People go there to procreate...it feels like a ritual.” The way IKEA ties procreation to consumption, they suggest, resembles a form of sublimation.

Lego is of course a children’s toy, but it is a corporate version of the old fashioned wooden blocks, which through near monopoly has assumed a multinational behemoth of a structure. The pleasure it provides is assembly, the fitting together of pieces to form a whole, which the artists also see as a form of dreaming, aspiration. I find it interesting that over the past decade or so, Lego has moved away from marketing the bucket of bricks that encourages freeform building, in favour of single-object kits. Lego’s character within this exhibition is also to do with its plasticity. Lego is made from a type of plastic called ABS or acrylonitrile butadiene styrene. ABS is a thermoplastic, a petrochemical derived from crude oil, cellulose, natural gas and/or coal.⁵ Lego is a member of that category of non-biodegradable products that may be recyclable but are not ultimately disposable.

⁴ <http://www.statista.com/topics/1961/ikea/> Accessed 09/03/2015).

Add info about the type of plastics that Lego uses.

⁵ (<http://www.plasticseurope.org/what-is-plastic/how-plastic-is-made.aspx> Accessed 10/02/2015).

With IKEA, global marketing and economy is achieved through the diminishing of product quality. The furniture is largely manufactured from veneers glued over particleboard, which means it can be sold flat-packed. Economies are gained by putting the onus of transport and assembly on consumers themselves, with the help of the ubiquitous allen key. But, the artists suggest with *Venerable Architecture*, that there is something ersatz or fake about veneers, those slivers of material masquerading as the real thing. Such manufacturing processes mean these products don't last. Inbuilt obsolescence also extends to design. Rather than get things fixed, we upgrade to the next iteration, whether we're talking furniture, digital devices or fashion. IKEA becomes symptomatic of the ever-increasing cycle of production, consumption and disposal underlying commodity capitalism.

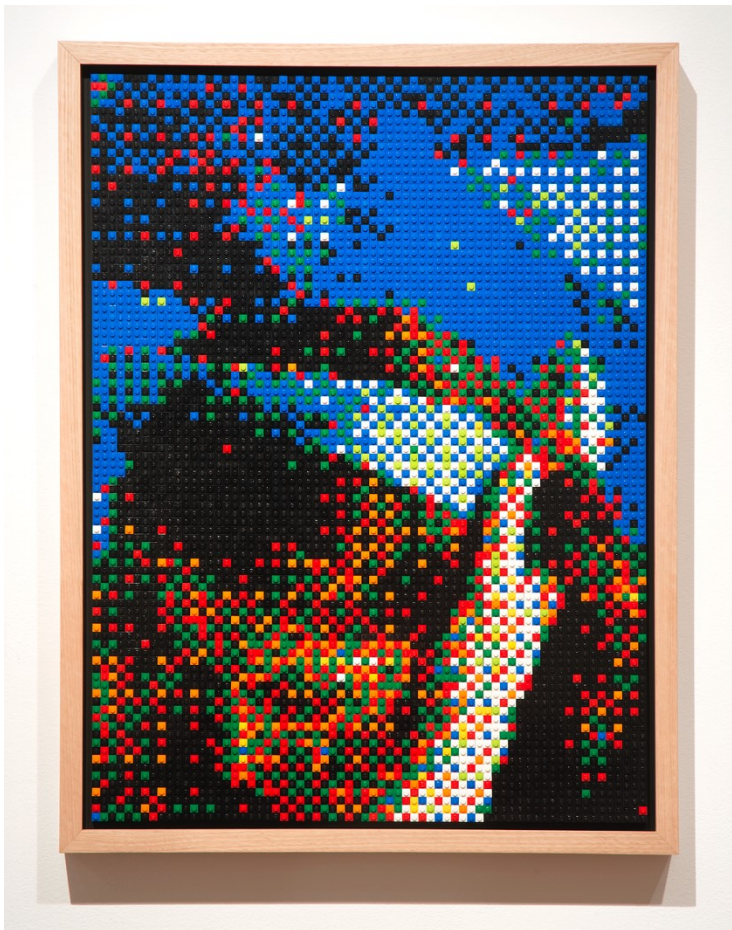


Figure 58: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Smorboll* 2014, Lego mounted on board, 79 x 60.5 x 7.5 cm.

And this constellation of ideas becomes explicit in the artists' Lego pictures. Healy and Cordeiro sourced these images from a website that, ironically, is dedicated to identifying IKEA in pornographic films. The titles of the pictures in the exhibition, for example *Rampen* (2014), *Alslev* (2014) or *Vinager* (2014), may come across as racy, but they actually refer to furniture ranges. For the artists, this bizarre confluence of IKEA and pornography is strangely fitting. What we have here, then, is art that sets in motion a material and metonymic chain, where consumer desire comes to stand in for sexual desire – a wonderful instance of the market's ability to shape our very subjectivity.

The final piece of the puzzle in this exhibition has to do with the compromised position of the wildlife depicted. The exhibition performs a kind of domestic cohabitation, in which commodities are incarnated, literally, in the bodies of the animals. This disturbing fusion for me is reminiscent of birds ingesting plastic, or turtles being strangled by plastic. In the unease it prompts I see this work as emblematic of the way we share the environment. Consumerism not only invades our subjectivity but the environment itself, and its fallout can be felt across wildlife, habitat and climate. Venereal Architecture skewers contemporary commodity culture whilst acknowledging its desirability. As an allegory of shared space it is dystopian.

It is now that the title of the exhibition begins to make sense. Architecture made from veneers is patently unstable and, the title's analogy suggests, a potential sign of disease. It is here that we find the key to this art, in its marriage of metaphor and material, an art assemblage that keeps all its links active, whether they be those of desire, consumer behaviour, the environment, the petro-chemical industry or pure colour and play, art that can play and critique at the same time.

If Healy and Cordeiro make art from the fallout of commodity capitalism (Davis 2012), does this mean their art is political? Theirs is an art that contains the potential for critique but which cannot be reduced to that. It is not art that conveys a straightforward political message, but nor does it constitute dispassionate apoliticism

in the manner of Warhol. This art is multivalent; it is playful and decorative, conceptually sophisticated, politically aware. In being wrought as well as found, their sculpture strikes a balance between idea or conceptual art, the sculptural hand of the artists and the particular nature of their materials.

Nevertheless, the pair's reliance on public funding means walking a fine line. "The trick is how to gain the support of the society we live within while still maintaining a critical stance towards the institution" (Healy and Cordeiro in Hanru 2012, p. 77). The critical potential of Healy and Cordeiro's art emerges in the interplay between form, materials, ideas. If we define contemporary art by its contemporaneity (Smith 2011), as what it is to be living in our times, then this is very much an art of its time.

Now that their elder child has started school, Healy and Cordeiro have made the decision to settle down. The final story of house and home concerns their own home in the Blue Mountains, which the international success of their artistic practice enabled them to buy. They have created two art studios on the property. One is the garage, which they have insulated, and the other is a traditional Turkic yurt left over from a previous exhibition, which they have set up in the backyard.

Beginning with the bathroom, Healy and Cordeiro are renovating the small house themselves, even down to the removal of asbestos. This is a fairly unusual endeavour these days; a growing number of people are becoming reluctant to do their own household cleaning, much less undertake such a difficult and dangerous job. With their practical and logistical expertise, however, Healy and Cordeiro are confident they can learn to do it safely. This intention for me smacks of a broader propensity in the life of this couple. Underlying the way they make art from 'what is at hand' is an ethos of self-reliance and 'making do', a material economy in line with environmentalism. In this affordance, the hand of the artist finds its corollary in everyday life. The last part of my interview with the artists was spent in their backyard inspecting the yurt, a circular tent with a wood heater under its central roof

aperture. We were devising economic ways of making of the yurt watertight without blocking out the light.

For many home decorators and renovators, IKEA becomes the easier option. We succumb to the impulse to replace old fittings and furniture, to throw things out rather than fix or adapt them. We enjoy the drive of the search, the thrill of the find, the satisfaction of the exchange, the triumph of the purchase. We endlessly play out desires, the satisfaction of which eludes us, in a Lacanian pursuit of something that may not actually exist and with potentially disastrous consequences for the planet. Their 2011 work, *Future Remnant*, comprises a life-sized model of a dinosaur skeleton, a replica of that of a Monolophosaurus. Like many pieces of sculpture it is sitting on a pedestal, in this case a motley collection of IKEA tables, chairs, and other things. It is a comment on the archeological traces our disposable society will leave behind, a dedicated layer of trashed furniture and allen keys in a warming planet.



Figure 59: Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, *Future Remnant*, 2011, dinosaur fossil replica, cable binding, IKEA furnishings, 285 x 180 x 485 cm.

In the end what fascinates me about Healy and Cordeiro's artistic practice is its reciprocity, the way their art emerges from the texture of their everyday life. With its rich entanglement of art and life, its multiplicity and its vision, their practice is a powerful illustration of art's multiple determinations, a mixture of circumstance, the environment, skills and proclivities, personal choices and values. Things affect them, and they in turn create art, helping to effect change as they go.

Conclusion

I stand and watch the form turn, mesmerised by its movement and simplicity, and by its evocations of the whirling dancer. Reading the poem by Rumi on the wall, I try to absorb the idea that the lover circles his own heart, and recognise that everything turns, from the atomic to the planetary. This is a moment that art can bring, something akin to the transcendent.

Art today generates experience, it creates encounters, it causes us to think, to reflect, to feel. It creates delight, it makes us angry, it bores us – the range is wide. Art is that supernumerary thing, built for no other purpose than to be art. But contemporary visual art is a specialised discipline, one that is tied to the times. What we might take from it is its reflection on the present, and its evocation of what art can be in the present.

This project is ultimately about artistic practice. How do contemporary works of art evolve? How do artists make art? Artists make art in the context of their lives. This book details the emergence of contemporary art between life and practice, examining the dovetailing of artistic practice with the everyday life and environment of the six artists in question. It looks at the artists' interaction with the world around them, and explores the role of factors such as art materials, ideas, people, the environment, accidents and discoveries in the shaping of their art.

In this book I have borrowed a conceptual framework from a work of literary criticism by Italo Calvino to highlight particular qualities in the work of these six artists.

Hossein Valamanesh – the quality of lightness – looks at how his sculptural works express a philosophical and abstract quality, explore derive elements from the artist’s environment and the poetry of Rumi to create this result. Karla Dickens – quickness – is employed to explore her urgent, political art, in which her use of the potent object has the ability to shock us into awareness of the operations of racism in our history and today. Her practice of collecting also demonstrates the object’s ability to reach out to the artist and suggest a creative purpose. Elizabeth Gower – exactitude – exemplifies the poles of the crystal and the flame, the tangle of material stuff and waste that is a feature of our lives is her source material from which she makes orderly geometric art. The Gothic art of Polixeni Papapetrou – visibility – made in collaboration with her children, which depicting cultural figures that exemplify various iterations of the Other. Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro – multiplicity – make art that derives from the complex global systems that govern society today. All these artistic interactions between art and world are distinct in their own way but they share the quality of collaboration with the world around them. As that world keeps changing, so too will the contemporary art of its time alter alongside.

Writing this book has meant looking at contemporary art, thinking about it and writing about it. Above all it has involved meeting artists, talking to them and listening to them, each of which has been a privilege. The artists’ accounts of their work and the stories they tell are the grist of this project, and as a writer I find those stories as interesting as the art itself. Stories have protagonists, themes, challenges and problems, complexities and resolutions, and these stories all demonstrate variations on this model. These accounts contribute to our understanding of the art and the art making process and provide information that may augment the aesthetic experience of the work. But these accounts do not circumscribe all interpretation. The book does not seek to limit the meaning of art to the artist’s intentions nor, by the same token, limit it to my own interpretations. What this book seeks to do is to open up the

discussion to people outside of the artworld and to present artists as people, as workers in their own right.

Writing about a visual medium has its own challenges, and the relationship between word and image is not straightforward. I have found describing the work of art to be a valuable exercise, helping me to pay closer attention to matters of form, composition, scale and subject. It also grounds the reader's attention, encouraging her likewise to look more closely, to slow down and spend time with the work. Ultimately, the project has involved creating a parallel work, a literary one to go alongside the visual ones. The book may be attendant on the art but it doesn't need to be. It is written in such a way that as a text it can also stand alone.

Contemporary visual art is continually evolving. The book's gestation has been long – I have been considering these artists and their work over a period of five years. In that time art forms have emerged and artistic practices have evolved that are not represented here. Rather this book can be seen as a foray into contemporary visual art at a particular point in time and from a particular point of view.

Ultimately, the book contends that art matters and without it our lives are all the poorer. Art rewards our attention and generates experiences that are valuable in and of themselves. What it also does is alert us to the texture, the ideas, the possibilities, the problems, the aesthetics and the forms of today. It generates experiences that range from the sensory to the emotional, from the aesthetic to the intellectual. Increasingly it alerts us to the major issues facing us and deepens our awareness of and even knowledge about social, political, technical and environmental change. Even though it can at times be challenging or even incomprehensible, contemporary visual art remains an invaluable part of any culture. As the pace of life continues to speed up, contemporary art's ability to reflect on the present time and on itself count amongst its many strengths.

Dispersed Agency:

Creative practice in 'This Art Life'

Exegesis

Doctorate of Creative Arts in Communications

University of Technology Sydney

2018

Introduction

“It is in the gap between art and life that the consciousness of what we are is constantly being reshaped” Meaghan Morris (1988, pp. 9-10).

This doctoral project concerns creative practice in the fields of contemporary visual art and art writing. The creative component, ‘This Art Life’, develops a nuanced study of the art and practice of five visual artists working in Australia today: Elizabeth Gower (Vic), Hossein Valamanesh (SA), Karla Dickens (NSW), Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro (NSW), along with Polixeni Papapetrou (Vic) who is deceased. These are established mid-career artists whose work has received critical attention and is widely exhibited. This is not a study of emerging artists living in a situation of economic and cultural precarity.⁶

The exegesis has two foci, one cultural theory oriented, the other literary. The first area of concern comprises the idea that contemporary visual art emerges from a mixed landscape of artist’s practice that includes auxiliary factors outside of or adjacent to the artist’s control. The second locates the genre, the essay as creative criticism, in which ‘This Art Life’ is written, and discusses writing about contemporary art practice from this perspective and within this form. The contention in this section concerns a specific conception of the essay as quasi-encyclopaedic that renders it a fitting form for the exploration of this mixed landscape.

Contemporary visual art is a complex and continuously evolving field, now become so diverse as to resist survey (Papastergiadis & Lynn 2014). No longer simply the preserve of the gallery or museum, contemporary art can be encountered anywhere and everywhere: in the lobbies of buildings in the CBD (James Angus, 1Bligh St, Sydney), in city squares and plazas (Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence, forecourt, Museum of Sydney), in parks and gardens (Tony Albert, Hyde Park, Sydney).

⁶ For such a study in the northern hemisphere, see Forkert (2013).

Temporary works also make their appearance in inconsequential laneways (Agatha Gothe Snape, Wemyss Lane, Sydney), on billboards and in the sky (Patricia Piccinini, Skywhale, Canberra region, Melbourne, Tasmania, Japan) or on public transport (Tram Art, Melbourne Festival 2017).

Despite this visibility, contemporary visual art can be challenging and often defies interpretation. The public's reception of contemporary art is frequently at odds with the art's critical reception. For this reason, artist Grayson Perry, in his entertaining book about navigating the minefield that is contemporary art, can entitle one of his chapters 'Democracy has bad taste' (Perry 2014). One of the reasons for this difficulty is that contemporary art is no longer confined by the standards used to measure traditional art – aesthetics, representation, and excellence of execution. It need no longer demonstrate the hand of the artist. It blurs the boundary between art and non-art, evading attempts at demarcation and disciplinary identification. Its eclecticism, rolling evolution and pushing of boundaries (Sullivan 2009) is such that it has come to represent a "paradigm of no paradigm" (Foster in Halsall 2016b, p. 439).

In the light of this rolling evolution, the question of what being a contemporary artist entails is also not easy to distil. And yet the question of creativity, of the creative 'moment' and the genesis of that most mysterious thing, art, is a subject that has a long history in the field of aesthetics and continues to capture attention today. This exegesis, indeed this whole project, takes the notion that 'artists create' and subjects it to scrutiny. It investigates what creativity looks like in the context of individual practice. The overall research question the project explores is how contemporary art can be seen to emerge between life and artistic practice. The project investigates the way that, in the context of individual practice, a range of factors can play a broader role in shaping the work of art. These might be social and material environment, socio-economic circumstances, family and cultural background or the rhythms of the everyday.

Contemporary visual art is the art of contemporaneity, ineluctably tied to the here and now, that is to say, to its time. One mark of its distance from the modernist project of the mid-twentieth century, with its Greenbergian notions of art for art's sake (Mack 1994), is its perceived ontological role. According to Smith, the contemporaneity of contemporary visual art is manifested in the dual concerns that it extrapolates – what it is to be ontologically in the present time, and also what (contemporary) art itself can be in the present time (Smith 2012). In the context of this study, the present time is taken to be the time of the artist. The term 'contemporary' is itself a problematic, which it is not in the scope of this study to explore. As the pace of life speeds up and social change and fluidity persist (Bauman 2013; Rosa & Trejo-Mathys 2013), contemporary art can both be in the vanguard and a self-reflexive exploration of these issues.

