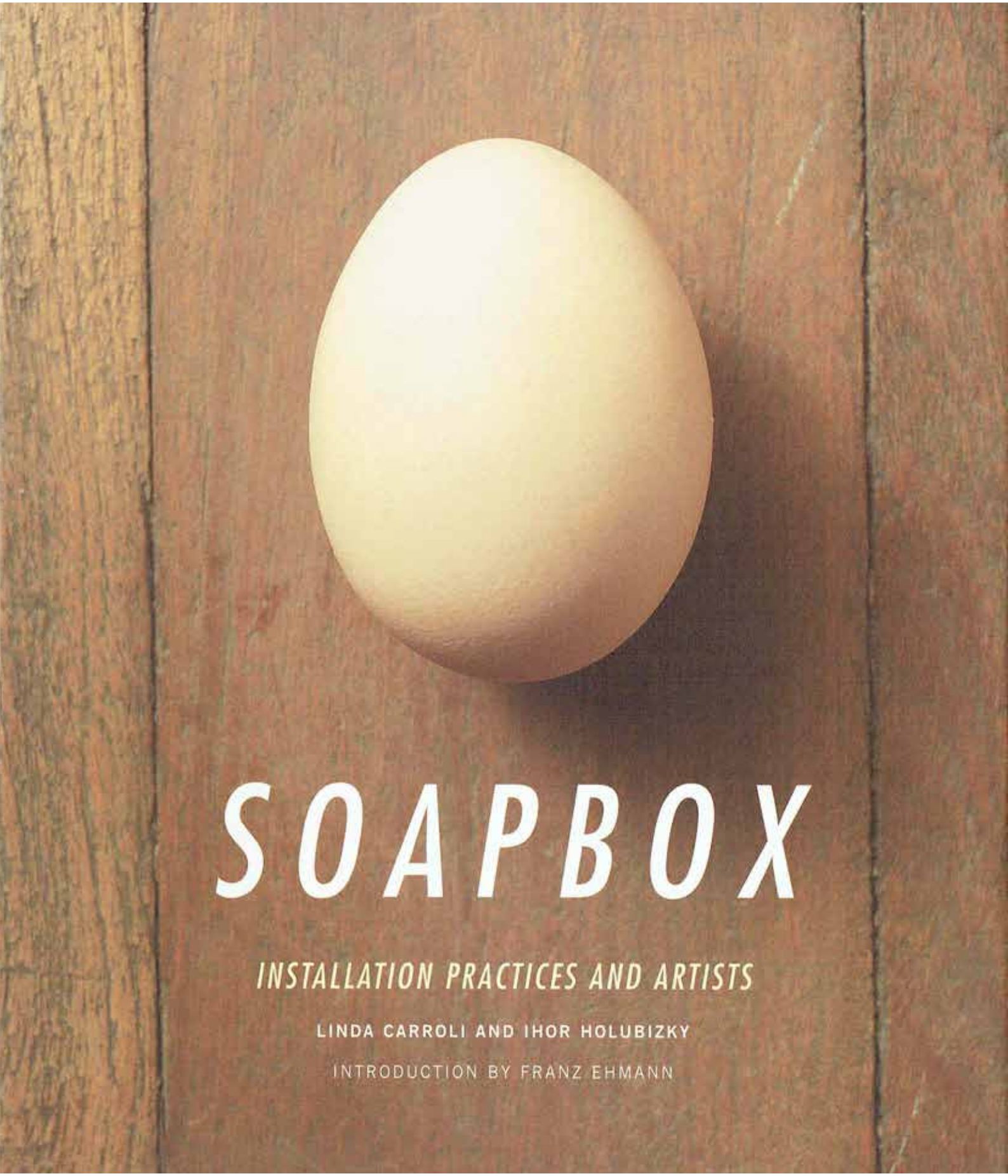
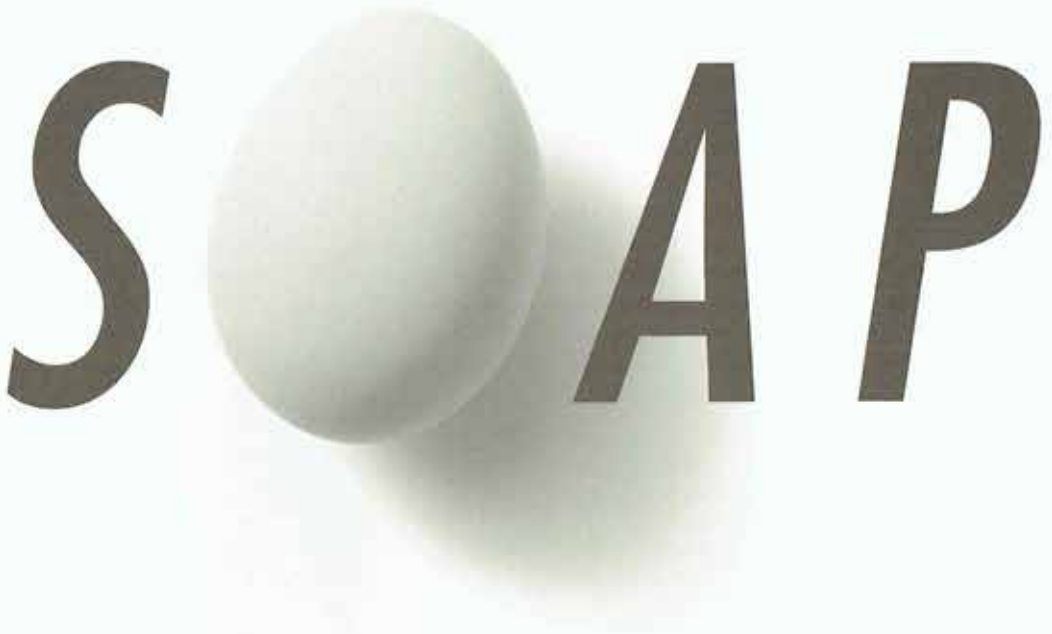


