

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ONTOLOGICAL
SIGNIFICANCE OF SCULPTURAL OBJECTS**

by

Colin Langridge

BFA (hons), Curtin University

MFA, University of Tasmania

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ABSTRACT

The research is developed through sculptural artworks that seek to raise the question of their being. They do this through their indeterminate presence, which often awakens people to ask ‘What is it?’ I ask how sculpture can encourage people to wonder about what things are, and how the relationship/s we form with art can then lead us to reflect upon our other more worldly relationships. I also pursue the questions of what is sculpture, and what is contemporary art, in order to map out an understanding of the domain of my practice, and the issues at stake regarding the making and display of sculpture.

Through a reading of the ideas of Martin Heidegger and other Continental philosophers, I have focused upon the way our (Modern Western) relationship with things in the world is problematic, and how art can help us to address some of these problems. It is through art’s poetic ambiguities that our usual determined and closed relationship with the world can be opened up to other readings. An investigation into contemporary art practices reveals several issues that put the artwork into context and shed light upon difficulties facing contemporary artists particularly in terms of: what am I to do, why should I do it and how should I proceed?

My artworks are aimed at raising questions for the viewer about being, sculpture and contemporary art. I have developed the cooperating technique of wooden construction to make unusually shaped wooden container-like sculptures. I have also investigated other semi-industrial working methods to construct sculptural objects that oscillate between various possibilities for the viewer. These artworks operate in the field between the familiar/unfamiliar, functional/non-functional and the

known/unknown. They resist the viewer's efforts at stilling the oscillation between possible readings and evade some of the common roles of contemporary art such as being a site for social and political dialogue or being a reflection of contemporary/pop/consumer culture.

This project contributes to the dialogue already in play between several Post-Minimal sculptors whose work touches upon constructed and or manufactured ambiguous forms. It further develops the language of how to discuss these issues through my philosophical readings. It extends the cooeping technique beyond the simple cask form to discover the technical possibilities for this method of construction. It brings to the gallery visitor an actual experience of what Heidegger writes about art, particularly in terms of his ideas about 'the truth of being as revealing/concealing'. The research also develops our understanding of the nature of contemporary art through questioning several aspects of it and through adopting outmoded and laborious methods of making that are at odds with our digital age. The artworks are the result of working toward a position of indeterminacy that is alluring, by partially resisting the viewer's efforts to know them.

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PART ONE: THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

The Research Question

Research is a kind of search and I have been searching for a clarification of the ontological significance of things called sculpture particularly in reference to my own practice as an artist/sculptor. This searching arises from a sense that contemporary art practices have become liberated from formal constraints to the point of ambiguity and this has lead, for me and perhaps for others, to a deep sense of uncertainty about what I am to do. How can I proceed when the domain of my activity has few defining boundaries?

This is the problem of contemporary art practice that I have chosen to investigate and it revolves around the issues of; what am I doing, how should I proceed and why am I doing it? This is why the words ‘ontological significance’ have been placed in the title. It is because they sum up a range of amorphous issues that are all aspects of the ‘being’ of sculpture, which reveals itself as a complex thing that sits between more certain categories of being in an oscillating unsteadiness. I have tried to draw this aspect of the being of sculpture to a more prominent position in this research.

It would be a mistake to infer that I am trying, in some anti-post-modern quest, to return to a simpler modern way of understanding sculptural art practice. It is in fact the multifarious nature of post-modern contemporary art practices that provides the impetus for this investigation. It is the perhaps ironic position that ensues when the libertarian forces of modernity have created a situation where a relatively free space has been cleared for artists to act within and yet after the rebellious pushing against past forms has ceased then what now?

The recent digging over the residue of history through various cultural studies, which has resulted in numerous dis-coverings of hidden power oriented agendas, has also brought with it a scepticism of ideals due to the global idealism inherent in the modernist paradigm. This scepticism encourages me to resist working toward ideal goals and to find my primary role in criticising the past or present power structures. I wonder whether there is something else for an artist to do?

PART TWO: CONTEXT

Philosophy: Martin Heidegger's Ontology

The philosophical ideas of Martin Heidegger are highly relevant and influential to this research and so a brief outline of some of the major issues he has addressed is important as a context to my recent art practice.

Martin Heidegger was a German Philosopher who lived from 1889-1976. His central concern was to question being or the nature of how things exist, which is called ontology. Early in his career he was involved in the development of the field of phenomenology and worked alongside Edmund Husserl, the famous phenomenologist, until they parted ways in the early 20th century.

Heidegger's most famous and influential book is *Being and Time* where he raises the question of the meaning of being. He found that humans are beings for which their being, existence, is an issue of concern and thus he investigates being through an investigation of the entity that asks about being – humans. He called this particular way of being *Dasein*, which literally means being there. All things appear for us as beings, we also appear to ourselves as beings and thus we (humans) are locked in to any questioning about being. The problem Heidegger noticed is that we forget being and our involvement in the presencing of things in favour of only relating to the world as a series of disembodied entities, beings.¹

¹ In Heidegger's thought there are two uses for the word being: it can refer to the concept of being (existence) or to actual beings (entities/things).

Humans are self-aware and have a concept of their finitude, with which they have to live. Heidegger claims that to live authentically is to live in the full awareness of our impending death. This idea was very influential to the later French Existential philosophical group. It is also important for humans to remember our capacity to choose our future from the range of possibilities we are given by being thrown into a particular time and place. The danger here is for us to let popular or dominant ways of being determine our way of being when we have the opportunity to be self-determining within the limits of our possibilities.

Martin Heidegger found that being is linked to time in that beings, individual entities that can be people, objects or even ideas, exist historically. This means that things exist in terms of the past, present and future. The future became important for Heidegger as the opening up of possibilities towards which we move. Thus our being is temporal in that we are projecting ourselves forward from out of the past. This point relates to the opening up of imaginative possibilities for the viewer of my artwork and also for me as the maker of the artworks that evolve over a period of months from an initial idea towards their realisation.

He also argued that being is linked to language, which, for humans at least, names beings and brings them to light for us. Without being named it is difficult for us to conceive of a thing: without a name it is potentially not being. This causes me to consider whether Heidegger was only interested in the way things are for us, human beings, rather than that they might not exist without human perception of them. It seems that this idea of considering how things might be without us perceiving them is an impractical pursuit that is possibly a version of metaphysical enquiry. This would run counter to Heidegger's project, which was critical of metaphysical enquiry because it develops a theoretical relationship to the world rather than an involved one. It is unhelpful to consider how things might be for non-human beings

because we can never experience that and thus we are better served to focus on what we are able to experience. Things always show up for us as occurring within the context of various categories of being (in Heidegger this is the fourfold of earth, sky, gods and mortals) and to try to understand them as having another, more authentic, existence outside of or before this human construction is to imagine another world and not to come closer to the truth of our world.

Heidegger's most relevant essays for this research are: *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935), *Letter on Humanism* (1947), *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1951), and *The Question Concerning Technology* (1953).²

According to Thomas Mautner in the *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* '... Heidegger hoped to overcome the tradition of Western Metaphysics that began with Plato. Its main shortcoming is its "forgetfulness of being". Traditional metaphysics tends to single out certain privileged entities (the Forms, God, a transcendental self, Spirit etc.), thereby forgetting the fact that our understanding of being is based on the way we are in the world and relate to entities in it. This defect in traditional metaphysics leads to the misguided quest for a definitive theory of everything: a total account, once and for all, of why things are as they are.'³

He also points out that, 'The modern cult of 'technology' – a way of relating to the world that treats things only as objects of domination and consumption, without insight into its own limitations – is itself an expression of nihilism, the only philosophy left for a metaphysical ambition that has come to grief. It is a mentality that can be overcome with a better insight into the true meaning of what it is to

2 My major source for these essays is D Krell (ed), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, Harper, San Francisco, 1993.

3 T Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, Penguin, London, 1997, p.243

be, and with the rejection of what Heidegger called ‘humanism’, reason’s claim to be able to know the world exhaustively and to put it entirely to human use.’⁴

I have developed my sculptures so that they tend to resist being appropriated as a resource by the viewer. It is impossible to do this entirely, but it has been through the choice to not concern myself with using the artwork to communicate specific ideas or express emotion that the work has been able to operate as a resistor to the usual way people relate to contemporary artworks; that is to attempt to read the artists thoughts or intentions off them or to find things the work is telling us about our culture. Also the works often are impossible to take in visually all at once. By creating works that only gradually reveal their nature, the viewer has to rely on recent memory in order to construct them as complete objects. The sculptures often have aspects that will always remain hidden but they announce their hidden presence to the viewer and thus highlight their resistance to them.



Figure 1: *Whatever* 2003 (detail)

The labour-intensive traditional method of construction often employed, coopering, is an act of physical engagement with the

⁴ *ibid.*...

materials that allows them to assert their being upon me (as the properties of wood assert themselves) in my attempt to create the form I have designed. This is different from a more conceptual art-making practice that can lead to a theoretical distance between the maker and what is made. This aligns with Heidegger's criticism of modern western metaphysics.⁵

Truth

It seems that the theatricality Michael Fried criticised in early Minimalist art is today very much a welcome part of the viewing of art where the artifice of display has often become an exposed aspect of the artwork.⁶ The shelves, hanging fixtures and support structures necessary to the physical display of the artwork have been left intentionally exposed by numerous contemporary artists (for example the exposed stretcher frames on Sigmar Polke's recent work). It brings a smile to my face when I enter a gallery and see these exposed structures because there is a sense that the artist is poking fun at the serious attitude of earlier art. It seems that they have given up trying to create a façade of the perfectly autonomous and magical thing. The flawed but perhaps more real or truthful attitude expressed therein reveals an underlying desire for truth in the work of some contemporary artists as contrasted with a much earlier emphasis on illusion. Later, with modernism, there was a sense of aesthetic autonomy where the art object appeared as a perfect whole unencumbered with the dross of the real world of gravity and other restrictions.

⁵ Heidegger argues that western metaphysics has developed a theoretical distance between self and world, particularly through Rene Descartes, rather than 'the fact that we are conscious self-interpreting selves embodied in material, social and historical contexts and above all constrained by our mortality'. Mautner, p. 242.

⁶ A Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, Yale University Press, London, 2000, p.188-9 Fried argued against Minimalist art for the way it drew the artwork and gallery space from autonomy into the real.

It seems that underlying much of the contemporary art world is a desire to expose lies and delusions. This is also apparent in much influential post-modern writing such as that by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault who both display eagerness to get at the truth behind appearances. Of course we have even more obvious recent examples of this trend in the documentaries that expose political lies such as those by Michael Moore. It seems that a cleaning up job is in process, a cleaning up of the mess of delusion we have been born into and become part of in the present global environment. Of course this position is counterbalanced with another position that is actively creating the structures of delusion, which are often found most apparent in the popular media. This suggests there is a belief that we are being deluded and that we must work towards clarity and a seeing through toward a truth, which is under it all or behind it waiting for us to uncover. But what is the expected nature of this truth? What form will it take and can we recognise it if we find it?

Heidegger also investigates truth, but he goes beyond a searching for the truth of statements about things to the nature of truth, to the truth of being and the being of truth. It is one thing to ask about the truth of a statement or the truth of our perception of the world but it is another thing to turn the question of truth upon truth itself and attempt to discover the truth of truth.

Heidegger comes to the conclusion that truth is also untruth and that the world is both concealed and revealed to us.⁷ This polemic seems satisfactory in that it allows for every possibility to eventuate and still be encompassed in its simplicity. It allows for us to wonder whether the world we perceive, in all its deceptive glory, is actually the truth rather than an illusion covering a hidden more true truth. The world of lies and deception is the world and we can never reach beyond it to a more true world where we would live undeceived by our senses

⁷ Krell, p. 182 –203.

or by the machinations of people and organizations. The chameleon lizard adapts its body to deceive predators and escape their notice yet can we say that there is a true colour for the chameleon and all the other colours it takes on are mere illusions or untruths?



Figure 2: *Final Cause* 2005 (detail)

Artists have addressed notions of truth and the politics of exhibiting art in museums and galleries but, in some cases, they may have become paradoxically both critical and complicit simultaneously. As Isabelle Graw has noted, ‘The result can be an absurd situation in which the commissioning institution (the museum or gallery) turns to an artist as a person who has the legitimacy to point out the contradictions and irregularities of which they themselves disapprove.’ And for artists, ‘subversion in the service of one’s own convictions finds easy translation into subversion for hire; criticism turns into spectacle.’⁸

Thus the act of making and displaying artwork that reveals the structures of display, the exposed theatricality Fried mentions, must,

⁸ Z Kocur & S Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, Blackwell, Carlton, 2005, p.44.

if we follow Heidegger's lead, in itself contain elements of untruth. There must actually be something concealed in its revealing. Perhaps it is the avant-garde impulse to disrupt the gallery visitor's expectations about art that is concealed because the revealed theatricality now actually becomes a sign of work that is disruptive and can be easily recognised as such. Thus it may actually be a short cut to a perceived avant-gardism that could not actually be if the work is recognised and taken up by the gallery visitor as authentic avant-garde work because they have read the signifying signs that tell them so. This form of artwork may appear acceptable to the gallery visitor because they expect it to be disruptive and may be gratified that they can recognise the avant-garde nature of the work and thus feel themselves to be hip. If the work were truly disruptive they would have difficulty accepting it as art and certainly would feel more than a wry grin upon seeing it. What form this truly disruptive work would take I don't know.

A further complication to this issue is that there has also been a corresponding post-modern critique of the idea of truth itself. Professor Jeff Malpas points this out in his essay '*Speaking the Truth*': 'Suspicion regarding the notion of truth is a characteristic feature of much contemporary thought. Often this suspicion is based on the view that takes truth to be a notion associated with a discredited view of knowledge or with an oppressive and exclusionary politics.'⁹ Malpas goes on to argue the case that the idea of truth is inherent to social interaction and that we could not operate/speak without trusting that the other person is telling the truth. The idea of truth is also fundamental to the very basis of the criticism of it, the dissenters are using the notion of, or desire for, truth to criticise misuse of it.

⁹ J Malpas..1996, 'Speaking the Truth' in *Economy and Society* 25, p, 1.

The upshot of this is that it is tempting, if one believes the concept of truth to be faulty, to adopt a kind of relativism. I understand a great deal of post-colonial art to be exposing cultural relativism. This seems to be the situation in recent times, we are able to accept different ways of seeing events and things and thus adopt an encompassing or compassionate relativism of sorts. We understand that different viewers of our work will bring their own history and prejudices to it, the master narrative has been exposed but not eliminated. I have made and exhibited my artworks as things that resist being seen/known fully or all at once and thus I am happy that my artworks oscillate between truth and untruth in their shifting aspects. The concealing/revealing nature of truth points to the way that any perspective on a thing reveals it in a certain light while simultaneously concealing other perspectives.

Our Relationship with Things

The artwork addresses what I perceive to be imbalances by working in opposition to dominant ontological attitudes in our modern western culture. These attitudes form relatively narrow categories in the way we relate to things. My artworks present themselves as things that make it difficult for us to form the usual kind of relations with them by oscillating between standard categories and causing us to question their being rather than presume to know what they are immediately as is the case with most things.

This resistant attitude stems from an early intuition, in my artistic development, that something was wrong, for me, with the dominant paradigm within which contemporary art was operating. The problem gradually emerged as my understanding developed. I was interested in being a creative individual and much of the Post-Structuralist debate, which dominated discourse in the visual arts (in the 80s and

90s), leant more towards systems, groups and social structures, particularly in terms of language, which all seemed to head directly away from what I wanted to do. Even though I did have a social and political conscience I felt even then that this was not really my place. I would much rather be alone and act alone trying to draw upon a personal vision to fuel my creative efforts.

Post-Structuralism is critical of Humanism and my individualist stance leant toward a Humanist position and thus it seemed that there was a clash here of understanding about what I was doing as an artist. On the one hand the driving force behind my artwork was a personal imaginative vision that was more concerned with the thing than the viewer/reader of it and, on the other hand, I was moving through a system that appeared to place the viewer/reader of art at the centre of art activity, as the end user of art.

I should add that there is a common or popular suspicion of language as somehow falsifying or obscuring reality and the corresponding belief that art can somehow reach behind this veil to grant us access to the true world. The philosopher Donald Davidson argues convincingly that we perceive the world through having language and for us there is no other world; it is a world involved with language as a means for individual comprehension and social communication.¹⁰ Philosopher Jeff Malpas adds to this that there is also a suspicion of the idea of truth as somehow always being associated with dominant master narratives. He points out that we cannot operate in a social world without the concept of truth and that we have to assume truth and even commit to it in order to speak.¹¹ I am not advocating a rejection or suspicion of language and/or truth, I am questioning a particular model for thinking about visual art.

10 D Davidson, *Truth, Language and History*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2005

11 J Malpas, 1996, 'Speaking the Truth' in *Economy and Society* 25, p.156-177.

I came to see that art as a form of communication was opposed to the way I understood my artwork.¹² The attempt to communicate logically encourages one to pass on information to another in a clear and concise manner - to bridge the gap of alienation via language. This seems a perfectly reasonable task for visual artists to embrace, but what bothered me was that this reduction of experience in order to communicate through the medium of the system of readable symbols that is language appeared to reduce the creative impulse, which is to me a widening, embracing activity. Thus a reaction away from a perceived reductionism inherent in the concept of art as a form of communication towards art as an open-ended ambiguous activity ensued.

Examples of visual artists that use the former communication model are Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Gordon Bennett, Peter Tyndall, Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer and Imants Tillers. It now occurs to me that many of these artists use their art towards political ends and that perhaps it is the concept of art as a political tool that bothered me. I don't think it was due to a political conservatism on my part, as I have previously engaged in numerous art-political activities. I rejected this direct political activism in favour of an engagement with form, materials and being because of the frustration I felt in attempting to bring about social change with visual art.

It was not until I read Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* that I was able to find a way to see this problem succinctly. He showed that it is the poetic nature of all the arts that suffers through adopting a more pragmatic view of art. I wanted my own work to be more poetic but by using the art-as-communication model I was actually working at odds to this. When I let go of that goal, that way of thinking about art, I felt quite liberated and it was only then that I

¹² The phrase, art as, is itself indicative of recent ways of thinking about art where it is a malleable concept that is projected or applied.

was able to develop a confidence with my work and really feel that I was doing what I wanted to do. I want to make clear that I am not suggesting the artists mentioned above are somehow unpoetic or lacking, it is my received ideas about art that I am referring to, models for the realisation and development of my practice.

Heidegger points out that a model of art-as-language need not presume communication as the primary goal. 'To see this, only the right concept of language is needed. In the current view, language is held to be a kind of communication. It serves for verbal exchange and agreement, and in general for communicating. But language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated. It not only puts forth in words and statements what is overtly or covertly intended to be communicated; language alone brings beings as beings into the open for the first time. Where there is no language, as in the Being of stone, plant, and animal, there is also no openness of beings, and consequently no openness of nonbeing and of the empty.'¹³ It is through naming things that they emerge into being for us and it is this process of the viewer negotiating the sculpture as a newly emerged thing, for them, I am interested in.

There is an element of the absurd in my art and it is this element that opens up the work poetically to numerous potential understandings. The absurd does not make sense and it does this because we are operating within a rational system of meaning that has been socially/historically constructed.¹⁴ The issue is that, since Friedrich Nietzsche, at least, some people have adopted alternative perspectives on the world and these perspectives can work to create fissures in our otherwise rigid understanding of things. I want to

¹³ Krell, p.198.

¹⁴ The word rational stems from the Greek ratio, which indicates a desire to establish measured relationships between things. See C Seife p. 25-61.

create openings in the world of the people who view my art through inserting a different kind of thing into their awareness. This is not as grandiose a claim as it might seem and can actually take the form of a moment's confusion rather than necessarily being a life-changing event. Thus I suppose there is still an element of the political in my work, wanting to bring about change. However I am no longer addressing particular issues or using things as symbols to say something.

What I wanted to do and still want to do is make art that satisfies my creative impulse. The creative impulse springs from my imagination, which is often irrational. The interface between the private and the social, which is possibly the location of my problem, is of course the domain of language, and artists are often, it seems, involved in attempting to bridge this gap using the visual language they have developed through their practice. What I have found though is that the more I tried to bridge the gap the less interesting and satisfying my art was (dry), yet when I felt liberated and made artwork without considering the reader/viewer so much, the art tended to become more interesting and definitely more satisfying to make. I am aware that there is also a potential pitfall here in that an artist who continues to work in this self-indulgent manner can end up making incoherent and inaccessible work. So the issue becomes one of restraint, where the creative imagination is let play while the socially and historically informed professional artist drives the activity by applying the brakes at certain points and pressing the accelerator at other points in a journey of discovery of one's practice.



Figure 3: *Cleaner* 2003

This suggests a splitting of the self into various voices with differing interests that are managed from above by a dominant self. As crazy as that may seem it actually is the case that artists, in my experience, do talk to themselves while working and assume at least two identities while making work. At the simplest level there is the self who is doing the physical making and the self who is viewing the operation and commenting on it as it unfolds. Even in young children making art one can see this splitting as they become alternatively involved in the work and then step back to look at it. There is at times almost a sense of surprise when stepping back as if you hadn't seen the thing before. This may also be that while making we are absorbed into a specific aspect of the artwork and when we step back we are able to see the whole thing as an ensemble and thus assess its character as a complex being that we judge in terms of whether it is working or not. This also becomes apparent in the experience of a ruined work that has been overdone, here we recognize that we have allowed ourselves too much freedom in some aspect of the work's formation that has irretrievably upset the balance between elements and made the work ugly or unacceptable in some way.



Figure 4: *Agitator* 2005

But in some forms of contemporary art, this aspect of being an artist is divorced. A significant number of contemporary artists do not actually make the artwork themselves, or they do not make in the sense of constructing or forming a thing. Thus they rely heavily on the original idea /design and trust in this. I have experienced this way of making art in doing a large public commission, which had to be fabricated by an engineering firm. This way of working is inescapable if an artist is to take on large projects that require industrial construction methods. However many artists have also chosen to employ craftspeople to make their work, Jeff Koons is perhaps the best example but also Andy Warhol, and numerous others come to mind (Scott Redford for a recent Australian example). For these artists it is this fact that is a crucial part of the work's significance. They are making a point about our culturally conditioned expectations and about the notion of artistic genius and the mark of the artist's hand. I found that when I worked in this way much of the creative process took place in the design stage. A great deal of energy went into the technical drawings and in making decisions that were both practical and aesthetic. The artwork was still very much mine, even though I had not actually made it, and I still

had that sense of stepping back at the end and looking at it as though I had never seen it before. Overall I found it very stressful to have to let go at some point and hand the drawings over to the engineer and commit to the final plan without the opportunity to come back in later and to change my mind.



Figure 5: *Grand Tourer* 2004

At art school from first year onwards we were trained to think of our art as a form of communication. We even used language that formed this relationship with it in our critical reviews. We made statements like; what are you trying to say with your work, I can't read this piece clearly, I don't get that message from it, how will you symbolise that idea in your next piece? We were being trained to develop a visual language and to become visually literate. We were readers of art and we made our art like writers. In fact we often had to write about what we were going to make in advance of making. Then later the lecturers would read our proposals to check that we had in fact adhered to them, this was professional practice. I am not saying that this was wrong, in fact the training I have received has enabled me to develop as a professional artist and I appreciate and value what I have learnt. But that still does not hide the fact that I had to get beyond that early way of thinking about art to find a way that

works for me and that the way I had been taught was quite problematic for me.