As a hybrid project, this Doctorate of Creative Arts is an amalgamation of various types of discourse – creative and scholarly. The creative component comprises a book of essays, in which several types of discourse are interwoven, including theory and analysis, art criticism, narrative and reflection. The genre into which this work falls is creative criticism, designated as such by the adoption in the book of a conceptual scheme from a work of literary criticism, *Six Memos for the New Millenium* (Calvino 1988). This generates a form of inter-textuality, adding a dimension to the project beyond the art critical. 'This Art Life' is concerned to create and sustain interest in a complex field through writing that engages with theory but retains accessibility through a lightness of tone and touch. This endeavour comprises the substance of the second research question – how this project has approached the subject of contemporary art practice in literary terms.

The relationship between the creative work and the exegesis can be seen in the light of practice-based research. The specific form of creative research that has been influential in this project is Carter's "material thinking", the integration of text-based knowledge with creative practice whereby the two influence each other (Carter 2004).

This has enabled the generation of two types of knowledge in the project, one provided by critical distance, the other immersive and intuitive (Gibson 2010). 😊

Writing at the intersection of cultural theory, narrative and reflection produces a plethora of “I”s (Schlunke & Brewster 2005), including myself as writer, as scholar and as viewer of art, as well as the “I” of the artists brought to life by the direct inclusion of their voice. The immediacy of the artist’s voice is central to the tone of the book, helping to ground each narrative in lived experience. Artists’ stories are not necessary for the understanding and appreciation of art but they provide a second order level of understanding, “a way of making the tacit know-how that has been accrued in the creative process communicable through language” (Gibson 2010). Artists’ accounts of their creative practice, and the stories they tell about their work and its origins, reveal a great deal that is delightful, interesting and unexpected, whether dealing with materials, techniques and ideas or with impulses, habits or influences. I have discovered that significant creative moments of discovery or inspiration often occur for these artists in random and unexpected ways during the flow of everyday life.

Creative criticism is a form of art writing that can constitute a stand-alone text rather than one necessarily attendant on the art (Thompson 2017). This genre has been chosen with the aim of rendering the subject accessible and culturally interesting to a readership outside the art world in a way that also endeavours to do justice to the art in its complexity. When paired with the artworks, these essays augment the aesthetic experience of the viewer by granting them an understanding not only of the aesthetically relevant information about the work’s history but also a sense of its genesis and development. Contemporary visual art entails a mixture of material, aesthetic and conceptual considerations, and creative criticism is a way of delineating these within the broader narrative about the conditions affecting the emergence of artworks within the context of individual art practice. This is multi-discursive writing that combines narrative with critical analysis and reflection. A “good text”, suggests

Latour, might make use of story without it being framed as fiction (Latour 2005, pp. 126-7).

Questions of definition

Since this study presents the work and thought of, and influences upon, six artists I designate as contemporary, it is important to grapple with what is meant by contemporary art. Defining contemporary visual art is not a straightforward question and furthermore it leads into the issue of what contemporary art does or is perceived to do. Contemporary visual art is difficult to define in part due to its challenge to, and distance from, the norms of traditional art, vis. originality, aesthetics, representation and skill of execution. Contemporary visual art may or may not show evidence of the artist's hand, the work may or may not be in the form of an object. Underlying these most recent art world developments lies the question of art in general. At the broadest level, Guattari defines art as "creation in a nascent state, perpetually in advance of itself" (Guattari in Papastergiadis 2013, p. 89 note 2). For Spivak, the logic of the aesthetic gesture is a "reaching out towards the distant other" (Butt 2017, p. 128).

For Smith, contemporary art mirrors the category-shifting, shape changing nature of contemporaneity itself (2011). He outlines three broad strands in international visual art practice: styles and practices conducted in dialogue with the past, particularly modernism; the post-colonial turn, including art that is geographically widespread and which pays attention to identity, ideology and rights and thirdly, the arts of contemporaneity, in particular the concerns and strategies of emergent artists for whom the lexicon of modernism and postmodernism is out of date (2011). Smith adds that contemporaneity, the key condition of the present time, has superseded modernism in critical discourse. One result of this is the art world's restless quest for the latest 'best thing'.

Halsall finds that contemporary art theory defines the art of today along the following lines: the post-contemporary, in which art form or style is no longer aligned with an epoch; art that goes beyond the object to embrace forms such as conceptualism, performance, earth works and systems art; and the 'post-medium condition,' as coined by Rosalind Krauss, in which the onset of digital art means contemporary art is defined in terms of format as "a heterogeneous and often provisional structure that channels content" (Joselit in Halsall 2016a, pp. 441-3).

For Heinich, contemporary art represents a new paradigm, contemporary art as system, the characteristics of which are the dissolution of artist agency, the diversification of forms and materials and the explosion of art worlds (Heinich 2014). Context and the operations of the art world are crucial, and these developments, she suggests, call for a sociological framework of understanding. A range of "art worlds" (Becker 1984; Thornton 2012) manage the emergence and circulation of contemporary art and determine what is to be designated as art. Heinich argues that four circles of operation mediate the field: artists and their peers; art specialists (i.e. curators, critics, gallery owners); collectors, and the general public. Thornton identifies further sites of influence in the auction house, the art journal, art fairs and biennales. In addition, the destination of the artwork has shifted away from the market and towards the museum (Heinich 2014, p. 39).

Contemporary art is cosmopolitan in character, enmeshed in a global dialogue (Papastergiadis 2013). Papastergiadis contends that this "discursive turn" manifests in contemporary art's cross-culturalism, its critique of globalism as well as nationalism, and in its contemplation, post 9/11, of the international phenomenon of terror and the conflicts linked to it (2013, p. 108ff). Also emerging from this landscape is a utopian impulse, a feature of which is the "reflexive hospitality" that artworks can produce (Papastergiadis 2013, p. 114). This involves the "co-production" of artwork and viewer's subjectivity, which phenomenon, he seems to suggest, pushes back against an international climate of instability and conflict. In an article about Bruno Latour and his sociology of associations, Halsell goes so far as to argue that the work

of contemporary art has become virtually indistinguishable from cultural theory (2016b). I suspect that this might be a step too far insofar as the purpose of cultural theory is to explicate cultural and social phenomena whereas art has no necessary purpose other than to be art.

This is not to argue, however, that art does not have effects. Theories that characterise the role of contemporary art span the social, political and philosophical. Alfred Gell (1998) puts a further emphasis on art's generative capacity, arguing that an artwork's formal or thematic properties create a response in the viewer, an inference or interpretation and/or something less discursive as in a feeling, intuition or call to action (Osborne & Tanner 2008, pp. 2-3; Pinney & Thomas 2001). Lyotard develops Gell's position through the idea of the art's superfluity, its ability to trouble the social and economic structures that give rise to it: "art always exceeds the social determinations and political narratives that we try to impose on it" (Lyotard, Crome & Williams 2006, p. 288). He contends that:

What is important in a text is not what it means, but what it does and incites to do. What it does: the charge of affect it contains and transmits. What it incites to do: the metamorphosis of this potential energy into other things, but also other paintings, photographs, film sequences, political actions, decisions, erotic inspirations, acts of insubordination, economic initiatives, etc. (Jean-François Lyotard quoted in Muecke 2002).

On a more profound level is art's ontological role, and several theorists make this case. Carter argues that art, on the one hand, proposes a social relation and, on the other, plays a role in "the ethical project of *becoming* (collectively and individually) *oneself in a particular place*" (2004, p. xii). Smith proposes a definition of contemporary art that pairs the contemporaneity of contemporary art with its status as ontological (2012 Part vi). He argues that principal concerns of contemporary art lie with what it is to be in the present time, and what art itself can be in the present time. Likewise,

Papastergiadis cites Durham's argument about art's contemporary concern with who we are as humans in our "communal but distinct identity" (2013, p. 108).

The sheer diversity of definitions, all of which have something to offer, is an indication of the complexity of the field and its fast moving nature. This exegesis doesn't offer a totalising view of contemporary visual art, preferring to leave these various views in play. The line of thought, however, that underlies the study of the work and practice of the artists in question is in accord with Smith's contention concerning the ontological contemporaneity of contemporary art.

In this section, I outline the shape and the parameters of this study, which takes place within the parameters of practice-based research. This two-part project represents an exercise in creative practice and practice-based research. Two types of practice are at issue – contemporary visual art practice and literary practice – and these correspond to the chapters in this exegesis. The first, artistic practice, constitutes the subject of the creative component of the project, 'This Art Life,' and the second, the literary approach taken for this work. Both types of practice are explored in the exegesis within the framework of practice-based research. The first research focus comprises a materialist study of artistic practice in relation to the six artists who feature in the creative component, the book of non-fiction essays. The second research focus concerns the literary rendering in this project of the subject of contemporary art practice for a wider non-art world audience and readership. The first, a study of dispersed agency in the artistic practice of the six artists, is thematic and content-related, whereas the second is a reflexive exploration of genre and literary form. Both chapters integrate text-based knowledge with creative practice, a collaboration Carter posits as central to his understanding of "material thinking" (Carter 2004, p. xii).

Practice-based research

Practice-based research is creative practice paired with research, with the research also located within the context of creative practice (Hannula, Suoranta & Vadèn 2014).

As such it is both performative and reflexive, creating knowledge through interwoven forms of creative practice and critical enquiry (Michael 2017, p. 133). In 'This Art Life,' practice-based research takes the form of "material thinking." Conceptualised by Paul Carter, material thinking is an approach that combines text-based knowledge specifically with artistic practice (Carter 2004, p. xii). As well as identifying the artistic techniques and forms involved in art practice, material thinking extrapolates the conceptual work that informs and underlies creative practice. Even when the practice is not conceptual art practice, in which the idea takes precedence over the form, conceptual thinking is often implicated in contemporary art practice. Like arts criticism, material thinking also sheds light on the artwork itself, "recreating the fall or capture that a work of art performs and turning it into discourse" (Muecke 2002). Carter expounds the concept of material thinking in the context of collaboration, but a single author can also adopt material thinking, as is the case with this doctoral project, by producing two types of work, with the academic text reflexively analysing the creative one.

Institutional context

This section addresses the institutional context in which these artists work and the ways in which recent institutional and discursive developments impact upon the identity, standing and ability of artists to make work. In thinking about visual art practice today, a key factor is the culture and industry within which the career of the contemporary artist is situated, sustained and administered. Public arts policy and bodies such as the Australian Research Council and the Australia Council delimit the visual arts career through measures such as funding, accountability, training and teaching, artist residencies, exhibition opportunities and prizes. In this context the productivity of the artist is measurable as a "realisation of value" both in terms of artists fulfilling key performance indicators and serving institutional goals. 😊

In the current climate, artists are increasingly undertaking doctoral work in visual arts in the form of a 'studio degree' or some other non-traditional PhD. This is now

required of artists who wish to teach at a tertiary level. This shift towards the professionalisation of the artistic career has had a number of results. Firstly, it has led to the reframing of the perceived activity of visual artists as practice-based research. Within academia, practice-based research is a fluid field that can vary from university to university (Batty & Brien 2017). Whilst it is already the case that contemporary visual art develops within conceptual systems, the breadth of research methodologies across such research, and the ontological assumptions around these, generate further complexity (Schwarzenbach & Hackett 2015). These institutional parameters create a further mediating influence not only on the career of the artist but also on the art itself.

Secondly, the cosmopolitan character of contemporary visual art has produced the phenomenon of the global artist: “Increasingly, travel fosters a sophisticated, globalised artist, familiar with a broad range of venues and audiences, networked with curators and dealers in cities on several continents” (Thornton 2014, p. xv). The international system of artist residencies enables artists to live and work in destinations around the world. These are usually for short periods of time and entail limited stipends. Global artists belong to a group Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk terms the ‘jet set proletariat,’ only just adequately subsidised by a tight system of institutional support (Lally 2011). As we shall see, travel can end up being integral to the type of art produced, with artists practising economy by collecting found objects at their destination and with the destination itself affecting the outcome.

Exegesis Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 Artistic practice

The focus of chapter one is artistic practice. Recent thinking in continental philosophy has expanded the concept of agency to the realm of the material (Coole et al. 2010). In the context of contemporary visual art and artistic practice, this chapter takes up this theoretical extension so as to mount an argument for dispersed agency and multiple determinations in the genesis of artworks. It problematises the idea that artistic practice can confine itself to artist agency, and canvases theoretical models that

enable the study of heterogenesis in the field of contemporary visual art, in particular through the invocation of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari 2004) and Latour's actor-network theory (Latour 1999, 2005).

The notion of assemblage within the work of Deleuze and Guattari developed amidst questions of social change and becoming. Their theory is characterised by the themes of heterogeneity, multiple determination, ephemerality and the rhizome. I adapt these concepts with their emphasis on multiplicity and de- and re-territorialisation and apply them at a micro level, to account for the emergence of artworks within the broader context of individual art practice.

I mount this argument in conjunction with Latour's actor-network theory. In this body of theory Latour develops an argument about agency as decentred and collective. Importantly, he broadens the concept of agency to include the non-human. Collections of agents, he argues, are at the heart of social change and events, and actor-network theory provides the tools to trace these agents of change as they connect and reconnect in unstable and temporary networks and alliances. According to this model, agency is decentred and distributed across networks. Although agency is no longer centred upon the sovereign individual, Latour nonetheless returns agency to the figure of the artist through the notion of "instauration" (Latour 2011). This is where the artist welcomes developments rather than instigating them him or herself.

The chapter proceeds to investigate the practice of six contemporary artists through the perspective of dispersed agency based upon the combined theorisation of Deleuze and Guattari and Latour. The approach utilised in this study of contemporary art practice is "ethno-methodology" (Latour 2005). It seeks to shed light on the generative processes in art practice, proposing that works of art are not only "made" by artists but evolve through the combined agency of human and non-human factors. Through this examination of the interwoven nature of work and context, the study also maps ontological dimensions of contemporary art.

I theorise the broader landscape of factors that impact on the development of an artwork, including the artist's circumstances, the act of collaboration, the presence and influence of children, and the ability to concentrate on their practice fulltime without having to seek additional employment, or if so, only periodically. I also take into consideration the recalcitrance or magic of the artist's materials, the actions of the art world itself, including the artist's relationships with gallerists and museum curators, the domestic space and the studio, as well as broader factors such as social and material environments and the rhythms and textures of the everyday. I take into account the global nature of the art world, including the international system of artist residencies.

Chapter 2 Literary practice in 'This Art Life'

Chapter 2 concerns the writing of 'This Art Life.' It is a study of the literary questions that have arisen in the project, including those of genre and voice. This chapter comprises a self-reflexive discussion of the literary design and rationale of the book, 'This Art Life.' The book comprises a series of essays that situate artistic practice in the everyday lives of artists, exploring the way artworks emerge in the interface between work and life. The book's genre is a form of art writing, specifically creative criticism. The strength of this genre for the purposes of this project lies in its capacity to combine art criticism and theory with narrative and reflection, forms of writing and knowledge that are more intuitive and grounded.

The thematic shape of 'This Art Life' derives from the work of literary theory by Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium* (Calvino 1988). In this book Calvino chooses five literary values that he takes to be worth preserving into the new millennium: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity. The sixth, consistency, he was yet to write at his death in 1985. In this book, Calvino explores a rich selection of authors and texts in the light of each value. The values Calvino translates possess enormous analytic potential because they traverse the physical, the philosophic and the aesthetic. 'This Art Life' borrows this premise and applies the five values to the

five artistic practices, one per artist. This approach provides a thematic and literary shapeliness to the book, and anchors it in a stylistic framework. The adoption of these universal values in the book helps to point up alignments between the way in which the artists practise and the nature of their work.

Furthermore, the question of voice and the essay as form are explored in this chapter in relation to Calvino and to Roland Barthes, whose writing style and approach to cultural criticism can be seen at points to overlap. In the hands of both these writers the essay as form has the capacity to accommodate lists and the quasi-encyclopaedic. The list itself has something of a rhizomic structure, in that it decentres the hierarchical importance of certain elements above others. The essay as form is able to accommodate a series of elements non-hierarchically, rendering it a suitable model for the exploration of dispersed agency and the potentially endless list of factors that can be said to impact on creative endeavour.

The conclusion

The conclusion reiterates the substance of these two chapters with regard to the broader origins art which in addition to with artistic practice can be traced to the lives and environment of the artists and, secondly, the ways in which these themes have been treated from a literary point of view. It notes that key texts referenced in this study were publishing in the 1980s, including works by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, Italo Calvino and Roland Barthes. It notes the debt owed to these thinkers in the deployment of the terms assemblage, actor network theory and multiplicity by Deleuze and Guattari and Latour, the five qualities delineated by Calvino and the thinking around voice and essay by Barthes. The conclusion involves some of the key issues of the 1980s and the ways in which artists engaged with them. It then compares these to the contemporary issues with which artists are concerned, and lists the key questions addressed in the art of the artists in question in this project.

Conclusion

This project may span two fields of research, but taken together they form dimensions of the one study. Writing about artistic practice from the perspective of the general reader enables greater comprehension of what can be a complex field. The broader landscape of the artist's life and its relation to the artistic process is intrinsically interesting for the reader who might like to gain insight into creative practice and the development of artworks. At the same time, from a theoretical perspective such a landscape can be seen as a collection of factors that augment the role of the artist in the creative process.

Chapter 1: Artistic practice and Dispersed Agency

Introduction

Brian Massumi has argued that art marshals real forces (Massumi 2010). This chapter presents a study of artistic practice and the complex processes and factors at play in the emergence of individual artworks. It is a study that grounds the emergence of individual artworks in material and social context. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage, and Latour's actor-network theory (ANT), I outline a materialist methodology with which to map the evolution of works of art. For the time being, this involves a shift in emphasis away from the agency of the artist and towards a more inclusive and interactive genealogy of artistic practice based on the notion of distributed agency. Together these theories allow for a more nuanced understanding of influence, intention and effect in artistic practice, one that allows these categories to merge and overlap. I begin with an outline of the theory before going on to map the constitutive elements in the practice of select artists.