SOAPBOX

INSTALLATION PRACTICES AND ARTISTS

LINDA CARROLI AND IHOR HOLUBIZKY

INTRODUCTION BY FRANZ EHMANN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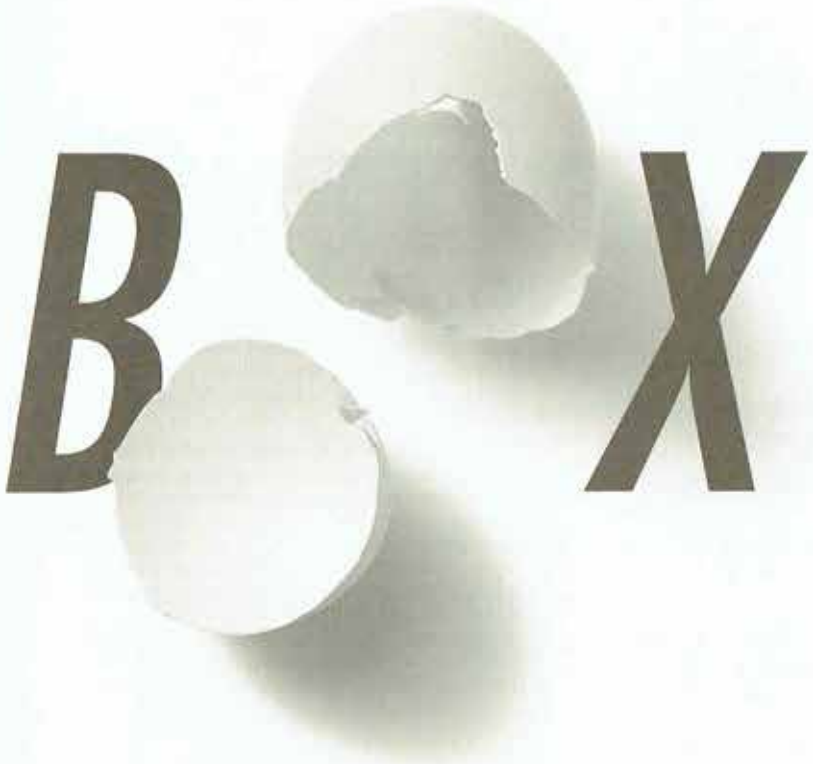
INSTALLATION PRACTICES AND ARTISTS



INTRODUCTION BY FRANZ EHMANN
ESSAYS BY LINDA CARROLI & IHOR HOLUBIZKY

PUBLISHED BY THE INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
BRISBANE 1999

SOAPBOX: INSTALLATION PRACTICES AND ARTISTS

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INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
608 Ann Street, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane Q 4006
GPO Box 1897, Brisbane Q 4001 Australia
Tel: +61 7 3252 5750 Fax: +61 7 3252 5072
im@ima.org.au www.ima.org.au

SOAPBOX GALLERY
95 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane Q 4006
Australia Tel/fax: +61 7 3257 2733

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Since 1985, **Linda Carroli** has written as a journalist, essayist and critical writer. Her writings have been published in *Leonardo*, *Eyeline*, *Periphery*, *Real Time*, *Meanjin*, *Broadsheet*, *Globe E*, *Xtexts* and *Artlink*. As well, she has written a number of artist catalogue and critical essays which have been published by Australian Galleries and Artist-run-spaces. She is an experienced researcher and editor having worked on a number of academic, media and community research projects, with special interest in arts, media and culture. She has worked in digital, print and broadcast media as well as in editorial and is currently a member of the Editorial Committee of *Eyeline* and the Queensland Editorial Committee and the Hypertext Advisory Committee of *Real Time*.

Ihor Holubizky is a writer and essayist. He has contributed to numerous gallery catalogues and critical journals internationally, and is a frequent contributor to Art/Text. His 1999 essay credits include: *VANITAS: Pope Alice presents Luke Roberts* and *Richard Grayson: ahistoryofreading* (IMA, Brisbane); *The vernacular bride*, on contemporary art in Ukraine (Mendel Art Gallery, Canada); *Because you're mine, I walk the line*, on media artist Mark Laliberte (Art Gallery of Windsor, Canada); and *A wilderness station*, on 20th century painting practice (McMaster Museum of Art, Canada). He is currently a curator for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Ihor Holubizky acknowledges support from The Canada Council/Le Conseil des arts du Canada.

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VERY LITTLE ALMOST NOTHING

INTRODUCTION BY **FRANZ EHMANN**

I had an impulse of the most pressing concern: is art, and specifically in this case installation, useful or useless (particularly in regard to political and social development/evolution)? This century we've experienced a few cultural highs but largely have been entrenched in social troughs. With science and warfare at the forefront of human endeavour the simulacrum of this century is its own destruction. The end of all things (history, philosophy, poetry, painting, modernity ...) has been called for and as yet nothing has happened. As we enter the next millennium and farewell the 20th century, value is becoming a 'conscious dilemma' of the postmodern condition. Which of the values of culture and society will we take with us? And what will we leave behind? Speaking plainly, we create value, live, breathe, eat and digest value, yet never deal with the by-product of mediocrity.

If here I have misread the culture in which we live then surely under current cultural theory I am simply employing a strategy to expose a second rate (mediocre) culture. Nietzsche on mediocrity:

> Fundamentally, they want one thing most of all: that no-body shall do them harm. So they steal a march on everyone and do good to everyone. We have set down our chairs in the middle—that is what their smirking tells us—and as far away from the warriors as from the contented swine. This is mediocrity.[1]

No arrogance is intended here, our history is not yet written. Culture high and low, history major and minor forms parts of the wreckage left behind which constantly claims our attention for validation and re-evaluation. Utopia/dystopia, forgiveness/hate, memory and forgetting are all fluctuating forms which move in and out of each other in the same manner in which we teach each other.

Art is one means of communication and there is no disputing its voice. The critical question is what is communicated and who will actually listen? We are once more on the brink of cultural poverty and its values. Aesthetics may yet prove a valid ground on which to cover cultural mediocrity and its poverty.

Terry Eagleton critically affirms in *From the polis to postmodernism:*

> Art itself may thus be an increasingly marginal pursuit, but aesthetics is not. Indeed one might risk the rather exaggerated formulation that aesthetics is born at the moment of art's effective demise as a political force, flourishes on the corpse of its social relevance. Though artistic production itself plays less and less of a significant role in the social order (Marx reminds us that the bourgeoisie have absolutely no time for it), what it is able to bequeath to that order, as it were, is a certain ideological model which may help it out of its mess—the mess which has marginalized pleasure and the body, reified reason, and struck morality entirely empty. The aesthetic offers to reverse this division of labour, to bring these three alienated regions back into touch with one another, but the price it demands for this generosity is high: it offers to interrelate these discourses by effectively swallowing up the other two. Everything should now become aesthetic. Truth, the cognitive, becomes that which satisfies the mind, or what helps us to move around the place rather more conveniently. Morality is converted to a matter of style, pleasure and intuition. How should one live one's life properly? By turning oneself into an artefact.[2]

We are all artefacts, made of two distinctive aesthetic forms—internal/personal and external/de-personal. We are also interchangeable and as we cross over from one zone to the other we blur the boundaries, fragment and fuse with one and other creating differences and renewed potential for cultural expression and experience.

