PART FOUR
How the project was pursued

Collections, collecting, collectors:
One of the key intentions of my practice is to suggest a way for the viewer to experience my inner state and my original response to the people, subjects and objects of the past which have inspired a work.

For a viewer to share a similar emotional engagement, I need in some way to replicate my own journey visually for them to travel. This requirement of travelling means that I usually wish a viewer to read each work as a passage – not just a passage as in narrative, which is an underlying structure that has inspired many works, but a physical passage through space and time which waits beneath the surface narrative. This journeying-passage is a pacing of the viewer’s progression through and around the work.

My focus has been one of widening my knowledge of which materials and techniques can potentially be used in the work. Continually resurfacing within my practice are particular strategies that are not dependent on media nor on ‘originary’ story. These are unintended key markers of my work. This open approach to media is also true for possible catalysts for the works. I am open to any overheard remark, any clipping from the paper, any grouping of materials in my studio, suddenly forming a triggering narrative which drives the next investigatory artwork.

Additionally, crucial to my understanding of this investigation has been the opportunity during the last five years to meet with, and/or hear speaking publicly, the writers, cultural theorists and artists quoted in what follows: Susan Stewart, Susan Pearce, Slavoj Zizek, Irit Rogoff, Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett, Fred Wilson, Jean Fisher, Stuart Hall.

Key strategies of my investigation which I discuss in this chapter include:

• The place and use of collections and familiar objects in my work
• Representation, humour, irony and anxiety within the promise of the everyday - the subversive
potential of the nostalgic familiar object and the non-familiar subject
• Detection as a methodology
• A case study in surveillance - and how the results are often other than we envisage
• Absenteeism and history: the cost of maintaining a Sacred Place.
• The use of repetition
• The lost detective who didn’t have a clue – me

The place and use of collections and familiar objects in my work:
As a collector, I seek out objects and data that sit on the periphery, pieces that have been discarded by many. They are usually snippets of time that suggest an alternative story and may have been anathema to mainstream perspectives. In utilising and framing the fragmentary and almost lost, 25 I am suggesting the magnitude, complexity and the sheer numbers of stories that presently, or shortly, may lie beyond our earthly realm – implied and evoked by those surviving remnants.

A souvenir is about remembering, whilst a collection is about forgetting. 26 A collection reflects its individual components, as well as recharging a situation with new meanings arising from those exchanges occurring within the grouping and between the assemblage and the viewer (and I would add the artist). 27 Stewart acknowledges that ‘Collections are not representational – they speak beyond what is seen’. 28 She believes that the collection replaces history with classification.

One intention of my use of material collected over time, is to emphasise the impossibility of rendering a single truth from a collective. By emulating, mimicking and parodying the collection with a collection, I suggest that

26 Stewart, Susan, On Longing; Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Sosetnir, the Collection, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996: 152
27 As Hannah Fink wrote of my own incessant collecting activities: ‘For Julie Gough, collecting involves her keen desire to understand the past through objects’.
28 Stewart, S, 1996: 151
ultimately it can only classify the endless and indefinable as endless and indefinable. 29

The boundaries of the collection are the locked cabinet door, or the lack of an information-card. In the past, a collection, like western history, set its task to name or identify without acknowledging that there were already names and interactions existent, for example here, Australia, prior to European arrival. A collection is as much about elimination of materials as inclusion; it tells as much about its maker as itself, therefore, it is as contrived as any documented history with one author. 30

I believe that collections create new contexts. The manipulation of this potential is a central technique in my work, destroying, subsuming and transcending the original context. 31

By utilising the 'collection' with its components of reproduction, multiplicity, recognisability, nostalgia, ownership, I intend to connect the household with the museum; the scientific exploration of minute difference with the continuity-factor of basic behaviour through time. The collection is a metaphor for control, containment, order, logic and fear of the unknown.