Martin Heidegger was anti-Humanist and anti-Modernist, two positions that complement each other and reflect similar values. Both are taking a critical stance toward recent western culture. This reveals a perceived problem with both Modernism and Humanism. The problem for me becomes one of anthropocentrism, which Heidegger addresses in *The Question Concerning Technology*, and the way this leads to a narcissism of epic proportions where the world comes to be experienced primarily in terms of its use as a resource for our, human, consumption. In the art world this attitude is overwhelming, art is generally expected to be ‘about’ human issues. Even when the artwork is a landscape devoid of human presence there is still the viewpoint of the gaze taking in the view as a resource, usually for aesthetic pleasure. The landscape is there for us to enjoy and it is presented in the painting or photograph or print as an aesthetic moment of pleasure in the contemplation of nature as whatever context we put to it.

Of course this attitude is very difficult to escape and one may wonder why we should want to escape it at all. The pursuit of truth and knowledge is the impetus behind Heidegger’s critical stance. He sees that the problem with Modernism is that we become trained into thinking about things in particular ways that can become the ‘only’ way, or more ‘real’ or ‘true’ than other ways. Of course this has happened in all cultures and at all times, for it is difficult to see the world unwrapped from whatever cultural baggage we have learned. The problem with modernity and Humanism is that we have become accustomed to viewing the world as being there for us, rather than as us being in the world. This puts us at the centre and causes us to view everything in terms of how it relates to us. Our understanding of the world thus becomes narrow and parochial. This may be the attraction of the sublime, which can act to take us momentarily out of our usual

stance at the centre and put us at the periphery, this is often experienced as fear by the ego.

The way I have attempted to address these issues in my PhD artwork has been to make ambiguous sculptures that make it difficult for the gallery visitor to achieve closure. The artworks do not reveal all of themselves to the viewer both physically and conceptually. They withhold aspects of their being from the viewer and by doing this they maintain a sense of mystery and escape from being fully overpowered by the viewer. I am assuming here that the viewer wishes to overpower the artwork by reading it and understanding it. Of course many successful artworks do what I am claiming for my artworks, they stay alive through being poetic and keeping us guessing. However I am working to make this apparent by paring the sculptures back to being very much present but without any seeming relevance or reason for being there other than to be there. They are moments of resistance to the urge to consume all of the world as a resource. They resist our urge to know them by hiding from us aspects of themselves.



Figure 6: *Invitation* 2005

Immanuel Kant raises the problem of purposiveness and purposelessness for art in terms of rational thought, where it seems that things generally have a purpose that can be rationally deduced; art seems to be without purpose and it is in this purposelessness that Kant finds beauty to reside. This touches on the related themes of determinism, teleology and causal ontology. We are accustomed to think of things in a prescribed way – it is how we structure reality. Aristotle described four causes: matter, form, efficiency and telos. Telos is the final cause and the reason why the thing has become what it is. We expect that things have come into being for a reason, that they are the means to an end and believe we can rationally deduce what a thing is by knowing what it is for. This teleological attitude encourages in us a manipulative relationship with things. My artwork may disrupt this determined attitude through its indeterminacy and thus cause a momentary hiccup in the way things usually are.¹⁵

In the 20th century the aesthetic orientation towards art was challenged by left wing theorists, such as Theodor Adorno, who suggested that the idea of art being without purpose actually served to neutralize it as a political tool.¹⁶ We can find politically engaged artworks as far back as Goya but in recent times the shift from high modernist abstraction to a more culturally reflective art happened in the late 50s. I came in on the other end of the wave of politically engaged art of the 60s, 70s and 80s and found it to be the dominant paradigm from which I wanted to be free, and yet social and political relevance is inherently embodied in my understanding of what contemporary art is. So I am working as an artist within the socially/culturally/politically engaged world of art I have been thrown into and my work has part of its identity, at least, in being

¹⁵ Mautner, p 90

¹⁶ C Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1999.

consciously non-political/not addressing cultural issues and yet still existing as other/critique to the viewer.

It is art cast in this role of political tool or cultural mirror that shapes it primarily as a resource. This encourages us to relate to it mostly in terms of its use for us, which concretes the problematic attitude of anthropocentrism. Heidegger explains, ‘As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve. Meanwhile, man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself and postures as the lord of the earth. In this way the illusion comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself.’¹⁷ This, according to Heidegger, is the relationship to beings we have adopted in the modern world.

“The ordering of things takes on a specific form in technology, and the dominance of technological ordering threatens, according to Heidegger, to reduce human beings themselves to mere *resource*. In this way, everything (even our own being) comes to appear as merely something available for our use. *Technology*, the essence of which Heidegger calls *Gestell*, thus transforms the world and everything in it into a pure ordering of things made available for production, transformation, and consumption – there is no end in such an ordering other than the ordering itself. We are, however, inextricably involved in technology, and cannot abandon it, but it is exactly the refusal of limitation (the refusal to recognise that things are more than just resource, that is the mark of technological ordering). The

¹⁷ Krell, p. 332.

technological attitude conceals its own character as a mode of the disclosure of being, presenting itself as simply the way being is. This tends to reduce the appearance of the world as a totality of things to be ordered and calculated only in terms of their being as resource.”¹⁸

Art is one of the few things that can thwart this process by resisting the transformation into a resource. However this is not something that is intrinsically a property of art but rather it is something that artists can work towards creating in their work. It is the idea of poesis, which is making or invention, that is important here because it is through the artist’s creative act that art viewers can notice new or previously hidden aspects of being.¹⁹



Figure 7: *Invitation* 2005

My sculptures are designed to work at odds with the normal/modern/western way of relating to things and to become resistant to the scientific ordering attitude. It is their indeterminacy that allows them to work in this way because the scientific attitude presumes determinacy – that every effect has a cause that can be uncovered. Gestell does not allow for indeterminacy and so the intrusion of an indeterminate being is disruptive. The sculptures can

¹⁸ Professor Jeff Malpas, 23/6/2006, quoted from a personal email to me.

¹⁹ Poesis is: coming into being through techne (human) and physis (nature).

be physically de-constructed and the way they have been made can be found, their dimensions and materials can be discerned, the claim that they are artworks can be noted thus placing them in a cultural sphere but they do not appear to exhibit a determining cause. They are present as things, as contemporary sculptures, but they do not represent another thing or idea external to themselves, they do not express a feeling, they do not communicate any particular message and they appear to be arbitrary. My sculptures could have taken another form and perhaps still have operated equally well as artworks. They have developed from the accumulation of skills and knowledge, the development of values and attitudes, awareness of the contemporary art milieu, personal history and the particular practical and material opportunities that are available in this place (Tasmania).



Figure 8: *6.5 Days Per Week* 2002

Thus it could be said that my sculptures have been determined by the combination of these and other causes and that my decisions in the designing and making process were also pre-determined by my culture. However the process of making these works is anything but pre-determined due to the many difficulties encountered along the way and the problem solving exercises engaged. Often I seek advice from people with more expertise than me, have to learn new skills to solve a problem, or the materials will limit what I can do with them and so a design will change due to physical limitations. The result is that the final sculpture arises as an unexpected thing that is never as I

first anticipated and is often quite different from the initial design. They are indeterminate artworks arising from the complex relationship of innumerable forces set into play through choices made by me to solve unexpected problems.



Figure 9: *Whatever* 2003

A further complexity arises through the viewer's understanding, I presume, of coopered wooden objects. They are used to encountering objects like these as wine barrels or as wooden boats or other kinds of outmoded functional containers. They understand that it is difficult to make an object like this and time consuming too. The sense of confusion that then arises is one of not understanding. I quote one viewer who said, 'How the hell did it get like that!' Meaning, I understand the source of this thing, the coopered wine cask, but I don't understand what has happened to that familiar thing. How and why has it morphed into this form? Here it becomes evident why the method of making is inherent to the tension in the artwork.

Another viewer advised me that I could achieve those same forms in much easier ways and wanted to know why I was putting myself through these hoops. I presume he was fishing for any evidence of a nostalgic romanticism of the outmoded that might reveal a hidden agenda in my practice – a longing for the past and an antipathetic disengagement with the present. I responded by saying that the

method of making is to me as important as the form and that they both work equally to engage the viewer with the being of the thing. The thing would not be what it is if it was made another way, it would then be another thing. The laborious method of construction allows the viewer to place themselves into the maker's shoes and imaginatively to perform the making themselves. The outmoded style of the thing heightens the familiar/unfamiliar tension and it also brings into question the common idea that contemporary art should reflect contemporary culture by not doing so.

It seems that viewers of my sculptures often react in either of two ways: they focus in on aspects that they know and engage me in a discussion on boat-building techniques, for instance, or they begin with a question such as 'What is it?' Both of these responses suggest that the work appears as unfamiliar or unknown as a whole thing that becomes knowable in its parts. The idea then arises that people relate to the sculptures with an epistemological approach. It is knowledge or the lack of it that dominates the relationship. The sculptures are knowable to a degree; we can know that they were made as part of this research, for example, but to the uniformed viewer they present as mysterious things that tempt us with their familiar parts and shun us with their hidden aspects.

This is in fact the way Heidegger claims all things behave in his *The Origin of the Work of Art* essay.²⁰ Revealing and concealing are two of the many polarities he uses to describe the tension or strife in things, which we experience as rising out of nothingness into being and then back into nothingness. The play between the dark and light faces of the moon might be a simple way to express this far more complex idea. He goes on to say that the truth of being, of the way things are to us, is made apparent in artworks which often play on this poetic revealing and concealing of their meaning and physical

20 Krell

properties, and that things show up for us differently depending upon the world in which we live which changes with history. There is also the basic fact that as we consider one aspect of a thing other ways of viewing it recede and thus we can never apprehend a thing totally at any one time because each perspective obscures others.

Heidegger stresses that 'great' artworks reveal the truth of being to us and he explains how this occurs through both a historical and a phenomenological approach. Artworks are well placed things because they hover between the earth (unknown substance) and the world (known culture), their historical situation is exemplified due to the way we are culturally conditioned to relate to them and they are often indeterminate things that keep the question of their being alive. It is not that they are any more true than other things but rather that usual/ordinary things are covered over with familiarity which obscures both their open and their unknown aspects from us. Great artworks, in Heidegger's terms, tend to resist familiarity by maintaining an open unresolved meaning that changes through time.

I have been working with these ideas to assist the development of my sculptural practice. They have greatly assisted my understanding of what I can do with sculpture that works with its characteristics as poetically oriented art rather than put it to service in other ways that may diminish its indeterminate art being. As well as being a positive development of my practice, this research has also been a form of resistance to what I perceive as potential problems for contemporary art that may tend toward reductive ends through the assertion of predetermined outcomes, such as the accurate or true reflection of a time or place.

Sculpture: What is it? ²¹

Why hold to the tradition of sculpture? Why not let go of the restriction and free myself of this limiting term? Because I was once told that limitations allow for freedom. This was mysterious to me until I understood that by following the technique of cooperating I had in fact opened myself up to a wealth of opportunities for sculptural practice. It is also the case that by narrowing my focus to sculpture I have opened myself to a great richness and depth of potential for the practice of making art.

If on the other hand I had thrown off the restraints and worked for complete freedom from definition of my practice in order to liberate myself, I might have ended up with nothing to do. It has been my commitment to sculpture that has allowed me to discover the incredible depth to be found in that medium.

My original interest in sculpture was sparked by the seeming freedom of means it offered in this now expanded field. The way it could interact with people in space as well as being a visual and symbolic art form intrigued me and I felt at ease with the mechanical physicality it allowed. It seems that the term sculpture can now encompass almost anything but it is the making of objects that has particularly interested me. As Charlesworth notes in his essay '*A Field of Many-Coloured Objects*': 'Faced with the extraordinary proliferation of objects, attitudes and perspectives that make up the landscape of sculptural practice over the last ten to fifteen years, the idea of attempting to define a coherent field labelled 'sculpture' is a vertiginous, probably futile act of insane over-generalisation, the misrecognition of a diverse set of activities whose only common

²¹ Rosalind Krauss addresses the questioning of Modern and Minimal sculpture in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 4th edn, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1985.

quality is that they happen to happen in the three dimensions of the material, physical, made thing.’²²

Our world is littered with 3 dimensional objects, which we use, take interest in and ignore through our daily lives. We take many things for granted and move through space and clamber over things without usually stopping to consider them. When Richard Serra placed his *Tilted Arc* across the plaza in New York the office workers there suddenly became all too aware of the open space they previously passed through daily. Now that they had to walk around this long plate of cold steel becoming aware of moving through space, moving further and differently than before, they also became aware of the nature of a great steel plate and its imposing impenetrability. The sculpture in this case was a pain for some but it had caused both a symbolic and a physical intervention in their lives, which they acted upon until it was removed.



Figure 10: Wood splitting under pressure.

22 J Charlesworth ‘A Field of Many-Coloured Objects’, *Contemporary*, 2004, (64) p.18.

The sculptor when making a work becomes very aware of the physical properties of the thing they are working on. Its weight of course but also its resistance to modification and its potential for harm, toxins for example. They need to procure the material in advance and therefore they also need to know how much they will need to make the thing they have in mind. Will it allow them to use it to make what they envision?

To begin, I often envision the work in advance. I imagine a form and take it through a series of transformations to try out variations until I am satisfied with it and then I make a drawing as a record of the imaginative process. The initial idea comes about through forming a void in abstract (mental) space. This void once formed is the absence of the artwork, which the artwork can then be called forth to fill. The creation of the void is an act of will that is aligned with deciding to come up with a new piece. The void is a way of explaining how the artworks are called into being. The lack of an artwork precedes the desire to create one, but first the recognition of this lack must take place. This can be generated though only after a number of other processes have occurred. These generally unspoken processes are; the acceptance of one's being an artist, of what kind of artist one is, of a developed body of knowledge and skills, of a body of work from which one proceeds, and of the sense that there is a place for the work to be. Without these issues settled it is difficult to move forward. Once I have resolved them I can then move directly into the creative process because I already have a comforting set of boundaries in place within which I can develop my imaginative ideas. The plainest example here is the foreknowledge one has of a future exhibition with a prescribed floor or wall space allotted in the

gallery, this imagined empty space that one works to fill is the void in real terms which can also be generated as a mental construct.²³

Since developing the constructive technique of coopering where I generally bend laths (staves) of wood and join them to form round hollow containers I have felt comfortable with the above creative process. The ever-accumulating vault of knowledge and experience in this technique is allowing me greater ease with my ability to develop imaginative designs because I can develop the form within the bounds of what I know is possible and then stretch these bounds to consider what may not (yet) be possible (for me). Fortunately at the School of Art there are a number of experienced technical staff on hand to help me to realise designs that are beyond the limits of my knowledge and skills, so it is the technical aspects of sculpture that often set the limits, but also encourage me to go beyond them if I can. This technical development through extending a simple joining process is demanding and satisfying but it is also revealing to me aspects of the creative process I did not understand prior to working in this way.

Sculpture for me has its essence in the three dimensions. It really must be contrasted with other two dimensional art forms in order to be found, because when the average Australian person thinks of art they probably think of painting. What about installation art or site-specific art you may ask, are they sculpture? These art forms are generally included in the sculpture departments of art schools but they are in some ways actually working away from the traditions of sculptural practice in that they are inherently methods of avoiding the unique sculpted object. They are three-dimensional but they seem to want to de-centre the artwork and put the viewer in the centre.

²³ Art Schools, galleries and curators all in their own ways externally create these voids for artists and students but it is important for an artist to develop methods that create empty spaces for their work to fill and thus become active rather than passive agents.

For me the term sculpture indicates a three dimensional artwork that is an object, this may be a conglomeration of parts but there must still be a sense of a unified whole where the thing is apprehended as a complete thing. This would include a scattered array of objects for instance if they are intended to be seen as parts of a unified one thing – the sculpture. I am aware of the potential problems that await the fool who attempts to define anything, particularly the voices of dissent that may feel either wrongfully excluded or included. However, even so, I am writing this section of this exegesis in order to develop a deeper understanding of what I am doing, I am not trying to impose something.

The dimensional difference between art mediums is made clearer through this quote from Alex Potts in his book *The Sculptural Imagination*. ‘A persistent theme in his (Merleau-Ponty’s) discussions of perceptual awareness is that the space we actually see is not an abstract Cartesian space within which we map out the positioning of things, as if we were a disembodied eye overseeing them. Rather, he insists, the space we see is a realm in which we ourselves, as viewers, are situated, not something we look at or into. We see things from within our own horizon of viewing. Depth, he also maintains, is a dimension of the world around us which we see as directly as any other aspect of it. We do not infer it indirectly from a more primary flat patterning of our field of vision.’²⁴

The three dimensions are height, width and depth. They indicate a thing that has form, which extends in these dimensions and it is the dimension of depth that appears to separate sculpture from two-dimensional art forms. The three dimensional nature of sculpture then leads to the issue of frontality which is taken for granted in two-dimensional artworks. Relief sculpture is generally frontal, in that it

²⁴ Potts, p. 215.

is intended to be seen from the front. Many non-relief sculptures also have a preferred viewing position but many sculptures also attract the viewer to move around them and notice the complexity of the object in its different aspects. This is something that is also extended to the interior of sculptures, which draw the viewer's attention towards the work's inside and outside. I have chosen to employ this aspect in many of my works.

The fourth dimension is time, which is an element of all artworks, both in their making and viewing. It is the silent dimension that is not taken into account when a description of the work is called for, although people do often casually ask how long it took to make this or that artwork and artists are often concerned at how long people will spend in front of their work. 'Temporality is absolutely central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of visual apperception. He envisages perceptual awareness as located in an ever shifting present, but at the same time made possible because what we presently perceive develops out of what we have perceived in the immediate past, and also anticipates what we are about to perceive in the immediate future.'²⁵



Figure 11: *Things for looking at other things* 2004

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 218.

In the past sculptures were generally modelled first in clay and then in plaster or wax. After decisions had been made about scale and composition the work would then be realised in its final form in a more permanent material, which was usually, stone, bronze or wood. Occasionally sculptors also employed plaster, ceramics and cement but much less frequently than the three mentioned above. Thus it was that a sculptor chose their preferred way of working, or the best medium for a particular work from those three options and then from further variations within that medium. I expect sculptors then would have not spent a great deal of time thinking about their medium, they would possibly not think about it at all other than trying to get good quality marble or whatever. They would probably have spent a great deal more time thinking about their composition and the metaphorical allusions within the work. They would also have thought about the limits of the medium and their ability to work it, which would have set the boundaries of possibility for their work.

Today I think about other things because I and other contemporary artists are generally not going to be sculptors who work with only one medium. However there are some benefits to the old way of developing a great familiarity with a medium, the most significant one is depth of practice. This is not such an issue for a painter who might early on in their career decide to be either an oil, or a water, based painter and then seldom change. Sculptors since Duchamp and Picasso have had many options opened to them and are free to move about from one way of working to another from one exhibition to the next if they choose. I have experienced this wandering and still find myself attracted to trying out different ways of working but I have also recently discovered the benefits of developing a certain amount of depth by following through not only in one medium but also in a particular way of working with it.

In his book/thesis *The Phenomenology of Painting* Nigel Wentworth tells us, 'So far from thinking that "originality" or "creativity", the

grand ideals of the Romantic myth, result from unbounded freedom, we must recognise that they are only possible within a structure of behaviour that is habitual. Man's being grows out through his developing habitual modes of behaviour. The desire, therefore, to escape from habit to a realm of pure freedom is the denial of the very structures of being man requires for his own fulfilment.'²⁶

The body of work made in this PhD research period can be contained in two groups. One is the coopered hollow vessels and the other is all other work, which consists of works made to curatorial briefs and the smaller tool-like works. These individual sculptures are all addressed in detail in the Making the Sculptures section of the exegesis. The reasons for this split in practice are twofold in that they are pragmatic and exploratory. The coopered work forms the central body of research and through it a development can be traced. The other work arose through responding to exhibition opportunities over the three year period or it was sensible to take on smaller projects at times to maintain momentum while the bigger and slower process oriented works developed. However it is true to say that most of the artworks conform in differing degrees to the idea of ambiguous and opened ended sculpture.



Figure 12: *Shave* 2005

26 N Wentworth, *The Phenomenology of Painting*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p,52.

The familiar/unfamiliar tension in the sculptures is a device to avoid initial feelings of alienation towards the objects and then to hopefully increase the sense of alienation the more one looks. This is aimed at extending the length of time the viewer engages with the work on the premise that we investigate unfamiliar things more deeply than familiar things but that we are more likely to approach a thing that appears familiar.

What are my coopered sculptures about?

What is important about these artworks is that they have been made using a particular construction technique. The series of coopered sculptures have developed largely out of technical investigations with each completed work leading to further possibilities. This sets these works apart from those contemporary artworks that have developed out of social, cultural and political interests where the artwork operates as a focal point for social interaction and it has its being in this. If my works were, for example, primarily about resurrecting outmoded craft practices as a subject for dialogue then I could find easier and less puzzling methods to achieve that end. It is the open-ended exploration of technique, form and materials that has been influential in the manifestation here rather than a primary concern with the viewer and the work's ability to communicate particular issues or content.

These sculptures all present as ambiguous 3-dimensional constructed forms. They are usually designed upon variations of container-like vessels that often reference the wooden barrel or cask. In plan view this form has as its central structure the circle, which is divided into equal pie sections in the same way an orange is if you cut it in half. The rind of the orange equates to the wooden part of the cask forming a segmented round shell emanating from a central axis.

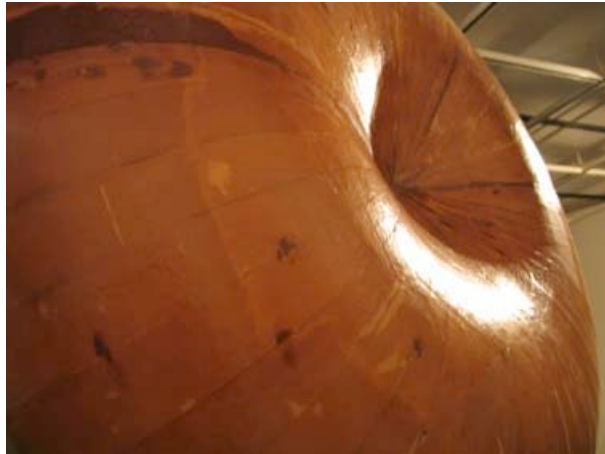


Figure 13: *Invitation* 2005 (detail)

It is the roundness of the cask that lends it one of its greatest attributes; that of being able to contain matter and yet to be rolled on its edge easily. Thus the cask has its round edge for transport and its flat ends for stable storage. The amount that a cask holds is controlled through either the size of the circle or the length of the staves making for a fatter or longer cask.

I have learnt some of the basic techniques required to make the cask form and have then extended these through variations upon that form.²⁷ The main way I have done this has been to vary the bent curve of the wooden stave. Through experimenting with various curves I have learnt about the properties of wood and some of the physical limits there are to bending wood. Because the coopering technique relies upon the repetition of a segment of a circle a small variation can then amount to a large difference through this repetition. It has been this repeated incremental shifting of form through small design changes that has resulted in the formal outcomes of many of my sculptures.

²⁷ These techniques have been learned through a book on coopering (K Kilby, *The Cooper and his Trade*, 1971), the Tasmanian School of Art wood technician, a mid-PhD research trip to Bordeaux in France to observe three cooperages in action and personal experience.