To arrive at a concrete point in history, one that constitutes a departure from value and its inevitable characteristics, is only possible in rare moments of enlightenment. This begs the question, are we submerged in tautology or in cultural regurgitation?

As Robert Musil points out rather poignantly in *The man without qualities*, 'Our times rejoice in a number of great ideas, and by a special kindness of

fate each idea is paired with its opposite, so that individualism and collectivism, nationalism and internationalism, socialism and capitalism, imperialism and pacifism, rationalism and superstition, are all equally at home in them, together with the unused remnants of countless opposites of an equal or lesser contemporary value.'[3]

Everyone understands order and chaos, love and hate, sunshine and rain, up and down, left and right, white and black and at this point in history we are again at the crossroads of a 'cultural dyslexia and forms of schizophrenia as the mainstream mind runs down into random disorganisation and burn out.'[4]

Presumably if 'random disorganisation and burn out' is as visible as the decline of the sun, then to stop, alter or postpone the end is as schizophrenic as to help it along. What is sad about this situation is its retroism. Somewhere in the not so distant past lives the ghost of nostalgia, a place that has been kept dear in the hearts of the mainstream and that which has always been better than the here and now. (Paradise lost and found and finally colonised as a shopping mall.) This is definitely not contemporary culture nor is it the site of Soapbox.

Walter Benjamin describes the painting *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee in this manner: 'This is how one pictures the angel of history ... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress'.[5]

This has been a century and indeed a millennium of progress. We are both the judge and critic, passing value on to the next generation. Art functions as a marginalised ideal governed by use-by dates. In the world of postmodernism, the *alltag* (everyday) is a 'product' with art, cable TV, the superhighway, virtual reality, the world wide web ever redefining the boundaries of amusement.

Of course all of the above may be just as true in reverse. Robert Musil perceptively wrote in *The man without qualities*:

> He could just as easily have said the opposite, that art is subversive because art is love; it beautifies its object by loving it, and there may be no other way in this world to beautify a thing or a creature than by loving it. And it is only because even our love consists of mere fragments that beauty works by intensification and contrast. And it is only the sea of love that the concept of perfection, beyond all intensification, fuses with the concept of beauty, which depends on intensification.[6]

Soapbox Gallery was established in June 1997 and runs an exhibition program that explores installation practices and related expressions of contemporary culture. In its short three year history, it has shown 40 exhibitions featuring the work of more than 100 artists from Australia and abroad.

Having experienced these years of intensely focused exhibitions at Soapbox, one realises that it is very little almost nothing. Yet this love for installation and contemporary art practice is extreme. While most of the work exhibited is ephemeral and temporal the only way to truly posses these artworks is through the fascination of understanding and the love of art.

Justin Avery, Natalie Billing, Courtney Pedersen and Caitlin Reid are four artists who use installations to explore ideas specific to place and memory.

Pedersen and Avery examine notions of displace-

ment, creating forms which envelop the space and contrasting these with more 'earthbound' materials such as cement and potatoes, wax and light, while Billing and Reid use repetition (notepaper, archive boxes, match-heads, dresses) to dissect personal histories and their relationship to structures of regulation.

The personal is again present in the work of Britt Knudsen-Owens, Debra Sara and Chris Handran. By incorporating specific domestic references into their works—traditionally 'feminine' home crafts, household furniture, suburban streets—they ask questions of the viewer about the layers of protection the home offers and the authenticity of our own histories.

History takes on a more trans-cultural cloak when looking at the work of Anna Nordström, Sebastian Di Mauro and Franz Ehmann. These artists utilise images and materials from their European backgrounds—olive oil, travel documents, beeswax, ash, pure pigments and spiritual/alchemical symbols—to locate in a wider humanist context the conflicts and concerns of the emigré.

The works of Charles Robb, Ross Hobbins and Saul Kallio Edmonds, return to the body, literally, in their respective practices. By locating the body in a specific political context and then dissecting it (whether through sculptural or photographic means), these artists explore aspects of the construction of male identities and the way in which structures of authority affect the way we regard our own and other bodies.

For artists such as Julianne Lawson, Jondi Keane and Jodie Cox the gallery becomes a tool to be used as raw material. By creating works of repetition which use physical properties such as colour and gravity, these artists interrupt the gallery's geography to examine the way in which bodies react to visual stimuli and the complicity of art history in this process. These works are staged and coded within the situation of Soapbox as a site.

Linda Carroli introduces installation as 'reeling in an unruly reality' and places emphasis on the global and its location of site within the critic of provincialism. 'Leaving the scene of the crime: the appearance of the anxious object' takes particular presence in Ihor Holubizky's writing. This is affirmed through a short history of installation practices and of Soapbox as a site of installation and as a hothouse of ideas and intoxicated intransigence.

Installation practice at Soapbox draws from a broad range of individual techniques and viewpoints. By presenting the gallery-goer with works which blur the boundary between art and its environment, and make their presence essential to the work itself, Soapbox promotes a progressive art experience which holds immense transformative potential. Simply, it is a site of cultural intensity.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969), p. 190.
2. Terry Eagleton, *The ideology of the aesthetic*, Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, England, 1990, p. 368.
3. Robert Musil, *The man without qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins, Picador, Great Britan: 1995, Book I, p. 405.
4. Arthur Kroker, 'Panic value' in John Fekete (ed), *Life after postmodernism*, St. Martins Press, New York, USA 1987, p. 193.
5. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana Press, England 1992, p. 249.
6. Musil, *op.cit.*, p. 399.

Westinghouse

REELING IN AN UNRULY REALITY

BY **LINDA CARROLI**

I

What is the 'where' of installation? I ask, 'where'? I am concerned that 'art' might be thought of as global, somehow transcendent of locality. I am concerned that art might be presented as distinction rather than a distinction.