Representation, humour, irony and anxiety within the promise of the everyday - The subversive potential of the nostalgic familiar object and the non-familiar subject:

An anxiety, a fear of the unknown has propelled non-Aboriginal Australian society to create and successfully market many objects to represent Australian Aboriginal people and culture. These are objects for household consumption. Some people today call this 'Koori Kitsch'. 32

29 'Behind the seriality of the collection is the threat of chaos of infinity'. Stewart, S, 1996: 156
30 Stewart suggests that: 'The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art, its function is not the restoration of a context of origin, but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical rather than contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life'. Stewart, S, 1996: 151
31 'The context of origin is destroyed, subsumed by the transcendent and ahistorical context of the collection itself' Stewart, S, 1996: 165
32 These include bad taste ornaments in the form of ceramic ashtrays, mugs, plates and vases, plaster wall-'faces' of Aboriginal women, children, stockmen, elders, concrete outdoor Aboriginal garden 'gnomes', place mats, tea towels, coasters, laminex designs.
Stewart recognises that:

Kitsch objects are not apprehended as the souvenir proper is apprehended, that is, on the level of the individual autobiography; rather, they are apprehended on the level of the collective identity.  

Kitsch objects conspire to render the Aboriginal miniaturised, harmless and manipulable within the domestic environment. They also fix-in-time all Aborigines as one, singular, Aboriginal. They serve to distance by parody and insult an entire people as an exotic mute unknowable Other. I believe that this form of kitsch is familiar to most Australians who lived through the 1940’s – 1990’s.

In contrast, Pearce describes souvenir objects as objects... ‘which form the starting point for a personal narrative, and which demonstrate the truth of the story’. I work to provoke the tension and unease existent between the worlds of the private souvenir and the public kitsch object.

Aboriginal kitsch; colours of the 1950’s in paint or fabric; toys, shoes, clothing, puppets, washing machines, kitchen utensils, souvenirs, and 1970’s trashy novels; - all these may initially act to distance an audience to a safety-zone of the pseudo-past. But, my intent is to lure out the recognition factor inescapable within memory-span to connect the viewer, psychologically, with the story.

Equally central to my work process is the maintenance of a sense of humour. Often bordering on the macabre, certainly twisted, my use of humour is my means of further displacing borders, such as where-funny-meets-awful. Bad humour is my vehicle for releasing tensions within a ‘remembering’ that allows for fears

---

33 Stewart, S, 1996: 167
34 Stewart describes kitsch as: ‘Souvenirs of an era and not of a self. Other objects have an original use value. Kitsch imply the imitation, the inauthentic, the impersonation. Their significance lies in their exaggerated display of the values of consumer culture’. Stewart, S, 1996: 168
36 ‘The collection holds a ‘dream of animation’ which also thereby has a social/political claim... for it posits the collection as an intervention, or act of significance, and it compels the consciousness of the observer to enter into the consciousness of the collector’. Stewart, S, 1995: 31
and positions of uncertainty, involvement, or even complicity, to resurface.

Integral to and underpinning my use of repetition and collection is my use of familiar objects; this is my strategy to elicit narratives of recognition and remembering in the viewer.

The evocation of nostalgia is also an integral aspect of this investigation. Stewart refers to the nostalgia of the souvenir and states that without desire there is no nostalgia, for nostalgia requires distance to operate.

I subvert the idea of nostalgia by apparently evoking and providing a path to the nostalgic through my use of the familiar object – but the context of the alignment, patterning and structure of placement replays a less appealing segment of the past.

Familiar objects are often comforting; they induce a state of reflection and recall; they encourage defense mechanisms to be withdrawn; they foster nostalgic conversation and reflection; they are my means to draw a viewer into a work with false promises that the unthreatening and everyday awaits.

My work subverts the supposed nicety of the everyday and of much national memory. I place objects out of context, away from their original site, their original companions, and their original life. I re-register their given meaning by adding another layer of negotiation; a tactic affiliated with what artist Gordon Bennett calls a ‘field of disturbance’.

37 According to Hannah Fink: ‘...It (nostalgia) is of the essence in the art of Julie Gough. Yet Gough’s nostalgia is not of the honeyed sort. The found – and fabricated – object for Gough invokes memory: bad memory, false memory, lost memory, absence of memory. The word nostalgia was coined in the eighteenth century from the Greek nostos ’a return home’, and algos ‘pain’, literally to describe homesickness. In its current, transferred sense it is a dilatory term, one that carries connotations of a certain limpness of mind: we do not anticipate pain in its construction. For Gough, collecting objects from the immediate past allows her to repeatedly revisit her childhood and adolescence, and to begin to explore the Aboriginal heritage of which she grew up unaware’. Fink, Hannah, 1998: 5

38 ‘There is no continuous identity between these objects and their referents. Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance. And it is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises... For the nostalgic to reach (the) goal of closing the gap between resemblance and identity, lived experience would have to take place, an erasure of the gap between sign and signified, an experience which would cancel out the desire that is nostalgia’s reason for existence.’ Stewart, S. 1996: 145

39 ‘I started to use illustrations out of old social studies and history textbooks in order to intervene in the seamless flow of images that I believed were reinforcing the popular sense of an Australian Colonial Identity. I didn’t want to destroy this mythic identity, which would have meant endorsing some kind of replacement;
My work attempts to engage an audience so that they unravel for themselves where I and they have come from, and then imagine how we might travel together to a new destination in the company of our accumulated implicities, knowledge and understanding.