Figure 14: Nadalie Cooperage – Margaux, France.

It is the development of new forms through variations upon the same basic coopering construction technique that allows me to map the development of these works throughout the PhD research period. I should also note here that the steel ring used to traditionally hold the staves together has been replaced by various glues in my sculptures because of the way the ring breaks the line and form of the work by cutting across it. It is also important to note that I have made a small amount of casks in the traditional method and form to learn technique but this occurred shortly before formally beginning this research.

Not all of the sculptures have been coopered structures; in fact some work has been a distinct departure from that way of making. In particular some of the earlier work was closer to traditional

representational carving than to coopering. I chose to occasionally depart from the coopered construction of ambiguous container forms in order to investigate both my response and the viewer's to more representational forms in the context of having restricted my practice, over the last decade, to ambiguous structures. This was a way for me to alter what I had been doing and involve myself in something formally different in the hope that this would inform the return to my usual practice.



Figure 15: Clamping and Gluing

The coopered sculptures themselves are generally round hollow forms that have a smooth surface and a uniform materiality. They are usually made from wood, which is left to show itself through numerous layers of sanded varnish. This creates a smooth surface that has a light catching sheen. There are allusions to wooden boats, wine casks and furniture to be found in many of my sculptures. I accept these allusions but do not attempt to make them with the artwork, rather it is more a side effect of working with these materials in this way that causes those allusions. I don't like it or dislike it - every material and working method carries certain allusions with it.

The roundness of the forms is a choice that reveals my taste for the organic over the rectilinear (I refer here to the right angle and the straight edge which is what organic materials are often turned into to make them useful to us). The sculptures often have openings and invite the viewer's touch. I am happy that the works have a sensuous appeal and suggest organic form, which I have often played off against the linear construction of coopered vessels. It has been pointed out to me that many of my sculptures are obviously erotic. However other people equally report to have not noticed them as being erotic. Perhaps we learn, as artists/art students, to see objects in a psychoanalytic light that tends towards erotic readings of form. In an attempt to be objective, knowing it would never succeed, I have tried to see the works as having the same kind of round features and openings that appear on many other familiar things that are not usually read as being erotic. The suggestion is that we project eroticism onto them, however I do not intend the works as expressions of erotic themes and equally they are not intended to not be expressions of the erotic. They are intended to be ambivalent.

The wood I use is sold in flat rectangular sections of varying lengths. It is very useful and convenient to be able to buy timber like this. It can be easily quantified down to the millimetre so I can design my work in terms of the dimensions I know the timber comes in. The machines in the workshop are all designed to work with flat surfaces. Round wood straight from the tree has to be processed awkwardly to make it flat so the machines can accept it and the artist can control it. I then create bending moulds so I can steam the wood and bend it around them to make it follow the curve necessary to create the sculptural form. It is interesting to think of wood on its journey from the tree to my sculpture where it is made into a round thing again. However, this is not what my work is intended to be about, I am not using the sculpture as a platform for a romantic idealism of nature nor of outmoded craft practices.

The coopered sculptures generally do not represent things other than themselves. They are unique forms made using a repetitive process where the form is built up over time by making each part and adding it to the existing structure in terms of the original design. The final structure has allusions to organic things like oranges, pumpkins and sea creatures. It does not have a skin, the outer surface is the structure (this refers to the timber finished celery top pine sculptures, the later MDF works have a fibreglass and resin skin).



Figure 16: Bending and Gluing

Later I became interested in new techniques that allowed me to spray acrylic auto paint to give the work a plastic coloured surface. The sculpture's being began to change. It became more complex. What the viewer saw on the outside was not what was on the inside, the works retained their mystery. They continued to withhold elements of their being from the viewer.

Alex Potts mentions this incrementally revealing nature of sculpture and the way that some works are never totally revealed to the viewer. 'What she (Krauss) saw as being given to the viewer in the experience of the sculptural works she admired was not some immanent sense of centred structure or form that transcended all one's partial views but "the infinite sum of an indefinite series of

perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which it is given exhaustively”.²⁸

They literally withhold aspects of themselves from the viewer in the way that some areas are visually inaccessible. They cannot be seen all at once. As you move around the sculpture it looks different but still all part of the one thing. Some of them even have an interior that you see into if you look inside, but once you do so you lose the view of the outside. They cannot be seen all at once. They do not reveal their reason for being. They are present but only as art not as art as ... something else.

People ask me “What is it”? I usually answer, “It is an artwork designed to get people to wonder what it is”. Surprisingly people are often satisfied with this reply. I am surprised because I don’t expect people to be so accepting, I expect them to be more demanding of art than they appear to be. But perhaps they are more demanding and I am just not witnessing their critical side? That the work tends not to refer to other things in the sense of being about them or imitating them causes the viewer to address it in a more immediate/present sense than might otherwise be the case. When an artwork is experienced as primarily referential we can tend to look through it to the referred rather than become engaged in the thing before us (my artwork titled *Things for Looking at Other Things* addresses this idea).

The physically involved nature of viewing sculpture has often been noted. As Potts suggests: ‘In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty highlights several issues that pertain to a sculptural mode of viewing. For one thing, he is adamant that we cannot understand the complex sense of what we see in the environment around us by isolating some purely optical level of sensory

²⁸ Potts, p. 209.

awareness. Seeing integrates within itself the kinaesthetic and tactile dimensions of experience. When we look at things, we are situated in their space and move about among them, and our seeing them needs to convey a sense of them as things to be touched and acted upon or physically responded to.’²⁹

People often run their hands along the sculpture’s surface seeming to take pleasure in the smooth feel of the work. Some people focus on the way they are made and try to understand what has happened to get wood to be like this. They enjoy deconstructing the fabrication process in terms of their own experience and knowledge of making things. They try to understand the sculpture in these terms. They come to know what it is in these terms, how it was made and what it was made from, but they do not know what it is in other terms, they only know it partially. This is one of the benefits of a thing being art, it encourages us to apprehend its being in its many aspects, because the thing is on display as a thing to be contemplated when it is art. The thing is exposed and naked before the viewer and yet they do not grasp its being, they still ask what it is. They understand its parts, but it as one thing, as a whole thing, is not understood. My work has been designed to maintain this opening, this unknowing and yet even if it does so it will not have shared its mysterious nature with the other things in the world such as the glass of wine in the hand of the gallery visitor. The glass of wine does not rise into the mind of the gallery visitor in this way. It is used and discarded, and the artworks in the gallery space are also used and discarded. Once they have been seen and a decision has been reached about them, in whatever way, they have been consumed, visually swallowed by the viewer and perhaps even talked about, then it is time to move on to the next piece and do the same. The mystery does not stay alive in the gallery visitor for very long, it has a short life.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 214.



Figure 17: Before joining the two halves

The artwork as an object of interest rather than as a reference to some interesting topic has a long history that culminated in modernist formal abstraction. Bernstein in '*The Fate of Art*' for instance, observes: '... the displacing of (subjective) disinterestedness – that in virtue of which a work is regarded for its own sake and not for any ends external to it – into the work itself, thereby grounding its autonomy, its being, so to speak, an end in itself. This, of course, is a standard thesis of German Idealist aesthetics: the inwardness and depth of the work of art, its having 'soul' in Kant's sense, is what draws the spectator in and grounds disinterestedness.'³⁰

Bernstein's comment is a Modernist one that celebrates the illusion of the autonomous abstract work of art, which we in this Post-Modern age can no longer do without feigned ignorance. But even though any artwork has myriad associations with other things and thus is never truly autonomous it may be that the momentary illusion of autonomy assists the viewer to move beyond their ordinary state of relating to things and to perceive the artwork in a richer and deeper way than they do other things. Perhaps the lack of an obvious purpose of the artwork helps in this regard? A sculpture that has visual links with the world of pragmatic industry and is yet itself not

30 J Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1992, p. 118.

functional and only a thing for looking at, for contemplation, does indeed seem to set itself apart from the world to some degree.³¹



Figure 18: *Things you don't know that you don't know about*, 2005

I do not wish for my art to meld into the world of everyday experience but to momentarily shift us from that normal way of being and it is in causing that shift that my artwork has its artistic function. 'Looking at a sculpture could be thought of as a distinctive kind of experience that makes us more acutely aware of the temporality lodged in our awareness of things than an everyday looking at objects. We linger on our looking, noticing the different aspects the work presents and the unstable, shifting sense we have of its immediate appearance rather than merely taking note of it and registering its appropriateness as an object of use or pleasure. We would go crazy if we opened up our everyday apprehension of things in this way.'³²

What are my tool sculptures about?

The tool-like group of works have developed alongside the coopered sculptures. In this research the first time I produced a tool-oriented sculpture was for the *Seven Warehouses* exhibition in 2002. All of

³¹ Here not functional refers to normal functional items like tools and not the artistic functions we associate with artworks.

³² Potts, p. 219.

the works in that show were derived from tool/machine sources because I chose to respond to the labour history of that place. I have elsewhere outlined the individual sources for those works.



Figure 19: *Conformer 2*, 2005

There is a connection with Heidegger here as well in that a metaphor used to explain different ways of relating to a thing, in his terms, is the broken hammer.³³ The broken tool encourages us to wonder about it rather than just use it without considering it. To use a tool is representative of the normal way we relate to things, to consider them is unusual and yet this is the scientific attitude that Heidegger criticises for not investigating the way things usually are. This close consideration of the thing happens when the thing is removed or shifted from its normal relations with us, either by being broken, scientifically investigated or put on display as a thing for viewing.³⁴

There is a twofold reference here in my tool sculptures. They may look, especially the later ones, like tools but they do not work like tools and can be considered in the same way as a broken tool. The second is that we have certain expectations about artworks, that they are expressive, aesthetic, crafted, meaningful, a form of language,

³³ Krell, p. 19.

³⁴ Heidegger calls the normal way of relating to things without consideration *ready at hand*, he calls the unusual way of relating to things with careful consideration *present at hand*.

reflective of culture, that we will/can get something from them that is good for us, that they are innovative and progressive, that they are intentionally symbolically loaded by the artist and that they are on display and accessible to the viewer both physically and, potentially, conceptually. One needs only to think of a painting here, spot lit, the painted surface fully available to the viewer positioned at a convenient height and with little visual distraction on the surrounding wall. I accept that most successful artworks are not immediately conceptually available to the viewer and that a process of interpretation, in which the meaning is gradually or partially revealed, is usual.

It is my intention that in some ways these tool sculptures are broken, that is, they do not work in the way we expect artworks to do. This causes us to stop momentarily and consider them in a different way. The irony here is that, if we extend Heidegger's argument from tools to art, we are in an unusual position. This is because artworks are things to be considered and thus are situated outside the way we normally relate to things, they are present at hand rather than ready at hand, and yet, because we know how to look at art in galleries, we adopt a ready at hand relationship with them in our contemplation. What I am claiming is that the normal relationship with things Heidegger points out is with art reversed because it is normal to contemplate art, that is the way we use it.

This confusion of ontological categories is perhaps the axis on which my sculptures turn. They set up a situation where we are unsure about how we should relate to these things. It usually manifests itself in a small way but sometimes people react by physically engaging with the art in ways they never would if it were a painting or a bronze statue. They push it around, lift it up, try it out, rub it, ask about structural matters and at the same time maintain a wary distance (mentally?) from the thing. This has in fact lead to some of my works

being damaged, in some cases severely, in ways that other artist's nearby works have not been.

Our normal relationship with artworks is to contemplate them from a short distance, which is not the way we relate to a fork for example. We expect artworks to operate in certain ways, we use them to achieve certain results. There are different categories of artwork of course and we recognise which type it is relatively easily because we are culturally conditioned to do so. Thus we know that a Jackson Pollock painting will deliver different results to us than a monumental statue, we know what they are for and we can use them to get results such as aesthetic satisfaction, aesthetic rejection, a sense of self as aesthetic judge, an appreciation of fine craftsmanship, an understanding of local history, a visual image of a famous person, and so on. We use artworks in the way we use other things as a resource to obtain results/outcomes for ourselves. However the way we use artworks is through contemplation rather than through unthinking manipulation.

The tool-works appear to offer themselves as things to be manually handled (however I don't necessarily want people to handle them), this immediately sets up a confusing situation for the gallery visitor. A further confusion arises when we instead contemplate them and realise that they cannot be used for a practical purpose as tools. Then they must be art rather than tools. But when we try to use them as art they do not offer themselves up to be used in the way art usually is, they resist; a symbolic reading, a meaningful relationship with cultural, historical and social issues (the works in *Seven Warehouses* were intended to relate to social issues but the following works are not). They immediately trigger a creative thought process in the viewer who suggests, to themselves or their friends, potential uses for the tool, usually humorous. In this way the sculptures are working as open-ended entities that both draw the viewer in to a deeper than normal contemplation of a tool-like thing and initiate imaginative

projection. They also operate to extend the viewer's expectations about art.

Contemporary Art: What is it?³⁵

It may well be one of the defining factors of contemporary art that it is undefinable. That due to the liberating impulses of Modernism we have reached a place where almost anything is able to be art and thus the boundaries we usually apply as a means to define something are here continually postponed. Thus the question of what it is becomes one of great significance because it is its seeming property of being and almost not being that now appears most interesting.

'Contemporary Art is taken to mean work by artists whose active output, barring a handful of exceptions, goes back no more than twenty years and is still evolving.'³⁶ This rare, because they are hard to find, definition appears in the preface of *Art Now*, a recent survey book of western contemporary art. It seems to fit comfortably with many people's understanding of the term but it does not fully encompass the ways that term is actually used or the complexity it carries. For instance, I own two copies of auction catalogues of contemporary art that contain works dated as early as 1946 and many works from the 50s and 60s.³⁷ I know this is stretching it a bit but it is still a concrete example of the elasticity of the term that proves it, as used, is not contained within the above definition. We have only to think of Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol, who died in the 1980s, yet many would think of as iconic contemporary artists. There are also all the Sunday painters of landscapes and still lifes who would not

³⁵ This section of the paper was largely written in advance of Peter Timms book, *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art*, 2004, on a similar theme. I acknowledge that there similarities in our synchronous investigation of contemporary art.

³⁶ B Reimschneider & U Grosenick, (eds) *Art Now*, Taschen, Köln, 2001, p. 6.

³⁷ *Sotheby's Contemporary Art, Part I*, May 1995 and *Contemporary Art Part I*, November 1995

consider themselves contemporary artists and yet they do fit the above temporal definition.

The term contemporary literally means ‘living or occurring at the same time’³⁸ and thus it has a temporal character. Can it be that contemporary art is predominantly concerned with time and by extension history? ³⁹ It is beyond doubt that we presently have at our disposal more information about the historical development of almost everything than ever before and our awareness of being in history is perhaps more poignant as well. This is partly due to the accumulation of information by institutions and the development of techniques and tools that enable us to probe more deeply than ever before into the concealed layers of being, and retrieve information we can add to our store of knowledge.

It is our ever-growing store of knowledge that lends us this awareness of being in time. In fact time has become our burden to a degree because we are so aware of its passage and our ultimate finitude within it. We are stressed by time and the limited amount we have to achieve our aims within. We are also able to freely quote from other times and in a way act as if we are free of time in the sense of pretending such as we do at the cinema. We are often observing documentation of events from the recent past as if they were happening now when we watch the evening news on TV. In all these senses we are very much living in a culture heavily influenced by an acute awareness of time.

38 F Ludowyk & B Moore, *The Australian Modern Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p.167.

39 Rosalind. Krauss refers to art and time in her book *Passages in Modern Sculpture*.



Figure 20: *Press Cloth* 2002 (detail)

There is ample evidence of recent art that addresses issues from the past in a critical re-examination. In Australia there is a large body of work called Post-Colonial that raises historical issues about Australia's colonial heritage and the problems associated with it. Often this art seeks to uncover suppressed information in an effort to reveal a truth. There is also a great deal of work addressing injustices toward the indigenous aboriginal people of Australia. This work is very obviously historical and often employs evidence, for example, old black and white photographs. There are also numerous critical Feminist re-readings of the past in the form of visual artworks. The Modern phenomenon of keeping volumes of records about people and places provides much material for these historically engaged ways of working.⁴⁰

When we think of the visual art of the distant past we are reminded that a vast majority of the artwork relates either to historical moments and events or religious/mythical events perceived as historical events. In fact all art is historical, or at least historically located by us in retrospect. The problem is; how to think of those artworks that are both contemporary and also refer to the past. Because it does not seem that the intention of these works is so much the desire to reveal

⁴⁰ See M Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, for an in depth exploration of conceptual and ephemeral contemporary art practices that address arts own history

the now as it is to reveal the past. It is apparent though that these works reveal contemporary attitudes that allow and even encourage artists to provide a culturally relevant and accessible critical re-reading of the past. Thus these artworks are historically located in the present and seen as contemporary because of the critical culturally informed stance adopted by the artists who make them, a stance that could only have appeared now.

However it does appear that primarily we wish to capture the now in our contemporary visual artworks.⁴¹ We are not often concerned with representing great and significant scenes from the past as a means for positive cultural identification. We wish to find what it is about what is happening now that can tell us more about who we are. We are self-interested in our art. But we are not self-interested in the way the great Modernist expressionists were in that they were attempting to capture a personal moment of being, a unique individuality. We seem to be interested in what we are culturally now. Perhaps more than an awareness of time being peculiar to now is an awareness of culture - of being in or of a culture and of the difference among cultures. It is also worth noting that some contemporary artists choose to re-do or reinterpret famous artworks from the past but in a way that makes them relevant to now. For instance: Jake and Dinos Chapman, Gordon Bennett and Charles Robb directly reference works or styles of the past to bring their accumulated cultural associations into new contexts.

This then presents art as a reflection of current culture - both global and local culture. Art as a barometer of what is happening culturally. Just the very awareness of culture, perhaps this is something contemporary? But what is this desire to understand the nature of our contemporary culture? Why do we feel it is important to pursue this

41 'Contemporary art is about today – about everything that is happening and shaping our lives.' Paula Latos-Valier General Manager 14th Biennale of Sydney 2004, p. 1.

ever-changing idea of an underlying and unifying communal identity? Presumably so we can locate ourselves within it.

Lily Hibberd, editor of *Un Magazine*, reveals that many contemporary artists do direct their art towards the cultural. ‘We ought to be wary of the marriage of art with commodification, as it has brought about the loss of autonomy and the ability to question society in so many creative fields. So what role does art have to play in consciousness-raising and critique? ... There’s discontent with many of the social or political concerns at hand and artists have something to say on these matters, you just have to listen carefully.’⁴²

It is interesting to note that a 1954 copy of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 4th Edition, defines culture primarily in agrarian terms, secondarily as the growth of bacteria, and thirdly as a form of improvement by training or intellectual development. A 1998 copy of *The Australian Modern Oxford English Dictionary* defines culture primarily in terms of the appreciation of various creative art forms, secondarily as the customs and civilisation of a particular people or group, thirdly as improvement or development through training, fourth in agrarian terms and fifth as bacterial growth. Perhaps a shift in priorities has occurred through that 44 year period that suggests we are now more likely to value the social to the scientific?⁴³

It has been a dominant practice in progressive and serious visual art since the early 1960’s to address popular culture as a topic.⁴⁴ We only need to look at the incredible influence of Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Sigmar Polke to realise this. It is now often

⁴² L Hibberd, ‘Editorial’, *Un Magazine*, Winter (4), 2005, p.3.

⁴³ H Fowler & F Fowler, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1954, p. 292, F Ludowyk & B Moore, *The Australian Modern Oxford Dictionary*, 1996, p. 190.

⁴⁴ Here I am referring to a much greater idea of culture than just popular imagery from advertising and the media, it is culture as a topic that interests me.

considered usual for visual artists to address issues of popular culture with their work and we can see that some of the current biggest names in Australian visual art have had much success with this, for example Patricia Piccinnini and Ricky Swallow. Can it be said that contemporary art has its identity in this, that it addresses popular culture using recent technology as a medium? A survey of recent art magazines dispels that notion and indicates a shift from Pop to the Everyday, however it really is impossible to identify a major current style because where does one draw the boundaries within which that style dominates?

One effect is that artists may feel that they should address culture in their art and that they should adopt a contemporary medium so their art can look contemporary (witness the rise of the New Media category).⁴⁵ They may feel the pressure to do this so they can make work that is considered relevant and accessible to the imagined art audience. What is interesting to me about this is that all art that is made now is actually contemporary, if we are to take a rational position. Of course this would include the still-produced impressionist landscapes and bronze Rodin-like figures for the domestic art market. Now we know that these works are not usually considered contemporary and so what is it that does define contemporary art if it is not a style? How do we recognize contemporary art when we see it? Is it the location that gives us the way in through setting up a contemporary art context?⁴⁶

These issues are relevant to my practice because I am consciously working in an outmoded technique to develop sculptures that look out of time and out of place in the contemporary world. The way they are made, in a laborious and time-consuming repetitive manner, is also at odds with our convenient contemporary lifestyle values. I

45 See P Timms 2004 chapter one for an in depth discussion on this topic.

46 M O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, Lapis Press, Santa Monica, 1986.

want the artworks to raise questions about their being through their oscillating motion between categories.

Contemporary art is different to the art that came before it, and because it so often resembles everyday items from popular culture, or it is these but only displaced, it must have a display context that enables us to read it as visual art. However it is not only the white cube that allows us to recognise contemporary art: I think it is also a style, one that relies upon its affinity with the styles of our everyday world. Interest is then created through the twist the artist gives to what we easily recognise as familiar but which has been morphed into something odd.

All things that are being made now are contemporary, even the most atavistic items we can imagine. But there is a contemporary style that can be found and synthesized into an art object. There is a certain high gloss, crisp and colourful finish that can be seen in many high profile contemporary artists work (Anish Kapoor, Gary Hume, & Jay Younger). The look of manufactured plastic or metal products and colour digital prints also have it and I have flirted with this finish in the work shown below. This is not to say that all artists are working in this way: I am only stating general observations from accumulated intensive viewing of contemporary artworks. In fact there are some artists whose work is almost the antithesis of gloss, it uses worn, second-hand items and cardboard as materials, for example Sarah Lucas and Thomas Hirschhorn.



Figure 21: *Things for looking at other things* 2004.

The irony of this for me is that the very idea of a person trying to be contemporary, or trying to make their work look contemporary reveals that contemporary art is indeed a style and one that can be adopted. To have an art critic or gallery owner confidently state that an artwork is more contemporary than another seems to be a statement of style and not something about its inherent value as art.⁴⁷ The question that arises is why is it so good to be recognised as being very contemporary?

What is at issue here is the assumption that art, which adopts a certain style, is seen to be more effective or better than art which does not. This judgement is based upon the idea that contemporary art should be addressing issues of culture and, even better, popular culture - that it should encompass the now. If we believe that this is the primary role of contemporary art then it seems reasonable to look towards the art that most closely resembles familiar contemporary cultural imagery as fulfilling this role. It seems that the word contemporary is being used to both refer to things made recently and then also to define a specific class of these things which are perceived as more contemporary than others. Additionally, how does

⁴⁷ Here the issue arises about what the value of art is, this is addressed later on in this essay. The gallery owner quote is anecdotal.

one qualify contemporary visual artworks, what is the basis for judgement? Presumably their ability to reflect the now.