Background

The action of distributed agency is already at play in the art world and was an avenue the modernists actively explored. Early twentieth-century experimentalism in art and literature was in part about limiting the artist's control. The Dadaists' experiments with automaticity and the subconscious problematised artistic control over the creative process through exposure to or the introduction of the random, unplanned or uncontrolled, including the actions of the unconscious. Duchamp is particularly interesting in this context. In the case of *Fountain* (1917), a signed porcelain urinal, it is debatable whether he originally intended it to be an artwork or a provocation. He left it in the foyer of the Society of Independent Artists in New York, seemingly as a statement about the growing conservatism and restrictiveness of the body he had helped establish. Artistic status was in fact granted to the object after the fact by art

world figures acting as cultural intermediaries (Heinich 2014). He subsequently claimed the method as a form, denoting it a 'readymade'.

Today it is exemplified for example in 'machinic' artworks that are initially set up by the artist and then left alone to operate. An example of this is an assemblage by Oliver Hutchison, *Two Pendulum Wind Harmonograph* (2017), which consists of an autonomous drawing machine powered by wind. Interactive installations are another example of an open-ended form. Works such as these might generate any number of results. Artists also engineer a more limited set of creative outcomes, an example of which is the performative piece *Pie* (2009) by spat + loogie (Kate Barron and Lara Thoms). In this work, passers-by are invited to sit at a table and converse with the artists about contemporary art over a cream pie. This may result in the interlocutor eating the pie and/or 'pie-ing' the artist. On occasion artists themselves acknowledge hetero-generative processes in their work. In a succinct deployment of Deleuzian theory the German painter Katharina Grosse states:

I work in an open field that spreads out rhizomatically. That means that as the author of the painting, I am just a link among other links; I have the same status as the paints, the architecture, the time, the viewer, etc. I do not believe in causality, not in before or after, but in simultaneity and equality. I do not paint a representation or a vision; perhaps I paint blindly rather than seemingly (Grosse 2015, p. 144).

Assemblage and emergence

Assemblage is one of a cluster of interlinked concepts with which Deleuze and Guattari develop their philosophy of emergence and becoming in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, 1988). For my purposes assemblage is an umbrella concept that works on both the general and specific level. It provides an overview of artistic practice but also enables us to dig deeper into the genesis of individual works of art. I augment this concept with Brian Massumi's concept of heterogenesis and Bruno Latour's theory of instauration.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari present a philosophy of emergence and becoming that they base on a relational ontology. It is a series of conceptual approaches that, taken together, that counter the notions of linear causality and dualistic subject/object thinking underpinning classical social science (Dewsbury 2011).⁷ The central concern of *A Thousand Plateaus* is 'complex becoming', and their theory foregrounds heterogeneity, multiple determination and indeterminacy in processes of change (Venn 2006).⁸ Brian Massumi describes the book as a "sustained, constructive experiment in schizophrenic or 'nomad' thought" (Massumi 1992, p. 4), and his description of the worldview their theory reveals bears an uncanny resemblance to the field of contemporary art: "the world itself emerges transformed ... an idea presupposing a closed and finished world gives way to an open world full of divergent processes yielding novel and unexpected entities" (DeLanda 2002, p. 6).

Deleuze and Guattari's focus is on emergence at a societal level, but I would argue that their explanatory framework applies equally to the microcosm of art practice, particularly given its ontological focus on processes and its epistemological interest in posing problems rather than establishing truths (DeLanda 2002, Introduction: Deleuze's World). Their theory helps us to make sense of the sheer diversity and seeming randomness of contemporary art, and the bewildering array of approaches, processes, materials and technologies that constitute contemporary art practice. Their contention is that change cannot be put down to single factors nor to subjective (authorial) agency, but arises through "assemblages" or the dynamic interaction of open systems or "multiplicities" (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, pp. 22-3). The two theorise emergence and becoming as a series of relations that they designate through four key terms: "(de/re)-territorialisation (in relation to typology), the machinic (in relation to

⁷ In place of root-cause thinking they propose 'Evolutionary schemas may be forced to abandon the old model of the tree and descent' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 10)

⁸ Inspiration for this argument came from developments in the life sciences and physical sciences, including string theory, the gist of which Deleuze and Guattari translated 'into a [social science] vocabulary that re-codes emergence and becoming' (Venn 2006, p. 107).

autopoiesis), multiplicity, and *agencement machinique* (in relation to differentiation, compossibility)” (Venn 2006, p. 107).

What these terms refer to is the way in which social factors enter into temporary alliances or “open systems” to produce the new. Forms including art emerge from the temporary convergence of heterogeneous elements including the semiotic, the social, the material and environmental. Such factors have no necessary or previous connection. These “open systems” are the “semiotic chains, organisations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles” (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, pp. 22-3, 7). Factors intersect by means of “flows” or “open connections,” (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 12) and are drawn together and coalesce around a “common notion” (Phillips 2006, p. 109). In the context of this study, the artist and artwork becomes the common notion. Within this field of heterogeneity, determinants might be anything and everything: “Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other” (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 7). Deleuze and Guattari stress that their mode of investigation is one of mapping not tracing because constitutive relations can only be determined after the fact: “The rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced” (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 25).⁹

Deleuze and Guattari argue that in any change assemblage it is the *intersection* of factors that emerge and then disperse that results in the formation of the new. This occurs not by means of cause and effect but through *agencement*, the French term denoting both the act of fitting or fixing and the arrangement itself (Phillips 2006, p. 108). It refers to the “capacity to act with the coming together of things” (Dewsbury 2011, p. 150).¹⁰ What they describe is a protean, ever-changing landscape of intersections and alliances (p. 25), affects and re-bounds. The connections they form

⁹ ‘The tracing has already translated the map into an image... It has organised, stabilized, neutralized the multiplicities according to the axes of significance and subjectification belonging to it’ (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 13).

¹⁰ If assemblage thinking can articulate the ‘structures, dynamics *and ruptures* that ultimately make up the social’ (Dewsbury 2011, pp. 149, my italics.) then recent historical events such as the Arab Spring or global financial crisis would seem to provide fruitful grounds for analysis from this theoretical perspective.

are “polymorphous and rhizomic” rather than patterned or predictable, and the elements are “aparallel”, unrelated to each other except by their contiguity within the assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 11; Massumi 1992, p. 4).

For Deleuze and Guattari, events and outcomes derive from the coming together of a “multiplicity” of dynamic elements or properties within a particular territory (p. 554). These properties may include materials, ideas, people, environment and infrastructure, which act upon or “affect” one other, to produce results that are provisional in place and time. These properties coalesce in a state of “reciprocal presupposition” (p. 555) without recourse to ideas of subject or object. Developments in nineteenth-century music, for example, they attribute not to any given composer or genre but to the “slow mutation of the musical machine [that] serves as a foundation for new molecular flows that then intersect, conjugate, are swept up in a kind of instrumentation and orchestration” (p. 339). This idea is about the influence of context and the past and bears comparison to the effect of art history on individual practice. Whether art grows out of its context and past work or pushes back at it, it is part of a developmental flow.

Actor–network theory

Deleuze and Guattari focus on the structure of events in the context of complex historical processes (Patton 2010, p. 98), whereas Bruno Latour’s concept of actor–network theory (ANT) is pertinent to social events per se. What they share is a general argument about the nature of events within the context of those processes. Deleuze and Guattari come closest to ANT in their invocation of “lines of flight,” territorialisation and re–territorialisation to theorise “becoming” and the emergence of the new (Deleuze & Guattari 2004).

Actor–network theory is an example of what is in France now termed “pragmatic sociology” consisting of “empirical surveys grounded in close observation of actions in their actual contexts” (Heinich 2014). In this context it involves building a case about

artist practice and heterogeneity in the context of individual practice, in an analytical strategy that involves tracing and mapping interactions (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012; Latour 2005, p. 41). This study is alert to the dangers posed by “dissecting” art (Heidegger in Butt 2017, p. 136) and seeks to avoid diminishing the object of analysis. ANT enables this study to resist reductive approaches by opening the field up to a multiplicity of determining factors. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Latour employs the term assemblage, and the idea of a temporary coalescence of factors in the creation of change is common to both. While Deleuze and Guattari are focused on social change at a macro level, as critical theory ANT can be applied on a macro and micro level, with assemblages being seen to operate at a “very local, very practical, very tiny locus” (Latour 1999, p. 17).

In ANT, Latour develops a comprehensive account of agency as collective and decentred, as a way of conceptualising change and events that are particularised in time and place. As a metaphysical position, ANT dissolves the distinction between subject and object (Harman 2009, p. 73). It provides the grounds for a “sociology of associations,” an ethno-methodology (Latour 1999, p. 19) that traces social and material relations in the formation of change across unstable frames of reference. Significantly this kind of enquiry requires an empirical approach (Latour 2005, p. 51).

ANT posits the idea that arrays of agents form unstable fields of interactions to effect change. These networks or assemblages leave traces that we can study, and ANT provides tools to render these connections traceable (Latour 2005, p. 30). It is a performative definition, the onus being on locating networks of agents by their performance (Latour 2005, p. 34). In other words, “things are facilitated and enacted through networks” (Bosco 2006, p. 137). In this model, agency is decentred, located not in any one element but dispersed across the network or assemblage (Bosco 2006). Harman identifies four key terms in ANT: actants, irreduction, translation and alliance (Harman 2009, p. 16ff). Actants, or agents, are concrete; they cannot be abstracted and they operate as part of a specific event. They form temporary alliances, assemblages that form and dissolve, and through these short-lived interactions

produce social action, events, change, the new (Latour 2005, p. 65). The nature of the agents and of their alliance is peculiar to each situation. In being “a democratic universe of actors” (Harman 2009, p. 72), their nature and existence are contingent on the event whose formation they contribute towards and cannot be reduced to anything else (p. 17).

Agents of change are heterogeneous and cross category boundaries. They might be material, human or discursive (Bosco 2006). A key element of the theory is the attribution of agency to objects (Latour 2005); there is “no simple divide between nature and culture, facts and society, or objects and situations” (Halsall 2016b). Agents do something, and Latour couches their action in terms of mediation or translation. Through their interaction, agents as mediators “transform, translate, distort and modify” (Latour 2005, p. 39). What ANT represents is a model of collective action, “a world made up of concatenations of mediators where each point can be said to fully act” (p. 59). Action is “other-taken” or dispersed, its nature respectively “borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated” (pp. 45-6). The refusal to privilege the human above the non-human creates a flat ontology (Halsall 2016b), “everything is made to the measure of everything else” (Latour 2005, p. 57) and the multiplicity of elements contribute to the creation of an event. Bosco provides as an example of this in his work as a human geographer (Bosco 2006). He credits his computer, colleagues, books, job and professional network as key determinants of his work publishing papers (p. 137). These, however, remain factors relating to his professional life and, arguably, broader ones should be added, including his nuclear family situation and the opportunity to work fulltime, his health, education, family background, socio-economic class, and so on.

Latour argues that the type of agency attributable to objects is nonetheless intermittent. Whilst action is not limited to intention, things themselves might not determine the action but may “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on” (Latour 2005, p. 72). This contention might seem to weaken Latour’s case, and in the section below I explore the

extent to which material interventions can be said to determine the shape of individual artworks. A further complication is the degree to which the artist might, in the last instance, define the artwork or at least decide when it is finished. As we shall see, Latour himself addresses this question. Discursive elements, including language, metaphor, idiom and professional lexicon, also perform in networks, and Latour invokes the “always already” aspect of language in his phrase “those I represent speak through my mouth” (Latour 2005, p. 64). Even the methodological tools used to analyse assemblages, or ANT itself, or this piece of research, for example, can be conceived as mediators pertaining to the event in question (Latour 2005).

ANT can be seen to overlap the work of other French theorists of the social, particularly since the “material turn” in continental philosophy. Bourdieu’s theory of ‘habitus’ problematises the idea of agency: “It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know” (Bourdieu in Zembylas 2014, p. 15 note 1). Likewise the intransigence of materials, and also the argument that have their own affordances, also appears in a number of guises, and is captured in Bennett’s “vibrant matter” or “sensitive material” (Bennett, 2010) and in Carter’s “creative intelligence” of materials (Carter 2004). Carter’s book *Material Thinking* argues for a more limited form of material agency in the context of the “environment of making” (Carter 2004, p. 47). Artists’ creative decision-making, he postulates, “releases the inventiveness of matter in a way that eludes descriptions of reality couched in terms of simple concepts” (Carter 2004, p. xii).

ANT has been applied in a range of disciplinary fields (Law & Hassard 1999), for example, human geography (Bosco 2006), the market (Callan 1999), and education, art and art education (Sullivan 2017). Latour himself cites innovations that take place in the artisan’s workshop as a situation where the actions described by ANT can be

glimpsed (Latour 2005, p. 80). More recently, ANT has been employed to examine creative and artistic practice (Cypher 2017; Halsall 2016b).¹¹

How do we go about relating the notion of distributed agency to artistic practice and what do we locate? Following Latour we generate a textual account of the transformations at issue (Latour 2005, pp. 125-6) in the context of the “ecology of practices” (Stengers in Michael 2017, p. 126). And, drawing on what has already been done in the field, we can seek to capture the “rich vocabulary of the actor’s [artist’s] practice” (Latour in Law & Hassard 1999, p. 20).

There remains, however, the question of the artist’s agency itself. Once the model of the omnipotent artist or “Potter God” comes into question, the artist’s capacity to create (or construct) can be augmented with the a kind of active receptivity (*instauration*) (Latour 2011). In this scenario, the artist is “the one who welcomes, gathers, prepares, explores, and invents the form of the work, just as one discovers or ‘invents’ a treasure” (p. 311). Works of art “come together, resist, oblige – and their authors, the humans, have to be devoted to them, which of course doesn’t mean that they act as simple catalysts for them” (Latour 2011, p. 311). Artists welcome and embrace all sorts of things: ideas, the influences of others, found objects, but also something that might be less well understood, and that is the agency of materials themselves. This idea has been couched as “sensitive matter” by Isabel Stengers, and “vibrant matter” or “sensitive material” by Jane Bennett (Bennett 2010; Stengers 2011). Paul Carter argues that the emphasis on the symbolic function of art detracts from the creative process and the domain where the intelligence of materials asserts itself. In the context of artistic practice Paul Carter invokes the idea of material thinking (Carter 2004). It is material decisions, he argues, that underlie the creative process and what artists achieve with material decisions is the “release [of] the inventiveness of matter” (pp. xi-xii).

¹¹ Halsall contends that it is difficult to draw the line between contemporary artistic and theoretical practices and that Latour’s modus operandi as a theorist is comparable to that of an artist in its eclecticism, inventiveness and inter-disciplinarity (Halsall 2016b).

One valuable consequence of taking a new materialist approach to creative practice, is the theoretical insight it grants into the ‘Ah ha’ moment that artists sometimes speak of, the affirmation of a sense of the self through the resolution of a creative work. For Deleuze and Guattari this is the “Oh, that was me!” moment they term the “conjunctive synthesis” – the post-production of identity that sums up the (creative) event (Alliez & Massumi 2014, p. 16).

Two recent articles have considered contemporary art through the lens of ANT (Cypher 2017; Halsall 2016b). Halsall takes individual elements of ANT theory – network, quasi objects, flat ontology and mediation/translation – as his analytic point of departure, and discusses examples of artworks or events that in his view correspond to each concept. Whilst there is no doubt that each of these instances can valuably be viewed through ANT, there are two problems with the structure of his argument. Firstly, the art/events he cites serve to illustrate the theory rather than the theory explicating the events.

Secondly, his choice of examples is rather literal. To illustrate the idea of mediation/translation, for example, he offers an event in which the media plays a mediating role – a photograph taken by the freelance photographer Phil Collins captures the moment a teenage boy is determined to be a refugee from Kosovo. To illustrate the notion of flat ontology he chooses an artist who creates ‘ready-mades’ and other works using lo-fi everyday materials, an association of flat ontology with contemporary art’s flattening of distinctions between high art/lo-fi/everyday materials. For networks ‘populated’ by quasi agents, Halsall uses the example of the artist who challenges the autonomy of the art object and the process of authorship, and so on. Whilst these examples are pertinent, Halsell fails to take into account that, from the point of view of ANT, *all* agents, regardless of their nature, coalesce into networks. They all act as mediators/translators, and they all represent a flat ontology. What Halsell’s argument rests on is the notion that rather than the agents being of an indiscriminate type, agents must possess a particular nature relating to the event in

which they play a role. In other words he chooses his examples to match each of the ANT concepts as if they are the only relevant ones, which goes against the broad intent of ANT.

Cypher's area of focus is creative process, and its locus is the studio, in particular his own studio and his own practice as artist and designer. He employs ANT to argue for a more thoroughgoing understanding of non-human agency in creative practice, tracing the influence of the tools and technologies with which he works and their individual specifications and capabilities. He considers the way they determine in part the character and quality of his work, and the types of knowledge they generate. This self-reflexive mapping of complex processes in his own case brings him into the context of practice-based research. He draws on Carter's notion of collaboration to argue the case for the role of non-human agency in his own practice and those of artists generally. He singles out a range of factors influencing his work, including his studio, art materials and the tools and technologies through which his work is produced – digital cameras, computers and processors. The studio includes his desk and the research notes pinned to the wall. Another agency is the pencil with which he does preliminary drawings. He posits preliminary sketching as a form of play, a practice that is for him wide-ranging, causal and unformed and which serves to generate possibilities.

