

EXCHANGEABILITY : Sculptural alternatives through the
process of material embellishment .

by *Ann*

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Submitted in the fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art.

Signed statement of originality

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EXCHANGEABILITY : Sculptural alternatives through the process of Material Embellishment .

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This research project is based around the proposal that we are living in an increasingly industrial world. The physical structure of our environment is created and recreated so quickly that it is difficult to appreciate and understand, what is, or has been fabricated. Bound by the functional capacity of what is produced, our understanding of materials and objects is limited. This suggests that consideration of alternative meanings and appreciation of everyday items is also limited.

By creating sculptural forms using materials from my immediate manufactured environment, I investigate aspects of the world; seemingly ever present yet simultaneously dismissed.

To revisit and work with industrial matter has required a specific type of objectivity; the approach of an outsider viewing the surrounding environment for the first time. This approach has been influenced by time spent in West Africa in 2000, an experience that is discussed in my exegesis and has been crucial to my research.

In this body of work, a process of material selection has taken place, where a sensing of the physical possibilities of the material is woven with an understanding of its sculptural potential.

The techniques I have used and the configuration of each formal object have grown from a direct understanding of collected samples. This has been pursued through scale, specific material combinations, repetition, covering, cleaning, and exposing material. Each work contains metaphorical

qualities, yet all pieces have in common an aesthetic of restraint and simplicity. How to maintain the material in its most fundamental sense has been the main focus of the work.

The project is significant to the field because it contributes to a discussion on what is potentially overlooked in the everyday and how this familiarity can be re-presented and re-interpreted through sculpture.

This project is contextualized through the work of Marcel Duchamp, Anthony Cragg, Eva Hesse and Simone Mangos.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background

Traveller's Response

Travel Outcomes

The Outsider

Everyday

The Problem with the Insider

Observation Development and Discovery

The Nature of this Project

Introduction

This research project is an investigation into the parameters of a process- driven methodology for constructing objects utilizing materials from the urban environment. This process involves the gathering of everyday items and materials, observed and subsequently translated into three-dimensional and two-dimensional works.

The question raised in pursuing this project is:

- Can everyday materials be presented as formal sculptural objects that trigger an altered appreciation of the original material: moving beyond the familiarity of materials and objects?

It is my intention to test and re-present materials in such a way that the viewer is led to consider everyday objects in a new context.

Background

In 2000, after completing my Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree, I worked for two months in the Cote D'Ivoire, West Africa. Here, a strong traditional non-western culture has combined with that of the French colonialists. The result is an interesting blend of French and African influences. Everyday African traditions have fused with western objects; baguettes dipped in condensed milk and instant coffee for breakfast with traditional plantain and egg for lunch.

Within this complex environment, even the most basic essential item can assume a particular significance. Simple objects such as western hair rollers, for example, become important status symbols and are worn proudly each day. This is an African value system that transports objects from the western mentality of the throwaway, to items of greater significance. They become symbols of potency.

The prominence placed on particular items is based on three factors

- the difficulties of African life, including the constant threat of poor health and scarcity of money. These issues mean that objects basic to our culture are, there, highly treasured.
- the impact of newspapers, the Internet and television expose people to the perceived glamour of western culture and the goods that go with it. Western life is viewed as being easy because of all the benefits we are seen to enjoy including money and good health. This is attractive because life for the majority in Africa revolves around simple, basic survival. To have a few western items such as hair rollers offers a taste of all that is foreign *and* the freedom associated with it.
- cultural traditions of West Africa encompass a keen and acute sense of the aesthetic properties of items; an appreciation and enjoyment of visual qualities of anything from plastic wash basins [1] to traditional cloth.

Pride in the appearance, of not only themselves but all that surrounds them, is extremely important. Traditional fetish¹ objects, for example, are made to perform a specific function. Careful consideration is paid to the visual qualities, as the appearance of the object is integral to the working of the fetish. In a similar vein, western items are often seen as being potent because of elements such as form, color, and texture. Often these items are used purely for their visual qualities, without reference to the original function. Safety pins become beads for a necklace, bottle tops are used to adorn wire carry baskets, and bright orange plastic garbage bags are treasured.



Plate 1. Colourful plastic washbasins for sale in Abidjan, 2000.

Traveller's Response

As a foreigner, West Africa was an extreme contrast to my home and I thrived on this difference. At the end of each day I would sit, exhilarated, dazed and silent, trying to come to grips with everything I had seen, heard and smelt.

¹ An African fetish categorises any object credited with magic power. They are used to conjure away evil and eliminate chance. Because a definite result is expected, the belief in the fetish becomes a faith.



Plate 2. Wood stacks for cooking, line the banks of Mopti River, Mali, 2000.

All that I witnessed was new to my senses and far beyond my life's experiences. Each day presented culturally specific experiences from which I was able to locate the differences between African and Australian life.

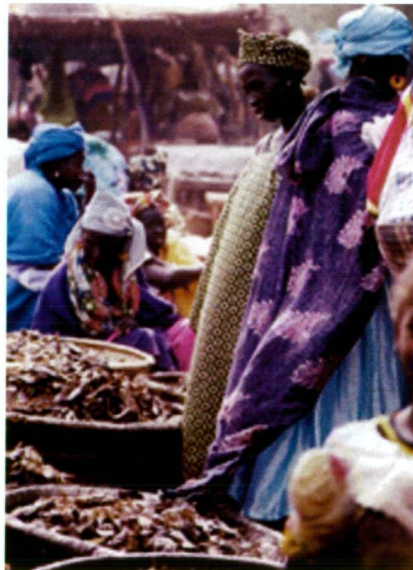


Plate 3. Colourful 'Fulani' woman buying dried fish at Mopti Market, Mali, 2000.

The vibrant culture and the people of West Africa have an honourable sense of community and a particular spirit that I hadn't witnessed before. It was quite an eye-opener to be constantly forced to compare this vibrancy to what felt at the time, my own controlled and superficial culture. An outsider,

looking in to a remarkable culture, I observed daily life with a new awareness. Hungry for further information, my observation included the objects and elements that constitute part of everyday life and that in my own environment, I had taken for granted. The combination of water and plastic is an example.²

In West Africa water is scarce and therefore highly prized. Valuable uncontaminated drinking water is sold in small plastic bags (10cmx6cm thin clear plastic tubing, heat-sealed at either end). I was drawn to these evocative packages of water - transparent parcels of molten light. The stunning simplicity of the water bags was strong, revealing distortion and magnification of the surroundings through transparency.

My intense fascination with these basic qualities made me aware of the aesthetic value of such a simple package. This reaction was intriguing as there was nothing special about these packages *per se*, yet I saw in them the potential for a sculptural material that could be used in my art practice.

This opened a treasure box of ideas not considered before; familiar materials and objects utilized for their visual and aesthetic qualities, beyond the boundaries of normal use and outside conventional understanding of the object.

The more visual information I sought, the more I found myself having to examine and question responses to familiar objects within my culture; and to examine the culture itself.

²

In metropolitan Tasmania, I turn on a tap and water flows from it in whatever quantity I want. I can do this anytime, anywhere.