What has not yet been raised is the possibility that a representation of culture may in fact not be the primary role for visual art. It probably is, at least currently, but what other possibilities are there? Can a critically engaged contemporary artist continue to create work and exhibit alongside their peers and not address issues of culture in their work, as the subject of the work? What if an artist chooses to address purely formal issues in their work, for example Sol Lewitt? Or they choose to adopt an idiosyncratic personal expressive style and subject matter, Louise Bourgeois? Or they choose to paint, draw and print large format portraits, Chuck Close? Or they choose to adopt outmoded techniques and materials to make highly ambiguous sculptural forms, Richard Deacon? What of these artists, are they not still contemporary even though their style is not recognisably now and their subjects are not issues of popular culture? Admittedly all of these artists are already members of the old school and more recent visual artists who adopt any of these non-cultural contents or old forms are often doing it with an ironic gesture that then draws the work into a cultural sphere through making a historical/cultural reference that addresses cultural aspects of art.⁴⁸ This is particularly true of Feminist re-readings of the often-noted oppressively masculine canon of Minimalist art.⁴⁹ For example, the artist Sarah Lucas demonstrates this attitude in her work through making ironic references to sexuality through minimal means and found objects that often make art-historical references.

48 When I say that the content is not cultural, I mean that the artists are not intending to address cultural issues with the work, I am not claiming that the works exist outside of culture, which is impossible.

49 A Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts Magazine*, 64(5) 1990, p. 44-63 & M Collings, *Sarah Lucas*, Tate Publishing, London, 2002, p.52.

I am not claiming that any artwork can exist outside of culture but hope to point out that much recent artwork plainly references cultural issues as its subject matter and that this is seen as a positive value. It is possible that our current artistic interest in culture is a result of changes in society where we are now very much more aware of culture, as a thing, than ever before. In the past it may have been the case that even though visual artworks were always cultural items the artists making them were not aware of this aspect of their being. It is also the case that images of art are generally now more available to most members of society and that these members now have a greater opportunity to voice their opinions about these artworks. Thus the cultural exchange value of artworks is more dynamic in that they are involved in the shaping of culture through public dialogue.

Evidence for the central role of cultural reflection in contemporary art can be found in recent books such as *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. ‘But if the critique of the cultural confinement of art (and artists) via its institutions was once the ‘great issue’, a dominant drive of site oriented practices today is the pursuit of a more intense engagement with the outside world and everyday life – a critique of culture that is inclusive of non-art spaces, non-art institutions, and non-art issues (blurring the division between art and non-art, in fact). Concerned to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social, either in order to redress (in an activist sense) urgent social problems such as the ecological crisis, homelessness, AIDS, homophobia, racism, and sexism, or more generally in order to relativise art as one among many forms of cultural work, current manifestations of site specificity tend to treat aesthetic and art-historical concerns as secondary issues.’⁵⁰

Ironically, in terms of my project, it is the existence of the possibility for this dynamic dialogue to take place between members of a society

⁵⁰ Kocur and Leung, p. 37.

in relation to an artwork that allows for the ontologically revealing/concealing aspect of art to become available as a function of art. This happens because when we see the work from another's point of view we are, potentially, opened up to a previously concealed aspect of the thing and our own view momentarily fades for us. Since visual art has become more publicly available through museums and galleries, and there is a greater amount of public dialogue taking place about contemporary art than ever before, witness the amount of art related magazines available, visual art now has an increased ability to act as a social force. It seems that using art to reflect or represent contemporary culture is both widespread and valued but what is the purpose of doing this? What do we gain from this activity?

The Contemporary Art Environment

Our understanding of what an artwork is or could be has shifted considerably over the last 90 years since Duchamp introduced the readymade. 'While large international contemporary art exhibitions are helping to expand the roles and responsibilities of the curator, many artists find themselves having to develop in aesthetic and political climates of increasing suspicion and constraint. Throughout the United States the political right is ridiculing artists, and even the idea of the artist; within the art community, there is widespread contempt for any tendency to romanticize the individuality, personality, hand, and heroism of the artist...It (contemporary art) is intended to draw attention to ideas, processes, and situations – not to itself as an object (if that is what it is) or to its makers...as the curator becomes a more and more visible player in the world of contemporary art, more artists are concealing their egos to prove to the art community, to the general public, and to themselves that they are worthy of respect.'⁵¹

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 57.

A major impetus in recent times has been to shift art away from its status as object. There are two reasons for this; one, the socialist drive away from commodification; and the other is a philosophical development of the field of linguistics through Ferdinand de Saussure's emphasis on inter-relationships between signs. Our modern and post-modern understanding of art has shifted from an interest in aesthetics, to reading art as sign, towards art as language/as a means of communication and recently art as a social interaction with Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. I have become increasingly aware through the research of how my practice is at odds with this dominant paradigm. 'The artist as an overspecialised aesthetic object maker has been anachronistic for a long time already. What they provide now rather than produce, are aesthetic, often "critical-artistic" services.'⁵² It is my perception that the current dominating emphasis is that artists should work toward an expression of the nature of contemporary culture and it is this that I am happily resisting. It is the underlying notion that art should be relevant and accessible to the viewing public that conflicts with my interest in things that may not necessarily find a familiar berth in the public mind.

This does not necessarily imply a knee jerk return to Modernist autonomy on my part because there are many ways to approach the making of art. And it is the making and display of art as opposed to the viewing of art that is at issue here. With the present dominant paradigm it is the viewer that is highly favoured and this is why the artwork is always 'read' rather than made, when we read about it. That is, the writer on art does not usually attempt to find the artist as maker in the work but rather to find the writer as viewer and give us that perspective. This can influence artists who might actually become viewers of their own work rather than makers of it.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 44.

I wish for my work to assert its being on the viewer, not to be a passive servant. I do not want my work to succumb to the overwhelming suffocation of things by the demands of human interest – the public. Thus I see my work as an act of resistance to the dominating attitude toward being that Heidegger has pointed out, which is to transform the world into a resource for our, human, use. The artwork will of course be appropriated by the viewer no matter what I do as maker and placer, but I can design the work so that it does not lay prostrate and available for every searching probe by the viewer but retains a part of itself either hidden from view or conceptually un-revealed and resistant to the ravenous gallery goer. And to make this explicit the artwork has to create the desire to penetrate its secret/hidden bit, so that its act of resistance becomes apparent and the human viewer experiences a denial from the non-human thing. At first it will be me that is performing these acts of denial because I am designing and making the thing but once it is in the gallery the work assumes a life of its own and acts upon the viewer according to its inherent physical nature. It becomes a relationship between person and inanimate thing. The art I am making is not entirely unknown, it has an unknown element or bit that is the temptation it sets forth to the viewer.



Figure 22: *Snug* exhibition installation view, 2004.

Critical art practitioners since Marcel Duchamp introduced the ready-made have been aware that the concept of art itself is under question. Before then artists did not question what art is because it was obvious to them that art was either painting, printmaking or sculpture, their main concerns were about quality and taste. Duchamp famously raised the question of art by submitting a urinal in an exhibition and thus gave birth to the 'anxious' art object. The boundaries of what art can be have since all but evaporated in the heat of audacious innovations in art practices that include; canned artist's shit and a device to pump honey around the gallery.



Figure 23: *Artist's Shit*, Piero Manzoni. 1961

In light of these expanded boundaries of art it seems now quite possible that almost anything could be claimed as art by an artist. This has created a problem, which is the one of what to do. How do I as an artist decide what to do next? If all possibilities are open then upon what grounds can I decide where to proceed with my next artwork? The contemporary art-world has not helped me to answer this question, because what it offers is only what others are doing. I could choose to work in a recognised and accepted contemporary style but this would not satisfy my need to know why I am making art. Just to have one's work recognised as looking contemporary is

not enough.⁵³ Researching Martin Heidegger has helped me to find a reason to make art and a direction in which to move. I chose the style I am working in due to it offering a sense of personal satisfaction and the opportunity for technical development and innovation. Tasmania is a great place to learn about working with wood.

Through the development of a philosophical understanding of my practice I have been able to find a purpose behind the work with which I feel satisfied. This purpose is to work towards attuning people to a different sensitivity to the things they encounter, to make artworks that act to resist the usual attitudes of people toward things and to allow the sense of Being Heidegger outlines to appear through the indeterminacy of my artworks. The artworks find aspects of difference to rather than affirmation of normal Western contemporary culture through the way they are made and the way they function.⁵⁴

53 I admit my work does have stylistic affinities with some major contemporary artists, most notably Richard Deacon and Martin Puryear.

54 It is not usual to find bent wooden ambiguous objects in our midst in the way it is usual to see images from advertising or consumer culture.

Conclusions on Contemporary Art

What can be concluded from amassing this array of material ⁵⁵ is that we live in a complex time and there are some things that can be said to help form coherence in the field of contemporary visual art. The most significant one is that contemporary art is usually about culture and this is how it gains value and significance but also meaning in the eyes of the art-going public. The other thing is that it is usually attempting to reveal something about the artist's current culture, the now.

Contemporary art practice is generated by research that the artist undertakes in order to both create new work and find new ways of doing this. Artists still sometimes respond to commissions but generally their practice is fuelled by their own interests and explorations. This leads to a situation where artists themselves potentially set the agenda for their art and thus a liberal position develops where the public get the art that artists want. But it does seem that this is not actually the whole case and that there are still controlling mechanisms at work influencing what is exhibited as contemporary art. These mechanisms are the power players in the art world: gallery owners, art collectors, curators, art funding bodies, academics, institutions, theorists and critics.

Even though the boundaries of what can be (accepted as) visual art have expanded considerably over the last century it is still the case that certain standards are enforced and this is because artists do not run galleries or museums where art is displayed. This restriction however need not be such a bad thing because in a totally liberal situation it would be difficult for artists to proceed without some sort of defining boundaries for their practice either to fall within or rebel against and these non-artist bodies can encourage artists to maintain

⁵⁵ I refer to the reading I have done on this subject, which is listed in the bibliography.

certain standards and to make art that has some sort of relevance and is accessible to the public. It is feasible to imagine that some artists left to their own devices might develop highly idiosyncratic and unreadable artworks that could become socially or artistically irrelevant, after all we are social beings operating within a historically located culture.

It seems, from extensive close reading of statements about and by contemporary artists, that primarily artists perceive aspects of the world or culture more clearly or deeply than the average person.⁵⁶ They do this by developing abilities and techniques that allow them to but also through believing that it is their role to do this (some writers and filmmakers would also see this as their role I imagine). The assumption is that other people are not investigating the world or culture as deeply and that artists can perform a useful function for their society in this way. They then display the results of their investigation in a visually interesting way. Sometimes however it is the display of the work itself that is the investigation and thus the people who experience the art also help to create it.

Contemporary visual artists appear to sample elements of their culture and, using a variety of mediums and techniques, they make and display artworks in an effort to present these elements either to the same social group from which the original material was sampled or to a different social group. Some of this effort may be directed towards educating these social groups about their or others culture. If this is so then the art has a positive emancipatory function in that it is being employed as a means to relieve people from ignorance. However, on a simpler level, it could also just be seen as an example of the artist expressing their personal view of the world in a public

⁵⁶ I closely examined/deconstructed numerous quotes from artists and writers from which I gathered data to support my observations. I have listed these quotes but not included them due to the large amount of material.

sphere. It can also be used in a negative or critical way to point out perceived problems or imbalances. Another function of contemporary art is to use it to draw attention to forgotten, overlooked or unsavoury things and further to initiate dialogue about these things in the community. It appears to me that contemporary art is rarely used as a means to reveal being in the terms Heidegger has outlined.

Contemporary art is largely concerned with issues of time and culture. Contemporary artists are taking on the role of cultural investigators who exhibit their findings as visual art. The forms of art are ever widening and changing as the locus of art moves from the object to a social interaction instigated by the artist. Ironically however, due to our acute awareness of time and the fact that culture is historically situated, artists are also frequently referencing the art of the past.

Contemporary art is inherently undefinable.

Contemporary Artists: Relevant artists and their practice

Marcel Duchamp	Chillida
Richard Deacon	Ian Haig
Anish Kapoor	Carolman
Mel Chin	Andreas Slominski
Donald Fortescue	David Jenz
Gerhard Merz	Doug Cocker
Martin Puryear	Glenn Dunn
Tony Cragg	

Marcel Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp is a familiar figure to most contemporary artists. He is a precursor to many of the major practices we associate with contemporary art such as installation art, conceptual art and the use of found objects in art. His most significant influence for this research project has been to raise the question of 'What is art?' By making this a subject he successfully turned the eye of artists upon their own practice and helped to shift the balance of power away from aestheticians in favour of artists. However it has transpired that in the latter half of the 20th and early 21st century theoreticians have since become powerful figures in the art-world by taking the question of what art is to ever deeper and more complex levels of inquiry that, by the sheer volume of text, have become impractical for individual artists to encompass.

Thus I have chosen to focus on limited areas of art-theory and to throw myself more determinedly into designing and making sculpture through the development of technique along with a focused development of understanding the specific theoretical context of my practice rather than attempting to know in depth all that is happening in the world of contemporary art. It is my attitude toward art and the world that is important here because that is what drives my values and power relations with people and things and thus determines what actions I will take towards the other.

'An artist must be unusually intelligent in order to grasp simultaneously many structured relations. In fact, intelligence can be considered as the capacity to grasp complex relations; in this sense Leonardo's intelligence, for instance, is almost beyond belief. Duchamp's intelligence contributed many things, of course, but for me its greatest accomplishment was to take him beyond the merely

‘aesthetic’ concerns that face every ‘modern’ artist –whose role is neither religious nor communal, but instead secular and individual.’⁵⁷

Duchamp, in an interview with Pierre Cabanne, says that the transition from his motion paintings to *The Large Glass* was largely technical and that he wanted to find ways to escape both his own and his peers achievements which he sought through technical means. This is ironic to me considering the large amount of literature on the symbolic aspects of *The Large Glass* and its following works. This is illustrated in the following interview passage.

D “Yes, and on dimensions. These were important elements. What I put inside was what, will you tell me? I was mixing story, anecdote (in the good sense of the word), with visual representation, while giving less importance to visuality, to the visual element, than one generally gives in painting. Already I didn’t want to be preoccupied with visual language...”

C “Retinal.”

D “Consequently, retinal. Everything was becoming conceptual, that is, it depended on things other than the retina.”

C “Nevertheless, one has the impression that technical problems came before the idea.”

D “Often yes. Fundamentally, there are very few ideas. Mostly, it’s little technical problems with the elements that I use, like glass, etc. They force me to elaborate.”

C “It’s odd that you, who are often taken for a purely cerebral painter, have always been preoccupied with technical problems.”

D “Yes. You know, a painter is always a sort of craftsman.”⁵⁸

Of further relevance to me is Duchamp’s interest in the poetic ambiguity of his works, which he says even he couldn’t explain. He

⁵⁷ P Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1971, p.10 –11.

⁵⁸ Cabanne, p. 38-39.

describes the title '*The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*' as making no sense, having no meaning, as anti-sense and non-sense. He goes on to explain that the only significance of the glass was that it could preserve the colour and resist oxidation. He declines an interpretation of the work saying, "I don't have any because I made it without an idea." Then he claims it is simply a sum of experiments, to which Cabanne responds with a question about various interpretations of the work. Duchamp reflects them back to their authors and claims they are neither true nor false which hints at Nietzsche's Perspectivism where things gain meaning depending on where you view them from.⁵⁹

Richard Deacon

Richard Deacon is a British sculptor who rose to prominence in the 1980s. He is often associated with Tony Cragg, Annish Kapoor, Richard Wentworth and Anthony Gormley as one of the New British Sculptors who followed after the success of earlier British sculptors of the 1970s such as Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy. These New Sculptors emerged as a group interested in the sculptural object after a period of dematerialisation in favour of conceptual artistic actions. For me Deacon and Cragg are the artists who have most grasped the idea of 3 dimensional sculptural form and material qualities as the field in which they explore rather than being driven more by content.

⁵⁹ Mautner, p. 418.



Figure 24: *Keeping the Faith*, 1992, Richard Deacon

It is the ambiguous nature of Richard Deacon's sculpted forms that first attracted my attention. This closely followed by surprise and admiration at his skill in getting his everyday materials to perform unusual feats to arrive at his constructed forms. Linoleum, sheet metal and wood are among the many prosaic materials he has worked with. In particular it is his bent wooden structures that have inspired me the most to learn how to work with wood to achieve interesting sculptural forms.



Figure 25: *Breed*, 1989, Richard Deacon

Deacon's early work, before 1995, presents the gallery visitor with a form that is very much in the same space as them and even reaching out to them in a way. *Breed* of 1989, which I have seen at the Centre

Georges Pompidou in Paris, is very disconcerting in this regard. It is the curving line in space, the relationship between the two similar objects, and the different aspect from each side – one is clad in stainless steel and the other with MDF – that invites the viewer to circle around the work trying to understand it. The fact that it is mostly air/space also aggravates the viewer's sense of stability and solidity.



Figure 26: *Passage de la mer rouge*, 2003. Richard Deacon.

He has recently (2000 onwards) experimented with sculptural installations that can take up a gallery space with numerous variations on the same physical theme. One that I saw at l'atelier Brancusi in Paris (above) was based on breaking waves and made out of steam bent and twisted oak. It was amazing to wonder about how he had achieved it but the actual sculptural form did not intrigue me to ask what it was as an object. It was because it was almost no longer an object but a flowing writhing wooden form describing lines in space that may have caused this. I saw other, earlier, work of Deacon's in London at the Tate Modern that still retained a sense of being a thing, an object, rather than a spatial experience. I wonder whether he was, at least in this recent work, experimenting with the relationship between object and installation?



Figure 27: *Passage de la mer rouge*, 2003. Richard Deacon

One formal element of Deacon's work I have noted is that it makes a point of lacking a front and a back. It sets up an ambiguous relationship with the viewer who is led to move around the work trying to find how to see it 'properly'. This supports Heidegger's notion of the 'truth of being' as revealing and concealing. In the monograph on Deacon (Thompson) it is noted that he read and was influenced by Heidegger in the 1970s. He shows an interest in the relationship between inside and outside which is an extension of earlier sculptural investigations by British artists such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

Richard Deacon is a contemporary sculptor whom I admire very much for his persistent and innovative exploration of technique and form. Not only are his artworks appealing to art-world insiders and the public alike, they also raise questions about their being to both of these groups. People stand before them and wonder what they are, what they might mean, what they might be for, how they were made etc. Of further interest is Deacon's intelligent exploration of sculptural issues such as frontality, skin, organic versus rectilinear form, scale, surface, the qualities of different materials and so on. His breadth of vision evades definition.

Anish Kapoor

Anish Kapoor is a familiar figure in the international art world. He is famous for creating numerous unique sculptures that reference the void and emptiness, and they often encourage an experience of the sublime. The sculpture shown above is one I like because he has created an interesting tension between the organic and the geometric. It is similar, conceptually, to the hollow stone works owned by the AGNSWs⁶⁰ in having a neat hole cut into an organic form. However



Figure 28: *White Dark* 1995, Anish Kapoor

this one differs in the purity of the surface and the smooth roundness of the overall form. Kapoor uses various fundamental physical characteristics of his sculptures to direct the gallery visitor towards the empty interior of the work or, in the reflective (mirror) works, towards the empty space surrounding the viewer.

I have experienced a number of Kapoor's artworks first hand while in Europe and in Sydney. I was not alerted to the sculptures as things that have been made in any particular way, nor was I attuned to the presence of the artist. He says of himself, 'Is it my role as an artist to

⁶⁰ The Art Gallery of New South Wales.

say something, to express, to be expressive? I think it's my role as an artist to bring to expression, it's not my role to be expressive. I've got nothing particular to say, I don't have any message to give anyone. But it is my role to bring to expression, let's say, to define means that allow phenomenological and other perceptions which one might use, one might work with, and then move toward a poetic existence.'⁶¹

His artworks successfully draw the viewer in to a relationship with their interior and cause the viewer to become aware of their body in space. They carry a sense of emptiness and the void. I think that my artwork has been influenced by Kapoor but I am not seeking to create or represent emptiness in the same way as him. The difference is that in my works the method of construction is apparent and the question of function is more likely to arise due to the visual links with other more functional things such as boats and barrels.

Mel Chin

Mel Chin is a New York based sculptor who is perhaps best known for his outdoor installation *Revival Field*. Chin works quite differently to me most of the time in that his work is carefully loaded with symbolic meanings that often need to be decoded using a key that he provides in the form of a written statement accompanying the work. Thomas McEvilley writes, 'With a scholarly meticulousness he loads or freights his work with multiple cultural references that, once recognized, convey a sense of the world's cultures interacting as an organic whole. The work itself, in other words, is a multicultural object combining elements from different ages and traditions. But the recognition of these references is sometimes problematic; in some cases, in fact, no viewer at all can be expected to recognize them.'⁶²

61 H Bhabha & P Tazzi, *Anish Kapoor*, University of California, Berkley, p.11.

62 T McEvilley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Allworth Press, New York, 1999, p. 247.



Figure 29: *Spirit*, 1994. Mel Chin.

This behaviour is actually quite normal among contemporary artists, and visitors to contemporary art galleries throughout the world would not be surprised to find an explanatory statement by the artist on the wall somewhere in the gallery. McEvelley explains that this is one of the main differences between Modernism and Post-Modernism in terms of visual art. That previously we expected the artwork to convey to us all of its meaning and significance purely through its form, this is a property of an autonomous artwork, it exists as a self-sufficient entity. Whereas now we no longer believe in that and understand that all artworks are culturally relevant in multiple ways and that the artist expects us to not only read the art-form but its contexts as well.

What first attracted me to look at Mel Chin's practice was an image of a large wooden cask suspended in a gallery seemingly balanced upon a rope strung across the room. It was surprising to see an artist using the coopered barrel form, especially such a large one, which looked to be made rather than found. Mel Chin actually spends considerable time and effort to learn the techniques he applies in his work. Though for him it is not craftsmanship that is important, according to McEvelley, he is primarily interested in using techniques, materials and forms symbolically to refer to issues such as multiculturalism and ecological pollution. Chin is not telling us in

a straightforward manner what his works are about, that is, he is not assuming a didactic position. He is maintaining a sense of poetic ambiguity in his work, in fact to the degree that it cannot be understood without assistance due to the complexity of symbolic layering.

This is where we have a meeting and a departing between our practices. The poetic ambiguity is the meeting and the highly structured intentional symbolic content is the departing.

Donald Fortescue

Donald Fortescue is perhaps, internationally, the person who is most associated with coopering as a technique for sculpture and furniture. When searching for Coopered Sculpture on *Google* it is his name that appears in multiple on the first page. He even runs short training courses in the field, which are advertised on the net alongside his gallery websites. Fortescue lives and works in America where he heads the Wood/Furniture program at the California College of Arts and Crafts in the Bay Area. He originates from Australia and has been involved with numerous Australian teaching and art making institutions such as the Jam Factory in South Australia.

His work is beautifully finished in the craft tradition and I have seen him making work here in Hobart when he visited 2 or 3 years ago, I did not know at that time that he worked with coopered objects as he was then making a cabinet. He, like me, is attracted to the idea of reaching beyond the straight, right angle, plank of wood that dominates the world of timber construction.