I intend my work to unsettle viewers; to invite them into what may resemble their own domesticity - and then to provoke them. Irit Rogoff speaks of the 'uncanny' and quotes Freud's definition '...that class of frightening which leads back to what is known or old and long familiar.'

With slippers, postcards, bags, beds, shoes, brick walls, kitchen tools, plaster wall ornaments, washing machines I have decorated the gallery with the interior icons of bland post-1950's suburbia. But I have displaced home, something is wrong, each work promises something other than it delivers. This 'awkward strangeness' is what I wish to engender within and between the works and the viewer.

I rework the past, initially in order to see how things may have been seen before me. Slavoj Zizek, after Lacan, calls this means of recovery after the search the stain - the reminder of the real that becomes visible. Zizek refers to Holbein's painting The Ambassadors as Lacan's constant point of reference that nothing is what it seems to be ...and notes how this knowledge opens up the abyss for a search for meaning.

40 'Uncanny in Freud's sense of "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known or old and long familiar". We have to remember that Freud's "uncanny" is actually the "unheimlich", the unhomed or that which is not at home. Both its frightening and its familiar qualities come from its awkward relation to being not at home, to the "strangeness" which that condition assumes'. Rogoff, Irit, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 2000: 7

**Fig.57**  
Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533. Oil on Oak. 207 x 209.5cm.

*Something other* is what I work with; the unsettling idea that two elements can both portray and conceal a much deeper story.

Jameson suggests that:

> Anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness that find expression in popular culture.⁴²

And similarly, Rogoff explores relations between subjects and places, calling this practice geography.⁴³

I wish to test and gauge relationships between people, places and things; setting-up object-laden works based on pre-scribed versions of history.

The questioning of the 'given' order of things, that is central to my investigation, was intriguingly enacted

---

⁴² Jameson, F, 'Recognising the Unrest: Reification and Utopia in mass culture', *Social Text (U.S.A.)*, 1979: 134

⁴³ 'I was drawn to try to work in the arena of geography because it seemed possible to locate within its revised understanding an alternative set of relations between subjects and places – an alternative set of relations in which it is not scientific knowledge or the national categories of the state which determine both belonging and unbelonging, but rather linked sets of political insights, memories, subjectivities, projections of fantasmatic desires and great long chains of sliding signifiers.' Rogoff, Irit, 2000: 7
by artist Michael Asher in 1979. He took a cast bronze statue of George Washington from outdoors at the Art Institute of Chicago into the centre of a room in the very gallery where the contemporaries of the original sculptor of the work (Houdon) had their work displayed. But the Houdon sculpture had weathered outdoors, it now looked more like a statue or monument than a sculpture. It looked out of place. This disturbance compelled the viewers to reconsider not only the Houdon statue, but all of the works in the gallery, thus questioning viewers' own ways of perceiving the given order of things.

![Image of George Washington statue](image)


This disruption of the expected can do more than jolt a viewer into re-cognition of how the world of art is constructed; it has the potential to take the viewer beyond a gallery and encourage new ways to apprehend, debate and perhaps to change the boundaries of social and political spheres.

For me, understanding the past can only be achieved by experiencing it, by being part of it. As Schlereth notes 'It is only possible to understand performers of the past by becoming performers in the present.'

For Rogoff, art can negotiate what other disciplines cannot. Trying to analyse contexts and assumptions

---


45 What we have here is a detail that in itself is usually quite insignificant [or] even a non event. Like the alteration of a small detail in a well-known picture that all of a sudden renders the whole picture strange and uncanny.’ Zizek, Slavoj, 1993: 53

may be frustrating and lead nowhere but sometimes working with or experiencing art may give answers and certainly may supply possible pathways. 47
As Gordon Bennett notes the importance of 'disrupting' the 'field of representation' is a way of involving viewers. 48 Langton asks us to 'find ways to undermine the colonial hegemony'; 49 and this, of course requires that we face and accept 'the political consequences of representation.' 50

I believe that Aboriginal people, and by extension our culture, have been stereotyped into caricature beyond Eric Joliffe's comics or the crass ceramic ashtrays and imported decorated t-shirts. We are disturbingly expected to embrace the roles which non-indigenous people want us to live; the invariably romantic situations dating from circa 1800 and probably from Rousseau in the 1760's. Thus, we Aboriginal people often feel uncomfortable admitting that we can get lost in the bush, hate mosquitos, or perhaps just do not like eating lizard. In our own role we feel inauthentic.