Travel Outcomes

Questioning how we appreciate familiar items heavily influenced my visual arts practice within an Honours course undertaken in 2000. This body of work centred on transforming elements of the everyday into sculpture. I looked at and utilized materials relevant to my particular surroundings, but with specific focus on exposing the alluring and intriguing light conducting qualities of water. The water was contained within transparent heavy-duty plastic [4]. Simple welded structures held large quantities of water, which allowed for the movement of light through the liquid, creating effects of magnification and distortion.

All my work from this period was approached with an aesthetic of restraint and simplicity. This resulted in a process of paring back material and structure so that the work was stripped of any extraneous components. This way, the integrity of the material was not undermined, as the simplicity of the material itself became the strength of the formal object.

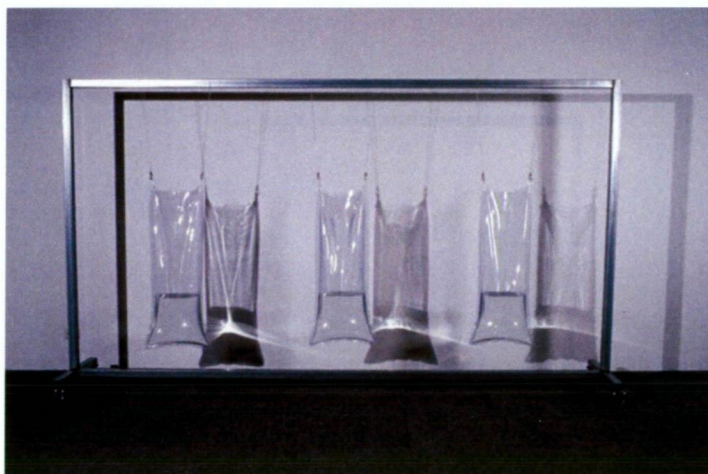


Plate 4. *Liquid Calm*. Trudi Brinckman, 2000, 3m x 2m x 20 cm.

The Outsider

My travels in West Africa introduced a different perspective to seeing and understanding my environment. Travel of any nature allows for an opportunity to be exposed to the everyday life of a different culture. It encourages our acceptance of the new and unfamiliar in our lives. Because it is foreign, travellers expect to be surprised by what surrounds them and from this change in expectations, a specific form of alertness develops. As A.J. Liebling wrote, 'It is the outsider who sees the environment; as the islander sees the outline of the distant mainland.'³ A traveller, a stranger, an outsider, views a new environment in an objective way, with particular clarity.

What then of the environment we think of as our own? The familiar surrounds us within our daily lives and because we are accustomed to it we take it for granted. Only when we have the opportunity to see *as an outsider*, do we learn to understand and appreciate it more deeply. The view of an outsider can be paralleled to the objective position in which British sculptor Tony Cragg places himself to better perceive the world around him in order to collect materials for his sculptures. Ulrich Wilmes states that Cragg 'demands a distanced observation of one's own surroundings in order to be able to better perceive and understand one's position within it'.⁴ Wilmes goes on to talk of Cragg's technique of impartial observation, which draws parallels back to the removed position of the outsider; the traveller observing.

With these notions in mind, I look at objects around me, as would an outsider observing something new. In particular I have considered banal,⁵ or familiar components of our everyday

³ Liebling quoted by Edmund Carpenter in 'The islander', *They Became what they Beheld*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1970. No pagination.

⁴ Wilmes, U. 'Anthony Cragg - Living in a Material World' in Cragg, *Anthony Cragg - Material-Object- Form* 1998, p.149

⁵ Commonplace and trivial, 'To be defeated by banality is to be confounded by ignorance, and that is a problem for all of us.' first

lives for my sculpture; everyday commonplace things that have a prescribed function and purpose, such as plastic bags, seat belts and electrical cord.

The issue for me is how do we appreciate and learn from the familiar world of our home environment as insiders of that cultural system?

Everyday

In *Every day*, the Eleventh Biennale of Sydney, Nikos Papastergiadis writes about the refreshing relief provided by artists with an interest in the observation of their environment. He talks of the link between art and life being provided by a foundation of 'materiality [in] both art practice and experience...(which drops) bookish concerns with text and brings art into direct contact with life'.⁶ Artists such as Martin Creed and Colin Duncan exemplify this approach, making direct works that provide a bridge between objects, life and art. Martin Creed for example uses basic materials such as blue tack or balloons, which are transformed into minimal space interventions, challenging the definition of art. Colin Duncan uses recycled cardboard and paper to construct installations, which entice the viewers' sense of sight and touch.⁷

My interest lies in the actual physical products of the everyday. For me, the use of everyday items within art practice forces the consideration of our place; our physical contribution; our attitude in the world. I observe that we are surrounded by function-based objects and materials that define our every-day experiences; items integral to our culture, essential working

published in *Tony Cragg*, exh.cat., Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover 1985, quoted from 'Preconditions' in *Anthony Cragg-Material-Object-Form*, p. 60

⁶ Papastergiadis, Nikos. 'Everything that surrounds – Art, Politics and theories of the everyday', *Every day - Eleventh Biennale of Sydney*, Sydney, 1998, p. 22

⁷ Martin Creed: Born 1968 in England, lives and works in London. Colin Duncan: Born 1958 in Australia, lives and works in Melbourne.

components of western society. Beyond normal context and established function, these objects hold little significance and cease to have relevance for most us. Within contemporary western culture, we tend to fashion a world for our specific needs and status. We surround ourselves with objects that aid our definition of self and ease our everyday living. We tend to not look beyond the position of our own comfort and prestige.

The Problem with the Insider

This attitude potentially stifles our vision and produces a narrowed perception that assists in the diminishment of our sense of discovery. The danger is that we may stop noticing things in the world that no longer meet our specific criteria for defining self. Writer, Peter Schjeldahl sums this up by referring to 'an atomized society numbed to the spirit both in things and in ourselves'.⁸ This is an issue I aim to confront within my practice.

Observation Development and Discovery

I think of the keen eyes of a child. Always inquisitive, observing their surroundings; for children, discovery is vital.

As a child, my sense of exploration found me picking up objects such as sheep jawbones with teeth still intact, rescuing them from neglect and storing them in boxes under my bed.

These things became valuable to me and were frequently examined, played with and observed. As memories, I stored a mass of visual information, related to these strange objects.⁹

⁸ Schjeldahl, 'Craggs Big Bang' in *Tony Cragg Sculpture 1975-1990*, London, Thames and Hudson in assoc with Newport Harbour Art Museum, 1991, p. 74

⁹ Later in my twenties on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, I found two goat's teeth, which triggered my childhood memories of finding an extraordinary item and also recalled a method by which I would observe and question. Back at the Hostel, the teeth were scrubbed over and over with a toothbrush lathered with toothpaste and then carefully 'enhanced' with a nail file.

Their importance however was not solely based upon my handling of them. The objects also enabled me to consider the environment from which they came and the history of that environment. The object's location was always a key factor. A chance finding from which I could register a specific sense of place; the existence of it, the existence of myself, the similarities and the contrasts was important. Where do we fit in the scheme of things?

In *They became what they Beheld*, anthropologist Edmund Carpenter comments on the rapidly changing modern world. Accompanied by stunning photography of western and non-western everyday life, Carpenter provides short yet powerful anecdotes on facets of modern life, its hardship and pleasure, movement and stability.

Carpenter, in talking of the 'wide-eyed wonder of the child', states, 'they swarmed all over every problem instead of beaming a ray of specialized knowledge at it'.¹⁰ Children question with all their senses, habitual thinking does not restrict them.