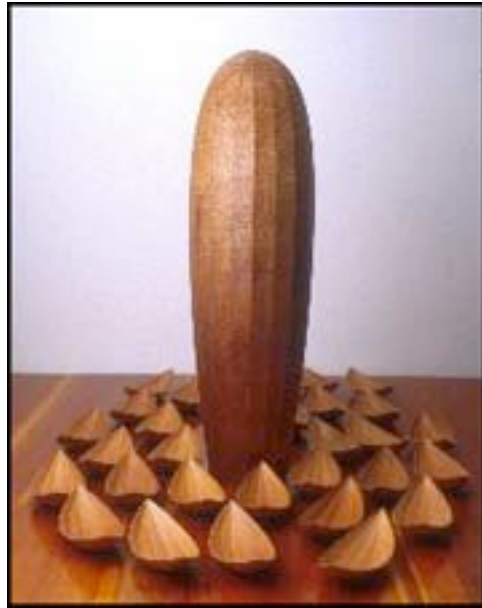


Figure 30: *Pod*, 2000. Donald Fortescue

‘The objects are impeccably made, and despite their minimalist forms, they betray the artist’s obvious love of technical innovation. On a purely technical level, in fact, most furniture makers would be amazed by this show, because there is not a straight line anywhere in sight. Fortescue, an avid writer, notes in one of his recent essays, ‘...it is incredibly easy to create lengths of timber and joints which are perfectly square and straight with standard woodworking machinery. To defy this unwritten ‘law of rectilinearity’ is difficult and expensive, and its success depends on the eye and hand skills of the maker.’⁶³

It seems that Donald Fortescue is broaching many of the same areas of concern in my own work such as; the difference between the straight and curved line/form, pursuing the technical development of an outmoded practice (in terms of hand-making coopered forms), displaying an interest in creating ambiguity through confusing functional looking things with non-functional sculptural things,

63 G Adamson. ‘Designing Futures’ *American Craft*, June/July, 2001, p. 1

developing a body of work that often relates to the empty container and exploring the nexus between craft and art.

Fortescue appears to have a stronger relationship than me to craft/furniture making practices and traditions. This is because he actually is a furniture maker and designer who has reached into the world of sculpture after developing his skills, whereas I am a sculptor/artist who has explored the craft/construction technique of coopering in order to create round sculptural forms in wood. Thus the two approaches to the same technique have created similarities and differences. I suspect Fortescue is working in context to the dominant practices in the furniture-making world where I am working in context to the dominant practices in the contemporary art world.

The limitations inherent in the coopering technique of construction are fundamentally what create the visual links between his work and mine (these limitations are addressed elsewhere in this paper).

Gerhard Merz

Gerhard Merz is a German contemporary artist who began as a painter and printmaker but eventually evolved into a sculptor and installation artist. Merz has strived towards 'blank art', which not only suggests an absence of content but also an absence of formal concerns such as surface quality.

'But the appearance of coldness and blankness that Merz's sculptural structures exude fends off the visitor's tendency to suspect inner sancta. As one circumambulates them, the point increasingly seems to be that there is nothing inside. Insofar as they are mysterious

enclosed spaces, their mystery is simply the neutral factuality of their emptiness or meaninglessness.’⁶⁴

The blunt facticity of Merz’s work is a point of intersection with my work. ‘Like the meaningless grids, the relentlessly neutral sculptural structures have an insouciance or casualness about their seemingly aggressive assertion of negation or emptiness. There are traditions in which emptiness is regarded with horror vacui, and others in which it is revered with emotions that rise in the throat. Here a different attitude obtains. Emptiness is simply a meaningless fact in the way that, say, numbers, by themselves, are meaningless facts.’⁶⁵ I acknowledge the numerous potential references and contexts that may arise from my work but at the same time I hope that the fact of the thing present before the viewer is prominent.

I think that the emptiness of Merz’s work may be further than I wish to go with mine because I do not want to alienate people with my work but bring them closer to things. ‘Merz has worked on a position that derives historically from that articulated almost a century ago by Rodchenko. It is neither the work’s sense of pregnant emptiness nor its sense of baldly stated material presence that is the message. The message is how hard it is to face neutrality: the cold fact of its emptiness or meaninglessness, stated without emotional projection – either lament or celebration. The sense of factuality is not, as in American Minimalism, the factuality of matter in all its threatening solidity. Nor is there sentimental feeling about ‘the Void’ or some such idea of unthreatening immateriality. An arbitrary emptiness of meaning is simply experienced as a fact which often goes unacknowledged in culture.’⁶⁶

⁶⁴ McEvilley, p. 337.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 338.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 338.

Merz seems to have an understanding of Heidegger's concept of the technological attitude that prevails in our modern culture where things appear for us as primarily a resource. 'Merz seeks, as he puts it, a 'cold' art, meaning dedicatedly anti-sentimental. It's a position with a strategy and an agenda, like 'cool jazz' of an earlier era or the cosmic cold of Bach cantatas and partitas. In the simplest sense it means that one has not projected emotional fantasies onto the work; one has not been able to use it for some purpose of desire or aversion.'⁶⁷

The idea of art as a sign, the prevailing way of thinking about visual art in the 1980s and 90s, suggests that it functions to point away from itself to whatever it is signifying. This sets the artwork up as primarily a resource for indicating. 'Merz's emptinesses don't point toward a metaphysical beyond, as Klein's did. They don't point, in fact. They're just there in the meaninglessness of being themselves. Emptinesses that are simply the plain facts of life.'⁶⁸ It is this property of 'being there' that I am interested in in my own work and yet I know that it can never escape the projections of the viewer and so I have attempted to place the work somewhere between being empty and full.

Martin Puryear

Martin Puryear is an American artist who is renowned for learning and using outmoded, traditional and obscure craft practices to construct his ambiguous sculptures. He has particularly shown an interest in the craft techniques of certain American Indian tribes and northern European indigenous tribes such as the Laplanders.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 340.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, Pg 341

Puryear often creates a union between organic and man-made forms and this possibly reveals the source of some of his pre-industrial skills. He also tends toward a reductive aesthetic by using only a limited amount of materials, often only one, to create his sculptures. They encourage me to think of a simple relationship between human and natural material, the creative process that comes from exploring the properties and possibilities of certain materials and ways to use knowledge and tools in harmony with the material.



Figure 31: *Old Mole*, 1985. Martin Puryear

Tony Cragg

This British artist needs no introduction to most people familiar with contemporary art. He is one of the major international figures in the world of contemporary sculpture where his inventiveness with materials and sheer quantity and quality of work are impressive. I am less interested in his figurative works than the ambiguous sculptural forms he has created usually by layering or some other repetitive process. It is his gradual move towards a more abstract form that elicits the question of ‘What is it?’ that I aspire to with my work.



Figure 32: *Time Suds*, 1993. Tony Cragg

He is interested in questioning the being of sculpture as Ulrich Wilmes notes, ‘Anthony Cragg’s sculptural ideas presuppose a synthetic understanding of sculpture which looks upon the three-dimensional form as an objectification of process and material. Cragg is concerned with visually representing the conditions which make sculpture what it is generally understood to be.’⁶⁹ It is this questioning of the activity, form, materials, processes and culture of sculpture, within a contemporary art context, that I also find interesting and a great source for inspiration.

Chillida

Chillida is a Spanish sculptor who has a close relationship with Heidegger. I find little in common with Chillida other than that we share an interest in the philosophy of Heidegger. I do appreciate his artworks for their intriguing and pleasing form and manufacture however they are very much in the region of Modernist abstraction that leans too close for me to ideas of autonomy. Although, after saying that, I also appreciate that many of his artworks successfully integrate with and activate the site.

⁶⁹ H Friedel, *Anthony Cragg*, Cantz Verlag, Munich, 1998, p 143.

Ian Haig

Ian Haig is a Melbourne based contemporary artist who questions the role and function of much contemporary art and attempts to find ways to slip outside of accepted art practice by exhibiting in unusual locations such as Sex Expo's. His artworks are then presented as either both or neither artworks and sex toys. Haig encourages the indeterminacy of his works by offering colour brochures along with his displays that further heighten any confusion that might exist. His sex toys are tools that are absurd in that they probably can't be used as sex toys but are suggestive enough to pique one's imagination.

Carolman

Carolman is a French artist who has designed numerous tools that do not work. His tools are absurd and humorous. He seems to be an example of a later day popular surrealism. I only mention Carolman because a French friend suggested him after seeing some of my tool sculptures. It seems that his emphasis is on the amusing nature of the absurd. His artworks often consist of altered found objects that obviously cannot work and usually have a joke quality. For instance: his teapot with the spout pointing towards the handle.

Andreas Slominski

Andreas Slominski is a German artist who is known for his absurd and humorous artworks. The ones that are relevant to this research are his traps, which are tool-like artworks that appear functional. They do in fact function to do what he claims for them but their functions are absurd and that is what transfers them into the category of art.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Riemschneider, p. 152-3.

He has also made a device for scaring people in the park at night. It's a tool that resembles a rabbit trap loaded with a twig that, if the device is set off, snaps the twig. This is a reference to dramatic movies where the sound of a twig snapping alarms the hero that their assailant is nearby. There is always a danger with this kind of art that it could become only amusing, a one liner, however I have never seen one of his works in the flesh and so cannot say how they function as art. He has received a good deal of institutional support for his eclectic practice that suggests there is more to his work than merely a good joke.

It is the fact that he is using the idea of the prosaic world of functional tools and devices as a resource to make his absurd artworks that has created a link to this research. Slominski is a good example of a relatively successful European contemporary artist working in this vein. The fact that he is successful in the current art-world suggests that the idea of the link between the prosaic and pragmatic world of function and the imaginative and sometimes absurd world of visual art continues to prove a fertile ground for artistic development.

David Jensz

David Jensz is a Canberra based artist who has regularly exhibited in Australia and overseas since 1979. Jensz was early on a performance artist but is better known for his sculptures constructed out of prosaic materials like rubber and corrugated iron.⁷¹

He usually employs only one or two materials for a sculpture, connecting them together in small pieces to create formal structures that fan outwards or spiral around depending upon the pattern created by the shape and size of each unit. The artworks usually have a

⁷¹ P Haynes, *David Jensz: Sculpture*, Canberra Museum and Gallery, Canberra, 2003

central empty space around which the structure has been created. There is a strong sense of pattern and formal shape in Jensz's work that pleases the eye and draws it to the empty centre.



Figure 33: *Synchronous Time*, 2003. David Jensz

People who write about David Jensz often raise the idea of mystery, of the time based performative aspect of repetitive making and the beauty of form. His works are ambiguous in meaning and yet they carry the potential for different readings due largely to the historical implications of the materials he uses. He is intrigued by the creative possibilities of unusual sculptural materials such as plastic plumbing pipes or rubber inner tubes. The sense of beauty in his works arises through the simple patterns created through structural order. The materials, in our society usually ignored, are transformed into things that people want to look at and appreciate. It seems that Jensz is a champion of the overlooked.

Formally there is a meeting point between our practices in that we both often use repetitive construction techniques to build round/circular sculptures. The funnel shape in the work by Jensz pictured above is typical of this way of working. Thus any sculptor who uses a similar method of construction will produce forms that have superficial similarities, Anish Kapoor for example. It then

becomes their task to use the materials, the way they are joined, dimensions, scale and method of display to create something different from their colleagues.

David Jensz exhibits a primary interest in Martin Heidegger by quoting him on the first page of the catalogue of his recent solo exhibition in Canberra (2003).

Doug Cocker

Doug Cocker is a Scottish artist who is little known outside Britain despite having a relatively long and active career. He studied art in the late 1960s and began teaching in 1972. He has been exhibiting widely, particularly in Scotland, since 1969 and has completed numerous public art commissions.



Figure 34: *Calvin's Tools*, 1995, Doug Cocker

The aspect of Cocker's work that interests me is his tool sculptures produced in 1994-5 for an exhibition at The Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh. The image above shows a selection of a much larger group of works.

I stumbled across Cocker while looking in the library for a book on Tony Cragg and was surprised to see images of his imaginative tool inspired sculptures. They are more lyrical than my tool works and seem to exhibit a strong curved linear aspect that suggests they are the outcome of drawings. They are also designed to be displayed on the wall as art objects and not to be handled. Some of them are close in form to real tools but most are much nearer to abstract sculptural forms.

I appreciate the skilful making, attention to detail, empathy with materials and imaginative form of Cockers tool works. However my tool works are, possibly, less whimsical or lyrical than his with more emphasis on the potential for them to be read as actual tools rather than as artworks. Other images of this series of Cocker's show the tool sculptures displayed as a large wall arrangement with the works equally spaced and directly hung across a gallery wall. They are ambiguous but not puzzling due to their obvious designation as artworks.

Glenn Dunn

Glenn Dunn is an Australian artist working out of Canberra. He teaches at the ANU School of Art in the Sculpture Department. He has made several sculptures that use the circle as a reference in the same manner as coopering. I have not been able to gather a great deal of information about Dunn's practice other than what I can see from looking at images.



Figure 35: *Translator*, 1994. Glenn Dunn

The work shown above is similar in form to one of my sculptures (*Things that you don't know you don't know about*) but it appears to have been constructed from plywood judging from the markings on the wooden surface. The pointed and closed ends terminate the work and grant it the sense of a self-contained and resolved sculpture. There is no invitation to consider the interior space and the rounded surface creates an interesting juxtaposition with the flat floor while my work hangs in space. It appears to reference one central circular axis where my similar looking work references three axes. Dunn has also made a coopered ball shape that is closer to the traditional technique of bending lathes of wood around a circular axis. He appears to have glued the lathes together and finished the work with a clear coating similar to the way I have treated some of my sculptures. This work also has closed ends and presents itself as an exterior surface pushing outwards to the viewer rather than inviting them to look inside.

PART THREE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

List of Works

<i>6.5 Days per week</i>	<i>Invitation</i>
<i>Press Cloth</i>	<i>Agitator</i>
<i>It was mainly women in the jam room</i>	<i>Strainer</i>
<i>Model for Gate</i>	<i>Pat</i>
<i>Something Else</i>	<i>Shave</i>
<i>Juncture</i>	<i>Final Cause</i>
<i>Cleaner</i>	<i>Lure</i>
<i>Whatever</i>	<i>Meant to Be</i>
<i>Grand Tourer</i>	<i>Conformer 1 & 2</i>
<i>Things for looking at other things</i>	<i>Not understanding</i>
<i>Things you don't know you don't know about</i>	

All works were made during the PhD research period

Making the Sculptures

A description of the making process for these works:

The technical developments throughout the research period are an integral part of the research. The ideas about contemporary art and the philosophy of art have intertwined with testing new ways, for me, to construct sculptures. Thus it is the things themselves, in the complexity of their being, that are the central creative force in this body of work. The cooperating process of bending, shaping and joining numerous wooden laths/staves to form a hollow round container has

been the major construction technique I have developed through this research. However many other making techniques have been explored and developed, particularly working on the lathe and working with fibreglass and resin. Thus the ideas behind the sculptures are carried along through various forms and materials that spring from extending technique through experiment.

The first three works were made in response to a curatorial brief supplied by Rebecca Greenwood who curated the group exhibition *Seven Warehouses* at the Long Gallery in 2002. The exhibition addressed historical aspects of the harbour warehouses at the Salamanca Art Centre in Hobart. I chose to refer to the period when the warehouses were used to manufacture and store fruit jam. I particularly focused on the period around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

It was to this small-scale industrial factory with its elements of labour and machinery that I turned for inspiration. I conducted research in the form of reading historical accounts of the conditions in those factories and sourcing photographic depictions of that place.⁷² The photographs were mostly of the outside of the factories and they usually depicted the owner and his family standing in front of the building. However I did find a good source of images of a similar factory on a different wharf at Hobart from the same period and so could gain an idea from that of the conditions and the types of equipment employed there. Later I was pleased to find images in an old local newspaper of the inside of the Salamanca Factory showing both men and women who worked there. This was particularly exciting because there was also a lack of images of women at work in the photographic record.

72 D Young, D, *Salamanca Arts Centre Interpretation Strategy*, Hobart, 2000& Tasmanian Archive Library Hobart

A large number of women were employed in the jam factory and so I decided to incorporate their presence into the works. This became the driving impetus for the work, to bring the presence of these long dead people back to the place where they had spent so much of their lives into what is now an art gallery. To honour their memory I suppose. It became important to me to do this when I stood in the gallery and realised I was standing on the very floorboards they had stood upon and to try to understand how difficult life must have been for many of these people. I had worked in a factory when I was younger and had some idea of the monotonous nature of the work.



Figure 36: *6.5 Days Per Week*, 2002

The fact that The Long Gallery is protected under the Heritage Act meant that I had to consider artworks that would have little or no impact on the building. I chose to employ the relationship between the workers and the owners in the factory to create a tension in the artworks. The sculptures also engaged with a dialogue between the domestic, as feminine, and the industrial, as masculine.

6.5 Days Per Week is directly influenced by a device for allowing things to tumble downwards from one floor to the next, in a controlled manner. It is basically a spiral made out of wooden planks. I found an original one still installed in a nearby building and used it as the model for my version. I chose to cover the underside of the spiral with a rich gold thread jacquard fabric with a Victorian period

pattern and to wear down the top surface and leave it rough. I also had a stamp made with the word 'produce', which I stamped in red ink at regular intervals along this top section to refer to the fruit packing crates. I wanted to achieve a sense of the hands on working environment on one side and the well to do owners life on the other. The title refers to a quote from an historical account of the factory that said they worked six and a half days per week in summer. The sculpture was installed to hang from the ceiling at a height that allowed viewers to engage with the work at eye level.



Figure 37: *Press Cloth*, 2002

Press Cloth, was inspired by the machine they used to squeeze the juice from fruit. It was called a cloth press and did not look like my artwork. I also decided to incorporate the form of a bed that was comfortable on one side and uncomfortable on the other. To achieve this I used bolts with wing nuts to connect the two sides. The cloth mattresses were different, on one side I used a double thickness of padding and the jacquard fabric while the other side was a single thickness of padding and calico fabric. The winged nuts protruded from the calico while their domed heads sat low and smooth on the jacquard. On the calico I arranged and had printed a series of black

and white images sourced from old photographs of people who worked in the local jam factories. Prized among these images for me were the ones that showed the people who had worked at this factory. The images were punctuated at their corners by the tightened wing nuts, which caused a quilt effect. The frame that held the two mattresses apart was made from the same kind of wood the gallery was constructed from, Tasmanian Oak, and I joined the two halves using large door hinges on both sides, thus giving the impression that the box could be opened but leading to the frustration that it was an absurd arrangement, which could only be opened with a screwdriver. All metal fittings were painted black to harmonize with the black images.



Figure 38: *It was mainly women in the jam room*, 2002

‘It was mainly women in the jam room’ is a quote from an historical account of the factory; it was one of the old workers being interviewed who said it. In this work I wanted to use the image of the large cauldrons that they boiled the fruit in to make the jam and I mixed this image with the idea of a hooped skirt and the fabric of a lace curtain. The base of this work was made from sheet galvanised iron cut and riveted to resemble a large low-rimmed jam tin. I wanted

to give the impression of something moving through a process from the top to the bottom in the same way the fruit was processed through the factory. This work was lit so that the lace cast a delicate shadow on the floor around the work. It was tall and flimsy with a great deal of air in the centre. The skeletal frame was constructed from steel painted dark brown and raw Tasmanian Oak slats bent to create the volume of the cauldron.

The next artwork was a response to a public artwork proposal for the town of Sorell. The project was called *The Sorell Gateways Project* and its fundamental premise was that the work should be sited near the highway as one enters the Sorell district from Hobart. The artwork should reference significant and relevant aspects of the Sorell district and be accessible, able to be understood by locals and visitors.

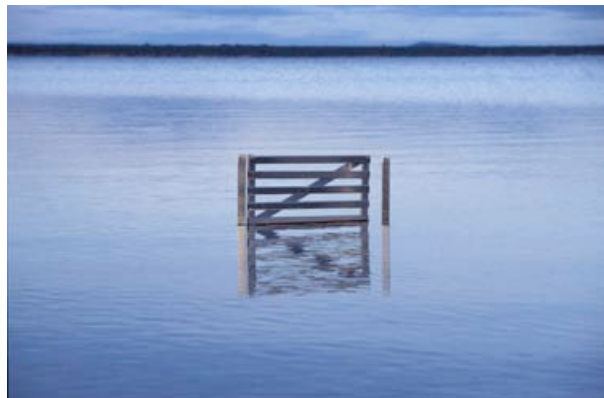


Figure 39: *Gate*, 2002

Gate was conceived after meeting with a contingent of people from Sorell who informed me and the two other finalist artists of their ideas for the artwork and their conception of what was significant about Sorell. Initially I had the idea to make an artwork that was situated alongside the causeway and which would interact with passing traffic via numerous suspended discs that would catch the light. This idea was abandoned due to safety concerns. Then I hit upon the idea for a large stainless steel stockyard style gate to be

erected on the lake traversed by the causeway. The stockyards were the prime reason for Sorell becoming the focal point of that district and the open gate would be able to be read as a welcome sign by most people. The often still lake would provide a beautiful reflective surface for the shiny steel gate standing on piles in the water. The image above is a 1:10 scale model of the gate, which was to be 6 metres long and 3 metres high. My design was short listed for this commission that unfortunately was abandoned by the council.

I was then included in a curated group exhibition called *Bodybag*. The premise was that a group of artists operating out of the Letitia Street Studios, which briefly included me, were acting as a body and that the island of Tasmania was also a body. We were to respond to the idea of the body.



Figure 40: *Something Else*, 2003

Something Else is a large-scale (20 times) replica/version of the human fifth lumbar vertebra. This is an area of my body I am very familiar with as I have a history of back pain at L5. I made the sculpture by laminating pieces of pine and gradually building up an oversized roughed out form, which I then carved back into to create a more organic smooth surface. I chose to leave aspects of the vertebra in the angular timber form while others were carefully rounded out to resemble the bone structure. Working from a number of drawings

and photographs of the vertebra I originally finished the work in a gloss varnish but later abandoned this due to its repulsive effect. I then chose to go for a more furniture like finish and used a walnut stain under a gloss varnish and then completed it with a satin varnish to dull it down. The gloss underneath was used to create a slight visual flicker as the eye moves over the work. It is displayed on the floor on its side and raised about 1cm with hidden dowel feet. The effect is to present a thing which is both familiar and unfamiliar, in that it is read as a bone but this reading is confused by the scale and the timber finish. The title refers to the way the artwork refers to something other than itself and plays with the idea that we see this thing but reference it with something else that is not there. I chose not to make any comments about the body with this work but to use the body as a reference for the work.

The *Ten Days on the Island Festival* is Tasmania's summer festival and in 2003 it was controversial. The festival was being partly funded by the government department responsible for managing Tasmania's timber industry, Forestry. This caused a moral dilemma for many of the artists participating in the festival and a large contingent dropped out and decided to form their own alternative festival called *Future Perfect*. I made a piece for this show in collaboration with historian and wooden boat expert John Young who wrote an essay about the plight of minor species timber in terms of the activities of Forestry. Minor species, such as Celery Top Pine, which I regularly use, are threatened by the forestry methods currently employed because these minor species are not viable to large operations, which prefer to focus on certain major species. The issue is that the minor species take twice as long to mature and so the harvesting process gradually extinguishes them as a species through killing the ever-younger trees. Careful logging techniques like those of the distant past selected certain trees but did not take everything. The idea is not to halt logging but that it should be managed differently.