How can art be anything but a localised practice? For Edward Said, 'Texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly.'[1] Installation, which engages the aesthetics and politics of particular spatialities, can only really address its own and immediate locality regardless of its engagement with, or movement towards, 'the global'. Keith Patrick argues that:

> Art *is* provincial, born of very local and immediate experiences. What on occasions makes it seem

less so is more than not to do with a nexus of commercial, critical and political interests extraneous to the art itself ... While art is a local affair, there is a universality to the way similar patterns emerge internationally.[2]

It is apparent that art of 'here' enters into an exchange—perhaps even a conflict—with the art of 'there'. Comparisons ensue and through those comparisons, a hierarchy based on other localised determinants and criticisms emerges. For Terry Smith, 'the provincialism problem' is marked by an 'attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of values' which are determined elsewhere.[3] This represents a 'double bind' where provincial art is measured against those values as either adherence or rejection. The provincial (local) artist is always external or other to the global. In this respect, Smith argues that the provincial is always a copy of an other worldly, original work.

Subsequently, questions emerge about why and how the local tilts towards the global. As Rex Butler argues, the logic of the 'provincial problem' is 'that of the double bind or vicious circle: any solution to the problem would only be possible because of it, could only lead to a further extension of it ... We must see that the very thing that makes it irrefutable, unsurpassable, also means that it is undemonstratable, does not really exist.'[4] For Butler the 'provincial problem' is merely an assumption or attitude, a prescription not a description, something that does not and might not exist.

Nevertheless, this double bind is something that is lived and performed in the world, prophesied and speculated about. Let's face it, Brisbane, Australia, the reality of this 'where', suffers a little in the assertion of the local. Not only are there determinants and criticisms of art, there are also determinants and criticisms of locality. Even though we'd like to, we are not quite ready to think outside these mythic and arbitrary hierarchies. In terms of art and culture, the artists who practice in Brisbane are painfully aware that 'here' is neither Melbourne nor Sydney and in turn, not New York, Paris or Tokyo. These 'elsewheres' represent the aspirations of the myriad of wannabe's or gonnabe's who stream through visual and fine art degrees, pay to exhibit in 'artist-run spaces' or who vie for subsidy and opportunity. These 'elsewheres' are the perennial destinations which mark art (and artists) as worldly, international or global. Accordingly, art transcends its locality to become global, and *some localities are more global than others*. In so doing, apparently it is liberated from the very set of concerns which drives it.

This might mean that the generality of this global art simply complies with those foundational 'western' precepts and perceptions of art and culture at this moment, referent and reverential to a once universalised and rarefied history of 'western art'. In this respect art, if it is about anything, is about Art rather than seemingly menial localised experiences, abstractions and flirtations which we might sometimes carelessly and knowingly refer to as life. Not unexpectedly, I am confronted with a curious set of polarities which chart the path of transcendence. If art is global and life is local, then life transcends the local as art. Subsequently, art does not imitate life, it sacrifices life in an elaborate ritual which celebrates itself.

Such is the irrationality of binarist logic. Hopefully, notions of space, such as 'global' and 'local', emerge as the connectivities of spatio-temporal flows, movements and engagements rather than

hierarchical assertions. By attribution they assert scope rather than scale. Subsequently, work occupies multiple sites: the local and global are not exclusive, not othering, not pejorative but flexible, assiduous and heterogenous. It becomes apparent that the relationship between the local and the global is tense and complex, that there are elaborate exchanges which occur between them and that such polarities have limited currency in this fractious and unruly epoch.

II

How can I begin to define a practice as diffused and diverse as installation which has been reiterated as an artform, comprised of other artforms, throughout the 90s? Why would I, if I attempt to show some respect for this epoch as a period of sweeping cultural change, even bother? David Green observes that installation is undecidable and that 'forms of contemporary installation oscillate between the extremes of emptiness and fullness, order and chaos, absence and presence.'[5] Installation is clearly a practice of space in which an inquiry of that space is made, in which its limits are tested. Usually, although not exclusively, that space or site of inquiry is the gallery. Green proposes that:

> Installation comprises that which has no autonomous existence as object or artefact and is only fully realised in its existence with regard to the actual space in which it is placed—and of which it may, and often does, become physically a part. In a most fundamental sense, therefore, installation is always site-specific. Using the notion of site-specificity in its most precise sense would allow us to distinguish between those practices in which the site of the work is an important but ultimately secondary consideration and those in which site is taken as essential and constitutive of the work.[6]

As Green points out, a question about what constitutes art's object is raised. While both approaches to installation directly address the gallery and invite the viewer to enter or play the work of art, they register the notions of site-specificity and spatial arrangement as constitutive of installation differently. Perhaps this means that installation is a wildly political jab at the object, that its diffusion of object is also militation against the primacy of the notion of art as object. The art object which was celebrated in a peak of voracious acquisition in the 1980s—although the said tension predates that decade—is clearly the object of disdain in ongoing experimental practices such as installation which impose a markedly different economy.

While these objects assert their own presence and completion, the installation provides the viewer with an inclusive viewing experience in which the viewer's presence is requisite. Wolfgang Max Faust explains that, 'walking around the works forms a connection with the spatial context. Seeing them from a number of perspectives turns perception into a process.'[7] For Michel Foucault, 'to image another order/system is to extend our participation in the present one.'[8] Installation images another spatial order in which we participate with the present spatial order, even if only by displacement, resistance or intervention. For Green, 'in installation the work can never exist without its location and the location is taken as forming part of the work. Yet it is also true that the work cannot be reduced to, and be coextensive with, its loca-

tion. Analytically, at least, work and site remain separable."[9] Further, there is a 'doubling of display' described as:

> the difference between the displayed work and the work of display—in which the distinction between the work and the site is placed continually in question, while at the same time that question is necessarily held open. The 'doubling of display' is thus a matter of installation's continual renegotiation of the boundary between the art object and its other which, in most instances, will be the physical and spatial nature of the architectural site of which it is both a part and apart.[10]

The rules of engagement are not apparent as installation undoes the practices of exhibition, viewing and consuming art objects. While it overwhelms the space or creates dialogue with architecture, it does not disrupt the practice of the gallery. Installation displaces the art object by dispersing it and posits in its stead the gallery. Ironically and subjectively, installation produces the gallery: it is reaffirmed as a site of exhibition, a space for art. We know this 'thing' which is not an object is art because it is sited in the gallery. A search ensues: the search for art and meaning, for confined aesthetic experience. The viewer realises the installation and its meanings through engagement resulting in an altered spatial arrangement between viewer and artwork. The viewer experiences the artwork by immersion and the viewer's point of view is privileged. Architecture and art conflate and fold. Conjunctions and hybrids of performance, viewing, exhibition are produced.

It would seem that such becomings and intervention should destabilise the gallery. However, the practices of the gallery are far more resilient, and while it may have experienced a range of interrogations and dissections, it has nevertheless assimilated those practices that seek to 'undo' it. In many ways, installation practices have produced the artist run space. Defying commodification, the installation operates in an economy based on expenditure and loss rather than consumption and acquisition. It is expenditure that is not (or rarely) compensated for by acquisition. It is subsequently an expenditure borne by individuals: both the artist and the viewer whose expenditure or loss produces the artwork.