This is something we share with other 'colonised' peoples. In his book of poems Columbus Day, Jimmie Durham, a Cherokee artist and writer, described how ambivalent loyalty to a shadowy self/nationhood infected his country:

One of the most terrible aspects of our situation today is that none of us feel that we are real Indians.... For the most part we feel guilty, and try to measure up to the white man's definition of ourselves. 51, 52

---

47 'On occasion, certain encounters with conceptual art works which are taking up the same issues would provide a bridge to the next step for thought: an actual cultural making, not an analysis, of a condition I perceived theoretically. ... Art, then, is my interlocutor rather than the object of my study. It is the entity that chases me around and forces me to think differently, at another register or through the permissions provided by another angle.' Rogoff, Irit, 2000: 9

48 'By disrupting (this) field of representation, I hoped to implicate the observing subject in the production of meaning, not in order to affirm the subject but in order to stimulate thought and the possibility of exceeding the historical parameters that frame it.' Bennett, Gordon in McLear, lan, 1996: 127

49 Langton posits that what is required is an anti-colonialist cultural critique which can 'move boundaries and undo the restrictions which make it so difficult for any of us to speak'. Langton, M. Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993: 7

50 Hamilton suggests that: 'An anti-colonial stance requires above all a practical commitment to the political consequences of representation. Anti-colonialism requires a rupture and a positive awareness of the way colonial representation has shaped, and misshaped, reality for coloniser and colonised alike.' Hamilton, A in Langton, M., 1993: 5


58
Luis Camnitzer notes that for Durham, ‘to play the role of the purified and uncontaminated “original Indian” is alien both to his memories and to his goals.’

This is a bind about power and control that is central to Arjun Appadurai’s argument in the essay ‘Putting Hierarchy in its place’. Appadurai speaks of the ways in which ‘native people are seen as confined to, and by, their places’. She terms this process metonymic freezing.

For Langton the contrived relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, is really between people and symbols or stand-ins:

Textual analysis of the racist stereotypes and mythologies which inform Australian understanding of Aboriginal people is revealing. The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists... ‘Aboriginality’, therefore, is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people create ‘Aboriginalities’...

Like Langton, I suspect the invention and maintenance of these stereotypes of Aboriginality are results of the protagonists not knowing each other - of being distanced. For bell hooks, this form of separation potentially enables new relationships and

52 Gerardo Mosquera similarly sees the colonised subject as a satellite of the colonist, not just passively reflecting the colonist’s desires but sometimes actively seeking its approval: ‘At their convenience curating cultures select, legitimate, promote and purchase. The ecumenical Eurocentric vision chooses what is valuable in the world, imposing it internationally through its networks. Apart from the more obvious implications, this provokes the art of the curated cultures to adapt in order to satisfy the preferences of the curating culture, not only looking for material benefits, but following the prestige of the paradigms legitimated by the centres.’ Mosquera, Gerardo, ‘Some Problems in Transcultural Curating’, in Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts, ed. Jean Fisher, Kala Press, London, 1994: 135


55 Langton, M, 1993: 33 - 34

56 Langton M, 1993: 38
deliberations to emerge.57, 58

Within several of my works I have utilised repeated objects which stereotype Aboriginal people or ‘Blacks’. I see this as a means to get straight to the centre of the story; to quote directly back to ‘the authors’ of oppression and disenfranchisement; and to subvert their original means of mass-communication by this misdirection. These works include Bad Language, The Trouble with Rolf and Brown Sugar.

Bad Language is a collection of Black slavery and sexual novels that relate stories of Black sexual prowess and White desire. These are not books with names of owners on the flyleaves. From the bottom of 10¢ book bins in suburban Op shops I have lifted them to squarely face the viewer and ask what is this? Were these in your home? Who are these people? Who are you?