Figure 41: *Juncture*, 2003

Juncture is a 1:1 simplified scale model of a wall mounted fire extinguisher made from Celery Top Pine. It is mounted in a red metal authentic fire extinguisher mounting frame. The body of the extinguisher is coopered and hollow. The handle is spring operated and when pressed exerts a palpable pressure on the hand. Issuing from the top-side of the body is a coopered funnel shaped like a flower, with a stamen inside. It reads like a flower growing from a fire extinguisher and also that the flower is the thing that puts out the fire. I wanted to refer to the way the forests are burned before clear felling which kills many animals and young trees. The carefully crafted object also refers to the ways these minor timber species are used and valued by certain people such as boat-makers who will suffer when the species is gradually replaced by Tasmanian Oak. There was also a positive element of hope in the budding flower that something might come from the *Future Perfect* exhibition. This sculpture was also exhibited at the *Woolhara Small Sculpture Prize* in 2003.

The small scale of the previous work encouraged me to make another small piece due to the low cost of materials and the relative speed with which an idea could be tested. Technically I enjoyed but had also been frustrated by the attempts to achieve a coopered funnel for Juncture. I had made three funnels by steam-bending numerous small pieces of wood around a form and then shaping their edges to make a bevelled unit the dimensions of which had been carefully determined through geometric plans. However the nature of wood and the potential for incremental error when gluing multiple units educated me in developing more controlled methods for this way of making. When making coopered forms, which are always circular, it has become my practice to make two halves which I then glue together thus allowing for correction at that time. However if the incremental growth of a gluing or shaping error has become too great the symmetry of the form is destroyed and the funnel, or whatever form, loses its coherent unity and becomes instead an object for contemplating the failure of the maker.

The development of the coopering technique for making curved container like forms in wood is fundamental to this research. Thus I have attempted to design artworks that offer opportunities for the further development of the technique. The next piece incorporated a funnel element that was created using a similar technique as before but with the wooden staves cut thinner and then laminated after bending thus creating a stable bend held in place by the glued join. This way of achieving a bend in the wood overcomes some of the disadvantages in the previous way of bending one thicker piece in that the thicker wood can move after bending and setting due to its inherent properties, memory of form and atmospheric conditions in the studio. However the new way is more labour intensive and uses more wood, the extra cut means a 3mm loss. This may appear as a non-issue on the small scale but on the larger scale it does amount to a significant matter, for instance if a work is to be 2metres long and made up of 60 staves at 50mm wide then we are looking at cutting

120 staves and then what was 120 metres of cutting become 240 metres and so on, everything is doubled. Thus it is attractive to reduce labour and materials by using a single piece of wood but the cost is the potential for the stave to not hold its bend and a loss of accuracy.

What this issue amounts to is a choice to aim for accuracy and smooth finish with tight joints or a quicker result using less labour and materials but with a rougher finish. This question of how the decisions in the process of making the work affects the final result in significant ways is something that will be further discussed later.



Figure 42: *Cleaner*, 2003

Cleaner is a half size very simplified model of an early Electrolux vacuum cleaner. I chose it as a model for my next artwork because it's function was to suck things into itself and this was appealing because I was questioning the function and role of visual art at that time in a way that brought into question the idea that we get something from art, that art gives to the viewer. I wondered whether it would be possible to make an artwork that took from the viewer? The vacuum cleaner presented a way to investigate this idea, as it is a thing that removes.

This sculpture also attempted to develop a curve into a rectangle through coopering. The geometrical development of this form revealed the incredible amount of wood required for this to happen, there would be a lot of waste. This is because the coopering technique works on the circle and when you take this into a rectangle large areas need to be removed. I abandoned this method, after much drawing, and decided instead to laminate a block of wood from smaller pieces cut in a triangulated fashion so that they gave the appearance of being coopered, they emanated from a single central point. I had not used the wood lathe before and was happy to gain experience on this tool. The result was a form that immediately gave reference to the vacuum cleaner. The centre section was formed of a hollow box with small holes drilled in the sides to suggest sound or air moving through them. In fact the holes were a device to suck the viewer's attention into the artwork through awakening their curiosity. There is a braided stainless steel cable fitted with a small wooden funnel made in the two stave laminated fashion. This funnel was satisfying as a funnel but it's round form conflicted with the rectangular form of the vacuum cleaner. The work seemed unsatisfactory and so I added bunches of bristles to the underside to create a brush or broom like effect. This lent the sculpture a sense of movement and added poetic confusion through the ambiguous combination of functions, related but incompatible in the same object. The brush base also set up the impossibility of being able to open and access the central empty space because the brushes jammed upon trying to open it, even though the latches on top of the vacuum cleaner sculpture suggested that it could be opened.

The next piece, *Whatever*, arose as the development of a much earlier work completed before the PhD research project. That was a suspended fluted cone made using the coopering technique in Tasmanian Oak. This work was itself a development of an earlier piece and the idea was to reverse the barrel curve in a concave fashion and have it open at one end and come to a fine point at the

other. This was successful and the development of that was to imagine another identical cone form and join the two open ends together thus forming a shape somewhat like two ice-cream cones squashed together. However the two cones are now split lengthways down the centre and then stretched about 1 metre apart. They are then joined by 10 bent planks (100mm x 10mm Celery Top Pine), which do not taper but do conform to the profile of the original cones. This was a way to extend the cooping technique beyond its adherence to the circle. The resulting form was a very successful work in terms of this project in that it was both formally appealing to many viewers but also puzzling and almost unfathomable.



Figure 43: *Whatever*, 2003

This may have been due to its seeming resemblance to both constructed and organic forms, and the viewer's inability to gain access to the inside and see how the central ridge was being achieved, of course this was caused by the original steam bending of the planks over the same mould. However in the final work it is supported internally by a simple wooden structure. This work sat for some time on a table in my studio until I decided to cut a hole in one corner and suspend it from a stainless steel hook. This was to allow full access to the exterior form and to invite further complexity into the work through the hole and the hook.



Figure 44: *Whatever*, 2003

Grand Tourer is the result of being selected to complete a public art commission for the Education Department at Rosny College. The commission was to design, make and install a decorative screen to shield the 4.5 metre high wood hopper (a noisy machine to suck woodchips and dust from the wood-workshop) from the view of people approaching the new entrance to the manual apprentice training area of the college. The screen was to fit in with the existing architecture of the school, built in 1973, and reflect the interests of the students. I considered a number of ideas until one day I was sitting, quietly gazing at the site when the hopper started up like a jet engine and blew a small bit of dust from its prominent exhaust pipe. I now saw it as a large engine that needed a body just like a car does and what better body than a 1973 Holden Monaro? I immediately realised that this would appeal to many of the apprentice mechanics and carpenters who used that part of the building. The existing hopper would be painted red (originally a scarred white) and its support frame black just like a car engine. The screen itself was to be orange with vertical black G-stripes that would echo the vertical lines in the existing building. I designed two large steel sheets to be bent and cut in such a way as to fit the hopper and the extra support frame



Figure 45: *Grand Tourer*, 2004

I would add and still give the impression of the curves of a 1973 Monaro. The selection panel however suggested that this might cause conflict with the Ford lovers and so the design was altered slightly to incorporate elements from a Ford GT, a Holden Monaro and a Valiant Charger. A great deal of time was spent on the engineering designs because I was going to be overseas during the construction of the steel plates, however all went according to plan, with the usual unexpected minor headaches, and the work was completed and installed on time.

Now, two years later, it has still not been graffitied, which indicates some level of acceptance by the students. There were many additional small elements in the design such as the cut air fins to allow people to catch a glimpse of the inside, the massive steel sheets are raised 10mm off the ground to give lightness and poise, the paint is a 2-Pack professional job finished with a graffiti resistant skin, the sloping top allows rain runoff to clean the structure, the vertical lines harmonise with those on the building and workers are able to easily access and empty the hopper bin.

I took four months off the research program and completed a studio residency at the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris. However during this time I drew numerous designs for possible sculptures.



Figure 46: *Model*, 2004



Figure 47: *Model*, 2004

I had a hernia operation in early 2004 that restricted my lifting capabilities and so decided to make a small model of one of the new designs to test out the form and the concept of introducing multiple circular reference points to create complex coopered forms. The exciting part of this sculpture was that there would be three reference points for the coopered staves and all three sections would then meet at a single point at the terminating end. I chose to use some Huon Pine that a friend had given as off cuts from her job and found it to be a wonderfully flexible wood. Essentially this sculpture is a cask/barrel shape that comes to a point at one end and an opening at the other. It is made in two halves, the bottom and top, which operate off different circumferences. I steam bent all the staves over the same mould. It was the angle of the bevelled edge that changed to make a tighter or wider curve. The bottom half was made first and when complete I began on the top by working from the outsides in. Thus I made the two top sides separately because I knew that the top centre section was going to be the area where I would have to make adjustments. The two top sides were started off by dry clamping them to the bottom section and working upwards. This made sure that the top sections would fit neatly with the bottom. When the two top sides had reached their apex and were starting to travel back downwards to the centre, due to the smaller circumference they worked off compared to the bottom section, I stopped and considered how to resolve the meeting of these two in the top centre. I measured the gap at several points along the form and calculated how best to shape the final five staves. Each one was custom made for it's particular place in the form, quite different from the usual uniformity of coopering.



Figure 48: *Things for looking at other things*, 2004

One of the sculptures designed while in Paris, *Things for looking at other things*, was a ball form that would be made in the same cooping fashion I had used before. The thing that excited me here was to bend each stave so they formed a semi-circle and then came around to touch at the inside centre of the stave, a bit like a capital letter B on its side. This would create, when fully formed, a hollow sphere whose interior appeared to curve away to infinity on the inside. The viewer would never be able to see the ends of the staves, which would be concealed inside the sphere. There would also be an interior space created that would be inaccessible. Unfortunately, while travelling I sustained an injury that had to be operated on when I returned and then needed at least a month to heal before I could lift anything heavy again. Thus I chose to experiment with making this form in a smaller version than what I had envisioned. It would now only be 40cm diameter.

The body was constructed by laminating numerous short lengths of Tasmanian Oak together to form a solid cylinder that could be turned on the wood lathe. This was then cut in half to make two shorter lengths because I had to turn the insides first and then the outsides after which I would join them to complete the sphere. I learnt that Tasmanian Oak was not a good choice for wood turning and the wood technician, who was training me in this new skill, swore under

his breath at the difficult end grain of this very hard wood. Next time I will use MDF like everybody else. After the pieces were turned and a locking system was created on the inside, I coated them with fibreglass and resin to hold it all together but, more importantly, to create a surface for the auto acrylic paint with which I had chosen to coat the work. I chose this because I wanted to experiment with a new glossy and colourful look for my work and this was the perfect chance to do that. It was the look of a snooker ball I was after. I chose the blue colour because it would help the interior to recede. After a great deal of sanding the interior and opening section of the exterior of the two halves were painted, these were then joined and the larger part of the exterior could now be painted and blended into the earlier paint job.



Figure 49: Stages of painting the sculpture.

The piece was then polished with auto polish to achieve a high gloss surface that served to confuse the viewer in terms of wondering what it was made of. The interesting aspect of this piece, considering it was purely an experiment, was that I had concealed the material it was made of and the technique of its making which was in high contrast to earlier work even though the form was similar to the earlier pieces. A criticism of this piece was that its glossy surface caused the viewer to gaze right on through the work to the other opening and out the other side, thus causing an early exit from their interaction with the sculpture. I decided to address this issue with the way I displayed the work, that is, by hanging it on a large wooden horn/hook protruding from the gallery wall which blocked the inner hole and instead focused ones vision on the relationship between the penetrating wooden horn and the slick blue glossy hollow sphere. This had the effect of charging the work with an erotic element that could prove to be a distraction for the viewer. It was mentioned that the possibility of being able to lift it off the hook and see the underside more clearly was creating a tension for the viewer who could not see inside the ball form as their head blocked the light while they peered in. I am happy for that tension to arise as it expresses a denial from the work to the viewer. Later I custom made a curved hood to fit the metal wall flange and cover its distracting form.



Figure 50: *Things you don't know you don't know about*, 2004.

The next artwork, *Things you don't know you don't know about*, was a return to the simple barrel form but with a technical challenge for me as the maker. I chose to make a form that used three circles rather than the one circle found in a barrel. The circle I refer to here is the one you see if looking at a barrel from above. The circle at the widest point, usually the middle as seen from the side, is the one that dominates the form and it determines a great deal of the making. With this work I wanted to have a large circle at the bottom and two smaller ones on top but designed in such a way that they still came together as a single unit. To this end I made a 1:5 scale model of the form in Huon Pine (shown earlier).

The result was not quite what I had envisioned but still a very pleasing form. The meeting of the two smaller circles on top was very subtle and alerted me to the probability of it being a much more difficult task at full scale. This problem was due to the tapered form of the sculpture which meant that the circles of different sizes had to appear to taper at the same rate as the larger one, this meant a very complex arrangement of the shifting centres of the smaller circles. Also the model form was not symmetrical, as a creeping error had shown itself due to a stave being glued incorrectly at an early stage. This is a major problem when working in a constructed series, a small error anywhere along the process will magnify and become larger with each additional element. I was advised to address this problem by making an internal moulding frame in the manner of wooden boat building, which would act as a true element. Thus I made the frames for the top and bottom after spending a few weeks working out the precise points in three dimensions from the two-dimensional plans. The use of geometry is essential in the early stages of the process because the dimensions for each individual stave have to be determined in advance as they change all the way along its length tapering towards the ends and wider in the middle. It is precisely through determining these dimensions that the final form of the sculpture is achieved. A bit wider or thinner at one point will

result in a bump or dip all the way around the final form. This is the way I have extended the coopering technique, which usually has an even taper to the ends from the centre to create the familiar barrel form. This work tapers differently towards each end and also tapers differently at the top and bottom thus creating a form that is both symmetrical and asymmetrical depending on which way you cut it.



Figure 51: The bending/moulding frame.

With this sculpture I also chose to experiment with a new way of shaping the staves using the Spindle Moulder instead of the Bench Plane. This was a new machine to me and I had to be trained to use it as it is potentially dangerous. The advantage of the spindle moulder is that once you have the true mould in place you can then reproduce the stave as a copy in multiples. The spindle moulder works off a mould you screw to the stave, which is shaped according to the mould by slicing off the excess wood. Thus it is perfect for the coopering process of construction, which relies on uniformity between the staves, in fact it is the ability of the cooper to produce the same article again and again that is a skill of the trade. However I did not know how to determine the diminishing dimensions of the staves other than to find a number of points along it, which I would determine using geometry; that is to divide the circle into the number of staves it would require. The process I had previously used on the bench plane only required me knowing the dimensions at the centre

and each end, the stave would be steam bent in advance and so the diminishing width would be automatically determined by the curve rather than by me. The problem with this technique is that it is also dangerous and very labour intensive with great hand-eye coordination required to get the correct cut at the correct angle. Due to this issue I could only make a few at a time otherwise I would run the risk of losing concentration and either cutting too much off or injuring myself on the spinning blade. The spindle moulder process proved to speed up the work noticeably and I could keep a supply of shaped staves up as the gluing progressed.

However a problem arose that only showed itself late in the making and then too late to change. There were slight inconsistencies in the true mould that showed up as a creeping/compounded error. The dimensions I had determined from a drawing were not quite right, even a millimetre out at some point is enough when multiplied 50 times for instance. Also the angle of the cutting blade on the spindle moulder had not been set at quite the right angle for this job and the form began to protest as I tried to make it conform to the moulding frame. I was making the larger bottom section first as it was the easier form and I wanted to learn from it before tackling the more difficult top section. As I glued each stave onto the previous one and forced them via clamps and twisted ropes to bend to the moulding frame the form gained strength and became ever more difficult to force. At this point I should say that I had also chosen to experiment with a new and different glue than I had used before, it was a polypropylene glue as opposed to the more toxic resin based epoxy glue. Upon gluing the 8th stave into place I released some of the clamps to gain access and the whole form gave a loud groan and exploded apart sending clamps and parts of the carefully constructed bending frame flying across the room. It did not like it and neither did I.

This caused a brief moment of depression and frustration that led to the shelving of the frames and allowing the form to be what it wanted to be, that is, allowing the creeping errors in the original true stave to determine the final form rather than what I had planned. Then, after giving in to the materials, things went ahead much more easily and I knew that whatever the final result it would work because I had learnt that if I continued to make each stave the same they will eventually return around the form to make a circle. What I also had to do to relieve some of the build up of a twist in the staves due again to slight problems in the true stave was to allow a gap to occur at certain points around the form which allowed a straight stave to be reintroduced to the system. In the final piece some of these gaps have been left in place as a means to gain visual access to the interior of the form.

Once I had made the decision to let go of trying to make this sculpture meet my original design my attitude to making actually changed and I became more open to allowing errors to remain but also to try out new ways of doing things. Thus I chose to make the bevelled edge change along the length of the staves as they came towards the top of the form. The change was to make the bevel towards the centre a sharper angle than at the ends thus causing the centre to gradually cave in to the middle, this was a way to achieve the valley I had originally wanted. I did this by making the staves on the spindle moulder and then shaving the centres off with my hand plane. The result was to create an oval shape at the middle and circles at the ends. The final two staves had to be hand shaped to fit as the tinkering with the system had caused an unorthodox final gap. The sculpture was made in two halves, which were to be glued together later. Next the two ends were made by laminating 14 sheets of 1cm MDF together and working them on the wood lathe till they approximated the size of the end holes (I had very little experience on the wood lathe and was both excited and a little challenged with this job). Of course the lathe is a machine that makes perfect circles

and my sculpture was an imperfect shape so the next job was to work with both the MDF and the coopered forms until they married in a convincing union.

A piece of plastic electrical conduit was set between the two ends in a way so that it curved enough to disallow seeing right through but still allowed enough light to give the impression of a gently curving tube. The final gluing together of the ends and two halves was done using the very strong but toxic epoxy glue I had earlier avoided. Some of the glue stained the MDF, which I decided to leave apparent. Finally the entire exterior form was coated with 4 layers of clear varnish and 3 layers of matt varnish. The work was suspended from a point of balance by a single steel cable.

This work was later entered into the *Peppermint Bay Sculpture Prize* where it was awarded the inaugural *Kingsborough Council Acquisition Prize*. I had to alter the hanging system now that it would be hanging above the heads of the local ratepayers in the Council foyer.⁷³



Figure 52: *Invitation*, 2005

⁷³ The work was accidentally damaged at Peppermint Bay and fell smashing into 5 pieces, thus it had to be repaired.

Invitation is a 2 metre wide hollow curved form that resembles a donut, a coracle and an empty car tire. It is made of bent and laminated MDF, 2 x 3mm sheets, coated with fibreglass and resin. The MDF sheets have been butt joined and laminated with cross-linking PVA glue. The idea here was to create a coopered form without having to use the steam bending technique. The 3mm thick sheets of MDF easily conformed to the shaping mould I constructed around which I would wrap two sheets with glue in-between. I would leave them for at least 4 hours and then remove them to have their edges bevelled. Due to the thin and pliable nature of this material, even after laminating, a 14inch Jack (hand) plane fixed up side down in the vice was used to create the bevelled edge. This required the plane be placed at the same level as the bench, which was to provide a level support for the long curved stave. The curve was quite severe and the two ends almost met again. Originally I had envisioned creating a curve that overlapped itself and re-entered the centre to pass through beyond the starting point. I may yet do this but for this piece I allowed the MDF to spring back to where it was happy to sit and not to set myself a fight against the tendency of the wood. The final work was coated with fibreglass and resin to create a strong skin to hold the form together because the gluing edge was so thin at 6mm. I had originally planned to paint the form with auto acrylic as a further development of the *Things for Looking at Other Things* piece but decided to leave it with the wood filler and resin staining as a finish after a number of requests to do this from peers. After considering the options it did seem right for this piece to be left as it was, marks showing, because it became more interesting as a complex thing rather than as a simple coloured form.



Figure 53: Bending the staves for *Invitation*.



Figure 54: Joining the staves for *Invitation*.

I initially imagined it to be painted a candy apple red colour and for the centre meeting point to protrude beyond the opening creating an inside out return effect. The final result is less dramatic and far more prosaic than this and yet it is a satisfying piece in that it has suggested the way ahead for many other potential sculptures. I am particularly happy with the rough finish that reveals the accidental marks of the making process. These marks are quite authentic in that I fully intended to cover them over until I saw the work covered in the resin and decided that it looked interesting enough like that. I am also happy with the fibreglass covering which has allowed for a very strong skin over a quite thin shell. This suggests ways for my wooden sculptures to become outdoor works. The interior of this piece is

alluring but it is very difficult to see certain parts of the work, which tend to remain hidden on the inside and this is what I wanted. The sculpture hangs on a slight angle to allow people to see it from various positions thus making it seem totally available and yet not actually being so due to the internal curve.



Figure 55: *Strainer*, 2005



Figure 56: *Pat*, 2005



Figure 57: *Shave*, 2005

I then began work on a series of smaller tool-like sculptures. This work sprang from a visit to the Museum of Ancient Tools in Troyes France (Le Musée de Outil) where I was impressed by the vast array of beautiful old tools that were so outmoded I had trouble working out what they were for. I realised that here the tools were doing the very thing I wanted my sculptures to do, draw me in to examining them by withholding an aspect of themselves from me. They looked functional but I couldn't work out what their function was. *Strainer* is based on the idea that I might use it for bending the staves for my sculptures. It has a long sturdy handle something like a shovel, an asymmetrical curved wooden block at the end and a steel hook mounted on the handle. The hook is to lead people to the conclusion that something is held by it while the handle is pulled to bend a form around the end. *Pat* is based on another bending idea. It is about the size of a shoemakers mould yet it has a handle at one end and a free moving metal bar swinging at the other around a curved end. *Shave* is based on a hand plane where the cutting edge is absurdly mirrored with an opposing cutting edge. This tool is highly finished with brass fittings and carefully filed and fitted decorative elements. It looks like an older style unused plane that at first does appear functional. With these tools I have swung from a new unused look to a weathered used finish to explore how these affect the viewer.



Figure 58: *Final Cause*, 2005

Final Cause is essentially a development of *Whatever*. It is as if the earlier work has been cut in half and the edges have curled around to meet one another rather than continuing on to a point at both ends. It is made from Celery Top Pine butt joined with a new foaming glue – *Purbond*, which has low toxic vapour emissions. I have carried over some of the fibreglass knowledge gained earlier into this work, which is supported strategically inside with sturdy fibreglass matt. I wanted to complicate the form by creating three curves in it. One is the obvious steam bent curve of the wood, the other is an almost imperceptible and therefore unsuccessful fanning of one end by cutting the staves thinner at the other end. I should have either made the staves much thinner or used more of them to achieve this effect. The other curve is noticeable on the top and bottom surfaces, which have been curved by adjusting the angle of the bevelled edge along the stave. The bottom surface dips in and the top curves out (as seen in the image above). This effect would have also benefited from more staves being placed in between the sides of the form.

I chose to limit the centre to five staves because I felt the overall sculptural form had a nice tension at this scale and if I had have added more staves the form would have flattened out and lost this tension. A steel pipe was bolted to the inside of the form to allow for

a mounting rod to be fixed to a surface and the sculpture placed over it.



Figure 59: Prior to joining the two halves.

The inside of the sculpture was painted with two undercoats and two silver top coats. Silver was chosen for its reflective qualities and also because it has industrial suggestions of chemicals and metals that add a sense of potential function to the form. I was going to finish the exterior in a matt varnish but decided to try putting some of the white undercoat on it and then rubbing it back to achieve a weathered look. This heightened the sense that this could be a found industrial object but also suggested that it is older than it is. The remnants of white pick up little indentations in the wood and highlight the joins and the linear nature of the work. The white was dominating the timber so I rubbed a few coats of timber oil back into it to bring out the wood and push back the white.