III

Like the conundrum which asks whether a falling tree 'really' makes a sound as it crashes to the ground if no one hears it, the installation might not 'really' exist if no one's *trajective* impulse plots the space between objective and subjective.[11] It is something you must believe. Such is the ontological register of virtuality, the continued organisation of space around the perceptual self. Installation, while acting as a repudiation of the imperious logic which has ensnared our imaginations, teases the realms of 'real' and 'virtual' experience. As McKenzie Wark explains, 'art expresses a virtual world that cannot be taken for granted.'[12] Art adds virtuality to our lives, extending our experience of this world in conceptual and intimate ways. This task of art might be presented under the rubric of the 'new empiricism' which Wark describes as:

> a highly conceptual way of handling information ... one that looks for patterns of information rather than fitting flows of information into fixed patterns ... It's not about measuring the world

according to an abstract, other-worldly principle and finding what is lacking in it. Rather it is a matter of apprehending the world in its variability, and looking for useful, productive and creative ways to make a life out of the events of *this* world.[11]

I can only hope in handling information and searching for patterns arising from that information, that art in its myriad forms somehow makes a difference. That culturally, art undermines a propensity to gravitate towards the fixed categories of, say, local and global (and all those other associated impunities). That art adds to this world rather than diminishes it. That art 'cultivates options' by experimenting with life rather than sacrificing it, that it speaks of choice rather than coercion. That through a conceptual engagement with information and aesthetics, art creates a virtual extension of the world, its moments and its meanings, its horror and its joy.

At some point we must accept that certain modes of representing ourselves and our world have been discarded, that these discontinuities have opened into a heterologically configured world rather than brought about its cataclysmic end. While still grappling with dialectics and dualisms, our formations of the world are not wholly constrained by them. We can both confidently and trepidatiously assert that we have begun to chart those spaces of discontinuity, fragmentation and transgression. Through these forays we have learned (or are learning) to negotiate the complexities of the world and its irrationality rather than directing that energy towards the rational, the universalising and the totalising. That perfect unity is at once ruined and exhalted.

NOTES

1. Edward Said, *The world, the text and the critic*, Vintage, London, 1983, p. 35.
2. Keith Patrick, 'Editorial: Ten years after', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, Issue 21, 1999, London, p. 26.
3. Terry Smith, 'The provincialism problem' in Rex Butler (ed), *What is appropriation: An anthology of critical writings on Australian art in the 80s and 90s*, IMA, Brisbane and Power Publications, Sydney, 1996, p. 131.
4. Rex Butler, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, p. 26.
5. David Green, 'Minimal interventions', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, Issue 17, 1997, London, p. 20.
6. David Green, *ibid.*, pp. 20-21.
7. Wolfgang Max Faust, 'Metropolis and the art of our time', Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (eds), *Metropolis: International art exhibition Berlin 1991*, Rizzoli Publications, 1991, p. 23.
8. Michel Foucault in Benjamin Genocchio, 'Discourse, discontinuity, difference: The question of 'other' spaces', Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (eds), *Postmodern cities and spaces*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, 1995, p. 38.
9. David Green, *op.cit.*, p. 21.
10. *ibid.*
11. Paul Virilio, 'Perspectives of real time', Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal (eds), *op.cit.*, p. 59.
12. McKenzie Wark, *Celebrities, culture and cyberspace: The light on the hill in a postmodern world*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1999, p. 163.
13. *ibid.*, p. 334.

SOAPBOX INSTALLATIONS

PLACE AND MEMORY 20

COURTNEY PEDERSEN
Sweeten the Blow, 1997
Sugar, barb wire, cement, plain print
6.5 x 8.5 x 3 m

JUSTIN AVERY
Cell, 1998
Calico, beeswax, light bulb, metronome, rosemary
2.6 x 1.8 x 2 m

NATALIE BILLING
Archive, 1999
Archive boxes, wooden shelf, table, book
6.5 x 8.5 x 3 m

CAITLIN REID
Compartments, 1998
Polycotton voile, plastic boning, cardboard boxes, twine
Size variable

THE PERSONAL 24

CHRIS HANDRAN
Suburbia, 1998
Hand-printed wallpaper, photographs, video, furnishings
Size variable (6.5 x 8.5 x 3 m)

DEBRA SARA
'Fingers in the Length of the Room' (Adrienne Rich), detail, 1999
Couch, hooks, cords and light
2.5 x 4 x 3 m

BRITT KNUDSEN-OWENS
Soak, 1999
Washbasins, bleach, indigo blue, cotton, TV-Video monitors, chair, hot plates and cooking pots
6.5 x 8.5 x 3 m

HISTORY 28

SEBASTIAN DI MAURO
Blur Between, 1998
Carpet underlay and blue pigment
3.05 x 7.5 m

FRANZ EHMANN
Worldly Pain—Worldly Spirit, 1998
Blackboard erasers, string, chalk, wax, milk, washbasins, chair, lightbulb, and canvas
Installation and performance (20 min.)
Size variable

ANNA NORDSTRÖM
Pavilion of Exclusion, 1998
Plaster foot, slide projections
Size variable

RETURN TO THE BODY 31

CHARLES ROBB
Gore, 1999
Fibre glass/polyester resin figure, acrylic paint, wooden platform, ceramic tiles, plasterboard
1.9 x 1.5 x 3 m

SAUL KALLIO EDMONDS
Encase, 1999
Commercial cardboard boxes
Size variable

ROSS HOBBINS
Synthetic Constructions/603322-88, 1997
Back lit film/light box, aluminium, perspex
6.5 x 8.5 x 3 m

THE GALLERY AS RAW MATERIAL 34

JULIANNE LAWSON
An Unfinished History of the World. Part 1: Absence., 1997
Plastic bags, water, food dye and blue steel tacks
11 x 4 x 5 m

JODIE COX
Disconnected, 1998
Nylon, sinkers and stones
6.5 x 8.5 x 3 m

JONDI KEANE
Systems of Attention, 1997
Wall painting, halogen light, objects
2.5 x 2 x 0.75 m

Natalie Billing (*Archive*) and Franz Ehmann (*Worldly Pain—Worldly Spirit*), acknowledges the support of the Visual Arts/Craft Fund of the Australia Council. Jodie Cox (*Encase*), Britt Knudsen-Owens (*Soak*), and Justin Avery and Courtney Pedersen (*Body Memory Field*) acknowledge the support of Arts Queensland.