Cypher also canvasses the idea of operational volition, acknowledging that artists are not necessarily in control of dimensions of their own subjectivity or even their power of execution. He argues that what takes place in the creative practice might be seen in the light of "trans-action," where, he suggests, impulses, desires and technical skills move "with and through" the artist, with the result that "in acting, one is being acted upon" (Cypher 2017, p. 122). Cypher develops his argument about visual art practice within the framework of practice-based research, the body of theory contending that knowledge and outcomes generated in and through creative practice can be designated as research and research outcomes (Sullivan 2009). Cypher argues that

“concepts, knowledge and research outcomes emerge from a specific practical or material relation” with “critical process” as part of the nexus (p. 119).

The relation between creative practice and practice-based research is complex (Barrett, Bolt & Bolt 2007; Sullivan 2009). Knowledge is generated in and through artistic practice, as we shall see in the discussion of the artists below, through “systematic and imaginative inquiries” (Sullivan 2017) to which must be added material and performative inquiries. The more conventional type of knowledge might be recognised as socio-cultural and political. It is worth articulating that in this context a key research outcome must be the artwork itself and the type of art experience and knowledge it engenders. 😊

Sullivan argues that visual art and design not only “change and challenge” creative knowledge systems but also produce knowledge in themselves (Sullivan 2017). A particular site of knowledge concerns creative process. This might constitute elements of the planning and developmental stage of the artwork, the processes of execution and the results of the work. The latter encompasses audience reception and the artwork’s future provenance at the hands of the art world or private collectors. Carter’s *Material Thinking* (2004) exemplifies the full range of practice-based research: artworks, historical and archival research, environmental input, collaboration with artists and community, cultural influences and art events and, significantly, the recording and discussion of these networks in the form of a scholarly book. The book also constitutes a more traditional form of research: a formal articulation of findings in the form of commentary, documentation and academic analysis.

Cypher’s envisaging of the agency of the material objects as collaboration is a new and useful development. It refines the nature of network mediations in the creative context, attributes agency to the non-human, and flattens the ontology or the lived status amongst the various agencies – artist, activities, materials, technologies, context and environment. His study of the collaborative impact in his own creative processes

of everything including the pencil itself used in preliminary sketching makes for a nuanced understanding of the complex processes at work in the emergence of the artwork. In addition, he cites the interactions between himself as artist and his own proclivities, as agents in his creative research. This notion of the flow of proclivities and mediators through the artist bears comparison to Latour's notion of instauration in that we can envisage the artist embracing possibilities not in fact instigated by him or her.

Secondly, whilst Cypher invokes the idea of agency in terms of the wider frames of discourse, culture and context, the latter with reference to the art world, the academy, government agencies, and so on, he doesn't go into the nature of their mediation in any detail, nor does he invoke particular examples of mediation arising from these more general sources. With the exception of the acts of playing and sketching, his focus is largely confined to the material and technological.

At this point, practice-based research and ANT as a mode of analysis butt up against one another. An assumption of practice-based research is that someone is doing the research and someone is benefitting from it, be that the artist, audience or art world or research communities. ANT, on the other hand, defines a field of creativity where knowledge and outcomes are produced in concert with the artist researcher. The salient point is that research-based knowledge generated in creative practice does not need to be articulated in any other way. What this means is that in the literature there are times when creative practice and practice-based research are fused, and times when they are kept separate. In Cypher's article we see the merging of the two in his title and in the drift of his argument about non-human agency in creative practice, and we see the separation of the two in his claim that "ANT can be useful to visual art practice-based research", that is, as research *into* visual art practice.

In sum, artistic practice cannot rely on a straightforward movement from idea to art form, nor can it be explained as the artist's manipulation of materials, ideas and technique and nor does it occur within defined boundaries between art and non-art.

From a materialist sociological perspective, an assemblage of factors can be seen to generate a work of art, and these constituent factors alter from artwork to artwork, and from artist to artist.

In this study, I build on Cypher's argument by employing a range of agencies across the categories of the human and non-human, the material and discursive. In the following discussion I map distributed agency, heterogenesis and instauration in the work and practice of the six artists in this project, taking ANT, assemblage thinking and instauration as the theoretical point of departure. I situate the origins of their practice in the everyday, and identify heterogeneous elements that combine to shape their art and inform their practice. In the context of this chapter, practice-based research is seen as inherent to their process. It also appears in the second guise articulated by Cypher, as a way of analysing artist practice from the outside through the theoretical frames of ANT and assemblage thinking.

The artists

In the following sections I explore the question of dispersed agency across the practice of the six artists in question, and expand on Cypher's argument concerning collaboration across human and non-human agencies. My point of departure will be Latour's contention that any artwork can be seen as the trace of the formation of a group (Latour 2005, section 1), a group that is unique to that particular artwork. The art forms in which the artists work are: Hossein Valamanesh – works on paper, mixed media; Karla Dickens – sculptural assemblage, collage and video; Elizabeth Gower – collage; Polixeni Papapetrou – photography, and Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro – sculptural installation, mixed media.

The nexus between deliberate art-making, art materials, the artists' personal experiences, their official career parameters and their cultural and family background constitutes a network, and these areas can all be regarded as key agencies in the genesis of their work. These networks figure and coalesce in ways that cannot be sheeted home directly to creative decision-making and artistic intent. These are mediated through concepts that underpin and inform the direction of some artists' work. There is a parallel here between ANT as practice and Massumi's notion of nomadic thought. Nomadic thought then, creates concepts which do "not reflect the ... form of a legislating subject, but are defined by a communicable force in relation to which subject, to the extent that they can be said to have one, is only secondary" (Massumi 1992, p. 5).

The networks of agencies or factors that inform the work of these artists is extensive and interwoven. In terms of the non-human it includes (art) materials, found and sourced objects, devices such as cameras and computers, the natural and material environment, and place. Human agencies include the artist her or himself, the artist's family, peers and art world figures (curators, dealers) and the broader social and cultural environment. Practices include collaboration, play and collecting. At a broader level there are the interlinked systems and practices that characterise contemporary society. In the case of these artists they include children's literature and stories around children (PP), globalism and its systems (CH & SC), recycling and consumerism (EG; CH & SC) and elements intrinsic to the artists' familial and socio-cultural background.

Two cultures, one landscape

The nexus between experience and culture bears a cross-cultural stamp in the work of Iranian Australian artist, Hossein Valamanesh, and his work is situated within a framework of cosmopolitanism. The network of factors in his practice includes the Iranian culture and language of his youth (Farsi) and the experience of being transplanted into a radically different Australian context and landscape. His practice

raises the question of the way the culture of our birth expresses itself at a distance in a new context. In his art, the operations of dual identity and interwoven cultural allegiance play out in his everyday Australian environment. He creates work that is infused with Persian culture but which is translated into the Australian context. Along with this heritage, he also embraces the culture of this country, and the influence of Australian Aboriginal art, a second ancient culture, is influential in his work and thought. These intertwined facets can be mapped across his entire body of work.

A mediating factor that links these two cultures in his case is the power of circumstance, which, like the other artists in this study, Valamanesh is quick to embrace. There is a freedom and serendipity to be found in the story of how the Iranian-born artist came to live in Australia. When he emigrated here as a young man in the early 1970s, the destination was not of his own choosing. He was following a young woman with whom he had fallen in love, and when that relationship failed to materialise he found himself in a new country without clear direction. Had he remained in Iran, we can envisage another trajectory, one in which, he says, his art would have been focused more on the social and political upheaval leading up to the revolution of 1979. With the move here, these earlier concerns gave way to a concern with emotions and the inner life. Valamanesh was already an artist and painter when he arrived, having spent the final three years of his schooling at a fine arts academy in Tehran. Further art school training in South Australia, especially in twentieth-century art history, provided him with the knowledge and freedom to broaden and free up his practice. He abandoned painting and shifted his practice towards sculpture, installation and the found object.

The legacy of migration manifests in his art in a variety of ways. Some of his work takes on questions of the global diaspora and the movement of people, posing questions of identity, of origins, of dislocation and belonging. *Where do I come from?* (2013) and *Where do you come from?* (2013) are companion pieces created from the incision and rearrangement of the world map. The dialogue formed by the two works also serves to underline our common humanity.

Persian poetry, particularly that of Rumi, inflects his art with a metaphysical texture. Recurring references to the mysteries of existence, love, mortality and time generate a universality. In *The lover circles his own heart* (1993) and *This Will Also Pass* (2007), we are directed towards these themes by the artworks' titles. In works such as *Hasti Masti (Large)* (2014), metaphysical insights are built into the fabric of the piece. In this artwork, calligraphic script on paper, the artist has in-filled a circle with the words "drunk" or "intoxicated" and "life". The two words take almost identical form in Farsi. This coalescence of language, poetic insight and calligraphy is transformed into a work of visual art.

One of the few things Valamanesh brought with him to Australia was an old collection of the poetry of Rumi. He is a devotee of the poet and his everyday world is mediated through knowledge of and deep familiarity with Rumi's work. Valamanesh grew up in a culture in which metaphysical poetry is the norm. It is a cultural mindset that he encountered at school, where children learn the poetry by heart, and at home, where his mother would consult poetry to divine the outcome of significant events such as the result of her children's exams. As with a language, literature learnt as a child stays with you, and Valamanesh comments that Rumi's poetry sometimes runs through his mind much like song.

Another legacy of his emigration was the cross-cultural collaboration he experienced with classical Aboriginal artists not long after his arrival in the country. The time he spent in remote Indigenous communities talking to the artists and making art with them constituted a cross-cultural exchange. Valamanesh was permitted and encouraged to work with and utilise an Indigenous aesthetic as long as he told his own stories. This intersection of art, language and culture can be seen as part of a dual movement between translation and invention, an "overlap and interplay" of cultures that involves the emergence of something heretofore unseen (Papastergiadis 2013, pp. 149-53). The influence of Aboriginal art and culture has carried through his practice, generating art that simultaneously demonstrates synergies with Aboriginal art, with

Persian culture and the Australian material environment. *Longing Belonging* (1997) is a signal piece, interceding between Persian and Aboriginal cultures but also invoking the ambiguity and sense of displacement engendered through immigration. For this performance piece he placed a Persian carpet in an Australian bush setting and then lit a fire on the central medallion motif. The burnt carpet then became part of a gallery installation together with a photograph documenting the performance. For him the work alludes to the Iranian picnics of his childhood, complete with carpet and samovar, which in the work is also transmogrified into an Aboriginal campfire. The experience of being suspended between the two cultures becomes, in *Longing Belonging*, an artistic realisation of a new cosmopolitanism, opening up a space where cultural dialogue, translation and renewal can take place.

Collaboration is an important feature of Valamanesh's practice in the non-human context too. The ethic that informs his work finds beauty and meaning in the rhythms and objects of the everyday. Valamanesh's local environment throws up a variety of objects and materials that make their way into his work, insinuating themselves into meaning by lending the work its distinctive affinity with nature. What is interesting is that for Valamanesh, these materials do not necessarily have prior significance. It is through their incorporation into his work that they gain symbolic importance. Like Gower, Valamanesh often discovers his materials whilst out walking. The material everyday exemplifies the intelligence of materials to be found in his art, whether they be grapevine branches, eucalypt branches, saffron or gingko leaves that he finds whilst walking, cooking, shopping or sitting. Valamanesh collaborates with the significant others in his life, his partner Angela a ceramicist and filmmaker son Nassiem. The elder two Valamaneshes have worked together on several public installations, including *Pat's Garden* (2007). Their creative process is also collaborative. *Forest of words* (2000) came about as a result of playing around with grape vine branches and was originally conceived, as he readily admits, as a result of having "butted into Angela's play" [with sticks]. This collaboration manifests itself in subsequent works like this, where curving knotted twigs take on meaning as they rustically spell out words in Farsi.

In the 1990s, Valamanesh also participated in a creative project with the writer and historian Paul Carter. Carter invited Valamanesh and the Malaysian Australian dancer Chandrabhanu to collaborate with him on a work referencing the life and death of William Light, the first South Australian Surveyor-General. Called *Light, a séance drama*, this was a performance installation for which Valamenesh was responsible for the site design, “a sculptural analogue” of the biographical story, involving light and sculptural installations (Carter 2004, pp. 98-9).

More recently Valamanesh has collaborated with his son Nassiem on the immersive video installation *Char Soo* (2015). This four-sided work depicts a day in the life of a busy Iranian shopping bazaar in real time. Four stationary cameras were positioned at the crossroads of the bazaar and the effect for the viewer is to be plunged into the centre of the precinct, witnessing the slow passage of the day and the myriad events and interactions that make up everyday life.

A further instance of collaboration involves his past self and his now deceased mother mediated through material form. The work *In My Mother's Hands* (2011) consists of a digital print of a black and white photograph of himself as a naked baby being held aloft by his mother. All we see of her are her hands, which in the work he has tinted in delicate colour. This work generated another featuring his mother's hands, this time cast in bronze.

Bearing witness

Karla Dickens' art bears the weight of the past. In her practice we can trace two interlinked lines of influence – one intergenerational and the other personal. Her work is a creative testimony to intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people as a result of racist policies, atrocities, poverty, social discrimination and disadvantage (Attwood 2005). Her practice bears witness to the past through work that references the stories of victims, including those who didn't make it into the historical record,

such as young women and the history of their forced slavery and rape. These concerns lend ferocity to an art that is often at the same time decorative and poetic.

Dickens' work constitutes a cross-cultural exploration of identity on the contested ground of history. The network of factors predating her artistic practice is crucial to its shape. Such factors include the effect the policy of forced removal of children (the stolen generations) has had on her family's history, and her own struggle in overcoming drugs and addiction. All the artist participants in this project tell stories but Dickens' account partly comes under the aegis of oral history. Her art is surrounded by stories and her accounts of her art and practice are ineluctably tied to the stories and experiences passed down by her extended family. Stephen Muecke has argued that Aboriginality is constructed in discourse, that it is the product of the speaking subject reiterated from one generation to the next (Muecke 1992, p. 17). It is also manifestly created through practices generally and material practice in particular, whether those be traditional or the non-traditional of which Dickens' urban art is a powerful example.

Dickens' art is also tied to place. Works such as *Warrior Woman X-XX* (2017) and *Never Forgotten* (2015) negotiate elements of Indigenous experience in place and time, including that of herself and her forebears. These are symbolic works, and the stories they tell and exemplify possess an educational power, containing messages that connect place to people as well as express the racist and sexist power relations of a society that still bears its colonial roots.

For this artist, art is therapy. The pace at which Dickens works is a manifestation of this. Apart from the demands of being a single mother, she works every day. She is prolific, with hundreds of works to her name. There is a self-reflexive aspect to her art, with her own experience butting up against that of her family and of Indigenous people more generally. The position she inhabits in her art is partly the child of her mother and grandmother, the descendent of previous generations, and partly herself as artist and mother. She talks about the impact forced removal of children has had

on several generations of her family and the different ways in which that legacy has played itself out. She finds parallels and links between her own experience as an artist and that of her extended family.

The Kirkbride complex at Callan Park, the large colonial sandstone precinct in Rozelle, has for decades been the home of the Sydney College of the Arts. It was built in the 1880s as a state-of-the-art psychiatric facility. Dickens' several works involving an embellished canvas straightjacket work are a reference to this element of her history. Whether decoratively embroidered or inscribed with text from Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* (Horne 1964), these works are troubling. The distinctive long arms designed to disempower and immobilise the inmate serve not only as a reminder of the incarceration of her great-grandmother there but also of the high rate of Aboriginal incarceration generally.

From the point of view of ANT, the relationship between Dickens' familial concerns, her creative imagination, and these found objects is an interesting one. Does she find the objects or do they speak to her? In *Work Horse II* (2016), for example, a work about the rape of Aboriginal girls in servitude, an old leather horse yoke stuffed with sharpened cricket stumps evokes colonial violence and violation with shocking veracity. The mindset that discovers these associations is one informed by all that has gone before her; it is angry, determined and creative all at once in its pursuit of truth and acknowledgement.

Other works such as *Warrior Woman I-XX* (2016-17) go further to stake out a truth and justice claim. This series of works, commissioned by the National Art School Gallery was part of an exhibition in which the artists were asked to make art relating to the Darlinghurst Gaol. The art school now occupies the entire site of the former gaol.¹² This is a second instance of Dickens making her work in relation to an art school superimposed on a place of incarceration. The juxtaposition in her work of this

¹² In the 1920s the site became a Technical School and the new location of the National Art School.

multiplicity of factors – incarceration, Aboriginal people, young women and girls in particular, her own family and the art school in which she trained makes these works an incredibly dense network. Here again we see restoration and reparation at work in this brave decorative art. It reclaims these figures and their stories and in their individual beautification grants them dignity.

Like Elizabeth Gower, Dickens is a collector. She scours the local markets and garage sales every weekend, picking up rusty metal, fabric and any other objects that might be pressed into service. Her work ranges across collage, sculpture and sculptural wall works, and her materials of choice are found objects and fabric ranging from 1950s bark cloth to things she just refers to as “rust”: old rusted iron objects big and small such as horseshoes, kerosene tins, and random household objects, along with the stuff of women’s craft, buttons, glitter, feathers and string, amongst a number of other things. Hawkins speaks of the uncanny presence of discarded objects, which “appear animate and able to make claims on us” (Hawkins 2006, p. 73). Rather than constituting a pleasant pastime, her practice of collecting seems to be driven, a reflection of her relentless work schedule but, equally importantly, of the need to practice economy.