Carpenter also uses the term 'organized ignorance' when describing an attitude necessary for navigating the unfamiliar. 'If you organize your ignorance, taking the situation as an overall project, probing all aspects at the same time, you find unexpected apertures, vistas, breakthroughs.'¹¹ This curiosity encourages confidence; a sense of place and knowledge, yet this same inquisitiveness is easily crushed as a child accepts the norms of society. All too often however, as our life progresses, our sense of wonder has the potential to silently slip away. For me then, the issue is, as adults, how do we re-activate and develop curiosity?

¹⁰ Carpenter, 'wide-eyed wonder of the child', *They Became what they Beheld*, (no pag.)

¹¹ Carpenter, 'wide-eyed wonder of the child', *They Became what they Beheld*

The Nature of this Project

In Anthony Cragg's lecture at the Kroller-Muller Museum, at the time of the Anthony Cragg retrospective, he argues that our understanding of material is an evolving process. This continuum extends beyond the limits of physical material qualities to include the metaphysical and as our experience of material deepens, its eventual use becomes an extension of ourselves. He goes on to say, 'The material is what we are a result of, this is where we came from and this is where we will find ourselves. We define ourselves and our cultures in the material.'¹² This observation helps to place my own project in context. Drawing on my childhood explorations of observing and gathering visual information, together with my West African experiences, I am endeavoring to push aside function-orientated boundaries to question the possibilities and value of materials and whether we can make discoveries from common items in our familiar world. Carpenter describes this eloquently when referring to the truths found in *things* when function is removed. In referring to trash he writes, 'junk is declassified and all its potentials, hitherto largely concealed by specialization, become accessible'.¹³ By pushing myself to see as an outsider, I try to retain curiosity in face of the familiar; to declassify; to rediscover new visual readings from layers of matter.

¹² Notes for a lecture given at the Kroller-Muller Museum, Arnheim 1995 quoted in Cragg, 'Sculpture -Material Extensions', in *Anthony Cragg Material - Object - Form*, Stadtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus Munchen, 1998 p. 74.

¹³ Carpenter, 'Obsolescence', *They Became what they Beheld*

CHAPTER TWO

How the work was pursued

Observation

Material

Process

Formal outcome

How the work was pursued

Simple processes ...with materials
nobody else wants.
Works in which I learnt from the
materials...Meanings I intended.
Meanings which surprised me.¹⁴

This section is intended to indicate a sculptural process that has evolved throughout the project. Key aspects included are:
Observation, Material, Process and Formal outcome.

Observation

I constantly seek everyday materials and objects for my sculpture. This has dictated a distinct way of observing my environment and has involved a definite conscious decision to look beyond the constraints of normal daily vision. It has been a continual process unbounded by specific time or place that has facilitated exposure to the random experiences of each day.

¹⁴

Schjeldahl, 'Cragg's big bang' in *Tony Cragg Sculpture 1975-1990*
p. 50

Exposure to chance observations, unexpected objects and materials: the exhilaration of discovery.

Intense observation has provided me with an opportunity to see relationships perhaps overlooked by others. Gradually, it has revealed the links between object and environment and my possible connections with both. It has become a central part of my sculptural exploration.

Material

I select materials primarily on the basis of distinct visual qualities and physical properties. Yet function cannot be entirely separated from this operation. For example, the transparency of clear plastic bags reveals an interior. Or seat belts, pulled tight to restrict; and from the material's contact with the body, smells and stains may develop.

Many objects and materials in our environment exist purely because of their function. They are designed for a specific purpose and this dictates our use of them. A detergent bottle, nails, concrete, plumbing clamps, a ladder - all of these have been developed for the role they will serve. I have found that working and thinking beyond the confines of this function, while at the same time acknowledging it, has created an interesting situation; in other words, I acknowledge function as a device for developing ideas that are metaphorical extensions of the original usage.¹⁵

Combined with this view of function, aesthetic qualities unique to the object and integral to its entity have added context in my work. I am fascinated by common electrical cord for example. I see cords that are thin and flexible or stiff and heavy,

¹⁵

Nails for example; a small device capable of joining and stabilizing large structures and forms. Piercing through, joining and strengthening. I see nails as the cartilage of our constructed world.

manufactured in various colors ranging from subtle copper to vivid yellow. They transport energy, information and data, linking us to each other by fast and reliable communication and providing a bridge for us to access everything that constitutes our technology-based society. Through them our everyday demands are met in a speedy and efficient manner and we are comforted by this familiar convenience.¹⁶

However, many of the benefits we rely on and enjoy are derived from a source of power that is often visually inaccessible to us. I am drawn to the idea of this invisible force that surrounds us, connects us - disconnects us. We aim to create clean aesthetic surroundings where machines and gadgets just miraculously 'do stuff'. Nevertheless the reality is that most rooms contain an array of colored cords hidden or concealed under carpet or in wall cavities. For me electrical cords can be seen as veins of the human body [5], or line drawings that map their environment. I imagine a raw cluster of linear forms that map a whole building floor with a push and pull of energy running from room to room.

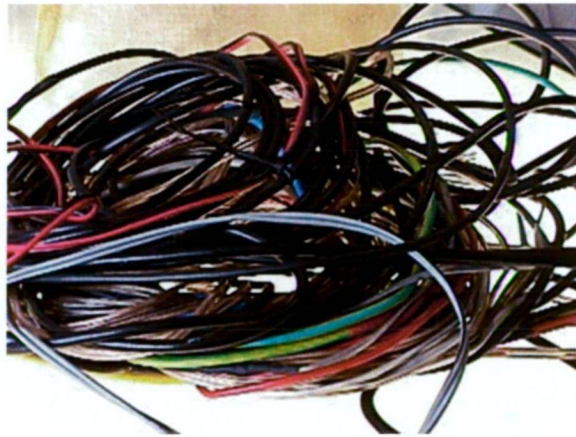


Plate 5. Second hand electrical cord – Trudi Brinckman

¹⁶

Seen in an extreme form in the following case history, “Psychologists were recently called to aid a boy who couldn’t move or speak unless an electric cord, attached to his body was turned on”. Carpenter, ‘They Became what they Beheld’, *They Became what they Beheld*.

My criteria for selecting material acknowledges function in terms of metaphysical extensions, however the formal elements of the material - form and surface, transparency, weight and solidity provide the initial catalyst whereby connections are made.

Process

Collecting and storing samples, enables a process of selective accumulation which has allowed me to observe and respond to the materials removed from their conventional context. My studio is a storehouse of collected materials that adorn the walls, shelves and floor [6]. Periodically I arrange and rearrange them; studying their make-up and specific characteristics. Through this I realize the potential for the material beyond the parameters of its normal function.



Plate 6. Studio – Trudi Brinckman, 2000.

Similar to the practice of architect Louis Kahn who ‘asked a brick what it wanted to be’,¹⁷ I investigate materials by trying to think *through* their basic structure, finding out what they can do. It is a process of re-developing connections by understanding qualities and potential at a physical level.