SEBASTIAN DI MAURO
Blur Between, 1998

FRANZ EHMANN >
Worldly Pain—Worldly Spirit, 1998

LEAVING THE SCENE OF THE CRIME: THE APPEARANCE OF THE 'ANXIOUS OBJECT'

BY **IHOR HOLUBIZKY**

Examining 'installation' as if it was a coherent practice is not an enviable task. Better to start with the appearance of the 'anxious object'[1] at the twin baptism of installation, a mythoplasm that is the prerogative and indulgence of the essayist. The first moment is in 1917 when Duchamp nailed a coat hanger to his New York studio floor—the self-evident and self-described Trap. The French title *Trébuchet*, is a chess term which means to place a pawn in order to trip (and capture) an opponent's piece. It invokes the oft-repeated punditry that new sculpture is the thing you trip over when backing up to look at a painting. Pun and witticisms aside,[2] Duchamp denied his guests the comfort of hanging their coats and declared the functional object made useless, except for the purpose that he determined. This was the atelier production, object and site locked in a textual bliss. Six years later El Lissitsky installed his

Proun Room in Berlin which he claimed to be 'the station where you change from painting to architecture.'[3] The claim is overcooked. El Lissitsky's installation considered the architecture of painting—the idiomatic proposition, as 'trap' is to 'trip'— but was 'correct' in identifying the site as a way station. The most basic condition of our universe, as Robert Irwin the American godfather of immaterial art practice stated, is that cultural ideas are always in transit and change.[4]

The English scholar Hugh Kenner identified another critical moment, a confrontation set in mythic time.

'Who is R. Mutt?' shrieks the curator.

'Who is A. Rodin?' rejoins the urinal sweetly.

Duchamp's urinal insists that it will sit on the doorstep until admitted to the museum's inner sanctum. Kenner concludes, 'the urinal's point has long been tacitly conceded ... and catalysed' in its immediate purchase by collector-patron Walter Arensberg.[5] In other words, the urinal moved from one state of installation to another—'closeted' in the 1917 Society of Independent Artists Exhibition in New York, as interloper and agent provocateur (but spirited away before the opening, as its 'job was done')—de installed and re-installed, its transgression squeezed dry by an act of connoisseurship and eventual canonisation.

To hazard a definition gambit, the act of installation (for Duchamp and El Lissitsky and those who followed or chose to differ), is to reinvest nature as a truthfulness to the concept, and wherein an object initiates a test of memory and perceptual awareness. The centre stage is an act of theatrical impudence. Author Andrew Benjamin described installation as a 'process of enactment,' and accordingly stated that the presentation site must also be described.[6] The fact that Duchamp's *Trap* and El Lissitsky's *Proun Room* have been memorialised as relics and reconstructed—reinstalled—does not diminish the thunder of their respective launches. From then on nothing could be the same, and yet everything remains the same. Monuments are still created, paintings still fabricated, and everything and anything can be distributed on the floor or mounted on walls. If the installed object is inseparable from its new modern space, the same is true of the pre-modern monument. Separating the statue of Abraham Lincoln from its memorial site of history, collective memory and consciousness, and relocating it in Surfer's Paradise makes no sense. What does the American civil war and identity mythology have to do with Australian colonial history or beach culture? It would be a very large and very misplaced bronze sign, a syntactic rupture and historic cataclysm. The concept of integrated object and expanded site was not lost on Gian Lorenzo Bernini. His bronze baldacchino for the Vatican (1624-33), marked the tomb of Saint Peter, but also has the connective tissue of the Piazza of St. Peter (designed by Bernini in 1667), even if the object and the architecture fall into different categories. The two are locked in a textual bliss, as much as Duchamp's (en)trap(ment).

COMING TO TERMS

It is somewhat noteworthy that in the glossary of Italian critic and author Achille Bonito Oliva installation is not listed. But in many of the 'movements' cited (some now constitute historical periods), installation is implicit—conceptual, environmental, body, land, and behavioural art—as all suggest a temporal and fugitive experience.[7] In a perverse twist (because

the modern world is nothing if it isn't ripe with contradiction), the hierarchy of material value can be overturned. The troops of impermanence, felt and wax, strike at the old guard of permanence, bronze and gold and oil (paint). Animal fat is nominally at the bottom of the material value scale until it is 'authored' by Joseph Beuys. Then the fat rises to the top. Karl Marx would have explained this as an example of labour and surplus value.[8] The fortunes of the avant-garde have risen and fallen, but art is rarely planted in the ground as if part of the natural order of things. There is always a frame and some contexts serve art better than others.

CONTROLLING THE TERMS

Twenty-two years ago the rationale for Dennis Oppenheim's installations was roughly translated by a curator as 'synthetic allegories'. Yet the curator also describes the installations as 'interactions of metaphors.'[9] Umberto Eco would have something to say about the traffic between allegory and metaphor. He may even suggest that the notion of 'synthetic allegory' be better served by the word 'fiction'. Less programmed and paradigmatic. If we accept the impossibility of linguistic and semiotic precision, installations may be approached as visualisations of figures of speech and the articulation of frames and contexts rather than the deconstruction of the object.

The frame in question is Soapbox Gallery, articulated and actualised by artists for three years. If they do not constitute a coherent movement—a master narrative—the site has been repeatedly installed. (In the scheme of things it has lasted longer than most, without the blessing of government culture.) Billy Apple (New Zealand-born) opened his New York studio in October 1969 as an independent alternative space for artists. He recounted that 'the investigation, and communication ... is more important than the 'success' or 'failure' of any individual work. In the space there is no separation between art and non-art activities. The installation or preparation of a performance event, or process-situation, is considered valid as an art situation/activity/event in an art context.'[10] Recently, the troika of Oliveira, Oxley and Petry have echoed this declaration: 'installation must ... also represent the artist's desire to extend the area of practice from the studio to public space (and) ... to widen the control that he/she has with the display of work.'[11]

Soapbox has provided for and encouraged a wide range of experimentation as an extension of the artist's studio. Upon occupying the site there was a conscious decision made to leave much of the imprint of the former tailoring workshop. The floors bear the marks of machinery and labour rather than being eradicated, the polished timber of uptown (Manhattan) elegance. Windows were blocked but walls not made uniform, thereby avoiding the white cube syndrome. Vintage cold cathode light fixtures were left in place but raised to ceiling height. The original office spaces serve as gallery office and exhibition site and a street front display window became an exhibition vitrine. This is no mere declaration of difference—us (artists) and them (custodians)—but indicates how the act and the intent is planted, or seen to rise from the ground. In contrast, the framing of cultural objectives by public institutions creates a distance from the noise of unruly art at its source.[12]