In The Trouble with Rolf thirty-seven plaster heads of Aboriginal stockmen make up the music notes from the fourth verse of the song Tie me kangaroo down, sport by Rolf Harris. It was strange to find one of these ornaments in a shop, but to then cast thirty-seven faces spelling out the notes and lyrics of freedom ‘bestowed’ onto Aboriginal stockmen - from the dying words of a pastoralist - was a perverse reminder of where Australia’s own head was at just three decades ago.

The Trouble with Rolf uses male heads; in Brown Sugar female heads are used. In Part Three I have described fully why Brown Sugar was an important piece of work. As I proceeded to plot my way across the large panelled work, I felt more and more certain that their collective destinies were almost completely out of their control. The controlling element was chance, and this was what I wished to represent in the work.

57 ‘For those depicted to use them (these stereotypes) subvertedly is empowering, and also invites the unsuspecting to the party.’ books, bell, ‘Representing whiteness in the black imagination’, in Cultural Studies, ed. C. Nelson, P. Treichler, L. Grossberg, Routledge, London, 1992: 339.

58 Coco Fusco similarly sees the potential for these stereotypes to be a means of moving forward by redirecting them back at those who conceived them. ‘They are both a reminder of a painful history of bigotry and disempowerment and a point for understanding it.’ Fusco, Coco, ‘Passionate irrelevance: The cultural politics of identity’, in Whitney Biennial of Art 1993, ed. Elizabeth Sussman, Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N Abrams, New York, 1993: 77.
Questioning must be ongoing and multi-faceted. Homi Bhabha sees a need for understanding, not who is being represented stereotypically, but who is doing this typecasting and how:

[The] point of intervention should shift from the identification of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.... What needs to be questioned, is the mode of representation of otherness, which depends crucially on how the 'west' is deployed within these discourses.59

But for Langton each new official means of representing and 'dealing' with Aboriginal people is another layer of evasionary obfuscation:

The central problem is the failure of non-Aboriginals to comprehend us Aboriginal people, or to find the grounds for an understanding. Each policy – protection, assimilation, integration, self-management, self-determination and, perhaps, reconciliation – can be seen as ways of avoiding understanding.60

Through my approaches and processes, the work becomes a means of engagement entirely alternative to 'official' records of the past; alternate and therefore demanding that we look again and look differently. The process of deconstruction must begin by presenting what is familiar to the viewer and the systems and frameworks by which it operates.

Jean Fisher notes how artist Fred Wilson deconstructs the museum through manipulating its collections and laying bare not only buried local histories, but their 'frameworks' imposed by society for its own purposes. 61
Today many artists are working to deconstruct western narratives. Like them, I work with the familiar materials and accepted gallery spaces of a western art discourse, but my intention is to subvert and challenge the dominating structures and ideologies which go largely unquestioned. Working from within these locational devices, I have more scope for contesting given values. However Docker warns that we need to remember our position, to remember ‘that we’re always inside the concepts we at the same time wish to critique.’

Integrally connected to my use of mainstream familiar and kitsch objects is the use of irony as a way of further subverting the expected meanings of things. Lucy Lippard considers the reuse of what was once the means of configurative control as a particularly fitting reversal and sees ‘Irony, humour and subversion [as] the most common guises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire.’ Such tactics allow artists to present an ever-shifting always questioning persona through their work. This allows them to infiltrate, to interrupt and to contaminate the received ideas of society.

I work with these interruptions and encourage former connotations of objects and their relationships to meet (my) reconfigured meanings within the optical field of motion produced by multiple objects. Upsetting expectations, my actions are displacements recontextualising parts of a story; and by the placement of objects, my work encourages viewers to consider how things might have been. Displacement is a useful means of negotiating the past. It challenges histories, but also the anthropological, social and philosophical frameworks by which society images itself through displays of cultural productions. Fisher, Jean, 1994: xiv


‘... They hold up mirrors to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences – inverse, reverse, perverse ... Those who are “always turning around on purpose” are deliberately moving targets, subverting and “making light of” the ponderous mechanisms set up to “keep them in their place.”’ Lippard, Lucy, Mixed Blessings: New Art in a multicultural America, Pantheon Books, New York, 1990: 4

Alan Radley discusses how this technique of utilising displaced objects is undertaken in nursing homes where there are further displacements of people and their memories. He suggests that they stimulate the viewers to involve themselves with their surroundings: ‘[The] artefacts are rarely self-evident when displaced historically and as such provide for an “argumentative” encounter with the past in the present’. Radley, A, ‘Artefacts, Memory and a sense of the Past’, in Collective Remembering, ed. D. Middleton and P. Edwards, Sage, London, 1990: 50
the viewer to walk between two paths, as I have done in developing the work. Firstly, the viewer sees the object upon approaching and recognises its usual context, then rereads the object in its current state and so on, back and forth. The mind is seeking to place the artwork within a framework of difference between then and now.