Another instance of material recognition or collaboration is the mascot logo of the South Sydney Rugby Team. Raised in Mascot in South Sydney and surrounded by fans of the team throughout childhood and adolescence, at a certain point she became aware of the ubiquity of the Rabbitohs logo – the image of the lean white running rabbit – particularly on cars. Once this presence came to her notice, she found on a drive from Sydney to Lismore that she started to notice them everywhere and not only on cars, an instance of how things can assert themselves and how we can become enmeshed with them (Grosz 2010). A thing takes on a life of its own which we must accommodate in our actions.

A further element that has found its way into Dickens’ art is the theme of motherhood, again predated by a significant event, the birth of her daughter. In a poetic coalition of

cultures and histories, this theme manifests in a series of collage works that depict the Black Madonna. This alternative historical representation of the Madonna has its roots in medieval Europe and Africa (Benko 1993). In these painted collages Dickens juxtaposes the traditional triangular figuration of the Madonna and child with motifs and other formal references to classical Aboriginal art. Included here are Dickens' figuration and dotting, and her haloed figures also recall the Wandjina figures to be found in the Indigenous art of the Kimberley. What Dickens achieves here is a re-contextualisation of this tradition for contemporary art and culture. These multivalent works are a recuperation that simultaneously exemplifies her own experience as an Aboriginal mother and someone who has been brought up in the Christian faith. The prevalence of Christianity in Aboriginal communities is a complex question in itself, both deriving from colonial policies of assimilation and cultural genocide but now embraced as a source of faith and community.

Detritus and pattern

In the case of Victorian collage artist Elizabeth Gower, I work my way into the question of dispersed agency in her practice starting at the level of the material. In this context, the material extends from art materials to source materials (those deliberately sourced by the artist) to the found object. From there the links can be traced to the broader environment, both local and urban.

One characteristic of her artistic practice, Elizabeth Gower comments, is that she might spend all day moving a piece of paper around a composition. In moving the paper cutting from place to place she is looking for a formal or aesthetic solution but is not able to command one immediately. The process of experimental positioning and repositioning occurring over time is for her a form of play, a process that allows time for something to emerge. When it does, when the paper finds its place, the artist embraces the result. In the very language Gower uses, the paper cutting takes on agency, and the artist the role of receiver. This is an instance of instauration, but it also shows the way in which creative decision-making is based on the collaboration

between artist and material. It indicates that the three agencies are intertwined: material agency, play and artist instauration.

In the creative process of all these artists, elements come together and disperse from one work to the next. Gower's body of work exhibits a certain unity so the network of factors might alter only slightly. Her materials of choice are paper detritus – consumer catalogues, magazines, bill posters, waste paper she finds in the letterbox and on the street. With this marketing bumf she makes meticulous collages featuring her characteristic pattern aesthetic. Connections start to become apparent between marketing catalogues, waste paper, collecting and recycling, locale, her movement through place and her reasons for being there. The common element, as in all these case studies, is the artist herself.

The process of collecting is central to her practice. Gower collects materials for her work at home and abroad, walking to the studio, travelling overseas, wandering as a tourist and picking up the children (when they were young). In the anthropological literature, collecting is viewed as the amassing and preserving of things for culturally related purposes (Belk 2006; Bell 2017). Gower was a collector even before she was an artist. She has an extensive collection of coat hangers, for example, which so far have not made it into her art. As a child she played in the back room of her grandmother's milk bar, where she would soak the labels off soft drink bottles and arrange the labels on the windowsill. These characteristic tendencies were developed far in advance of her becoming an artist, and continue to inform her practice. Collecting is a proclivity, a predisposition akin to a drive. It is something that people do or feel driven to do not only for the pleasure of assembling a set of like things but also perhaps as a way of ordering and making sense of their environment (Belk 2013).

Through the status of her found objects/source materials as waste, Gower's practice touches lightly on our complex relationship to rubbish along with the ethics of waste and of recycling. This is despite the fact that her materials are already becoming redundant, the digital age slowly rendering paper communication obsolete. Her

practice is also localised in that she finds inspiration and materials in the immediate environment. As a mediating agent in her work, paper waste for Gower has a powerful pull, as something that asserts itself so that we become enmeshed with it (Grosz in Hawkins 2006, p. 73). Hawkins argues that in their creative translation of rubbish, artists alter the ontological status of waste, refusing its status as other (Hawkins 2006).

The same could be said about the transformation of consumer items that occurs in Gower's art. Her work also has a consumerist theme in its translation of tiny images of everyday objects – makeup, clothes, bikes, cars and so on – into formal pattern motifs. There remains a thing-ness about those small consumer objects – shoes, clothes, domestic objects – as markers of everyday life and the home. A 2017 abstract work reveals lines made of paper cuttings derived from Kodak film boxes, in that deep yellow that is synonymous with the brand. This is a technology that derives from the era when film was loaded into cameras and photographs were developed at pharmacies. Once commonplace but now almost obsolete, there is an affectionate rendering of this material past, its presence now a novelty miniaturised in her work. She does not so much engage in direct critiques of waste and consumerism, as enter into a creative, even joyful interaction that transforms them into celebration of the material culture of the everyday (Johnstone 2008; Turkle 2011).

Another factor that affects the composition of her work is place, and many of her international sojourns have resulted from international artist residencies. As she has travelled in different countries as part of these residencies, Gower not only collects 'papers', but also patterns. These are for her markers of a culture, a country, an iconography she then distills into her works. So one body of work celebrates the curving forms found in Parisian balconies and wallpapers. Another references the grid pattern of New York's Manhattan, a third echoes the Moorish tile patterns distinctive to Barcelona. These could perhaps be accorded the status of 'found patterns'. 😊

Where Gower finds herself is not necessarily of her own doing. Gower and her two children accompanied her partner John R. Neeson when he was awarded the Samstag fellowship. She found herself in London but not necessarily intending to make work there. Circumstance and place propelled her into work even though at the time she didn't have access to a studio. It was Christmas and there were snow crystal decorations in the windows. The power of this shape with its internal patterning found its way into a new body of work; it persuaded her, if you like, to create a series of works originating in their experience of London at Christmas time.

If new forms arise within a field of heterogeneity, their determinants might be anything and everything: "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other" (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 7). Constitutive relations can be determined after the fact: "The rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced" (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 25).¹³ So we can map the rhizomatic connections that lend shape to Elizabeth Gower's artistic practice along the following lines: product marketing and junk mail catalogues, the system of overseas artist residencies, her personal habit of collecting and her grandmother's milk bar. With the exception of the artist residencies, art is not the primary concern of these associated fields, but their intersection with the artist at a particular time and place make it so. In this sense, the artist becomes the common notion of this particular assemblage.

The Gothic Other

The work of Melbourne photomedia artist, Polixeni Papapetrou, bounces off the tableau vivant photography of nineteenth-century photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron and Charles Dodgson. The coalition of factors at issue in her work cuts across photography, the (photographic) archive, collaboration, play, found and sourced objects, the lens of the other and of the Gothic, illness and, crucially, her two

¹³ "The tracing has already translated the map into an image... It has organized, stabilized, neutralized the multiplicities according to the axes of significance and subjectification belonging to it" (Deleuze & Guattari 2004, p. 13).

children and their pursuits. This mix of human and non-human factors, of people, concepts, objects and practices shapes and determines her work, coalescing in various configurations. Some of these coalitions have come about in part by accident or chance, which again is something that this artist is able to embrace. Her approach to her practice verges on the cinematic; by turns she has acted as director, producer, cinematographer, set designer and costume designer, shooting her characters in the studio against a backdrop, or in situ in the landscape.

One important relationship in Papapetrou's practice is the one she had with the archive. The photographic archive is instrumental both in the general tenor of her photography and also more specifically in her restaging of certain historical photographic works. Papapetrou's 2003 body of work 'Dream Child' involves a suite of works entirely based on images of children by Lewis Carroll. Here Papapetrou goes to some trouble to reproduce Carroll's pictures with a duplication of backdrop, figure pose, costume and props. In a similar fashion, 'Wonderland' from 2004 involves the reproduction of a number of John Tenniel's illustrations from the 1865 edition of *Alice in Wonderland* through a combination of painted ground and backdrop with Papapetrou's daughter posing as Alice. The influence of the archive becomes a distinguishing feature in Papapetrou's subsequent work, not so much on the literal level but as a looser thematic. The artist begins to play with nineteenth-century photographic conventions of narrativity and the tableau vivant without needing to go to the length of reproducing past images.

Both of the above bodies of work become an exploration of what can be said, or rather depicted, in the present day in conversation with the past. This is especially the case within *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs* (2003). This is the image that came to a broader public attention during a period of heightened public anxiety in 2008 over the depiction of children in art (Marsh & Whyte 2010). Through her work Papapetrou endorsed this approach as a legitimate convention for contemporary photography, and stood by it in the face of public criticism. As we will see, the journey by which she arrived at this type of art involved her embrace of

artistic developments that came about in relation to her daughter through the activities of play and improvisation.

The notion of otherness has played a crucial role in Papapetrou's artistic career. Partly rooted in personal experience, the concept has evolved into something of an intellectual and artistic preoccupation figuring in her work in surprisingly diverse ways. As the non-English speaking child of immigrants who had fled the Greek civil war, on starting school she experienced first hand the exclusion and isolation that being designated other can bring. Once she had children, she discovered the imaginative world of children's play and, in the depictions of her own children, this became for a decade or more the locus of her exploration of the Other.

Otherness is a key thematic of the Gothic and one of its central conceits involves restless opposites, the coming together of things that should remain apart (Williams 2007a). Her staged theatrical studies of figures possess a Gothic inflection across these various dimensions. The figures in these carefully orchestrated images are mostly her two children, now young adults. Costumed and masked, they depict a range of characters from fairytale, fantasy and folklore to the children's literature of Lewis Carroll. In its embrace of the Other in all its distinctiveness, her art becomes a celebration of difference. The presentation of alternative identities was already a preoccupation in her earlier work with images drawn from the body builder, transvestite and Elvis Presley fan club communities.

As an aesthetic, the Gothic is formal and studied, narrational and figurative and, as a literary form, falls into family romance (Williams 2007a). The atmosphere of mystery Papapetrou develops in her work, alongside the formal and studied nature of her shots, all resonate with this, as does her depiction of "lost eras, distant landscapes and outlandish personal appearances" (Williams 2007a). The inner workings of the child's imaginary play is inaccessible to adults and her work features a Gothic disturbance of categories, with her children disguised as animals, as the elderly and as earth spirits.

The characters are made eccentric by the fact of the children posing, and the idea of masquerade reinforces the idea that they are not what they seem.

A distinctive feature of her practice is her collaboration with her children, now young adults. Since their early years, her daughter and son modelled for her, inhabiting the costumes and masks, their hands, feet and overall size the only indicators of their identity. Significantly she tried not to direct them, it is they who found the pose and established the character within the parameters she set up. The form of collaboration at issue here is again comparable to a cinematic one with distinct roles being allotted to the artist and the models. This is in contrast to the more organic form of collaboration apparent in the case of other artists in this project.

That this collaboration came about by chance, through the conjunction of disparate events and discoveries, illustrates the importance of distributed agency in Papapetrou's work. When she decided to quit the law and stay at home to raise her children, the artist had no idea that an accidental game of dress-ups with her young daughter would define the direction of her work for the next decade and a half. As far as Papapetrou was concerned the photographs she took of her daughter that day were not art but shots of her child playing. Their transition to art was the result of an art world intervention, a curator who spotted them and suggested they be exhibited.

Her artistic representation of her children, particularly in pictures that channel the work of Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), has been seen as controversial, and the reception of her work in the light of this knowledge has also had a Gothic tinge. During the minor controversy that blew up in 2008 around the work of Bill Henson, her work too was seen by the public as somehow transgressive, both in her decision to include her children in her art, but more particularly in relation to *Olympia as Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs* (2003), a work that recreates the early twentieth-century version by Charles Dodgson.

Papapetrou's work continued to be shaped by random and unexpected elements, which she embraced and developed. The most significant of these has been cancer, the illness that beset her in late 2009, and which took her life in 2018. Intimations of illness and mortality have made it into her work in curious and poetic ways. Commissioned by the Melbourne General Cemetery in 2015 to make works in response to the cemetery, she made a combination of pictures – studio shots of vases of wilting lilies together with a Brontë-esque image of her daughter running under the peppercorn trees in the cemetery, dressed in flowing black.

The theme has been reiterated in *Eden* (2016), a body of work in which notions of mourning, mortality, masquerade and the decorative intersect. The works from this exhibition depict Papapetrou's daughter and other young women merging into a floral field. Dressed in floral fabrics and posed against floral wallpapers, they are masked in elaborate wreaths of flowers or floral coronets. These works were exhibited as part of an interdisciplinary exhibition and publication about cancer, mounted by the University of Melbourne. In the catalogue, Papapetrou plays the dual role of artist and cancer sufferer. The work is a putative gesture to her own experience of the proximity of death, with which, due to the terminal nature of her condition, she had to contend for several years.

In Papapetrou's case, collaboration with her children went in two directions, those of public art and private life. Her oeuvre is a creative collaboration that extends beyond art into the fabric of their family life. It functions as family archive, containing portraits, even if highly stylised, of the children at every stage of their youth. At the simplest level they document not only aspects of their lives but also the time working with their mother on this prolonged joint enterprise.

Nomadic thought and practice

Like that of Elizabeth Gower, the art of New South Wales artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro brings into play the ethics of waste and the level of the everyday. And like

other art preoccupied with the everyday, their work can be seen in the light of a poetics of noticing (Johnstone 2008). Their art predominantly takes the form of sculptural installation and it has a considerable conceptual component. As sculptors, they work across the modalities of mass, form, space and mobility. Healy and Cordeiro are global artists, not atypical of contemporary artists today and a significant measure of art world success. As members of van Heeswijk's 'jet set proletariat,' one of the consequences for their practice is the economy of employing the found object with which to make work.

A couple with two children, the circumstances of their private life are profoundly intertwined with their work. A distinctive element of their practice is their personal artistic collaboration. The lives of this couple represent a shared endeavour that extends across their artistic practice, personal lives, parenthood and lifestyle. They take mutual responsibility for everything: the planning and execution of the art to the administration of their practice and the publication of their work. In the context of their nomadic lives they also share responsibility for raising their children. In their case, collaboration seems to function as a type of fusion, arrived at through close interaction and interchangeability. This collaboration across all facets of their lives represents an unusual creative and personal interdependence. This is distinct from collaborations involving separate roles, as with Papapetrou and her children, or ones that might reflect a competitive element or student/teacher dynamic (Shenk 2014).

In his study of six creative partnerships, Joshua Wolf Shenk argues that creative collaboration is a phenomenon until now not well appreciated in a "genius obsessed culture" (2014, p. xix). Shenk proposes that a collaborative relation emerges through the following stages: meeting, confluence, dialectics, distance, the infinite game and interruption (pp. xxiii-xxiv). Confluence he sees as the development of a joint identity, and dialectics refers to the way in which the roles of creative couples are enmeshed but also remain distinct, with each taking up "archetypal positions" in issues. Distance is necessary for the couples to thrive and grow through tension and "frisson." He employs the notion of "the infinite game" to describe the way in which creative pairs

at their height operate in a tension between competition and cooperation, with interruption referring to the breakdown of the relationship.

Shenk's distinctions are valuable in understanding how the couple make their collaboration work. In Healy and Cordeiro's practice we see a comprehensive fusion of skills, ideas and execution. Their practice is so integrated that in the artworks themselves it is almost impossible to discern their input as individuals. In terms of their working process they could be said to demonstrate Shenk's dialectic in their retention of distinct identities and input, with each contributing their particular ideas, skills and working style. There is also evidence of creative friction. Healy and Cordeiro manage their collaboration in a number of ways. They read the same books at the same time, and they keep a journal of ideas that they generate in their discussions. They do this, significantly, because they often find that they initially disagree with one another's ideas.

This interpersonal form of artistic collaboration is only the first of other forms of collaboration that, following Carter and Cypher, inform their work. Theirs is both a systems approach and one that allows for accident, chance and random discovery. The agencies that impact on their work range from sourced materials and found objects and their affordances, to the socio-economic forces that shape their lives; their own experience of, and critical reflection on, the systems they encounter, and the experience of being global artists who are also a couple with children. What we can see in action here is Brian Massumi's "pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies" (Bennett 2010, p. 57).

For the past fifteen years, grants, scholarships and artist residencies have enabled Healy and Cordeiro to travel almost continuously. Before having children, these opportunities enabled them to live and work for significant periods of time overseas as they moved from one residency to the next. Not only did this enable them to make work in various countries in Asia and Europe, but also to exhibit internationally in group exhibitions and solo shows. The resulting nomadic lifestyle was something the

couple continued to embrace for several years after the birth of their two children. It has slowed but not entirely stopped now that their elder child is at school.

Not only are Healy and Cordeiro global artists, but globalism itself is a driving force in their art. Globalism, its systems and their embrace of nomadism in the service of a global art career are the very things that shape their art. In it we can map a nexus between their art and the travel imperatives of the contemporary art career, their first-hand experience of a nomadic artist life, including the systems, practices and logistics this has entailed. The circumstances of their career practice have unleashed a range of material, environmental and discursive agencies in their work. The result is reflexive art that manifests, reflects on and critiques the systems of globalism. As such it can be seen as a creative and material manifestation of Massumi's idea of nomadic thinking. The material, circumstantial, experiential and artistic all mediate the art, combining to generate something that, to employ Deleuze and Guattari, demonstrates a range of lines of flight, de-territorialism and re-territorialism.