The undercurrent of Soapbox is an intoxication with figures of speech, evident in the curatorial

themes and writings. Issuing from the soapbox-as-hothouse are exhibition titles such as *Pulp, im/material, Peep Show, 3 degrees of Separation, Futuretext*, and the venting of the inaugural show, *Soap Opera*. In his three-part essay for *Das Objekt*, Franz Ehmann declared the site and the audience: 'I am writing this for you ... surrender yourself to the experience,' and so on.[13] What does it take to make art, what is delivered, and what is taken away (meaning and memory)? A social purpose is also revealed. The exhibitions *Plaza* (addressing monuments and public space) and *Trans* (an exhibition of global perspective), acknowledge that the artist lives in the public and global domain, an activist stance in an age when the words 'modern', 'contemporary', and 'experimental' have been dulled, co-opted by industry and merchandising, and no longer able to inspire or incite.

One of the recurring installed fictions is the misplaced site—distinct from the misplaced monument—actions and interventions that are often expressed as disjunctive colloquialisms. They speak of something which is more than simulation, or the museological diorama as cultural staging.[14] The transposed space is made useless but not impenetrable, crossing between private and public space. Chris Handran's *Suburbia* is an obvious example—the dilapidated restaging of domestic wallpaper, chairs, television and framed pictures. Whether this is true to Australia's contemporary cultural condition is not the issue; familiar conventions move towards the mythology of the commonplace. So too for Natalie Billing's *Record Room, Keeping Tally*, and *Archive*, pulled from the nightmare-fictions of Franz Kafka. (Billing also takes on the cultural institution in her *Museum of the Mundane*.) Courtney Pedersen installed domestic remnants and ruminations as her *Home Truths* and *Dedicated to ...*, as did Caitlin Reid with her altered ready-mades of ironing board and chair (the chair is hung and made useless), and disquieting vision of *Compartment*, white dresses (children's communion garb), laid out in open cardboard boxes.

Provisional sites and (other) figures of speech appear in Justin Avery's *Cell* installation and related calico and beeswax works which are illuminated from an impassable 'within'. *Cell* is the room space suspended, not touching floor or ceiling, and hence an apparition which is neither of heaven nor earth. Suspension-as-metaphor is part of Debra Sara's *'Fingers in the Length of the Room' (Adrienne Rich)*. A couch is hooked and hung Stelarc-style in the centre. Other furnishings—a dresser and bench—are obsessively and threateningly distressed. Wax is dribbled around the drilled flesh wounds becoming a DIY stigmata. A counterpoint is Franz Ehmann's *Worldly Pain—Worldly Spirit*. One of the Soapbox rooms was lined with apparent in-progress objects or remnants—part schoolroom, artist's studio and storage space—and in another the floor was covered with half eggshells. Sitting in the midst of the latter was a waxed period lithograph on a picture stand, as if it had wandered away from a Victorian drawing room and become trapped or Lost In Space. De-territorialisation is a subtext of Charles Robb's fiberglass and mixed media sculptural tableaux, *Gore*. The body of a man lies on a white tile floor, Manet's *Dead Toreador* (1863-65) naked. Robb has transported a cultural site to a clinical examining room and added the head of a black bull hanging on a wall above, triumphant but also a trophy.

If Robb's limp figure is victim to lapsed attention, Jondi Keane's *Systems of Attention* present wall

paintings which have collapsed under his situational pressure. Floor lamps with halogen lights illuminate the painted surface with a totemic presence, a mid-ground between viewer and 'pictorial space'. A found object is placed on the floor at the baseboard, evoking the 'station' of El Lissitsky's *Prouns*. Keane states that one of his concerns is the production of 'use value'—to produce thought—hence a high surplus value without commodification. We leave only with the idea of a painting.

It should be clear that the object has not been eliminated, but returns in a supra-natural context, an ecology of installed mannerism. Jodie Cox makes reference to vessels, the basket and cocoon, and the threshold of the built environment, the pathway, tunnel, and arch. These are freely interpreted as quasi-objects or environmental studies made with thread, string and elastic, dependent on their attachment to walls or floor. Britt Knudsen Owens, like Cox, crosses object, architecture and theatrical situation. *Soak* is comprised of bundled white cotton 'braids' hung from the ceiling as if columns, and resting in bowls of water or blue indigo liquid. The slow absorption of blue indigo in the cotton braids is visible, but also provides the clue to 'seeing' the invisible absorption of water elsewhere, and to the bleaching to white of blue-stained braids. These elements are interspersed with video replays of the work being made, fragments of re-filmed Danish television programs (the reweaving of found narrative), and pots of dye being heated on hot plates (the essential material in a state of transformation). Sebastian Di Mauro's describes his work as investigations into the metaphysical and the ecological, and speaks of installed theatricality. *A Swimmer Enters the River* is a work that can only be executed on site. Six metre long sheets of drafting film are laid on the floor and written on with olive oil. Di Mauro suggests that his 'interest' in olive oil is connected to his Italian/domestic background,[15] but there is also a high symbolic value, an essential substance and nourishment (a proposition which appears in Ehmann's use of milk and eggs). In *Blur Between*, Di Mauro covered a wall with carpet underlay—a spatial transposition of floor to wall—before drawing a horizon line of pigment below the median point. Not to belabour the point or overstate the obvious, such works are inherently temporal and in-transit actions, staged and delivered as if soliloquies.

There are strays in the group selected, as if proof were needed that 'art should not have be a certain way,'[16] works which touch on concerns of remembrance (as with previous works cited), and 'operate the gears of self-consciousness.'[17] Anna Nordström reflects on her 'foreignness' as a peripheral consciousness and constructs photographic manipulations of self (selfhood); from an outsider perspective Australia can be seen in terms of waves of settler culture now coming to terms with deeper indigenous culture. Saul Kallio Edmonds is shown in a 'selfhood' performance, encased in cardboard boxes. The accidental text/poetry of merchandising can read as condition or character, as the phrase 'squeezable tea bags' hovers over his forlorn look. Ross Hobbins' backlit light boxes repeat images of the self (himself) as-mug shot criminal. Citizen, criminal and victim are conflated and installed in some file, archive and official reckoning. It should be noted that while the light box has pictorial portability as object, it is not the equivalent of painting or photography, and has a particular promotional context and function. It must be installed—connected and lit—for meaning.