I wanted people to gain limited visual access to the silver interior via a series of gouged slits that conformed to small imperfections already present in the timber. These rough holes also acted to break the perception that I was aiming for a high craft finish/display in my work.

Lure is a development of *Invitation*. It also uses the curved stave to create a round object that is built up from laminating two pieces of MDF together. In this case I folded the two halves of the structure over so they met back to back rather than joining them to make a full circle. It was while looking at this form, which created a small space inside, that it reminded me of a particular type of fungus that grows on dead tree trunks. This was when I decided to mount the work on the wall as a semi-circle. It is hung vertically for three reasons, to give people of various heights access to see inside, to avoid a direct reference to the fungi which grow horizontally, and to use the mechanical advantage inherent in this manner of hanging. Because it seemed vital that the edge where it meets the wall should appear relatively clean two small keyholes were cut in the back of the mounting board to set it flush with the wall.



Figure 60: The making of *Lure*, 2005

The work was covered with fine fibreglass tissue for strength, with the intention of painting it with auto acrylic, to return to the aesthetic of *Things For Looking at Other Things*. After a period of two weeks looking at the piece and considering various colour options I almost chose lime green (I was visiting car yards and looking at car colour charts to find a colour) which I thought might create a nice tension between the organic and inorganic, but I finally decided on a candy apple red colour. I visited an auto paint supplier and made enquiries

about this, their reaction left me looking for another solution, it would be very expensive and complex – apparently. I discovered that this colour effect is created by laying a reflective/metallic coat down and then laying an almost clear red coat over it. It seemed possible to do this with resin itself and so I spray painted some steel with gold enamel paint and then covered it with a clear polyurethane mixed with a little red colour. I experimented with this for a few days but found it was not to my liking – too dull.

Then I began to experiment with the fibreglass acrylic resin mixed first with gold dust tint and then red tint. This was more successful but still not quite alluring enough until I learnt that acrylic casting resin was more clear than the plain resin and so that was what I used for the work itself. It turned out that the cold weather here in winter slowed the drying times enormously and it took 7 days before I could handle the work without leaving fingerprints before applying another coat. This meant that the work took a month longer than expected to complete. It was while applying the coats and having time to look at the work that I decided to have the inside and outside different, with the inside candy apple red and the outside gold only. I hoped the gold would glimmer against the white gallery wall and the red would draw people to look inside the work.



Figure 61: The making of *Lure*, 2005

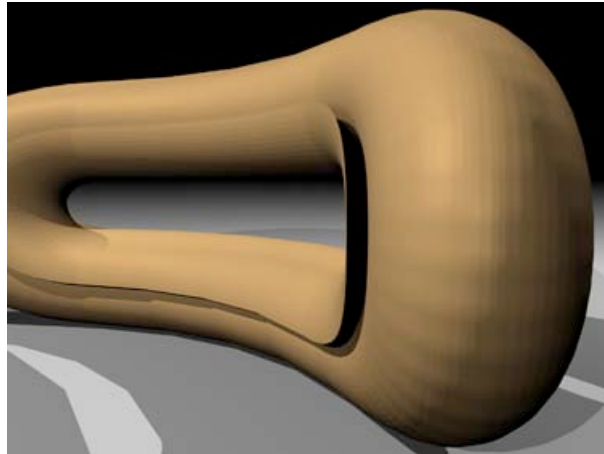


Figure 62: Digital image of *Meant to Be*. 2005

Meant to Be is the final coopered work in this research project. It exhibits the most radical curve and shows how small changes in the dimensions of the stave result in marked changes to the structure of the sculpture. It is a development of the earlier work *Invitation* where the stave is now taken past the beginning to circle back on itself rather than terminating in the centre. The technical problems associated with this form, easy enough to draw but far more difficult to realise, presented a considerable challenge. Due to the decision to use two laminated laths of 3mm MDF in order to achieve the extreme bend required I knew from the outset that the form would later have to be strengthened with fibreglass. This created a large amount of time consuming labour and exposure to toxins and dangerous fibres necessitating regular periods of discomfort wearing various safety devices. The decision to submit this work for a major outdoor sculpture exhibition (The 2006 *Helen Lempriere Sculpture Prize*) required that I increase the scale considerably to match its location. This increase in scale vastly increased the amount of time and materials needed to complete the project. I employed an artist to create a digital version of my design using the *Maxon Cine4* drawing program. This was the first time I had employed a digital program to draw one of my imagined designs and it was probably one of the reasons the work was accepted into such a prestigious exhibition.



Figure 63: Bending Mould

Imagine a wine cask stave, with its gentle curve, bent around so that one end goes beyond the other and overlaps it. The bending and laminating of the stave follows the same procedure as for Invitation. The dimensions of the bend were limited by the size of a sheet of MDF and the maximum height of the bandsaw cutting blade. The bending mould was complex, sturdy and allowed for a greater deal of accuracy and uniformity than earlier ones. It was only possible for me as the result of earlier problem solving experiences.

The shaping of the tapered edge of this stave was very problematic. How could I cut and shape such a piece of wood using the equipment at hand? I couldn't, so it was necessary to design and make a cutting jig that would hold the MDF in its curved position and yet allow access to the cutting blade. The design, testing and manufacture of this cutting jig took 1 month. Because the stave is a symmetrical cut I realised that if I could design the jig to cut both sides I would save time in the repetitive process of cutting numerous curved staves. But because the stave is cut on a precise angle the jig would only work for the other side if it could be reversed. Thus the idea of working from the centre of the circle arose to solve this problem. The jig was made so that it could be rotated to accommodate the reverse side of the stave. The machine used to cut the staves is a large bandsaw, the total cutting height of the blade is 60cm and so I limited the width of

the round form to 58cm. The jig is in two parts; the first part is screwed to the stave to hold it in place as a curve, the second part is a frame onto which the first part is screwed. It holds the first part at a precise angle to the cutting blade by working off the sliding square fence. There is a hole in the centre of the first part to receive an axle from the second part, this allows the jig to be turned upside down and the first part reversed so that a cut of the same angle and depth can be achieved on both sides of the stave.



Figure 64: Reversible Cutting Jig

Then the stave has to be cut again on the bench plane to achieve a precise, level and flat bevelled edge. At first I made a holding frame out of the same chipboard used for the first part of the cutting jig. However this created a number of problems; I couldn't see the bench plane cutting the edge and had to work blindly, and the MDF was still moving a little when I exerted pressure to pass it over the cutting blade and so I was unable to fully control the depth of cut. This resulted in the first five staves having to be rejected due to imperfect final dimensions. After consideration I realised that the main problem was the overlapping section and that if I could secure that I would be able to control the cut. A small wooden block was inserted into the overlap and glued and screwed into permanent position. The added benefit of this new development was that I could leave it in place and it would ensure stability to each section and then to the overall structure. The only problem was that they later proved to be difficult to fibreglass around.

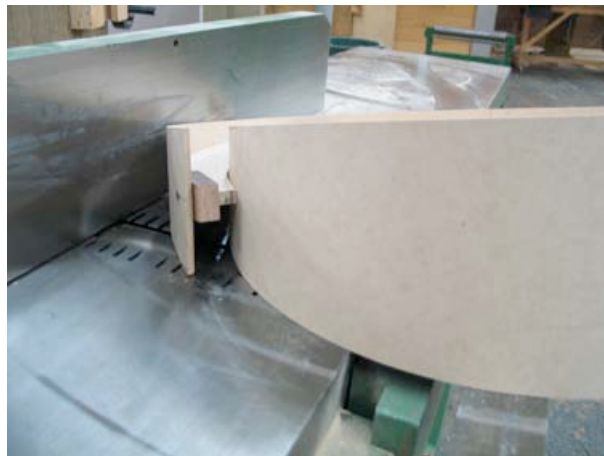


Figure 65: Shaping the bevelled edge.

The shaped staves were then glued to each other using clamps and blocks of wood. Due to the extreme curve and the substantial varying width of the stave, 200mm – 50mm, it was not possible for my clamps to reach across the gap all the way around the stave and I could only clamp the thinner sections. Thus I used plastic packing tape to pull the staves tight, surprisingly this strategy worked very

well on the relatively light MDF wood. I then had to fibreglass each section as I went due to the wooden blocks restricting access, particularly as the structure grew. This meant a great deal of carrying the structures from my studio to the spray booth where I could use the toxic resin for fibre-glassing and then back to my studio for the next section to be glued on.

A further complication to this process was that the design called for two long curved sections to stretch the two semi-circular ends apart. These sections were made using the same bending mould but the staves were then shaped using different dimensions to create a gentle curve instead of the semi-circle created at the ends. Another factor was that these joining sections curved on an angle that was at 90 degrees to the end sections and so the widest and thinnest areas of the stave were in different locations. The marking out of dimensions on these staves was thus different to the others. The joining and fibre-glassing of these sections was only marginally different to the end sections.

Because the artwork was going to Melbourne to be exhibited outdoors for at least three months it had to be able to travel and be sturdy enough for the weather and the people. The work was prefabricated in four sections to be joined on site, this allowed for more convenience with freighting the work. I was very careful in the application of the fibre-glass both inside and outside the form in order to give it maximum strength but to keep the weight down. I received advice on the fibre-glassing from various expert sources and decided to put a final coat of a boat sealant that was UV resistant on the external surface to resist UV damage to the polyester resin. The MDF has to be totally sealed from rain/water in order to maintain its integrity.



Figure 66: Gluing, clamping and fibre-glassing the interior.

I decided to not paint the sculpture and to leave the pencil marks and other working marks on view through the layers of resin. This choice was made to follow through with the earlier works where I had gradually been moving away from a crafted finish but also to create more interest in the work so that it did not finally appear as a single-colour autonomous abstract form but as something that had a history. The support structure is made from steel pipe of two sizes so that the exterior slides into the interior giving a firm structure. The metal support is painted with a professional Two-Pack finish in dark grey.

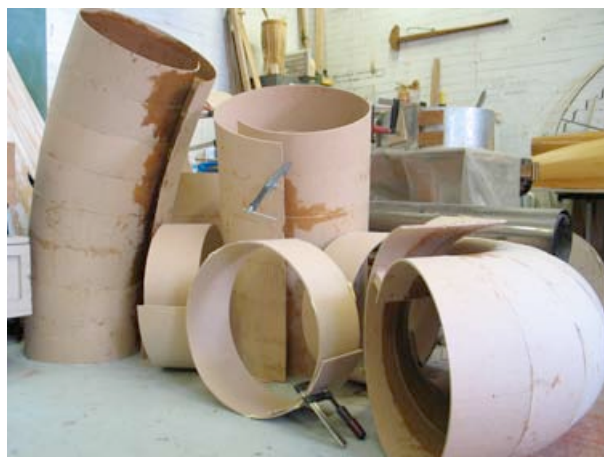


Figure 67: Work in progress.

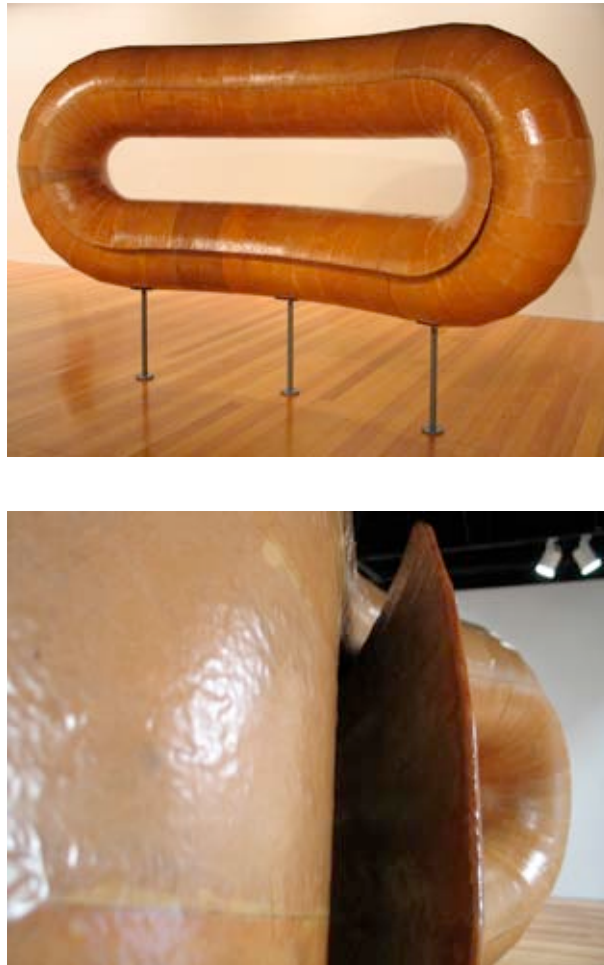


Figure 68: *Meant to Be* 2005

Conformer 1 and *2* are hand held tool-like sculptures that are made from laminated layers of steam bent Celery Top Pine. They are absurd tools in that they seem to defy having any useful function but they also strongly call the viewer to pick them up and feel them to try to discover their use by manual exploration. The curved shaft of the tools shifts the heavier ball end to an unusual place in relation to the lighter handle. This causes us to grip the handle in a particular way to balance the weight and yet holding the tool in this way tends to make it even less functional than it could be. It is the curious manual exploration of these sculptures that interests me. It indicates a fundamental questioning of the thing is taking place. I technically struggled with getting the bent laths of timber to laminate tightly and found that they moved apart after clamping and gluing. This is primarily why I made the second one, to attempt to improve the

gluing job but found that this one moved too, even after careful joining with epoxy glue. The gaps that opened up were filled with resin. The handle on *Conformer 2* is different than the first one as it adopts a more decorative style that causes one to keep shifting the grip to find the right/most comfortable position. The transition from the shaft to the ball is also different in that it flares out more in the second version giving a more substantial impression.



Figure 69: *Conformer 1*, 2005



Figure 70: *Conformer 2*, 2005



Figure 71: *Not Understanding*, 2005

Not Understanding is a wall mounted tool-like sculpture that combines steel, copper and wood to present itself as something that could be a functional part of some workshop. I have used the green *Hammertone* painted finish on the metal to enhance the semi-industrial aesthetic of this piece. The dirty look of the wood is also directed to this end. I carefully designed and made the steel support so that it would appear to be a manufactured item rather than a unique sculpture. A big part of this was to ensure that it hung straight and that the space created between the base plate and the bottom copper plate was level. I think the interesting aspect of this piece is to try to find where the work takes place in this tool, where is the actual site of action? I have perversely (in the sense of carefully considering what this tool, if it was real, might actually look like) chosen to employ a sense of aesthetic harmonies in using the green colour playing off the polished, yet worn copper in the sense of referring to the aesthetic appeal of some manufactured industrial objects.

Development of Ideas about the Sculptures

The sculptures can function in different ways depending on who is forming a relationship with them. For instance the artist who makes them, me, uses the artworks as a resource for certain ends such as: academic research, personal satisfaction, exploration of technique, extension of practice, a way to make money through sales, a way to gain recognition as an artist. There are potentially different kinds of viewers of the sculptures, for instance: the academic specialist who relates the work to a body of theoretical information about developments in contemporary art, the other artist/peer who relates the work to their own practice and to what they have seen of this artist before, the art reviewer who relates the work to other recent work and to things happening culturally, the uninformed member of the public who relates the work to their ideas and values about art, the gallery owner or director who sees the work in light of the long term situation of their gallery and possibly in terms of public safety and other legal matters, and so on the list could go. The artwork can operate in many ways for many different people and thus the idea of a reductive definition of the artwork and it's meaning would seem inadequate.

The earlier sculptures came about as a response to external forces, that is, they were designed and made in response to either curatorial briefs, group exhibition themes or public art briefs. However these works still contain my research concerns and are more or less successful in these terms aside from concerns external to the research thesis. The complexity of the being of a sculpture is inherently linked to the impetus behind its reason for being, which may sometimes be illogical.

I found that responding to a commission encourages in me a certain relationship to the design and execution of the sculpture that is

defined by my relationship with the commissioning agent. However I did not find this relationship to be detrimental to my sense of satisfaction and liberty with the design. The limitations are an inherent part of these undertakings and so to desire complete creative freedom in these situations is to call frustration upon oneself. Working within the limits of a commission became an exciting challenge and I felt the boundaries allowed an area for free exploration.

The essential problem with working to these briefs is one of the concept of art, or the idea of function. In the curated shows I was not browbeaten with the curators idea of the role of contemporary art but rather in more subtle ways I suppose I wanted to please them and, being inherently unsure as to what the role of contemporary art is anyway, I tried out that way of thinking about art that seemed 'normal'. I think this normal idea of art is to see it as a form of language and to see contemporary art as a way to reflect, re-present or articulate (communicate) ideas about the culture in which we live. In short, the work should be relevant to the commissioning agent and the people who will be looking at it.

The sculptural works produced in response to commissions were dominated by the idea of relevance. Each one was designed in terms of the projected expectations I had about the commissioning agent's desires and the viewing public. I made the work for them and thus gauged its success in terms of their response to the finished and exhibited work. If they liked it then I had succeeded, if they hated it then I had failed.



Figure 72: *Juncture*, 2003

An interesting outcome of this was that one of the works made for a thematic group show called *Future Perfect*, the sculpture is titled *Juncture*, was that it seemed to succeed in terms of the commissioning agent and the public, a photograph of that piece was used to represent the exhibition in a review in the Melbourne Age, and I received positive feedback about the work in terms of the political dimension of that exhibition – but it was criticised by some of my academic peers as being too didactic and craft oriented. Thus I became more fully aware of the different audiences for art and the possibility of pleasing one group while alienating another. In this case it was the fact that I was serving two masters, the commissioning agent and the academic research.

Perhaps the difference between the earlier work and the later work is that the earlier sculptures are more instrumental in their conception, they are used as devices to achieve particular outcomes and their poetic or ambiguous aspect may be at odds with this? The later works arise out of the technical and conceptual development of the works that preceded them and thus they achieve a sense of wonder that is associated with their irrelevance.

Clean Work was the first artwork made as a free exploration and it came about as a response to an early model *Electrolux* vacuum cleaner. Apart from the technical challenges in making this piece I was happy to see it as a form of play and to pursue its seemingly absurd proposition – that it could take from the viewer rather than give to them. The decision to add the bristles and make the object less vacuum cleaner like and more brush like was a way to take it beyond its source. The bristles also gave it a sense of movement or at least potential movement and absurdly blocked the ability to open the body of the cleaner, which is hinged and clasped to suggest it should be opened. Thus the object worked against its own logic and became illogical. It has been suggested that it does not however work toward creating an ambiguous opening but rather oscillates between the brush and vacuum reading and so is a switching piece rather than an elusive work.

Something Else is a work that is in the most part a direct representation of the fifth lumbar vertebrae. However, due to our lack of familiarity with such an obscure part of the body, I had hoped that it might at first prove difficult to recognise and create the open-ended situation I am seeking. This is why I chose to leave the bottom section as a hollow to reveal the flat timber used to construct the work – to create a slight visual confusion through the inconsistency of organic and geometric form. Tool marks were left in the surface of the vertebra to emphasize the fact that it was constructed and that it was not intended to be an illusion, to look like a real bone. Small pegs were placed under it to lift it off the floor slightly and create a sense that it was poised. One of the lasting benefits from making this piece was the satisfaction of boldly carving into it with an Arbortech tool, an angle grinder and a large rounded carving chisel to create the deep curves of a vertebra. This feeling for the organic informs many of the subsequent works. It has a strong haptic appeal, people want to

touch it and this possibly arises from the hand-crafted form and the smooth surface.

Whatever is a successful artwork in terms of this research project. It achieves the sense of open-ended ambiguity I am seeking and it also draws the eye of the viewer to examine its form, materials and method of construction, thus encouraging a multi-faceted relationship with the being of the thing. Its smooth and straight lines alert us to its material character as wooden planks, its curved organic form gives rise to numerous references such as a sting ray or a micro organism, and the complex coopered joins intrigue people as to how it was made. I felt that it should be suspended in the air so the viewers could appreciate it from all sides since its form changes considerably depending on the viewpoint. The shifting readings of the work align well with what Heidegger says about the nature of the artwork as revealing and concealing elements of its being over time.

To increase our awareness of the aspects of the being of the thing and thus shift towards an understanding of Being as unbounded and mysterious as well as bounded and known is to assist in revealing the truth of Being through art in terms of Heidegger's philosophy. To this end I have gradually shifted toward a position where the accidental construction marks have been left in the work to refer the viewer to the thing's history. To the aspect of its being a made thing, constructed out of these materials and in this way. The sculptures ultimately refer back to themselves rather than away from themselves to some other more significant issue or thing that they might represent.

There is a faint echo here, it seems, of outdated notions of authenticity in art, showing the makers mark and allowing imperfections to reveal a more true thing than the perfectly finished and presented artwork which it must have been thought was hiding some flaw and thus inauthentic. Even to use the word authentic

suggests links with Existentialism, of which Heidegger is a great influence. Authentic here meant to live truly with the knowledge of our future death in mind and the culturally conditioned values we inherit held up to question. It might have also meant being true to oneself, which would present the difficult task of knowing who one is.

In Heidegger's terms it is our communal situation that gives rise to the authentic/inauthentic dilemma. We are 'thrown into' a historically situated community and yet we also experience ourselves as individuals with the ability to think and choose before acting. The danger is that we can become overwhelmed by our community's notions of normality and cease to think and choose our actions, we allow the mass or the norm to decide for us. In this sense we live inauthentically. It is extremely difficult to live authentically, it requires regular consideration of our impending death, that everyone we know or meet will die, the possibility of Nihilism looms close, that we are ultimately responsible for our choices and actions and that the complexity of being is unlimited. These things can tend to be overwhelming if one seriously considers them, in fact it could prove difficult to then go ahead and choose to make art. These ideas also seem to be at odds with more recent conceptions of the culturally created individual who can only think and act in terms of the structures they are given.

In terms of these ideas my sculptures can be approached in a simple or a complex way. They can be seen purely as a shape that resembles something familiar, a donut, a cigar, or parts of the human anatomy, and then they can be left at that point. It seems to me that to leave them there could be a defensive act on the viewer's behalf where they maintain the powerful position of projector onto the thing. They remain at the centre of the world and do not allow the thing to impress itself upon them in an interplay, a dialogue (or perhaps they are just bored). When the viewer does move beyond their initial

projection to consider the materials, the manner of construction, the changing aspects of form as they move around, and the way that a simple suggestion of form can trigger psychological recognition of some familiar thing which is not actually there, then they move into the unfolding world of unbounded being. At no point can we hold all of the multitude aspects of the being of a thing in mind, they fade and come into focus alternatively and it is this way of relating that the sculptures seek to initiate.

Grand Tourer is an example of how, with very few clues, we can recognise allusions between things. The 4.5 metre high steel painted sculpture was designed to perform the prosaic function of screening an industrial piece of noisy machinery, however by simply adding two curves, painting the exhaust funnel silver and two black racing stripes over orange it unmistakably calls forth an early 1970's V8 sports car. However, in terms of encouraging an extended enquiry into the thing this work is only marginally effective because we quickly recognise it's simple task and it's obvious reference.

Things for looking at other things is a small alluring wall-based sculpture that seeks to create the desire to know it/see inside it and yet not be able to. The internal curve was formed by making the work in two halves that were later joined. The smooth blue plastic finish creates a sense of confusion about what the thing is made of and this adds to the sense of ambiguity inherent in its form alone. It was hung on a large, organic, wooden hook to stop the viewer gazing right on through. The shiny smooth surface has a strong haptic appeal and gives the work a pop style. This sculpture also has a relatively strong erotic element that, due to the paucity of means, has the potential to reveal to the viewer their act of imaginative projection. The title refers to the function of art as a thing we use to look at places, people, and issues beyond the actual thing/artwork itself. It is plural, Things, because it is made up of two elements.