Their-first hand experience of the systems and infrastructure of a globally integrated world, including travel, aviation and the movement of people, goods and products, and the systems and logistics supporting this, including freight, distribution, international marketing and consumption. The fabric of globalism as they experience it is the stuff of their art, including Euro pallets and cable binding, gaffer tape, small aeroplanes, flat packed furniture, found objects from various international artist habitations, and international toy and home wares brands. These are material traces of a nomadic experience of travel and constitute an index of globalism at a material level. It is worth noting that their practice concentrates on the material rather than digital dimensions of social change.

Carter's intelligence of materials is manifestly evident in their work. How these conjunctions coalesce in individual artworks is varied, critically astute and always materially apt. Take *Par Avion* (2011-2012) and *Stasis* (2012) for instance, both constructed from old aeroplanes. The process of creation of the former involved

sourcing an aeroplane, a Cessna 172, which they then had sectioned into seventy pieces. They proceeded to send off these as packages via airmail to an art gallery in San Francisco for exhibition. The pieces generated a segmented installation that in formal and spatial terms is a skeletal, disjointed version of the original. It retains these levels of conceptual, critical and ironic thinking, the modalities and materials of aviation, the increasingly antiquated postal service and witty and engaging contemporary art. 😊

As we saw with the impact of place on Gower's work, the places and habitations in which Healy and Cordeiro find themselves inform and shape their art. These are determined in part by funding imperatives and availability. Rebounding from their nomadic lifestyle and the environment in which they find themselves, their art can morph both in form and materials. *Takadanobaba* (2005), for example, is a work made entirely from the furniture and objects they found upon arrival during their artist residency in Tokyo. The three-dimensional wall work they compose from these is a neat and compact contrivance referencing the aesthetic of the tatami room.

Another work, *The Cordial Home Project* (2003), also demonstrates an element of dispersed agency. The work consists of an entire house deconstructed and layered geometrically to form a square slab in the gallery space. The artists had initially wanted to put piles of the rubble in the space. They were, however, prevented from doing so and the stacking approach became the solution to this problem.

A significant number of their pieces employ items from IKEA, the flat-packed furnishings and home wares that paradoxically democratise good design, make it accessible to the general populace, and help perpetuate a global design monoculture. These works build on the current cultural fixation on home improvement and decoration. They also represent the inbuilt obsolescence in which "cheap and broken consumer durables signify an economy dependent on disposability" (Hawkins 2006, p. 2). Several artworks focus on the material and environmental effects of globalism represented most forcefully by IKEA. *Dust to Dust* (2008) consists of three mounded

shapes in glass cases, the detritus left by three IKEA coffee tables destroyed and crushed by the artists. In *Future Remnant* (2011) a life-sized model skeleton of a dinosaur perches on a pedestal composed from a motley collection of IKEA products. The work riffs on archeological speculation about what will remain of the present era. This is a double irony as it is doubtful that the detritus of IKEA will still be around, although the allen keys most certainly will.

In *Venereal Architecture* we see a further coalition, that of international brands IKEA and Lego. Claire Healy comments: “the plasticity, the fakeness, is what you do when the real things, the natural things are too hard to procure, or when they’ve disappeared.” Here we see the conjunction of different types of desire, primal sexual desire expressed through pornography (venereal) is paired with the homemakers’ dream expressed through the globalised consumption of flat packed (veneer-ial) furniture. In summary, this is an art of globalisation and its repercussions, infused with nomadic thinking and characterised by bricolage, critical reflexivity and old-fashioned making do. In Terry Smith’s terms, it is an art of contemporaneity.

The final two artists I discuss in this chapter are Hossein Valamanesh and Karla Dickens. Cross-culturalism, or even cultural translation (Papastergiadis), is a factor in the work of both artists. In the case of Valamanesh, it relates to emigration and the resulting expansion of identity and cultural allegiance in a new place. In Dickens’ case, the cross-cultural has to do with the way she as an Aboriginal person negotiates the contested field of history, and also takes into account the way Aboriginal oral history undergoes a shift from discourse into formal historical text (Muecke 1992). Present in the work of both is the attempt to translate particular cultures and bring them “into the cosmopolitan dialogue” (Papastergiadis 2013, p. 154). In Dickens’ case this occurs as a polemic, in Valamanesh’s more as a philosophy or ethic.

The art of both raises the question of the influence of the past and the way in which it impacts on artistic practice. From the point of view of ANT, a way of conceiving of the agency of the past is through the notion of ‘flow’. In comparison to the idea of

channelling the past, flow discerns a further aspect of indeterminacy in the outcome of actions and events. One of the questions the work of these artists yields is the way elements fundamental to our identity run through us. We are not as unique and independent as we would like to think insofar as we are also the product of history and culture, of previous generations and the identity bestowed on us by our family history. Even the psychology and physiology we inherit from our forebears are then further forged by the circumstances of our upbringing and the actions that we take.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the work of these artists is the art of contemporaneity. It emerges from its time, is comprised of the materials of its time, evolving through and engaging with the systems and practices of its time. It is material art forged within or in relation to conceptual frameworks, the product of collaboration in the wider theoretical sense of the term. Following Smith, it is work about what it is to be now and about what art can be now.

Disparate and complex assemblages can be mapped in the evolution of the art and each artist's practices. In this chapter, in the manner of Latour, I have put together stories that map flows and networks, identifying a vast range of factors that help shape individual practice and help delineate individual artworks. Some of these are general, some particular but keeping in mind the idea of a non-hierarchical field they are arguably each as important as the other, with the sole exception of the status of the artist him or herself. We have seen how the artists and their artistry in conjunction with objects and the material environment, the past, gender and family, play, collaboration and collecting and elements of the world itself coalesce, becoming a form of agency in the emergence of their art. These come together in particular configurations and then disperse like crowds, leaving an art trace in their wake. Take away any one of these and the resulting artwork would be altered in some way. As we

have also seen, the artist is responsible for some factors, welcomes others and is sometimes surprised at the unforeseen.

Chapter 2: Literary practice in ‘This Art Life’

I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language” (Calvino 1988, p. 3).

Introduction

Whereas the previous chapter of this exegesis theorises emergence and becoming, mapping disparate factors influential in the genesis of contemporary visual art, this chapter explores the literary questions that have arisen in the context of the creative component of this project. This chapter canvases questions of genre and voice implicated in the writing of ‘This Art Life,’ a non-academic book on contemporary art practice. The literary approach and the voice adopted for this project form the crux of the following discussion.

Roland Barthes (1985) divides viewers of art into five types: the educated subject who understands the (cultural, allegorical) references; the specialist subject who can speak the discourse of art history (art movement, composition), the subject of pleasure, who delights in the work but can usually only express it by talking of the ‘beauty’ of the work. Then there is the subject of memory, for whom the work evokes something, changes their state of being. Finally there is the subject who wishes to reproduce the painting. Whilst any or all of these viewers may find interest in ‘This Art Life’ as a book, the intended readership vis-à-vis ways of looking at and thinking about art, aligns most closely with the latter three types rather than the already informed viewers who make up Barthes’ first two categories.

Genre

Contemporary visual art is a diverse and unstable field in which the boundaries between art and non-art are continually being challenged. It is a field that for most people requires explication. The ambit of this project – the investigation of the genesis of art from the materialist perspective of dispersed agency – needs to be balanced with the intended readership, which could be envisaged as a composite of Barthes' viewers. 'This Art Life' takes the form of a series of essays. These sit within the genre of art writing. The text might not conform with standard art criticism, art history or art theory, but it contains elements of each. It is not life writing although it includes details of the lives of the artists under consideration. It is a heterogeneous text, one that balances the demands of explication whilst also sustaining, to use Barthes' term, the pleasure of the text. It relies of plurality of discourses, including narrative, thick description, art criticism, discussion of ideas and reflection.

The last four decades have seen the emergence of forms of art writing that expand the subject and diversify the form (Thompson 2017). The *raison d'être* of traditional art criticism has been to do with setting standards and defending the status quo or new developments in the field. Experimental and narrative approaches have developed, in conjunction with the expansion of contemporary visual art itself, into new and diverse directions. New voices have entered the field, including artists themselves writing about their own and others' work. As Thompson argues, these new voices challenge the elitism and obscurantism of high theory and the didacticism of broadsheet journalism (2017).

These alternative forms of art writing are a departure from canonical forms of art criticism, art history and art theory. Thompson identifies four types of emergent writing in the art world: creative criticism, fictocriticism, collage/montage types of writing and literary texts that adumbrate theory or criticism. This plurality of voices

and forms has been read as a sign of a crisis facing art criticism (Elkins & Newman 2005), but Thompson argues that it might instead be regarded as sign of its health, a fluid and dynamic engagement between art, criticism, theory, literature and reception (2017, p. 113).

Various art-world publications and types of art writing have informed this study. Firstly, contemporary visual art is a complex and diverse field, and for readers not from the art-world, the text must be able to explicate aspects of this world. Secondly, it has been important to represent the artist in the context of their creative practice and from their own perspective. As artists develop new forms of practice, the boundaries of contemporary art continue to widen and the role of the artist is redefined. This occurs partly through the self-determination of the artist. The studio becomes a place where artists reshape art but also rehearse self-belief (Thornton 2014, p. xiv). 'This Art Life' is a text that draws on the extended interviews the author has conducted with the artists. The author also made fieldwork visits to the artists' studios and/or homes in order to see first hand the type of space in which creative practice habitually occurs. The text also grants space to the artist's voice and gives credence to the artists' own accounts of their work, remaining sensitive to the themes that arise in these accounts.

Recent publications provide critical guides to this world, translating some of the developments in the field for a more generalist audience with the tacit understanding that the art world needs a public and that that public deserves to be informed. One focus is on the figure of the artist, exploring the practice and motivations of individual artists through a mix of interview, biography and ethnography (Obrist 2015; Thornton 2014). Another focus is the practice of individual artists represented in their own words (Abramovic et al. 2015), and a third strand is concerned with the art world and with definitions of contemporary art, construing what it is, what it does and what it might mean for us today (Perry 2014; Thornton 2012).

Thornton's book divides the art world into seven areas: auction house, critic, art fair, art prize, art magazine, artist and studio, and the biennale, which areas she explores

by chapter. She presents each sector primarily through the prism of one of its major players whom she accompanies throughout his or her day. The book also draws upon interviews she has conducted with a range of art-world professionals and personalities. Through this day-in-the-life structure and through her opportunity to embed herself in this world, Thornton demonstrates the cosmopolitan inner workings and star personalities of this international network.

Grayson Perry's *Playing to the Gallery* (2014) is a more informal guide to the sphere of contemporary visual art and considers and covers definitional questions about art and artists. A witty critical introduction for the general public, it is designed to augment the gallery experience. Here the world of contemporary art comes alive in quirky cartoons hand drawn by the artist author, the self-described "flamboyant transvestite potter." He covers topics such as what counts as art today, how to judge whether art is any good and how people become artists. Funny and illuminating, this book constitutes a way of making a supercharged world approachable. What links these books is their intent to explicate art and its value for the non-art-world person. They are each, in their own way, explanatory texts, but they rise above didacticism in their venture into new forms of art writing for a wider less informed reader and new ways of addressing that reader.

Then there is the literature around the idea of creativity and artistic practice – that endlessly interesting and frustratingly elusive process that is creative endeavour. This area is often left to the voice of the artist, with the transcription of interviews leading the reader to the hope that we can plumb creativity through conversation. John Tusa's classic series of interviews with a range of people working across the arts is one such instance (Tusa 2004). A more contemporary survey of visual artists speaking about their art and practice is the wonderfully named *Akademie X: Lessons in Art + Life* (Abramovic et al. 2015).

One of the difficulties of the above approach for my purposes is that it is near impossible to draw any but the most general conclusions about artist practice. In her

survey of contemporary visual artists, *33 Artists in 3 Acts* (Thornton 2014), Sarah Thornton finds a simple solution by structuring the book and grouping her selected artists around three categories: kinship, politics and craft. These provide a way into the mass of her subject matter and generate some direction for the reader. In the kinship section she explores threads of influence and creative interaction between the artist and the art world (for example between artist and curator) or the extended family. Politics, on the other hand, has to do with artists whose practice manifests a political bent such as Ai Weiwei. The third category, 'craft', is an unusual choice of word for a section essentially focusing on different types of and approaches to artistic practice.

Experimental art writing

Rosalind Krauss argues that the work of art criticism involves the systematic unpacking of the work of art (Thompson 2017). She is also of the opinion that experimental art writing is not necessarily the place where this can be performed. However, various art world precedents reveal types of writing that achieve this goal. A precedent for accessible art criticism was the French eighteenth-century writer, philosopher and encyclopaedist, Diderot (1713-1784). Diderot developed his own style of art criticism, an epistolary model, which in its vivid descriptions and personal anecdotes, brought art and aesthetic issues to life for those who hadn't the chance to visit exhibitions (Arnold 1995).

Mention must also be made of John Berger's now iconic book from 1972, *Ways of Seeing* (2008). Deceptively simple in tone, it explores what it is to look at art, opening it up to the sort of questions that professional art critics may have regarded as naive. His approach was revolutionary in that it enabled the viewer to look anew at art that seemed reactionary and unconnected to either the present day or the ordinary viewer, locating in it universal properties as well as contemporary avenues for criticism.

In the present day, Janet Malcolm expands the genre of art writing in her piece 'Forty One False Starts' (Malcolm & Garner 2013). Here, frustration at striking the right tone and content provides the impetus for a piece of experimental writing that includes all versions of her piece about the artist David Salle. By publishing these attempts as a single work, Malcolm encourages the writer to extend their repertoire to include modes of writing and tones of address that would previously have been deemed out of place.

T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006) is an extended work of pictorial analysis that involves a series of lengthy disquisitions on two paintings by Poussin. It includes significant room for reflection, life-related as well as aesthetic, compositional and art historical. The chapters draw on diary entries the author made on successive days whilst standing in front of the pictures. In its detailed compositional descriptions and finely honed analysis, Clark sees this book in defensive terms as a counterbalance to Debord's 'society of the spectacle' (p. 185). In it he advocates the type of critical thinking that art can elicit in a time when images on every platform flood the public arena and compete for attention. As we shall see, this is a concern shared by Calvino.

A more experimental contemporary work to do with art is *Draw Your Weapons* (Sentilles 2017). This book takes the form of an extended reflection on war and terrorism within a literary genre and from an artistic perspective. She explores, often by recourse to the arts, the implications of conflict and atrocity in the lives of soldiers and others affected by them. The form of her writing is collage/montage, comprising the juxtaposition of different types of discourse – history and reportage, critical and creative reflection, memoir and theology – together create a composite picture of the themes and experiences under discussion.

Art and life writing

An early departure from conventional art history can be found in *Alias Olympia: A woman's search for Manet's notorious model and her own desire* (Lipton 1992). Lipton's unconventional book is both a radical feminist art history and an early example of auto-ethnography. Lipton came of age in the same feminist cauldron as the art historian and theorist Linda Nochlin, the author of the ground-breaking article 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (1992). With encouragement from Nochlin, in the 1970s Lipton set about researching the painter's model, Victorine Meurent. Meurent, who featured in six of Edouard Manet's most famous paintings, had been dismissed by art historians as little more than a prostitute and drunkard, and was thought to have died an early death. It was Lipton who revealed that Meurent had not only lived until 1927 but had gone on to become an exhibiting artist and member of the Society of French Artists (*Société des Artistes Français*).

Lipton's work project was robustly unconventional for the then-conservative discipline of art history and it became a personal quest. The book consists of two interwoven texts: her account of her painstaking search for information about Meurent and a fictional account of the inner life of Meurent herself. The book is a frank account of her search for information about this woman in conjunction with an autobiographical search for herself. She alternates an account of her research with the story of her own feminist awakening, as a young woman, to the deficiencies of her discipline and the under-representation of female artists in the canon and of female scholars in the academy.

Another work of biography, Drusilla Modjeska's *Stravinsky's Lunch* (Modjeska, Bowen & Smith 2001), also provides an example of a writer who has combined academic artist biography with something more contemplative and personal. This is a comparative biography of the two mid-twentieth century Australian artists, Stella

Bowen and Grace Cossington Smith. Modjeska's comparative biography doesn't use the life to explain the art, but maps the origins of the work in the artists' social and material environments. The book foregrounds the relationship between artistic practice and everyday life and also poses the question of how to write about this relation. In a way that is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf, Modjeska demonstrates that it was the financially independent and childless Cossington Smith who was able to pursue her career in an uncompromised fashion. Paradoxically, according to Modjeska, it is the years spent as the partner of the writer Ford Madox Ford that would make her the painter she became.

The title of Modjeska's book derives from an anecdote about the composer Igor Stravinsky. In order to retain this train of thought when preoccupied with composing he would insist that his family eat lunch with him in silence. Modjeska quotes Stella Bowen on the toll that creativity takes and the importance of domestic support: "Any artist knows that after a good bout of work one is both too tired and too excited to be of use to anyone. To be obliged to tackle other people's problems, or merely to cook their meals, is intolerably hard" (Modjeska, Bowen & Smith 2001).

'This Art Life' as creative criticism

'This Art Life' takes the form of art writing, but it is neither conventional art criticism nor art theory nor canonical art history, although it does contain elements of each of these. It is a creative criticism, a hybrid form. It is a text that can sit alongside art but also exist independently of it as literary non-fiction. Writing is a way of situating ourselves amongst things, and literary works produce poetic subjects, offering temporary subject positions to inhabit vis-à-vis the narrative voice.