An appropriate (or convenient) ending is Julianne Lawson's serial installations, each titled *Unfinished History of the World* (differentiated as Parts 1 through 20). Two recent episodes are site-dependent; a wall of plastic bags each filled with an identical amount of blue dye liquid, and a wall-filling painted sheet metal cruciform of blue and red. There is a formalist reference, as with Di Mauro's *Blur Between* and Jondi Kean's 'systems', but what matters is what materialises. History, like art, is unfinished and periodically is bagged or crucified. Only then can the text appear.

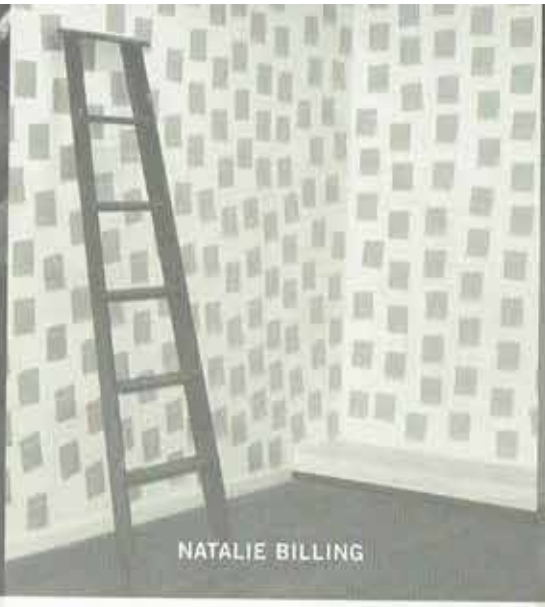
LEAVING THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

Apologies must be given for the essayist's speed. There are a multitude of issues with respect to the individual practices and these make for distinctions as much as commonality. The breathlessness of declared zeitgeists is too often moulded as a single sign, and no one should believe that a zeitgeist blows in only one direction. The moment any of the Soapbox artists enters into the official sanctum their re-installation will begin. In the meantime artists don't wait for definition or willingly submit to cultural valorisation.

NOTES

1 The phrase was coined by American critic Harold Rosenberg.
2 Another meaning for *trebuchet* is a mediaeval weapon which hurled stones, so getting to the root of Duchampian puns is a treacherous game.
3 Willy Rotzler, *Constructive concepts*, Rizzoli, New York, 1989, p. 100.
4 Robert Irwin, *Being and circumstance: Notes towards a conditional art*, The Lapis Press, San Francisco, 1985, p. 9.
5 Hugh Kenner, '...The dead-letter office,' in Brian O'Doherty, *Museums in crisis*, George Braziller, New York, 1972, p. 169.
6 Andrew Benjamin, *Object painting*, Academy Editions, London, 1994, p. 25. Also see Rotzler's chapter 'Liberation from the object', *op. cit.*, pp. 37-65.
7 Achille Bonito Oliva, *Art towards the year 2000*, Torcular SpA, Milan/Museu Brasileiro da Escultura, Sao Paulo, 1998, pp. 100-106.
8 Soapbox Gallery co-founder and artist Franz Ehmann has used a Karl Marx quote to underscore the immaterial: 'All that is solid melts into air'.
9 Alain Parent, *Dennis Oppenheim: retrospective, works 1967-1977*, Musée D'Art Contemporain, Montreal, 1978, p. 12.
10 *Alternatives in Retrospect; an historical overview, 1969-1975*, The New Museum, New York, 1981, p. 22.
11 Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, *Installation art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1997, p. 7.
12 The sentiment is borrowed from Hans Belting, *The end of art history?*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 62.
13 A 1996 exhibition for the Soapbox precursor White Box Gallery.
14 The term simulation is used in reference to 'the simulator'—the device used to train pilots. The simulator is not reality even though it is intended to replicate 'real conditions' and 'real crises'. Simulacra—'the mere pretense'—on the other hand would be a poor 'training' situation, sowing the seeds of doubt—'is this how it will be, or am I being fooled?'.
15 Sebastian Di Mauro, *Between material*, self-published monograph, Brisbane, 1998, p. 46.
16 Willem de Kooning, 'A desperate view' 1949, cited in David Moos, 'According to what', *Art Papers* magazine, May/June 1999, Atlanta, p. 16.
17 *ibid.*, p. 18.

JUSTIN AVERY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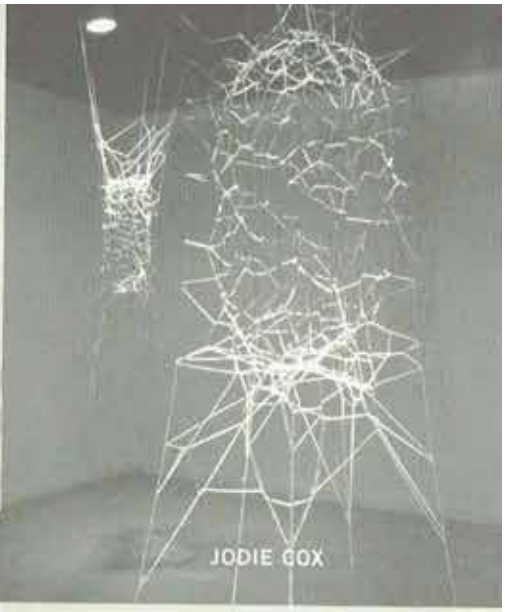
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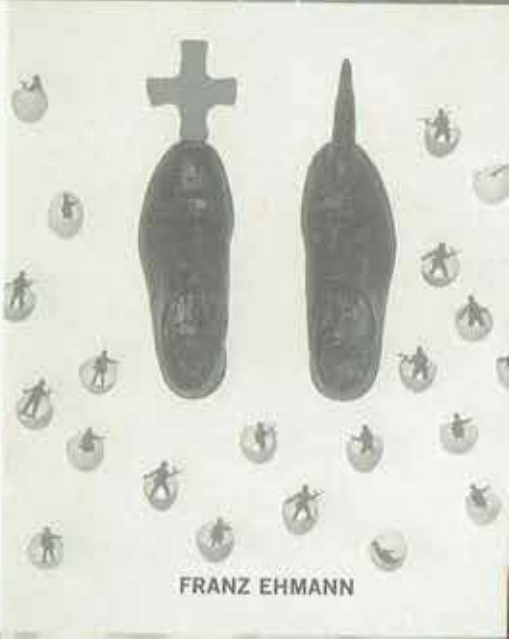
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