Play has been a crucial aspect of this method, and has facilitated the freedom of being lost *in* the material without preconceived conscious thoughts dictating my involvement. Working intuitively constitutes a sensing of possibilities, of random thoughts and reactions that pass through my mind, a jumble of non-coherent responses, the conscious and the subconscious symbiotically fused. Jackson Pollock wrote of the intuitive process of painting; ‘when I’m in a painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing....because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through’.¹⁸ This is comparable to my experience where I recognize and respect the strength of the material. I am aware of qualities not yet understood; in other words, it is not until I play with the material that I understand more fully a seemingly inexhaustible range of possibilities.

Drawing has become another method of working intuitively [7]
Drawing formulates a facet of play, where I gain an understanding of the elements of the material that I am working with on a two dimensional level. This allows for exploration beyond familiar and the immediate.

¹⁷ Cameron Bruhn, ‘The Architecture of Being’, *Artichoke*, Issue number 2, 2003, p. 115.

¹⁸ Pollock, Quoted by Carpenter, Carpenter, ‘Step Right In’, *They Became What they Beheld*, [no pag.]



Plate 7. Cord Drawing – Trudi Brinckman, 2003, A3.

From these various stages of examination I gradually develop a sensitivity toward each material and this has been most successful when pursued over time. I notice that each time I come back to re-examine something, new information is highlighted. I have realized that my understanding of chosen materials is in a state of constant flux and the ideas change accordingly.

The incentive to take the material to a sculptural form only manifests when I can see how to use inherent qualities in a direct way that combines integrally with composition, structure and form. This is explained by sculptor Carl Andre: ‘The one thing I learned in my work is that to make the work I wanted to, you couldn’t impose properties on the materials, you had to reveal the properties of that material.’¹⁹ For me, this means that ideas gradually evolve and form is generated from the material itself.

Suddenly, a point is reached where all the considered aspects come together, materials take form through sculpture.

¹⁹

Andre, Carl, *Every day – Eleventh Biennale of Sydney*, Sydney, 1998, p.30.

A key factor running through my work has been the deliberate use of material in its basic form; electrical cord is clearly still electrical cord for example. This involves a continual process of paring back so that the material becomes the main element of the work. Materials used are not altered to the extent that their former context is unrecognizable and the integrity demeaned.

In creating simple forms there is a danger that the resulting object will appear to have been produced without vision, intelligence, or creative thought. To achieve simplicity and maintain integrity requires a process of reduction; to learn and question, and then pare back the elements to an essential minimum. This demands patience, practice and care. Trust and confidence also play a large role. Trust in my judgement and trust in the material as potentially, powerfully simple.

An interesting paradox arises from this approach, in that the work appears to have been produced in a seemingly effortless manner. However, great strength can reside in works that appear to have been made by such simple processes. This is apparent in Simone Mangos' work, for although seemingly effortless, it raises questions (both positive and negative) in relation to its simplicity and this questioning becomes its strength. I recall the strong memory trace left by her works for these reasons.²⁰

20

The opposite of this is where initial appreciation of a piece is based on evidence of the labor that was involved in creating it. If the viewer's first thought revolves around the labour (this not being the artists intention), then the strength of the work and other readings are instantly lost. See pp 32-34 for more about Simone Mangos.

Formal Outcome

I have discovered that the significance of process, observation, material collection and intuitive play, lead to a development in thinking, whereby a new object is defined and re-defined from the original sample. As material directly dictates the final object, an ambiguous form is produced, where the nature of the work is questioned in a variety of ways because it is a familiar material and unfamiliar form simultaneously.

Thompson quotes Umberto Eco from his work, 'Opera Aperta' (The open work) where he discusses the effects of cultural transformation and its affect on art making.

Celebrating the healthy nature of transgression within modern culture, Eco sees information as responsible for progress and the source of appreciation and engagement within a culture. The generation of information is then the foundation for movement away from compliance and conventional reasoning. This is a broadening domain where layers of new evidence build on what is already known and exists as a continual process that is never complete because it challenges itself.

As Thompson argues, art is seen to exist in a similar field;

by constantly frustrating its own rules and conventions; by courting diversity...by continually frustrating normative expectations, it serves to expand and accelerate the flow of information in favour of new codes and new patterns of behavior.²¹

According to Eco, ambiguity in art is an invaluable contributor to this spread of information. He states, 'the more unpredictable a source of information is, the more information it generates'.²² A variety of meaning and information is generated as a product of ambiguous work: where a multitude of meaning can dwell;

²¹ Thompson, Jon. 'The Open Field', *Gravity and Grace: The changing condition of Sculpture 1965-1975*, 1992, p. 25

²² Umberto Eco as quoted in Jon Thompson, 'New Times, New Thoughts, New Sculpture', in *Gravity and Grace*, 1992. p. 26

where predictability has no home and where conventional methods of interpretation become obsolete.

Through a sculptural process, both the material in its original context and the transformed version, have a basis in reality, yet each has its own entity co-existing in the work. They are bound together in a union of change.

CHAPTER THREE

Related Art Practice

Marcel Duchamp

Tony Cragg

Eva Hesse

Simone Mangos

Conclusion

Related Art Practice

Artists who have informed my own work and as a consequence have facilitated an understanding of the location of this sculptural project are discussed in this chapter.

To expand my comprehension of making sculptures from common materials, I have investigated the style and approach of four sculptors. Selection of these particular artists is based around four key areas;

- The use of everyday objects in art practice; Marcel Duchamp.
- Understanding of environment through material; Tony Cragg
- Material sensitivity; Eva Hesse
- The nature of ambiguity in sculpture; Simone Mangos.

Marcel Duchamp

Any discussion on the use of everyday materials within art must include Marcel Duchamp as the pioneer of the found object. He paved the way for alternative critical thinking in the art world, providing intelligent, aesthetic declarations that would

challenge conventional practice. By blurring the boundaries between art and life, Duchamp questioned the definition of art itself. Inquiring if 'one can make works of art which are not works of art...[then] anything could be art or a source for art'.²³

Duchamp introduced three-dimensional everyday objects as art. By inventing the use of the readymade and assisted readymade such as *Fontaine* [8] and *Bicycle Wheel*, he removed these commonplace objects from a conventional everyday classification, taking them to a new dimension within an art context.



Plate 8. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.

In the context of a gallery or museum, Duchamp's readymades were gradually raised to the status of cultural artifacts as opposed to cultural residue. This meant that they were redefined and re-created by the viewer.²⁴

My own interest in Duchamp's work is its passage into art, causing the disintegration of conventional thinking. By

²³ D'Harnoncourt, 'Before The Glass: Reflections on Marcel Duchamp before 1915', in *Duchamp: Exposició organitzada per la Fundació Joan Miró i la Fundació Caixa de Pensions Barcelona*, febrer – març, 1984, p. 34.

²⁴ Duchamp 'The Creative Act' in *Duchamp*, Ibid, p. 12

redefining how our environment can be viewed, he introduced the fact that there is much more to learn and consider from our created world; that boundaries and meanings are not fixed. His works strengthen my commitment and interest in the potential of existing materials and fuels my exploration of making objects from the immediate environment.

Tony Cragg

The desire by artists to address ways of seeing through materials redeveloped as a prevalent art practice from the early 1950s to the present day. In the 1990s the artist Tony Cragg, wanted to provide an honest and engaging dialogue with life - real life as he saw it - through the construction of form.