Things you don't know you don't know about looks like a long drawn out wine cask with rounded open ends. It is suspended so that people can appreciate the whole form and so they can peer into the ends. When they do this they will only see a small curved tube rather than the interior or the other end - this resists a visual termination. Slits have been allowed to remain on the body of the sculpture, rather than being filled, to give the inquisitive viewer an opportunity to see the interior of the work however I found most people did not look into the slits and only viewed them as an imperfection or in a symbolic way. This sculpture was a real struggle for me to make as I used thicker staves than usual, 15mm rather than 10mm, and designed the top and bottom to work off different circular dimensions thus breaking the dominance of the symmetrical circle in coopering. If one looks along the top of the sculpture they can see the centre staves have been custom shaped to cause a flattening out of the round form. I think that it is this subtle shift in form that gives this sculpture a much greater visual appeal than had it been the standard circular cask form. The wooden finish makes the work attractive to people who might not usually spend time with contemporary sculpture.

Invitation was thus titled because of the large dark hole in one side that affords the viewer an opportunity, an invitation, to look inside. It resembles a coracle or a pumpkin or a grapefruit. It's form acts upon the viewer in this way, the slight angle it hangs at allows us to get under it and almost put our head up into it. However, it is actually quite difficult to see all of the inside due to the sunken opening and thus the sculpture maintains at least a part of itself unseen. Less obvious is the fact that while one is looking at the opening, what I am drawn to call the front, one cannot see the back and vice versa for the sides also. It cannot be taken in all at once and encourages both a movement to the hole and a movement around it. The fibreglass matt that provides a strong protective skin is quite transparent and almost invisible on the outer shell but inside it is apparent, due to the thicker gauze. The numerous marks on its surface reveal the history of its

making and they direct the viewer's thoughts toward the numerous joins in the MDF, the movement from wide section to a final point, and, if one looks carefully, the section where the two halves were joined. The MDF, trapped between the thin skin of resin and fibreglass, appears to be holding itself together against the odds. One looks for some superior structure hidden inside that is binding it but finds none, its being as a constructed thing is alive in the viewers mind.

Agitator is one of the most whimsical sculptures made through this research period and as such it has associations with *Cleaner*, another whimsical work. There seems to be a negative association with this descriptive word in some art circles at least perhaps because we want to be taken seriously and this might require the application of logic and reason. In fact, the word 'whimsical', was levelled at me by a visiting artist as a challenge and it seemed he expected I would attempt to deny it. I affirmed it and, even surprising myself, then went on to address the impulsive and playful attitude of exploration as a very profitable element of my practice. Each element of this sculpture was considered after the last, it was never envisioned as a whole in advance of its construction. The play between the crafted and controlled top section and the rougher lathes below creates a visual tension in the work that has arisen from those elements developing out of different manufacturing processes.

I carefully considered how the position, angle and type of handle would lead the viewer to approach the object in a particular way. That the viewer might imagine operating it manually through knowing how to grip a screwdriver handle. A thing we are all familiar using. Here they did not perform that function but instead provided two hand holds for a lifting and agitating of the whole thing. This led me to think of an undercarriage that would suggest this action. It seems that here is a reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea that our phenomenological relationship with the world is

embodied in the sense that we adopt spatial relationships with things in terms of our body.

The two layers of bent and sharpened lathes have been allowed to adopt a natural/inconsistent curve after being steam bent and moulded. This is what often happens with the other coopered sculptures where the lathes are then all made to conform to the greater structure via glue and clamp. Here I allowed them to appear as independent entities attached to a body rather than forming the body. The slight imperfection of their irregularity gives the work a sense of motion and thus alludes to the agitation mentioned earlier. The sculpture stands on its fine pointed legs in a fragile manner. It makes explicit its frivolity but appears to lack the physical gravity of some of the larger works to hold the viewer's interest. In some ways it is a bridging sculpture between the coopered works and the tool works.

The three tools works that were made next I had put off making since I had the initial insight into the potential that tools might have as a resource for this research project. It was in France at Troyes (Le Musée des Outils) that I experienced the strangeness of these outmoded objects that caused me to ask, what is it? The first attempt was a very rough gluing together of several scrap pieces of wood that were lying around the studio. From this I developed the idea for *Strainer* as a long handled thing that suggested it might be used for bending the wood for my other sculptures. Thus I set out with the idea that I might play at creating an illusory relationship between the coopered sculptures and the tool sculptures. I am happy with *Strainer* in that it does actually look like it could be a real tool. However it lacks the style that might make it more intriguing. A colleague suggested I beat it up a bit to make it look used and thus deepen the illusion. It may in fact be too prosaic to perform well as an artwork however it did remind me of some works I had seen by Joseph Beuys that were also very prosaic. I think the difference is that Beuys

loaded his objects with symbolic references while I am not doing that.

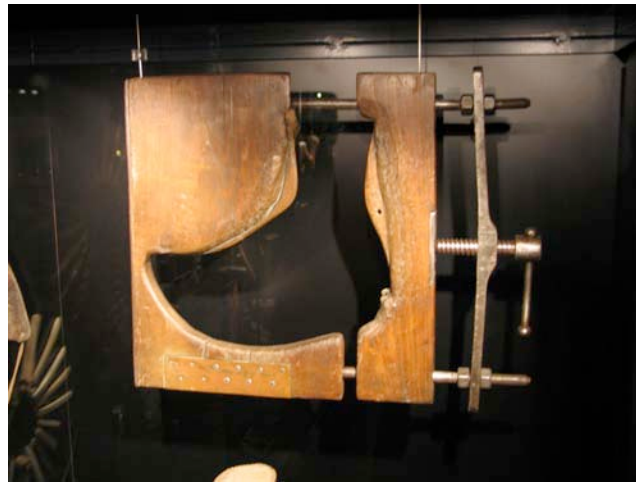


Figure 73: Le Musée des Outils – Troyes

Pat is a very successful tool artwork in terms of this research because it does look like a real tool, it has an outmoded and appealing style, and yet it resists having any useful function applied to it. The handle is based on a carving knife and it tempts the viewer to pick it up and turn it around to inspect the sculpture. The handle on this sculpture is a very strong attractor, more so than on the previous work. The tool has a passing resemblance to a human foot both in shape and scale. The moving steel element draws our attention to the round end and the small stepped part at the toe. These inter-relationships, along with the irresistible handle, engage the viewer in an imaginative questioning of how it might work and what it might do. At this point, in line with the Heideggarian concept of the broken hammer, we are engaged with the thing as being present at hand but we are directing our attention towards shifting the relationship to it being ready at hand.⁷⁴ When it is present we are examining it, this is a scientific attitude, and when it is ready we are just using it and it drops away

⁷⁴ This follows the story associated with Martin Heidegger about using a hammer to drive in nails, where we are relatively unaware of the hammer, and the ontological shift that takes place when the handle breaks and we begin to consider the hammer more closely to understand what has gone wrong. F Krell p.19.

from the forefront of awareness, this is a normal or usual attitude towards things in the world.

This concept of a shifting relationship to being is important to the way I have considered my artwork. Illusory artworks are working well when the illusion is convincing and the viewer sees the image and not the materials. Many artists through the Modern period and beyond have played on this by shifting the balance between making their presence visible in the artwork. This is most obvious in Impressionist paintings and sculptures where the marks of the artist's hand are left. When an illusory artwork is not working well the illusion is not convincing and we only see a clumsy attempt. Michael Fried addresses these issues in his writing on theatricality in *Art and Objecthood*.

My artworks play with this shift also by being positioned on the verge of contemporary art. This is why I have researched our current preconceptions and expectations about contemporary art, in an effort to find how to be at its margins. One of the prevailing ideas in contemporary art is that we use it to communicate, thus if the artwork is working well we are understanding what the artist is expressing. This causes me to wonder whether it follows that we are then, as a viewer, using the artwork in a ready at hand sense and are reading it but not addressing it's more complex being. This would be analogous to reading a book or watching television but not considering the technology and materials at work in these things.

With my sculptures I have sought to resist the viewer's ability to read them as devices for communication and in this way they don't work as we might expect them to and thus we are drawn into questioning the complexity of the work's being. They resist through my not thinking about them as a means for expression, I do not intend for them to communicate my thoughts or beliefs to others even though others might be able to decode ideas about me through the work. The

artworks are not designed or directed towards a symbolic position in the same way that a hammer can be appropriated as a symbol but it is not made for that end. The way that the sculptures are displayed as isolated and unique objects in the gallery discourages a narrative reading between them other than the obvious one that they are all part of the same body of work. It is my understanding that we construct meaningful relationships between things or the elements of a thing to create a meaningful reading. Communication requires relationships between a number of agreed upon symbols to be passed between people, this can be via symbolic objects as well as being more direct.

I have also worked to resist them being seen as abstract aesthetic compositions by giving them a functional and familiar look which is at odds with the international modern abstract style of a uniform surface and a coherent, often figurative, form as we might find with Henry Moore or Jean Arp for example. The sculptures are also designed to resist being approached as minimalist, through being constructed of many parts and making a point of their complexity. They also resist the Gestalt ideas of Robert Morris, where he wished for the viewer to take it all in at once. My sculptures need to be examined from a variety of viewpoints to become known.

If anything my artworks are closest to the Post-Minimalist position of Richard Deacon, Tony Cragg, Martin Puryear, Anish Kapoor and others, which I understand as adopting a liberated attitude towards materials, methods of construction and subject matter. There is obviously a debt here to earlier stylistic and theoretical progress in visual art. It was through Richard Deacon's work that I became interested in reading Martin Heidegger, however I did not learn anything about Heidegger's ideas through Deacon's work or writing but was rather alerted to the fact he had been reading Heidegger in the 1970's and the title of Heidegger's essay, *The origin of the Work of Art*, caught my eye. Thus I can truly say that much of this research

has developed from a relationship with Post-Minimalist sculpture and yet it has taken place in the context of recent developments in contemporary arts practices. I admire the physical properties of Post-Minimal sculpture and am aware of the content and context driven aspects of contemporary art in terms of installation, ephemeral art, relational aesthetics, multi-disciplinary practice, and new media.

Another prevailing idea about contemporary art is that it can reveal, represent or reflect ideas and issues relevant to contemporary culture and society. This may take the form of a critique on post-colonialism, consumer culture, globalisation, gender issues, race issues, pop culture, mass media, technology, religion and so on. I have attempted to make work that does not make a plain reference to contemporary cultural issues, it is not functioning as a thing designed to instigate social dialogue about something. If anything, some of my artworks may be pulled in to service as devices to raise the issue of a current alienation from outmoded craft skills such as coopering. I admit that this could be a link that people might make between several of the works and that they might surmise that this is what it is about. However I have not intended this and to the trained eye my craft skills are not very well developed and my methods of construction are certainly not pure in an archaic sense. I have a pragmatic relationship to my tools and materials that is not limited by any allegiance to outmoded techniques or to fine craftsmanship.

The third of the tool series is *Shave*. I often use the hand plane to make my sculptures and so it a familiar object for me to begin with as a reference. Actually the only aspects of this piece that are closely related to the hand plane are the handles and the metal plate on the base. The rest of it is an imaginative design. The absurd idea of having two cutting edges facing each other, especially since the handles indicate one direction for pushing/cutting, is the clue to it not being a real tool. It seems to work less well than *Pat* in terms of this project. This could be because it seems to sit too close to the familiar

for those who do not work with tools and to be too obviously absurd for those who do work with tools. I spent some time and effort in trying to get an authentic style to this one by carefully shaping the handles and adding little decorative brass highlights under them. It was meant to fall into that category of tools that are recently outmoded, well made and precise as opposed to the everyday cheaper ones. In this sense I could have gone much further than I have with the decorative elements but I don't think these would have helped to shift it from it's current situation very much and I might have become involved in an endless seeking for ever finer decorative touches.

Final Cause is a technical development of *Whatever*. I hoped that by introducing a complete rounded end and subtle curves in different directions that this piece might become more visually dynamic than it's predecessor. It does not appear to be this though. I have also opened up the slits in the joins in places where there already were small cracks to give the viewer much greater access to the inside than previously in these celery top pine coopered works. The inside was painted silver to increase the reflective light and also to provide a surprise for the casual viewer who I have observed is generally surprised to find silver paint in there. The rubbed back white paint on the exterior was applied with the intention of increasing the viewer's appreciation of the linear nature of the sculpture. Earlier works had successfully adopted a smooth wooden finish and it seemed time for an experimental change to another kind of finish. The white paint was surprisingly strong at reflecting light and had to be rubbed back considerably so it did not overwhelm the exposed timber beneath it, which I still wanted the viewer to see. It was with an aim to creating further complexity in the work that these layers of paint were applied and the holes gouged in the sides. Feedback so far has been varied, some immediately like the work while others, particularly those who are more familiar with my practice, are more ambivalent and tend to

prefer the simpler and more highly finished works like *Whatever* to the more disturbing *Final Cause*.

Final Cause was named after Aristotle's 4 Causes, the final one of which is the purpose for which a thing exists. This suggests that a thing's purpose for being is actually a cause that generates it. Here I am having a private joke in the sense that this work has no purpose for being, other than to be a work of art, and thus raises the question of whether this idea of Aristotle's is always applicable, however I should add that I am in no way seriously adopting a critique of Aristotle here. More than this I imagine most viewers of the sculpture will not be familiar with Aristotle and so will find the title uninformative with the hint that it might be meaningful if only they knew how. This is not an act of smarty-pants elitism but an example of titles that are poetic rather than explanatory.

The sculpture was designed to be either propped up against a wall, jut out from a pillar or wall, sit on the floor or stand erect from the floor. It has a straight thin edge that is in logical conflict with the slumped curved round end. I have gone to some trouble here to create a number of gradual curves in this work that would have been more pronounced had it been made wider than it is long, or at least equal lengths to create a square form. However I chose to stop short of that and present it as a pointed wedge that was not too bulky to transport and that would not be too heavy to mount off a pillar or wall if I chose. I am pleased with the final result and see the work as a terrific experiment for me in extending cooping. These experiments may not be obvious to the viewer, but that is not my intention, it is not a device to reveal virtuosity in cooped forms. For me it is a record of what happened when I decided to shave more off one side of a stave than the other and to start to play with multiple circles as reference points in the form. In this work there are three circle centres that are reference points for the cooped bends. In the past I have only worked with one except in *Things that you don't know you don't*

know about where I first experimented with multiple reference points.



Figure 74: *Meant to be* (in progress)



Figure 75: *Meant to be* (in progress)

Meant to be is the final coopered sculpture made in this research project. It is the largest and most complex coopered piece I have attempted and it exhibits many of the features gained through earlier experiments with coopering. The technical challenges have been raised elsewhere in this paper and so here I will focus on other matters.

The two central concerns for me with this sculpture were to test and extend technical developments in coopering and to create an inaccessible interior that makes clear its denial. The overhanging lip announces an opening to the interior, which is then barred by the

tight curve and the interior wooden blocks. The fibre-glass chopped matt used for the interior has been allowed to protrude beyond the straight edges of the wooden blocks leaving a jagged edge that suggests the organic. This organic reading is further enhanced by the slug-like exterior form that suggests movement through the different curves and the round body. I know that I have used several organic descriptors here and that suggests a leaning towards a life-like representation but this piece can equally be considered in terms of air conditioning duct systems for example. It is the sculptures property of oscillating between these different readings that interests me.

The decision to exhibit the work sitting up on its side was to allow the viewer full access to the exterior form and to be able to follow the curve if they wanted. If it was sitting flat on the ground one aspect of the curve would be obscured from view. This sets up tension in making the exterior of the sculpture fully available, if a person is willing to walk around it, and yet making the interior partly available yet mostly inaccessible. I also wanted to raise the question of where the centre of the work is and where its inside is, through creating the large central hole and also the interior of the tube. This gives the work both a centre and an inside. There is also the opportunity to see through the work and use it as a frame, this will be the case at Werribee Park I imagine. The gentle curved form provides a perfect opportunity to stand the work up on three points that will allow a stable base. I suppose the element that comes to the fore with this work is its strong formal, physical presence and yet simultaneously there is not much there – just thin bent pieces of wood – the work is mostly air.

Lure exhibits a relatively strong reference to the visceral with its pink interior and golden exterior glistening as if wet. This reference was unintended and arose as the result of a series of decisions through the development of the sculpture. At one point it was going to be painted metallic lime green which would have shifted the reading

considerably I imagine. The fact remains however that what is exhibited is visceral and thus it raises issues about why I am presenting this reference to the, presumably human body. The answer is; I don't know, and that it might potentially be an expression of my unconscious desires. Whatever the source of the form, it seems to offer the viewer substantial possibilities for an imaginative reading. The glossy reflective surface with its underlying colour and beneath that the glued segments of MDF create a multi-layered thing that opens to the viewer its protected interior, which actually holds nothing more than what we can see on the outside already.



Figure 76: *Lure*, 2005

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this research project I was uncertain about my art practice. Through the development of a philosophical understanding I have been able to find a purpose behind the work that I feel satisfied with. This purpose is to work towards attuning people to a different sensitivity to the things they encounter, to make artworks that act to resist the usual attitudes of people toward things and to allow the sense of truth Heidegger outlines to appear through the indeterminacy of my artworks.

I have noticed that the very thing I am attempting to achieve with this body of sculpture is also the thing that has caused me to pursue this research – ambiguity. It is the ambiguous nature of practicing contemporary art, where almost anything or any activity can be chosen as the next artwork, that has led me to narrow most of my practice down to the exploration of coopered wooden structures in order to achieve clarity and depth. The uncertainty I felt in the face of too many options encouraged me to seek a means to stabilise my practice and my understanding of the art I produce. Ironically, it is this sense of uncertainty and ambiguity that I am hoping to instigate in the viewer with my artworks. Thus one of the problems I have tried to resolve through this research has found its answer through opening up a similar problem for the viewer of my work.

The sculptural development of the coopering process has led to unexpected outcomes in the artworks produced. It has been through the development of ways to bend, shape and join laths of wood in combination with creative designs to suit and extend the technique that unique sculptural forms have been produced. The sculptures raise questions about numerous aspects of their being for the viewer. The artworks hover between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the way that prosaic material, such as wood, has been used to create

unusual complex curved forms that reference the world of functional design but seem to have no particular, non-art, function. Often the artworks also recall the human body, the industrial past, and animals or plants, and yet they simultaneously avoid being reduced to any simple act of mimesis.

The artworks draw attention to their being as things that are artworks. The sculptures have been made and exhibited in the context of contemporary art. They can cause the viewer to wonder about how contemporary artworks are supposed to function and about what our expectations of contemporary artworks are by resisting some of the common functions of contemporary art. These are: to reflect and or express ideas about aspects of the present culture, to generate dialogue about aspects of culture, to communicate, and to act as a force in social relations. My artworks, arguably, could be claimed to be acting in these ways but primarily and intentionally they act to draw attention to themselves rather than refer to cultural issues, however they also avoid being read as autonomous aesthetic modernist artworks by retaining obvious links to familiar things.

Martin Heidegger points out that the question of being has been largely overlooked in our culture for more than 2000 years and that this has allowed a problematic relationship to being to develop. This relationship is one where the world is encountered primarily as a resource. We predominantly operate within an ontology that sets up an ordering, calculating and controlling relationship with things and this precludes us having other kinds of relationships with them. It is the narrowness of our ontology that my artwork is designed to address through resisting the viewer's efforts at reducing the sculptures to resources. They do this through maintaining an open ambiguity that is achieved through their oscillation between familiar categories of being.

This focus on the being of the sculptural thing continues the dialogue already in play since the Minimal sculpture of the 1960's. This dialogue was then taken up again in the 1980's largely by a number of British sculptors. I have investigated what happens when a sculpture draws near to familiar things and yet maintains enough distance to excite interest in it's being rather than its referential qualities. I have designed and constructed sculptures that often announce to the viewer that parts of the artwork are inaccessible and I have used complex construction processes to further increase both the intrigue and the sense of not knowing in the viewer. The artworks range across a variety of scales, techniques and materials, some actually are representational while others are purely developments of technique. Some of the early artworks do address social/historical issues while the later ones seem to be socially irrelevant.

The artworks function to raise the question of their being in the viewer. They often incite questions such as: what is it, what does it do, what is it for, what is it meant to be, and how was it made? The hand-made complex constructed form of the sculptures draws people in to a relationship that engages the limits of their knowledge.

The body of work produced through this research has arisen through investigating the ontological significance of sculptural objects through formal (technical), historical (recent art) and theoretical (philosophical) means. Contemporary sculptures are a subset of the larger set contemporary art. Contemporary art evades definition and yet dominant trends are discernable. My sculptures are contemporary artworks and yet they operate differently than many contemporary artworks do. This difference hinges on my interest in the ontological rather than the cultural/social. The research has brought together disparate fields (Heidegger's ontology, coopering, tools, and contemporary art) in order to discover an alternative way to make and think about contemporary sculpture.

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Appendix Two: List of Illustrations

Part Two: Context

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detail of *Whatever*, 2003
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Figure 2
detail of *Final Cause*, 2005
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Our Relationship with Thing's

Figure 3
Cleaner, 2003
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Figure 4
Agitator, 2005
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Figure 5
Grand Tourer, 2004
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Invitation, 2005
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Invitation, 2005
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6.5 Days Per Week, 2002
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Figure 9
Whatever, 2003
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Sculpture What is it?

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Figure 14
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Figure 15
 Clamping and Gluing in the studio, 2005
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Figure 16
 Bending and Gluing in the studio, 2005
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Figure 17
 Before joining the two halves, 2005
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Figure 18
 Installation of *Things that you don't know that you don't know about*
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Contemporary Art: What is it?

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Figure 22

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Photographed at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, 2003 - 2004

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Scanned from: Thompson, J, Tazzi, Pl & Schjeldahl, P 1995, *Richard Deacon*, Phaidon, London, p.91.

Figure 25

Breed, 1989, Richard Deacon

Photographed at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, 2003 - 2004

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Figure 26

Passage de la mer rouge, 2003. Richard Deacon.

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Passage de la mer rouge, 2003. Richard Deacon.

Photographed at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, 2003 - 2004

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Figure 28

White Dark 1995, Anish Kapoor

Scanned from: Bhabha, H & Tazzi, P 1998 *Anish Kapoor*, University of California Press, Berkley, p. 55.

Figure 29

Spirit, 1994. Mel Chin.

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Figure 30

Pod, 2000. Donald Fortescue.

Downloaded from: Adamson, G 2001, 'Designing Futures: Recent work by Donald Fortesque', *American Craft*, June/July

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Figure 31

Old Mole, 1985. Martin Puryear

Scanned from: Benezra, J 1991, *Martin Puryear*, Thames and Hudson, London, p.98.

Figure 32

Time Suds, 1993. Tony Cragg.

Scanned from: Friedel, H (ed) 1998 *Anthony Cragg*, Cantz Verlag, Munich, p.113.

Figure 33

Synchronous Time, 2003. David Jensen.

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Figure 34

Calvin's Tools, 1995, Doug Cocker.

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Figure 35

Translator, 1994. Glenn Dunn

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Model, 2004
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Things for looking at other things, 2004
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The bending/moulding frame
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Bending the staves for *Invitation*, 2005
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Prior to joining the two halves
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