The conceptual framework for 'This Art Life' is derived from a work of literary theory, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, by Italo Calvino (1988). Each of the artist chapters is written as an essay, all of which cohere under the rubric of five universal values. The move from literary values to the context of contemporary art practice is a form of

translation, involving elements of synthesis and juxtaposition. Calvino's text provides a system and structure, a formal scheme and method. Employing Calvino's literary values as a framework renders 'This Art Life' in part a literary exercise. Such an approach distinguishes it from creative non-fiction where the impetus veers more towards the author's subjective processes in relation to the text at hand. Calvino argues that the systematic, rule-bound approach employed by postmodernists authors such as Perec paradoxically stimulates freedom. (Perec, he suggests, was the most inventive of the members of Oulipo – Workshop of Potential Literature – founded by Raymond Queneau, who railed against the idea that literary inspiration could be achieved through the blind exploration of the unconscious).

Secondly the artist essays are multi-discursive, interweaving narrative, criticism and argument. They draw sparingly on theory and art history in texts that also include information about the artists' lives and that grant space to the artist's voice. At a general level each chapter contributes to the overall theme of dispersed agency, and taken separately they expand on a theme derived from Calvino. They are essays in the manner that Barthes elaborates as the landscape of the essay: "metaphor (sustaining 'any discourse that asks "What is it? What does it mean?" – the real question of any essay') and metonymy ("What can follow what I say? What can be engendered by the episode I am telling?"; this is the novel's question)" (Morris 1988, p. 133).

Three principles lie behind the exploration of artistic practice in this text, and they go some way to answering the Barthes' questions in relation to the writing of 'This Art Life.' The first principle, Geertz's "thick description" (1973), is a way of establishing the individual culture of each artist's practice and its relationship to the world around them. The second principle concerns the nature of creative endeavour, including the actions of play and experimentation, artist's ability to embrace and adopt contingency and chance. For this I kept in mind two theories, Carter's notion of "material thinking" (Carter 2004), and Lally's conception of the artist as organising complexity (Lally 2011). These ideas are paired with the third principle, the notion of instauration and

the artist's ability to embrace change, which ideas I explore in chapter one of the exegesis.

In his 'Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,' Geertz posits the idea that cultural elements of a society are texts that form "collectively sustained symbolic structures" (1973, p. 448). "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (1973, p. 452). Such forms "function in concrete contexts to organise perceptions (meanings, emotions, concepts, attitudes)" (1973, p. 449 note 38). Their enactment allows for the self-interpretation of its participants, not only for the anthropologist. Subjects discover their own subjectivity in these texts, but Geertz emphasises the double actions of art forms; they display subjectivity and at the same time generate it. "Thick description" allows for a portrayal of artistic practice as symbolic action in all its "complex specificity [and] circumstantiality" (Geertz 1973, p. 23).

From Calvino

Six Memos for the New Millennium (Calvino 1988). *Six Memos* is a collection of essays that was originally designed to be given as the Charles Elliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University. In them Calvino approaches his discussion of literature through the lens of five universal values: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity. There is a certain humanity to this book, with the project being incomplete at the time of his death in 1985, the sixth talk on consistency remaining unwritten.

Calvino is writing at a signal point in history and in the service of future literature. The book is also an intellectual and literary self-portrait, both in the multiplicity of his literary references which display an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of European literature, but also in the particularity of his choices and his periodic references to fields such as science or mathematics. The book demonstrates a way of reading that is

at once deeply scholarly and accessible, partly due to his eloquent yet economical tone of voice, devoid as it is of theoretical and disciplinary terms. Accessibility is also encouraged by his liberal quotations from the texts, which grant the reader the opportunity to dwell on the literature and ponder his analysis. As such, the book is a demonstration of his own reading style, based on deep scholarly knowledge and also love for his subject.

He traverses a diverse body of literature, including ancient Greek poetry, Renaissance literature and the twentieth-century moderns and postmoderns – Ovid and Lucretius, Dante and Cavalcanti, Boccaccio and Leopardi, Cyrano de Bergerac, Musil and Balzac, Gadda, Flaubert, Queneau and Perec. He discusses legends, fairytales and the notes of Leonardo da Vinci. Distinctive themes and images include such fine analogies as the novella conceived as a galloping horse in ‘Quickness,’ or the ancient Egyptian symbol of exactitude being feather used in the weighing of souls in ‘Exactitude’.

In *Six Memos*, Calvino groups his discussion of literature and other forms of writing around this chosen theme of the values, collecting an array of texts and authors of disparate forms and genres that reflect each one. This systematisation is reliant on fragmentation, on the juxtaposition of heterogeneous items, upon a list. With his command of the history of European literature, Calvino creates associations and patterns that read like harmonic progressions, all turning on the theme of a universal value.

His decision to structure the talks around universal values gives the book an organic playfulness. Lucia Re interprets his treatment of the universal values along the following lines: lightness as an “intellectual agility with which literature must be endowed,” quickness as “the movement of desire,” exactitude as “meticulous linguistic precision,” visibility as the ability to conjure of up images for the reader and multiplicity as “the capacity of the literary text to function simultaneously as an

encyclopaedia and a map, a method of knowledge and a way of connecting facts, people and things in the world” (Re 1998, p. 136).¹⁴

The interpretations by Re shed light selectively on one element of his handling of the qualities. More generally, Calvino locates the values variously as aesthetic style, literary or thematic figure and physical property or philosophical concept. He also at times grants them a therapeutic effect, especially in relation to himself. Take ‘Lightness’ as a case study. In this extended reflection on what he means by the term lightness in relation to literature, he argues that lightness encompasses “precision and determination, not vagueness and the haphazard. Paul Valéry said: ‘Il faut léger comme l’oiseau et non comme la plume’ (One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather)” (Calvino 1988, p. 16). He then outlines three different levels of lightness traversing economy of style, subtlety or abstraction of thematic focus, and visual image:

First there is a lightening of language whereby meaning is conveyed through a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency.... Second, there is the narration of a train of thought or psychological process in which subtle and imperceptible elements, or any kind of description that involves a high degree of abstraction ... And third there is a visual image of lightness that acquires emblematic value, such as – in Boccaccio’s story – Cavalcanti vaulting on nimble legs over a tombstone (pp. 16-7).

For the purposes of this doctoral project, Calvino’s choice of universal qualities allows for the translation from one creative field to a second. I was able to discover resonances between his treatment of certain qualities in his appreciation of literature and my understanding of and appreciation of the artists. There is also the way he relates these values to the human condition and to contemporary life and times. But the synchronicity of this book with this contemporary art project resides in the

¹⁴ One scholar has borrowed Calvino’s framework to use in the study of contemporary digital culture, in the guise of a series of ‘memes’ (Apologia, p. 131).

manner in which Calvino interprets the values in the context of his literary knowledge and his philosophical concerns.

This broader interpretation is not only transferable from the literary to the artistic, but its sophistication opens up further possibilities for the discussion of artistic practice. The juxtaposition of the two texts provides the opportunity for a thematic and discursive inter-textuality. This is especially fruitful given that the art itself often entails the transmission of complex ideas and the marriage of stylistic and conceptual concerns.

In *Six Memos*, Calvino's translation of his chosen values for the purposes of literature is highly nuanced and also idiosyncratic. In his treatment of lightness, for instance, Calvino deems the concept to be representative of the abstract and the philosophical, which notion he explores in literary tropes and figures drawn from writers ranging from Ovid and Lucretius to Swift, Leopardi and Kafka. He invokes lightness generally as a way of looking at the world characteristic of both science and philosophy. He also employs phrases such as "delicacy of spirit". For all these reasons his essay on 'Lightness' resonates with the work and practice of Hossein Valamanesh. Calvino provides a way of holding together the purity and simplicity of the artist's material approach and the way the bent of his practice rests on his relationship with Persian metaphysical poetry, particularly that of Rumi, wherein his art expresses, with a lightness Calvino would endorse, something of Rumi's transcendental qualities.

Pairing Karla Dickens' chapter with Calvino's chapter on quickness was driven by several considerations, chief amongst them that Dickens is a driven artist whose work is urgent and political. Calvino interprets quickness in relation to several different literary forms, principal among them poetry and folk and fairytale. He identifies the "magic object" at the heart of such tales, which idea finds its corollary in the powerful work of this artist. Dickens' urban Aboriginal art is concerned with bearing witness to injustice and is grounded in historical events. Her story-based work resonates with Calvino's analysis of the economy and compression of folk narrative, along with the

narrative importance of a central object often deemed to be magic or, in Dickens' case, symbolic. He also discusses temporal patterns and the uses of repetition and these too are a feature of her art and practice.

Calvino's treatment of exactitude is very much to do with language. He complains about laxity of speech not only in people generally but also in himself. He opposes exactitude with a series of antonyms, including lack of definition, formlessness, confusion, and also with the idea of infinity. By contrast, he states: "Among the values I would like passed on to the next millennium, there is this above all; a literature that has absorbed the taste for mental orderliness and exactitude, the intelligence of poetry but at the same time that of science and philosophy" (p. 118). It is in this essay too that Calvino asks himself why he argues for universal values that people would otherwise take for granted, and outlines a more general sense of literature's ability to counteract societal ills. I take the basic architecture of these two poles, which he symbolises in terms of the crystal and the flame, and employ it in the discussion of the work of Elizabeth Gower. She is an artist who transforms that most random and formless of materials, waste paper, into artworks of geometric beauty.

Rather unexpectedly, Calvino's treatment of visibility looks at what he calls high fantasy – the imagination and the images that form in the mind's eye. This emphasis gives Papapetrou's work added resonance. Mental images, Calvino suggests, "rain down" into the mind (p. 81) and he explores this trope in the divinely inspired images to be found in Dante and Loyola of Ignatius before delving into his own practice as a writer of surrealist tales. Polixeni Papapetrou's figurative photomedia art traverses the realm of the gothic imagination. Through the action of masquerade, the play between the visible and the hidden are recurrent tropes in her work. According to the artist, imaginary figures in her mind's eye, in combination with found objects, underlie Papapetrou's work. Such figures then "rain down" into our own imaginations through the medium of her work.

Multiplicity, Calvino's fifth quality, is a key idea in this doctoral project. I initially discovered *Six Memos* through my reading around the concept of multiplicity. Multiplicity informs not only the chapter on the collaborative artists, Healy and Cordeiro, but also underpins the current project's thesis about dispersed agency, about the relationship between artwork and the world in which it emerges. Healy and Cordeiro's art is both inspired by and derives from the systems and environment of globalism, and the notion of multiplicity possesses both symbolic and material weight in their installation-based art. At a more general level, Calvino's thinking on imagination has helped shape my own on artistic practice: "the imagination as a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical, of what does not exist and has never existed ... to draw on this gulf of potential multiplicity is indispensable to any form of knowledge" (Calvino 1988, p. 91).

Underlying a number of works in this literature survey is the relationship between art (or literature) and life. 'This Art Life' has also been written in the space between art and life (Danto 2005, p. xx). Calvino addresses this directly in *The Uses of Literature* (1982) but it is something he alludes to several times in *Six Memos*, both in relation to himself and to others more generally. The qualities Calvino values he adopts both as literary approach and as personal philosophy. Literature has an existential function for him, enabling a search for lightness, for example, in reaction to the weight of living. Lightness becomes a way of looking at the world. "When humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into another space with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification" (p. 7). "But how can we hope to save ourselves in that which is most fragile?" he asks in 'Lightness,' before going on to locate, in a poem by Montale, "faith in the persistence of what seems most fated to perish in the moral values invested in the most tenuous traces" (p. 6). His personal motto since his youth, he writes, is *Festina lente*, hurry slowly (p. 48). As a writer, he states, his aim is to "remove weight" from his work (p. 3). His celebration of exactitude opens with a critique of the state of language, in which automatism reigns and the "loss of cognition and immediacy" in blunted expression extinguishes "the spark that shoots out from the collision of words and new circumstances" (Calvino 1988, p. 57).

This latter point exemplifies my argument about dispersed agency, in which the coalition of creative form and particular circumstances together promote the emergence of creative works, artistic or literary.

At some point, each of the critics in this chapter addresses the interlinked questions of how to read art and literature, and why read them. For Calvino, literature not only teaches us to pay critical attention to the world but functions as a form of education, “sentimental, moral and intellectual” (Re 1998). To access this requires, he suggests, a rigorous literary practice both on the part of the writer and the reader.

In his book of short stories, *Cosmicomics* (1968), Calvino experiments with literature’s ability to convey different kinds of knowledge. These are stories in which he takes a scientific theory or technological fact and builds a narrative around it. Lucia Re says that by the 1960s Calvino was arguing that:

The increased labyrinth-like complexity of the times requires an even more complex stylistic choice – a style capable of grasping and expressing the epistemological multiplicity of the world in the late industrial and new technological and ‘cosmic’ era of what we now call ‘globalism’ (Re 1998, p. 124).

T. J. Clark’s diaristic *The Sight of Death* is also a quiet call to arms about the political rewards of paying critical attention to art in the context of Guy Debord’s ‘society of the spectacle’:

There are circumstances in which it becomes a political act to show the kinds of critical thinking that images can make possible. It is, needless to say, a *weak* politics, a reactive and defensive one; but at least it recognises – which is more than can be said for most of the current ethnographies of ‘visual culture’ – the ethos of deception it is reacting against (Clark 2006, p. 185).

The grand narratives of life also figure largely in de Botton and Thompson's *Art As Therapy* (De Botton & Armstrong 2013), a book that envisages art's project in a beneficial light. The book mixes art criticism with allegorical and symbolic readings that call to mind Victorian attitudes towards the role of art. At one point the book demonstrates different ways of reading art: technically, politically, historically, for shock value, and therapeutically (pp. 68-72). The structure of the book includes sections on methodology, love, nature, money and politics. The authors argue that culture, along with politics, can be regarded as mechanisms by which we can regulate our thinking and emotions, thereby aiding in the creation of civilised society. "It is the music we listen to, the films we see, the buildings we inhabit and the paintings, sculpture and photographs that hang on our walls that function as our subtle guides and educators" (De Botton & Armstrong 2013, p. 100). That this situation might ring true for ideologies of all stripes is a point not addressed by the book.

In Calvino's view, literature shapes actions as well as thought, but not in any straightforward or doctrinaire sense. "Literature has the ability – which is often neither direct nor intentional – to impose models of language, of vision, of imagination, of thinking, in other words 'the creation ... of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action, especially in political life'" (Re 1998, p. 131)

Emergence, authorship and text

This exegesis posits a range of arguments about the emergence of art within the context of individual artistic practice. The broader thrust of my study is the landscape of factors and influences that impact on artist practice and help shape the finished artwork. What interests me here Terry Smith's argument about the contemporaneity of contemporary visual art being expressed in ontological terms, including its concern with what it is to be in the present time, and what art can be in the present time (Smith 2012). Five terms are at play in this project – the creative component, 'This Art

Life,' the exegesis, the art, the artists' practice and the world – and the relation between them is philosophically complex.

In this section, I map some of the conceptual relationships and patterns that have emerged in this study. 'This Art Life' comprises a set of narratives that build a case about the emergence of art in the context of individual artist practice. What is at issue here is the relationship between the one and the many, between the artwork and the field of networks from which it emerges – between artwork, artist and the multiplicity of the world. For Alfred North Whitehead, this process is generative: "the many become one and are increased by one" (quoted in Alliez 2012, p. 17).

The argument concerning the various levels of reality – artwork, artist and context – can only ever be a philosophical supposition grounded in theory, a speculation about the relationship between the disorder of the world and the order represented by the artwork. Calvino again: "Perhaps it is in the field of tension between one vacuum and another that literature multiplies the depths of a reality that is inexhaustible in forms and meanings" (Calvino 1982, p. 120). The essay as "plural text" may in its movement between text and meaning mirror or allude to the rhizomic networks that, from the point of view of assemblage thinking, create points of change and emergence. In this sense, text, theme and world meet each other and then diverge like buttons on the fabric of upholstery.

There is a further level of complexity in the construction of a hermeneutic text in the context of this study. The accounts of artist practice I employ in 'This Art Life' are themselves drawn from the artists' own representations of their art and practice. These explanations conceived by the artists are representations, often in story form, and they also possess the status of texts, ones informed by intimations and structures of language, culture, artworld orthodoxy and autobiography. In his essay 'Levels of Reality in Literature,' Calvino discusses the complexity entailed by the notion of authorship, invoking "the successive layers of subjectivity and feigning that we can discern underneath the author's name, and the various 'I's that go to make up the 'I'

who is writing” (Calvino 1982, p. 111). He goes on to argue that “it is only ever a projection of himself that an author calls into play while he is writing.” In the other words, the role of the author personifies a figure with which the author identifies. This projection is “something less and something more than the ‘I’ of the individual as an empirical subject” (p. 111). Likewise, the identities of the artists in this study are both less than and more than the empirical person who makes art, and the images the artists project of themselves are several degrees removed from any other role these people inhabit.

In this research, the choice was made to depend upon the artists’ accounts of their work and practice because the very stories the artists have to tell support the narrative intent of this project. These first-hand accounts, drawn from open ended interviews and discussions which I conducted with the artists, reveal certain themes and emphases that have proved valuable in the construction of stories about the artists. It is these themes that often chime with Calvino’s five values, allowing me to lift ‘This Art Life’ into the zone of creative criticism. For example in the interview with Hossein Valamanesh (‘Lightness’) as well as in his published interviews, there are hints that the world view and sensibility that inform his art extend to his approach to life, one that is inflected by his understanding and practice of the metaphysics of Rumi. In this way, the corollary between Valamanesh and Calvino’s “poet-philosopher” (drawn from Cavalcanti’s leap in the Decameron (VI.9)) arises:

Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself up above the weight of the world, and showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness (Calvino 1988, p. 12).

The poet-philosopher becomes an allegory for an ideal relationship to the world. A momentary quip by Karla Dickens (see my chapter ‘Quickness’) about the heaviness of her work, and the fact that it was making her back ache, for me exemplified not only

the political urgency of her art but also its therapeutic role. For this artist, the pressure to work is intense, and the velocity of her work is a necessary constant.