To achieve this, he centered upon a specific creative experience that observed daily physical matter, bringing alternative readings to its existence through art practice. His sculptural works evolve from man-made and organic debris, (broken glass, plastic bottles, bricks). These are gathered and scrutinized to establish a reconstruction of their basic nature and place in our world.

Cragg talks of a continual cohesion between landscape, figure and object and, by sculpturally working with these elementary groups, he aims to develop a personal understanding of this relationship. He states;

[In] the need to know both objectively and subjectively more about the subtle fragile relationships between us, objects, images and the essential natural processes... it is very important to have first-order experiences - seeing, touching, smelling, and hearing - with objects and images to let that experience register.²⁵

His appetite for knowledge, based around this landscape, figure and object relationship, is highlighted through his installation

Ten Green Bottles [9]. Many of Cragg's works are temporary installations consisting of fragmented objects that are then photographed as the record of their transitory life. *Ten Green Bottles* is testimony to this ephemeral approach; the reproduction of this work consists of broken green glass shards scattered in what appears to be an abandoned space. The space is well lit with natural light, accentuating a dirty white brick wall and concrete floor. Two old heaters stand discarded in the space as historical testimony to human presence and this abandonment adds to a subtle undercurrent in the room's atmosphere.

The title evokes an image of 10 green bottles, one by one being smashed against the brick wall, broken shards falling, scattering from the force of their impact. The placement of the dismembered bottles is accidental, yet relies upon the repeated act of smashing within a given space.

The three elements of landscape, figure and object are woven together as crucial elements for the work's existence. Looking at the random shards of glass forces me to consider the architectural elements of floor, wall, window and heater that define the space. The imagined proximity of the person in relation to the glass forces me to consider the deliberate human intervention with the material. These elements are therefore inter-connected, as each relies on the presence of the other. Glass shards remain as frozen moments, physical elements tracing a previous event, a physical trace of human gesture and space.



Plate 9. Tony Cragg, *Ten Green Bottles*, 1979.

In constructing a piece such as *Ten Green Bottles*, Cragg not only develops a clear and acute sense of material substance but also intensifies his comprehension of his world by coordinating material-based experiences. Turning over, scanning every man-made and natural surface to see what he can find, Cragg reveals a distinct inquisitiveness.

An understanding of Cragg's work shifts between an awareness of the original state and function of the material, to a curiosity about other material qualities not usually considered. The material components for his works are bold and familiar, yet because of their carefully considered treatment and final configuration they are freed of literal reading and become new objects in the world.

Recognizing the power of presenting simple objects in a controlled way, Cragg's sculpture seduces the viewer into observing and contemplating their connection to the manufactured world.

I look at Cragg's extensive body of work and see an intense need for information; a passion for finding out and understanding the subtleties of life. These are the forgotten moments of discarded broken bottles which indicate his

diligence in collecting items and translating them from his experience of the world. Cragg shares these moments, giving us sculptures that are sites of monumental ordinariness.

Eva Hesse

The works of Eva Hesse have been extremely valuable in reflecting on my own practice. Her sculptural works and documented diary extracts have provided telling insights into joy, conviction, fragility, tension and sensitivity. I have found it encouraging to be able to identify with the aesthetic properties and formal outcomes of many of her works, as well as with the internal struggle in her consideration of material and form.

Hesse uses materials such as surgical hose, latex, fibreglass and netting. She promotes the material substance of her sculptural forms by revealing innate physical attributes in the material such as the fragility of the latex, imprinted with her touch through the making process, or the translucency and brittle crispness of fibreglass. Her sensitive use of materials is witness to her subconscious merging of art and life. In particular, this is manifested through her focus on the juxtaposition of materials; qualities such as fragility and strength, temporality and permanence, light and dark. She has written:

I remember always working with contradictions and contradictory forms, which is my idea that in life - the whole absurdity of life - everything had always been opposites. Nothing has ever been in the middle.²⁶

The polarities in her work bring an experience where the work oscillates between being understood and not understood, being familiar and unfamiliar.

²⁶

Berger,, 'Objects of Liberation: The Sculpture of Eva Hesse', in *Eva Hesse: a retrospective*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 123.

Hesse's interaction with process was important, so she chose materials that could be physically manipulated without preconceived ideas of the result. 'I'm interested in finding out through the working of the piece some of the potential and unknown...in what is happening and what can happen and be completely free to let that go and change.'²⁷ This allowed her to move into a realm of making where the material dictated her involvement with it; an intuitive approach whereby the work can be seen as an expression of life with all its tension and fragility.

Repetition as a device to mesmerize her viewers added a particular potency and sensitivity to the use of the material. This is seen in *Repetition Nineteen* [10], which consists of 19 fibreglass canisters placed on a wooden floor. At first glance they appear to be similar repeated forms, yet the empty containers are completely individual, separate. The milky transparent fibreglass, en masse, captures the attention and is the seductive means for revealing light and fragility in contrast with the dark tone of the floor. The eyes rhythmically move from one form to the next, picking up subtle individual surface bubbles and indentations. *Repetition Nineteen* elevates a basic material, and uses repetition to reveal grace, where forms filter and contain light through what is usually a messy and awkward substance.

²⁷

Ibid, p. 125.



Plate 10. Eva Hesse, *Repetition Nineteen*, 1969.

For Hesse, the difficulties associated with art and life are witnessed through her refinement of materials, exposing the raw, sometimes ugly, sometimes beautiful essence of their being and, through doing so, she reveals the dichotomy of her existence. From the almost abject to the incredibly sensitive, Hesse's work is a reminder of the fragility of our being. The link between our exterior and interior worlds.

I am drawn to the dignity Hesse brings to whatever material she uses.

Simone Mangos

The works of contemporary sculptor, Simone Mangos, are assemblages of material, which generate unpredictable information for the viewer to consider.

A key feature of her work is the use of everyday materials (neon lights, buckets, fish net) and a specific process of material manipulation that is simple and enigmatic. She does not alter the materials, rather she works with their possibility. In *Invalid* [11] for example, a large bare room appears silent and stripped of life. Sunlight streams into the room, falling upon the wall surface between six arched windows. The light is mapped

further by its reflection onto a highly polished floor and this results in a rhythmic pattern of light and shadow. Stretched horizontally from outside each window and connecting, to cover the entire room, white net appears to hover as a breathing barrier between intangible air and architectural surfaces.

Light becomes the only element permeating through the confines of the net, highlighting the net itself and defining space and surface. Like the casting of a fisherman's net, the work appears as a gesture moving quietly within and beyond the confines of the space.



Plate 11. Simone Mangos, *Invalid*, 1995.

This piece appears to be so simple, yet is a carefully considered manipulation of one material within a specific space, that allows for a response that surpasses the boundaries of the literal. The qualities of simplicity and ephemerality of form and material are used as a deliberate strategy to allow the work to be viewed in many ways. There is space for our understanding of the work to shift between multiple readings. Scale is also an important dimension in her work because the viewer can project themselves into the space and this produces a sensory response of undetermined thoughts. Its ambiguity holds attention; no answers are provided, only questions as to why the net is there. Where does it go to? What does it keep in, what does it keep out?

My interest in Mangos' installations is based on a preference for work that is beyond definition, generating reflective space for the viewer. In describing her work as reflective or meditative, I underscore the inspiration that it has provided for me in understanding the importance of negotiating with the intangible, the ambiguous and the undetermined. Her work challenges me to develop and trust this sense, igniting wonder and lateral passages of thought and imagination.