The inability to reach a point of closure in what we are viewing or reading means that we actively engage ourselves in trying to transform what has been presented by others.65

Detection as a methodology:
In shaping my investigative means of uncovering information, I have borrowed the detective persona of fiction and t.v. drama figures such as Darren McGavin, who was Kolchak in The Night Stalker. Usually working alone, in the borderline zone of the night and the alleys, this figure solved a puzzle by living within it, never fully completing his task because the following week the next scenario awaited his particular way of perceiving the clues, of seeing details that eluded others. Seemingly disconnected, the crimes are really integral to the people and times that they actually represent. In the same way, the fragmentary scraps within document-meets-memory history hold the behavioural clues necessary to reassess the displaced past.

In scanning texts for information I become an investigator, a detective of sorts. Searching for the underbelly of meaning, my aim is to dislodge the evidence no one thought to remove, or even knew was there. I look for ‘meanings’ rather than ‘facts’ within the seemingly insignificant.66

Helmut Heissenbuttel relates how the crime novel derives its narrative movement from the ‘reconstruction of the trace of the unannounced’ where the trace allows ‘ever new combinations of possible contexts’.67

---

65 Stewart, S, 1996: 3
66 As Slavoj Žižek has argued: ‘The detective’s domain is the domain of meaning, not facts - thus the scene of a crime is structured like a language...[and...]...the detective is not only capable of grasping the significance of insignificant details, but in the apprehending of absence itself as significant.’ Žižek, Slavoj. 1993: 53
Absence is rife in historical records - the version of those colonised or documented is historically not recorded and is nonexistent through regular channels of research. Similarly, I no longer see the historical record as factual, rather it is a ledger leaking attitudes which often reveal more than scrawled names and dates - these are the details which bring meaning to my work. By discovering and adding these to taxonomic referencing and groupings, then enlisting myself as fallible and visible author/narrator/artist, I hope to open-up history to fresh contention.

The detective persona suggests the danger of discovery; the lack of absolutes; the clues that lead to nowhere; the red-herrings; the knowledge that any solutions will lead to more 'crimes' to solve. Physically, also I work undercover collecting information by unintentionally eavesdropping as the 'invisible Aboriginal' catching attitudes from those unaware of my identity. And thus I develop storylines from the reality of my peripheral position; which is within the subtexts of everyday life, acknowledging the self I would not be aware of - if Government assimilation policies had worked. 68

Developing these storylines, I have to work subversively, taking what I find and adding disruptive elements. John Docker writes that a way of making private life public is to insert crime into private lives thus causing passions to 'erupt involuntarily into the public arena' and suggests that this can be done by the 'use of a character who can legitimately spy and eavesdrop'. 69 In my case the character is me.

For Stephen Knight the detective is cast as 'Superhero, that is, (she/he) can enviably free and independent, yet also a sad and tragic figure, the permanent lonely outsider.' 70

Again I see this as something of my situation – I feel distanced from a western world where I walk seeking

68 Adrian Piper, an African-American artist explains this predicament of invisibility: 'Blacks like me are unwilling observers of the forms racism takes when racists believe there are no blacks present. Sometimes it hurts so much we want to disappear, disembody, disinherit ourselves from our blackness. Our experiences in this society manifest themselves in neuroses, anger, and in art'. Piper, Adrian cited in Mc Lean, Ian, 1996: 24
69 Docker, John, 1994: 222
clues and directions on what has been omitted from the official records and it is this distancing that has ironically provided me with my way of seeing the world. A world as askew and awry as myself. 71

I am stimulated by the potential for everyone to interrupt and thereby question their surroundings; those who, like artist Dan Wolgers, work with the perceived boundaries of objects and language. Wolgers dares to see beyond the borders of the reputable. His mixed media works challenge a viewer to recognise how much we are conditioned into unquestioningly following acceptable behaviour set by others. He asks us to recognise everyone’s potential to disrupt the everyday by acts of slight alteration. By looking awry, Wolger’s work has that edge of the unexpected which enlivens the world.