Underlying these narratives about the origins of artworks, are three key theoretical terms, which are almost but not quite interchangeable. These are Calvino's thinking around multiplicity, Barthes and the notion of the encyclopaedic and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage. Calvino uses the universal qualities as a prism through which to marshal and celebrate an array of literary texts in their distinctiveness, not minimising their differences or forcing on them a systemic conformity. In addition, Calvino elaborates his concept of multiplicity in relation to the novel. He calls this chapter his "apologia for the novel as a vast net" (Calvino 1988, p. 117), and develops this argument in relation to the encyclopaedic novel of the nineteenth century, and the hyper-novel of the twentieth. In novels by Musil and Perec he celebrates the novel's capacity to embody complexity and contradiction and "a sense of infinite possibilities". In his own *If on a winter's night a traveller* he traces webs of connections through the literary device of multiple, overlapping narratives.

Calvino's metaphor of the net is not so distant from Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblage and Latour's actor-network theory. The first is a textual reading and the second two comprise the theoretical grounds for analysing change and becoming. In chapter two I adopt these models of random and ricocheting networks to analyse artistic practice and present a relative case for dispersed agency in the genesis of artworks. In Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of becoming and the emergence of the new, the elements in any change assemblage are "aparallel" (p. 11), unrelated to each other except by their contiguity within the assemblage (Massumi 1992, p. 4). Another way of putting this is heterogenesis, "the emergent self-production of varieties of being, under far-from-equilibrium conditions" (Alliez & Massumi 2014, p. 16). In the case of assemblage the lines of flight mean that the action of networks is transitive, in this case moving backwards and forwards between the art, the artists and the world.

The multiple determinations of art can be conceived as heterogenesis through the operations of the network, and this concept helps to shed light on the actions of multiplicity in the context of the emergence of artworks. In this project the trajectory traced is from the multiplicity of the world to the end point of the artwork via the artist practice. There is an encyclopaedic side to this venture in that the network can never be complete and the exact nature of cause and effect is difficult to establish. The link, too, between the notion of assemblage and the encyclopaedic list as handled by Barthes at a textual or hermeneutic level, proves helpful here. There are parallels between Barthes' treatment of the text as polygraphy and assemblage as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari. As Culler says, Barthes the intellectual was a cultural commentator for whom the critic's mission was "to construct intelligibility for our own time" (Culler 1983, p. 7). The encyclopaedic in relation to the essay as form is characteristic of Barthes both as a thinker and writer. In his semiological studies, he analyses a plethora of cultural phenomena successively and this approach is tenable for any cultural instance. Barthes' intellectual preoccupations, and the systems of thought he develops, are also successive, each one displacing the last (Culler 1983).

In assemblage or originary narratives, the multiplicity of factors is potentially encyclopaedic. The encyclopaedia depends on the open-ended arbitrary structure of language (De Obaldia 1995, p. 152). Calvino's conception of multiplicity as a vast net has bearing both on the relationship in his chosen texts between text and world, and also on the intra-textual possibilities involving narrative and perspective. I argue that the idea of multiplicity as a vast net can be employed in relation to the question of art's ontological role *vis à vis* the world, and adopt Calvino's approach to harness multiple and diverse elements that have bearing on the art and practice of each artist. In her essay 'The Glosses of Roland Barthes,' De Obaldia discusses the encyclopaedic aspect of Barthes' "mythical inversions," as in his study of Sarrasine in *S/Z*, and points to the heterogeneity of his subject matter more generally (De Obaldia 1995, p. 148). She quotes Barthes from his essay 'The Work as Polygraphy':

I can imagine an anti-structural criticism; it would not look for the work's order but its disorder; for this it would suffice to consider any work as an encyclopaedia; cannot each text be defined by the number of disparate objects (of knowledge, of sensuality) which it brings into view with the help of simple figures of continuity (metonymies and syndetons)? Like the encyclopaedia, the work exhausts a list of heterogeneous objects, and this list is the work's anti-structure, its obscure and irrational polygraphy (pp. 150-1).

One trajectory open to the art critic is to trace the play of meaning in the work from a semiological perspective in the manner of Barthes' cultural criticism. This approach has its limitations in that it doesn't take into account reception and the specificity of time and place in the reading and decoding of art. In this project I work backwards from the work of art to trace the disparate factors influential in its emergence. This can be seen as an extension of polygraphy, creating another narrative based on art's intimations of the world, and the "disparate objects it brings into view." Assemblage elements of the encyclopaedic world – language, art forms, materials, environment, cultural and socio-economic factors – coalesce to form the one symbolic object, the artwork, a process is mediated by the artist and his or her artistry.

Barthes' employment of the notion of the encyclopaedic has bearing on the essay as form as employed within this project. Lists and the quasi-encyclopaedic are helpful in relation to dispersed agency in that they problematise the notion of hierarchical importance, helping move the argument towards a more rhizomic understanding the artists, their work and its influences. Barthes conceives of the essay form as a site for contestation. In her discussion of the "general economy" of Barthes' essayistic text, Bensmaïa argues that he thought of it not in terms of invention, or rhetorical disposition or even knowledge but as complication. She quotes Barthes "with intellectual things ... of combining ... at the same time theory, critical combat, and pleasure (Barthes 1975)" (Bensmaïa 1987, p. 99). She goes on to suggest that:

Indeed, what offers food for thought, what allows us to experiment with the Essay as writing, as a unique Form, is the possibility of a “plural” text made up of multiple networks “that interact without any one of them being able to dominate the others”: an “ideal” text that neither assumes an ultimate signified nor merely repeats the Same, but is a “galaxy of signifiers, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (Barthes 1970)” (Bensmaïa 1987, p. 99).

All types of literature, including the essay, have the capacity to be self-referential, and essay in particular can keep a number of subjects and arguments in play: “In all periods and in all literatures we find works that at a certain time turn around on themselves, look at themselves in the act of coming into being, and become aware of the materials they are made of” (Calvino 1982, p. 103). This project constitutes an exercise in the self-referential in that it consists of an exegesis examining the foundations of a second, hermeneutic text, ‘This Art Life.’ The project is also self-reflexive in that it lodges its subject matter and intellectual approach, assemblage thinking, in a literary form of the essay that incorporates the (possibly encyclopaedic) list into the fabric of its argument. Subject matter and form in this way provide a corollary to each other.

Voice

Calvino and Barthes have both been influential in this project in terms of voice and style. In Calvino’s case I have tried to capture something of the elegant simplicity of his approach, just as I have a tried to emulate the deftness and range of his discussion in what is a relatively short book. These qualities in Calvino are without doubt attributable to the fact that the essays were originally conceived of as talks. The seeming simplicity of Calvino’s style and structure and its poetic tone has helped breathe into my writing in ‘This Art Life’ a conceptual schema and a lightness, in his sense of the word, of tone and language, an adventurous and picaresque sense of rhythm and a quick light touch.

Poetry is of course a standard object of analysis in literary criticism but it is less common for the critic's own prose to express a poetic quality. An example of poetic tone in *Six Memos* can be found in Calvino's chapter 'Lightness.' Discussing Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, Calvino first quotes him directly "little motes of dust swirling in a shaft of sunlight in a dark room" before adding his own poetic gloss: "[This] is the first great work of poetry in which knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light and mobile" (Calvino 1988, p. 9). Two of the artists in this project interact with poetry, Valamanesh with regard to Rumi, and Dickens with regard to her own writing. In addition, some of Papapetrou's Lewis Carroll references also derive from Lewis' poetry. These instances of the poetic have licenced a more reflective and expressive turn of phrase in 'This Art Life' than would otherwise be met in art criticism. I'm alluding in particular here to the passage in Hossein Valamanesh – Lightness that describes my own experience of his work *The Lover Circles his Own Heart*, and the passages in Polixeni Papapetrou that deal with the artist's illness and death. This poetic environment has also allowed for the inclusion of Dickens' and Rumi's poems themselves into the text.

As a writer, Calvino is influential in other ways. An example of the wit, humanity and the cultured elan of his tone is to be found in 'Visibility.' He is discussing what he terms high fantasy, the realm of the imagination and the source of mental imagery, which, in the case of Dante's *Purgatorio*, Dante attributes to the divine. He begins by saying: "I will start out this evening with an assertion: fantasy is a place where it rains" (p. 81). He then outlines imagery in the mind's eye that derives from sources other than the divine. His lightness of touch and the intelligence of his approach are evident here in the way in which he can invoke the thought of specific authors with a single phrase. Writers in our in time, he suggests, "establish their contacts through earthly transmitters, such as the individual or the collective unconscious; the time regained in feelings that re-emerge from time lost; or 'epiphanies', concentrations of being in a single spot or point of time" (Calvino 1988, p. 87). In this way Calvino manages deftly

and elegantly to allude to Freud, Jung and Proust, amongst others, without needing to name them.

Barthes has influenced generations of writers of cultural criticism both in terms of focus of study and in the craft of writing. “Barthes”, Meaghan Morris writes, “never *writes* as a professional speaking to other professionals. His rhetoric is intimate, as though arguing with himself, and courteous, as though anybody could be listening” (‘Apologia’ 1988). Like that of Cavino, Barthes’ writing displays a lyrical humanism (Culler), effortless cultured intelligence and a dazzling play of meaning. As one of the first to subject contemporary culture to intellectual critique, the pairing of subject matter and tone of voice, and the essayistic and intellectual tropes he employs, are an instance of multiplicity, and an assemblage of disparate elements in their own right. Take his essay ‘The Eiffel Tower’ as a point in case (Barthes 1982). Here he presents an argument about the profound “double movement” of architecture, “always drama and function, expression of a utopia and instrument of a convenience” (Barthes 1982, p. 239). He begins by negating it, relating how Maupassant would choose to have lunch in the tower, despite the poor quality of the food, in order not to have to look at it.

This radiant position in the order of perception gives it a prodigious propensity to meaning: the Tower attracts meaning, the way a lightning rod attracts thunderbolts; for all lovers of signification, it plays a glamorous part, that of a pure signifier, i.e., of a form I which men unceasingly put *meaning* (which they extract at will from their knowledge, their dreams, their history), without this meaning thereby ever being finite and fixed: who can say what the Tower will be for humanity tomorrow? (p. 238).

Then there is *Camera Lucida*, his extraordinary study of photography, death and his photographic search for traces of his mother (Barthes 1981). This for me forms of a model of how to write about culture both personally and with recourse to theory. At certain points his theoretical prism and cultural focus come together to delineate a

moment of lived experience, all this in luminous prose. On the photographic portrait he says:

Each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares). In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I *intend*) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre (pp. 13-4).

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has traced the work of the authors who have been influential in the shaping of this project as a literary endeavour and as a piece of art writing. It has also explored some of the literary forms and tropes that give the project its texture. Speaking of photographic journalism, Barthes says: "In this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me and I animate it ... this is what creates every adventure." (p. 20). This for me is the excitement of art, one that has animated this creative and research adventure, an endeavour that has involved the mapping of the origins works of art and the identification of elements that together help shape the outcomes of creative practice, whether artistic or literary.

Conclusion

In its dual study of creative practice, this project draws in large measure on theory and ideas developed by seminal European thinkers of the 1980s. The conjunction of these texts creates a synergy that sews the different parts of this project together. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* was published in 1980, Bruno Latour, Michael Callon and John Law were developing actor-network theory in France in the early 1980s, Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the New Millennium* was published posthumously in 1988. The French edition of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* was published in 1980, and whilst his *Critical Essays* was originally published in 1964, by the 1980s his intellectual influence both within and outside of France was incontestable.

From the first of these theorists comes the idea of assemblage, from the second, actor-network theory. From the third comes a full thematic framework that includes a specific handling of the concept of multiplicity, and from the fourth, a conception of the essay as form and a substantive argument about photography and the self. Assemblage theory, actor-network theory and multiplicity form the substance of my argument about the role of dispersed agency in contemporary art practice. The two elements of this project, the exegesis and the book, represent this argument in different ways. In its nuanced discussion of the multiplicity of factors that underpin artistic practice and the evolution of the specific artworks, 'This Art Life,' the creative component, can be seen to demonstrate the argument of dispersed agency. In Chapter one of the exegesis, I lay bare this framework, first through a discussion of the literature around the concepts of assemblage, actor-network theory and multiplicity, and the models of change and becoming that they exemplify. I then outline the way in which, in individual instances of artist practice, the genesis of artworks can be mapped against the emergence and dissolution of temporary alliances of factors, of which artist's control is only one, albeit significant, factor.

Dispersed agency is also at issue in chapter two of this exegesis. This chapter delineates the literary dimensions of 'This Art Life' as a form of art writing. It establishes the genre in which the book is written to be creative criticism, discussing how a work of literary theory, Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the New Millennium* (Calvino 1988) helps shape the creative component's analysis of and meditation on artistic practice, one that is grounded in the texture and detail of the everyday work of individual artists. I argue that this textual borrowing constitutes in part a literary exercise, where a work of theory and criticism involving a set of universal values can be translated from one creative field to another. This is also an instance of dispersed agency, whereby the universal values, this project, and the artists in question come together to form an analytic and cultural assemblage, one that is contingent on this project. Chapter two also looks at the essay as form, particularly from the perspective of Barthes' work as semiologist. That any cultural form and practice can be subject to cultural analysis is an accepted part of his heritage. There is, in addition, his idea that the *raison d'être* of the essay is essentially one of complication, a model that sits well with assemblage thinking.

The 1980s, when these theories were formulated, was a period of great change. The socio-political landscape of the time included the growing conservatism of Margaret Thatcher's Britain, the AIDS epidemic, the thawing of the Cold War leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the over-heating of capital and the markets leading to the Wall Street crash of 1987. The socio-economic landscape today is arguably no less turbulent, with the challenges presented by the digital age; the triumvirate of globalism, consumerism and global warming; the rise of the populist right in Europe and America, and the development of intersectional thinking that links forms of marginality including feminism, race and class.

Many of these concerns find their way into the art of the day. As the art of contemporaneity, contemporary visual art has addressed, and will continue to address what it is to be in the present time, and what art can be in the present time,

that is, the time of the artist in question (Smith 2012). In the 1980s there was a new urgency with which art connected with social developments. New York saw the rise of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Willem de Kooning and Jeff Koons, and Britain saw the ascendancy of the Young British Artists, including Damien Hurst. In the Australia of the 1980s we saw the coming to prominence of artists such as Howard Arkley, Sue Ford and Leigh Bowery. Each of these artists was in their own way simultaneously engaging in aspects of contemporary culture and helping to establish those same elements: Basquiat's social commentary of the street, the transgender and New Romantic experimentalism of Bowery, key moments in Indigenous politics for Ford, the suburban graphic aesthetic of Arkley.

In addition to the artists represented in this study, some of the Australian artists who have come to prominence today include Patricia Piccinini, Ben Quilty and Vernon Ah Kee, each of whom makes art that is engagé, Piccinini in relation to biotechnical developments, Quilty in relation to war and the personal experiences of members of the armed forces, and Ah Kee in relation to Aboriginal family lineage, history and politics. The artists in this study engage with: globalism and its systems (Healy and Cordeiro), consumerism and recycling (Gower), the politics of Indigeneity (Dickens), the other (Papapetrou), and the transcendental in the everyday (Valamanesh).

The timeliness and strength of contemporary visual art means that it is important that this art and the artists who make it be supported and studied. Art's capacity both to engender culture and cultural experience, and to reflect upon it, are essential in the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape of the times. Such discussions can now take place on many platforms – digital, media and literary – but the role of criticism is vital in discussing what the artists are doing, what questions we might ask of their work, how their work might be considered and what its value is to us in the here and now. That the field of creative criticism is one that combines the critical and the creative is to its advantage. It is one that, as Barthes states, combines argumentation with the pleasure of the text, making it an exemplary cultural text.

These are the ideas and objectives that have impelled the arguments and the discussion throughout this project. There is a great deal of scope for further developments in the field of creative criticism, alongside that of more traditional fields of art criticism and cultural criticism generally. One area in particular that might be of interest is the question of voice in creative criticism, the pertinence of this to online and social media platforms and their relationship with contemporary visual art. An extension of this might involve a study of ways in which people can develop an interest in art and the platforms available for people to voice opinions beyond a limited online response. Of relevance here is the 2018 series on ABC television entitled *Everyone's A Critic*.¹⁵ Here a cross-section of the public, including non-gallery goers, gets the opportunity to see and discuss art and to form opinions about it within a broadly supportive atmosphere.

There is scope for the study of the interrelation between contemporary art and some of the great issues of our day, be they environmental, biotechnical or social. This can go beyond the art critical to track the emergence of such art in the context of social change, and monitor the affect such art has on people's thinking. As qualitative research, this starts to move into the field of cultural pedagogy. In this context, art's effectiveness in increasing awareness and knowledge, particularly with regard to the issues of the day, might become the field of focus. There is room here for research into the public's response to issues-based exhibitions such as *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*, which was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, in 2010. These suggestions are not designed, however, to undermine the fact that in the last instance the fundamental status of art is non-instrumental.

The study of the origins of art in the context of artistic practice brings to our attention the ways in which contemporary art plugs into the here and now, or into the then, as is the case with the art of past decades. Dispersed agency shows us the panoply of factors that inspire the artist and help shape artworks, from the material to the

¹⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/everyones-a-critic/>

conceptual, and from the domestic to the broader environment. These may be life matters, key issues of the time, accidental discoveries, all of which play a role. At the same time this is a subject that needs to be made accessible to the general reader so that contemporary visual art may reach a wider audience.

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