Conclusion

There is a sense of tension in the works of all of these artists; a sense that the link between art and life is tenuous and informative. By the use of 'ordinary' material, the works of Duchamp, Cragg, Hesse and Mangos acknowledge the discrepancies in the way in which the world is viewed and valued.

The common elements of our world are elevated drawing attention to the celebration of the integrity of what is potentially over-looked.

CHAPTER FOUR

The work

Current

Flat Relief

Slope

Package

Current II

Press

Sculptural Threads

Current

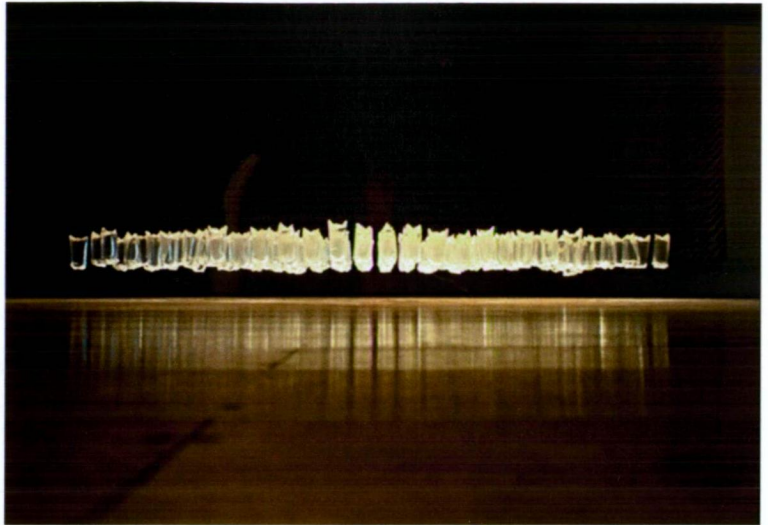


Plate 12. *Current*, 2002, Trudi Brinckman, 300 x 250 x 150cm.

Current consists of one hundred and forty 10cm x 6cm suspended clear plastic bags, containing water.

For this research project, I wanted to further investigate combining water and plastic to see how scale would affect the material qualities. From my Honours work, I learnt that large-scale works incorporating water are a specialized area since, with the greater volume of water, engineering and structural components become increasingly important. This was a crucial discovery as it made me go back to the basics of the material for a re-informed approach in order to find new ways of achieving scale.

The initial idea for *Current* was a direct result of this discovery.

For the average consumer a plastic bag is just a bag, but in actual fact, there are hundreds of different styles, sizes, shapes and colours. Since I was working with water, size, shape and strength were important criteria for selection. After investigation of the products of many packaging suppliers, I purchased a variety of bags for experimentation. The ratio of water volume to plastic strength, size, transparency and shape were crucial considerations. Finally, bags with high

transparency and strong plastic provided the answer. However, as the size and shape were not what I wanted, each bag was re-welded to form a hand-size, rectangular parcel.

Using equipment at Titanic Ice (Cambridge, Tas) and developing a specialised technique, I was able to fill each bag with a measured amount of water and then seal the bag close to the water line without the water spilling. This technique took quite some time to master as hundreds of bags leaked. For example, a fine crease in the plastic on the weld line, or not holding the bags in a particular way or some movement would cause a leak, ranging in size from a pin prick to a straight rip. With each discarded bag came greater determination to fine-tune the relationship between plastic, water and machine.

I wanted the water bags to bulge as the water pressed from within these containers, therefore the water line had to be as close to the weld as possible.

Two measured lengths of fishing line were then threaded through the top corners of each bag and tied at the ends to make a loop. Every thread of line had to be exactly the same length once tied. The threaded line was then looped under the water bags to create a type of sling for each bag to sit in at the bottom of the line, the weight of the bag holding the line in place.

One hundred and forty 's' hooks were made and attached to the gallery ceiling, providing hooks to suspend the fishing line.

All bags are hung 25cm apart, ensuring that any subtle movement of just one bag will create a flow of movement between all the bags. The fishing line is a visual aspect of the work, with light bouncing off each vertical strand, as well as off the water-filled bags, defining space through light.

Gravity is also a crucial aspect as the weight of the water pulls the line tight as if each bag were falling. The surrounding space

is integral to the work, as reflections, distortions and motion are figured through each form.

The floor is important as it mirrors a subtle undulation between light captured in the bag, and the adjoining shadow of each bag. These images move against each other as forms on the floor's surface.

Plastic bags, water, fishing line; these are products understood through their physical characteristics. They are combined in ways that push conventional identification aside to become something new.

Flat Relief

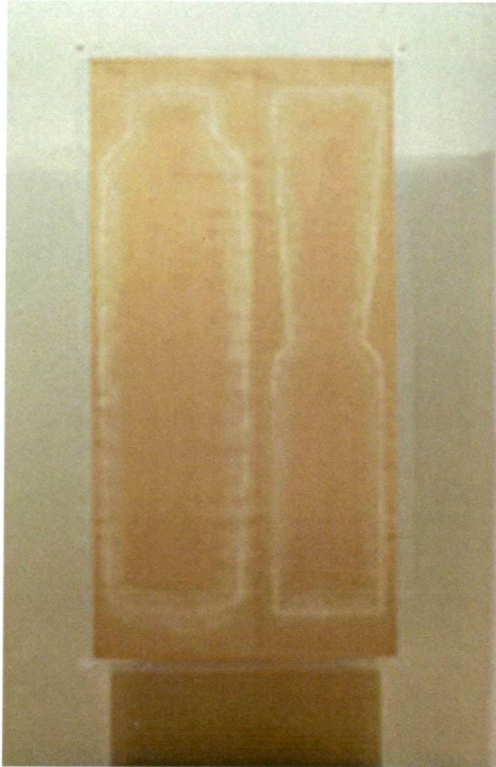


Plate 13. *Shade*, 2002, Trudi Brinckman, 200 x 120 x 40cm.

Flat Relief consists of building materials, particle board and plaster-fill. *Flat Relief* is constructed from two rectangular particleboard sheets, which are contained within a translucent plastic bag. Each bare board surface is broken with a carved linear form filled with plaster-fill. I wanted to create a soft haze, where forms would appear to float side by side. The overall intention was to use the particle board and plaster-fill. I had been experimenting with the idea of pushing them further through drawing, and thus providing an opportunity for the alteration of the usual context of these materials.

The initial observation came from a bare room I had walked past on my way to work. The room was in the process of being built and the walls were bare surfaces of particleboard butted together. The joins had been rendered smooth with plaster-fill. I was attracted to the smooth thick consistency of plaster, capable of filling in cracks and concealing joins. I noticed how the particleboard surface contrasted with the soft vertical patches of sanded plaster. The white plaster emerged from a

thickly applied solid line to a light diluted haze and this grading in thickness allowed the white plaster lines to appear to float on the neutral ground of the bare board.

I also noted that when sanded, the white plaster was completely flush with the particleboard surface as if the two materials had become one.

Experimenting with these materials, I noted how sensual the actual plaster-fill container and accompanying spatula tool was - curvaceous forms that when placed beside each other, seemed to create a provocative relationship. I imagined these objects stripped of any labelling, transformed to become raw, curvaceous linear forms.

I decided to *marry* material, form and process by etching a silhouette image of the materials used to fill in the etched marks of the silhouette: an etched drawing of the plaster-fill container and spatula. The etched areas provided a break in surface similar to the joins in a wall construction. I practised with a dremel drill to refine an etching technique that worked as a drawing method. I also experimented with the plaster-fill paste and a sanding method to produce a bright white line similar to the freshly sanded areas of the constructed wall. This resulted in a process of filling with the plaster, scraping off the excess with a spatula and then sanding the built up surface to achieve the desired transparent soft edge.

Forms related directly to materials. Particleboard surfaces were etched and plaster-fill was used in the engravings of surface. This recalled an image of the classic 'tool shadow board', where forms floated side by side remaining elusive whilst hinting at familiarity.

Through the construction of *Flat Relief*, I discovered a method of working where material, form, process and outcome all informed each other. The materials inform the process, the process informs the image and the image informs the material.

Slope

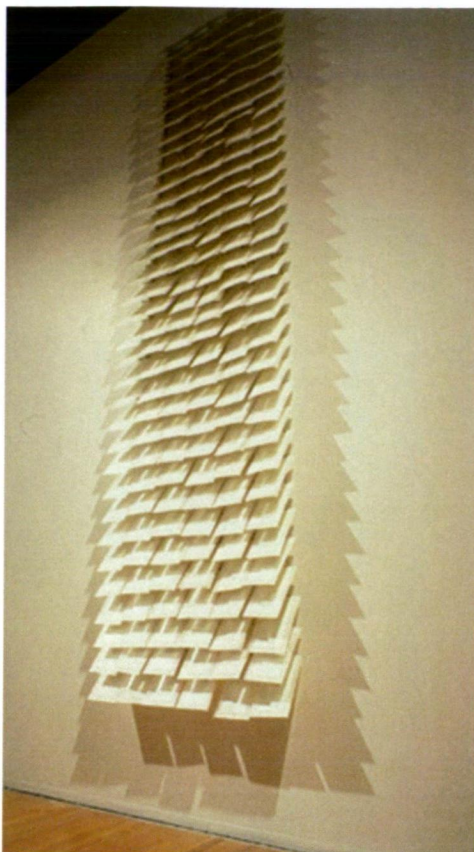


Plate 14. *Slope*, 2002, Trudi Brinckman, 260 x 150 x 15cm

I found a discarded box filled with fine, white packaging foam. Visually soft, yet tangibly strong, it shimmered with light falling on its surface. Held up to the eye, the space seen through the material was broken down into shades of light and dark. This seemed to soften the boundary between solid forms and space.

Aware of tonal qualities seen through the foam, I put other materials behind it to produce gentle contrasts between solidity and space. The result was a softening of the edges and a sense of the solid form and the transparent material becoming one.

Taking this further, I began to investigate the relationship between form, space and transparent surface, by covering found steel lighting-diffuser sheets I had collected from a demolition site. Two 5cm identical sheets of foam were cut and glued to either side of the flaps of metal. A deliberate measured excess

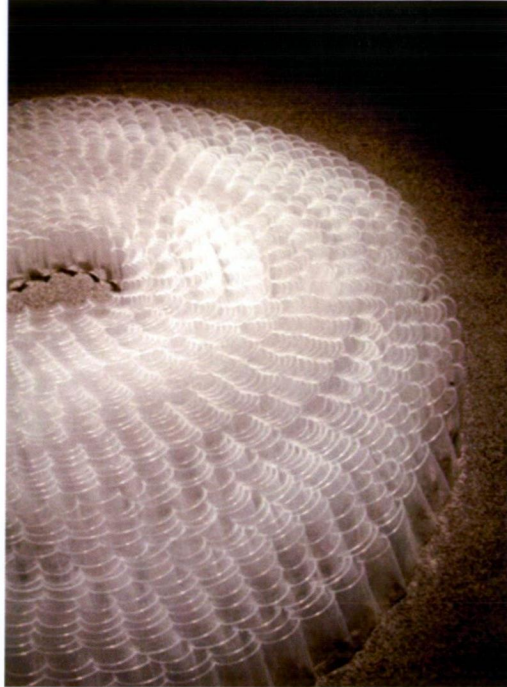
of foam was left around the edges of each metal component to contrast the material qualities of transparency and solidity. The foam and steel became one object as the steel plate formed a skeleton for the soft transparent skin of foam

I refined cutting and fastening procedures to maintain consistency in size and eliminate evidence of my touch. Simultaneously, this establishes a rhythm for making. Through this repetitive process I made hundreds of these skeletal flaps, which were then hooked to a mounting device and connected to the gallery wall.

The structure of *Slope* is tall and thin, with the proportioned harmony of a surveyor's grid, or a high-rise building stripped of all unnecessary elements. I thought of architecture uninterrupted by the distractions of adornment or embellishment and pared back to define only the purity of material and form.

The individual flaps of the structure slope towards the gallery floor, causing gradations of light and shade to be further accentuated through the shingle-like formation of the components.

Package



Package consists of 1000 small (75cm x 140cm) zip-lock bags joined together and arranged to form a circular spiral on the gallery floor.

The initial material for this piece came from a tip shop. While fossicking for old tins of paint I came across two clear, sealed bags containing zip-lock bags. Each bag had a white strip across the top, which formed the bag seal, and I noted the contrast between the transparent plastic and the white line. The dominant white gave definition to the bag and I imagined using the line as a way to define form.

Using a plastic welder, I played with joining the bags in different ways to build up layers of bags that would sit on top of each other creating a cone like form. Later I discarded this idea as I felt the form was visually complicated and was moving away from the essence of the material itself.

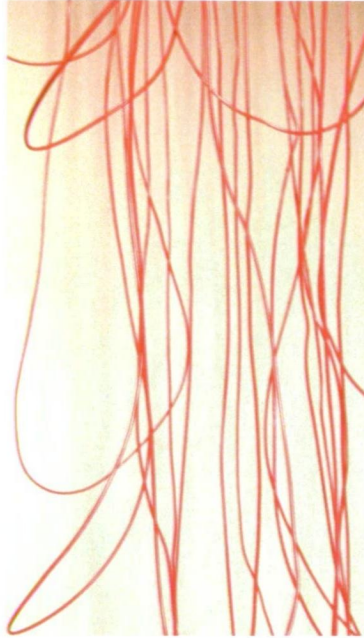
A year later, I revisited the plastic material and hung one layer of welded bags on my studio wall. Each weld had forced the bags to sit a particular way and this created forms in the plastic between the welds. I also noted that the transparency of the

bags provided a visual support for the continuing white line to float on. When placed on the floor the joined plastic material could support itself as an up-right form. I noted a quiet strength in the simplicity of what was happening with the material and concluded that manipulating the plastic just once, by welding the bags together, was enough.

I then repeated the initial technique of welding the bags together, and created one long single piece measuring 100m. Repetition of material and form moved the object into a situation where mass and scale became a device that obscures the initial identity of the bags. This ensured that registration of form took precedence over the familiarity of the material.

Form and familiarity, familiarity and form, this work attempts to create an oscillation between the two.

Current II



Current II is 600m of red electrical cord hanging from small hooks from the gallery ceiling. The cord trails in a series of uneven loops that drop to a height just above the gallery floor. One single strand of cord then meanders through the gallery space, finishing at a power point on the wall.

My interest in electrical cord developed when I moved into a new rental property. The old shack by the beach appeared to fit basic requirements. However, I found that in the entire house, only one of the three power points worked. Life was difficult to say the least. Power board was connected to power board and extension cords linked room to room in a random mess that covered the floor. I had taken for granted the ease of accessibility to power points as well as the essential role they play in everyday life - providing an intangible flow of energy.

I enjoyed the 'used' quality of all the cords. I thought about the mass of energy and types of information that had passed through each piece and what would happen to that information when the cords were joined to become one long cord. I considered the volume of energy running through such a thin material, a volume beyond my comprehension. The thought of

detailed wiring networks running inside wall cavities, of which I had been previously oblivious, fascinated me.

Collecting any abandoned cord I came across, I decided to join the various colours, thicknesses and lengths together and just keep on joining. In keeping with the method used by electricians to join electrical cord, I peeled away 1 cm of outer plastic from each cord end, wove the internal wires together and soldered the wire ends. This join was then covered with small heat shrink connectors.²⁸

The visual qualities of the connected cord excited me; it seemed raw and I found this refreshing.

Experimenting with this extended cord I wove the length through hallways and rooms in the art school. It was a drawing in a public space, linking together the areas it passed through. It scribbled across the floor and suggested the possibility of an art piece.

I later bought three 100m rolls of red electrical cord. Each roll, split the entire length down the middle resulted in two 100m lengths of finer cord, per roll, capable of being joined to become a 600m length. Working with this red cord triggered thoughts of my own body and circulatory system. A vigorous network of vessels and capillaries that pump the life force throughout my body, back and forth. This rhythmic system like electrical cord is either invisible or forgotten as it does its work quietly without my full awareness.

The electrical cord and body systems are metaphorically connected; parallel networks with a function crucial to the intricacy of both our external and internal worlds.

28

Heat shrink connectors are varied widths of coloured tube used by electricians to conceal and protect electrical cord joins once soldered.

I decided to simplify my interaction with the material by suspending the split cord and then letting it trail through the gallery. I felt that by initially removing the cord from the ground, it stripped away the familiarity and the connection of the cord to our world. This way I could allude to the idea of parallel systems; our cultural and physiological worlds.

Press



Press consists of four second hand safety seat belts, clipped and sewn together to form two clearly defined loops. These hang from the gallery ceiling, 1.5 meters apart. They provide support for a 900 x 1800 cm, large sheet of 4mm glass, which is balanced between each loop. Both the belts and the glass are suspended in space. The weight of the glass holds the belts taut and these prevent the glass from falling.

The construction of *Press* has been an interesting form of closure to this research. The use of safety seat belts and glass as the final elements reflects my understanding of our connection to materials.

Within certain situations, a seat belt is our perceived safety net. With a slight pull and a click of two ends, we are comforted by our sense of restriction. We place trust in this man-made material; and believe it will prevent further harm in events that are out of our control.

After car accidents, seat belts bear burn marks, evidence of tension on the material caused by the force of a body moving at

80km an hour against the locked seat belt. The material does not break, but the strain on it from the impact frays the material significantly and renders it unsafe.

The two straps of *Press* provide a means to suspend the large sheet of glass – a fragile material - that rests tenuously on the belts. What is seen in the glass is the reflection of the viewer, who is placed in a vulnerable position, as they are everyday, hoping that the belts will hold them. The construction of *Press* reveals the trust we place on materials, the delicate balance between life and death, suspension and falling.

From *Press* also comes the realisation of the fragile relationship between art and life. A reminder of one's uncertain position between an active life and the immanence of death, is mirrored by the fragility suggested through my process of making.

Common Threads

Although each one of the works described in this paper stands alone as an individual material enquiry, through the development of the research, I have found that there are common threads running throughout this body of work. These sculptural elements are:

- Simplicity – the process of paring back form and method to a point where the material itself is the main focus of the work. It reinforces, not what I can do with the material, but what the material can do through a series of carefully considered, simple interventions.
- Repetition – similar to the rhythmic quality of music, repetition urges the eye to methodically move from form to form, seeing variations that strengthen visual responses. It also reinforces a specific making process, where a simple physical gesture is repeated again and again. Movements are repeated - form grows.
- Light and shadow – these highlight and dramatise form. This adds another dimension to a work as new images, which draw on light and shadow are revealed. Light and dark; the negative and positive of the same form.
- Transparency – is an important aspect as it reveals form, seen to be a ghost of itself, simultaneously external and internal.
- Scale – aims to allow for the viewers' involvement, related to the work on a physical level, they become saturated by the 'presence' of the work.
- Suspension – activates form as it allows works to be freestanding, enabling movement and presenting form as self sufficient; objects are seen to defy gravity and association with the earth. This represents a challenge to the viewer as conventional 'grounded' methods of engaging and perceiving work are inverted. Suspension ignores the potential limits of sculpture.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Can objects be presented that trigger an altered appreciation of their previous context? Can we continue to learn from the familiar, the overlooked? Can we help viewers take part in an exchange which by its ambiguity forces them to pause and think again?

Papastergiadis wrote that art of the everyday should be measured on its own terms, and could possibly 'expose the underside of the social imagination and expand the modes of perception...to a transformation of the viewer's attention'.²⁹

This is a belief that art that is derived from familiar materials can potentially awaken us from somnolence.

My starting point for each work has been an attraction to a particular material. The crux of my work resides in the hidden potential of products of our physical world. The principal focus of the work is to reveal materiality as itself.

The materials utilised are ultimately re-defined by the viewer's interpretation. It is thus the viewer who finally creates a definition of what is in front of them, assessing its validity.

Through the development of the work, it became apparent that to continue viewing the material in its own terms after its changed role, required a delicate balance and a subtle manipulation of material into new form.

The material is not used to enable a disguising of the familiar in creating something different to itself, rather it is made more familiar through careful consideration; familiarity changes from the 'dismissed' to the 're-valued'.

²⁹

Papastergiadis, Nikos. 'Everything that surrounds – Art, Politics and theories of the everyday', *Every day - Eleventh Biennale of Sydney*, 1998, p.23

With objects and structures that hover between something familiar and something foreign, it is proposed that the viewer shifts between awareness of the functional life of the material, and what it has become through sculptural form. Something else is seen and this raises questions that challenge the known and accepted.

Simplicity and observation have become crucial elements to the work itself, and therefore to the viewing of the work. The simplicity of a sculptural form, where materials are pared back to reveal only themselves, presents a challenge for the viewer to go beyond their existing relations with the everyday, opening up fresh avenues for understanding.

To move beyond the familiar, one has to negotiate with what is known and to go beyond the literal is to participate in this changed viewpoint. What results is a translation of a previous 'reality' into an equally valid alternative.

Observing, collecting, making; this body of work has encouraged a consideration of the symbiotic relationship between man and material and provides through the cohesion of material, new information and new forms to shift our perceptions.

From this comes the realization that there are small discoveries to be made from the most unlikely sources; that it is possible to be surprised, to learn, and to re-consider the appraisal of things seen everyday. Discovery is profound because it moves beyond the limits of what we take for granted and any exchange of old ideas for fresh alternatives cannot be anything but energising.

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Dimensions variable.

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