Fig.59 Dan Wolgers, Object, 1991. Plaster

For Ralph Rugoff, the forensic approach that some artists employ puts them in a position akin to that of forensic anthropologists or scientists, forcing the artists and the viewer to speculatively piece together histories that remain largely invisible to the eye.72

71 Slavoj Zizek calls this position ‘psychotic’ (!) ‘The detective is someone who must maintain a psychotic position – ie. to not be deceived by the symbolic order and so to maintain a distance from it.’ Zizek, Slavoj, 1992: 79. I would suggest that ‘distancing’ is a universal creative way to honestly examine oneself and one’s surroundings.

72 Rugoff, Ralph, Scene of the Crime, ed. Ralph Rugoff, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Massachusetts, 1997: 63
Artwork directly involving the viewer in the interception and comprehension of history, can allow us to recognise the fallibility and the inherently suspect nature of all renditions of the past.

As previously noted, the direct analytical approach is not always the most fruitful. For Ralph Rugoff detection requires an oblique approach and Trinh T. Minh-ha notes that 'a creative event... is an excursion rather than a way to grasp or possess something':

...One can only approach things indirectly. Because, in doing so, one not only goes toward the subject of one's focus without killing it, but one also allows oneself to get acquainted with the envelope, that is, all the elements which surround, situate or simply relate to it.

Like Minh-ha, I believe that when we see, approach and render, in an oblique way, another zone is activated which resonates in alternate ways and offers other readings of a story or set of objects.

Durham too operates in this manner. He has referred to himself as a 'trickster'. He looks, listens, sees beyond culturally imposed boundaries to insert his own unique reading of a situation into his art-practice and his writings.

And this is my story. I have long perceived the world in a way that has no practical use in ordinary life outside my art-practice – or beyond my own community of friends who also interact with the

---

73 'Clues do not betray their secrets when directly examined; their story emerges only if they are approached obliquely. The forensic aesthetic, in this way, accepts a certain alienation as a precondition of meaning'. Rugoff, Ralph, 1997: 91
74 'It is important to remember that if one goes directly to an object, if one tries to seize it, one would always somehow lose it, and this is for me one way towards understanding truth. As I have stated elsewhere, "a creative event does not grasp, it does not take possession, it is an excursion."' Minh-ha, Trinh T., 'The Undone Interval', in The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, Routledge, London, 1996: 3
75 Minh-ha, Trinh T., 1996: 4
76 'When you let things resonate and approach them indirectly, you are opening up a place in which absence and presence never work as mere oppositions. So, although you cannot be exhaustive and totalising, you are not excluding either. Silence here resonates differently. It is not equated with absence, lacuna or emptiness; it is a different sound, ... a "soundless" space of resonance, and a language of its own'. Minh-ha, Trinh T., 1996: 8
77 The trickster has played an important role in all cultures. The trickster is the creator-hero, the court jester, the one who is permitted to go outside accepted boundaries, questioning rules and rulers. See Jimmie Durham, ed. Laura Mulvey, Dirk Snauwaert, Mark Alice Durant, Phaidon, London, 1995
world in this way. I do not read the world as it is
presented to me by others. I have found visual art to
be my means of releasing and expressing the anxiety,
fears and hopes of my own life.

The detective genre measures relationships between
time and space within a language of double-talking
dialogues laden with clues and the unspoken. This
best describes the world which I personally inhabit
trying to investigate, dislodge and disclose Australian
stories.

In the 1930's a book, or more correctly, a dossier was
published which contained samples of real human
hair, matchsticks, telegrams, photographs
interspersed with interviews on Police forms,
blueprints of murder scenes - clues all leading to the
potential apprehension of the criminal - if read
correctly.  

This 'book' embodies the desire that objects speak for
themselves and takes the reader on a journey of the
visible. Discovering it was an exciting node of
intersection between my own practice and that of the
detective. Although clues may be found in archives,
libraries and numerous texts - objects provide an
important means of navigating a crime; to search for
its essential components; to help reach a conclusion.

I don't pretend to know the answers, or see a single
solution for the puzzles of the past that continue to
intersect with and perhaps infect our present and
future. I follow, collect and assemble the clues to
ascertain as best I can what happened - what the story
might be?

I want only that my work should raise more questions
and possibilities - to perform an unravelling. My work
over the past few years has been about unravelling in
both its connotations. Unravelling as in seeking and
discovering means to investigate and represent stories
- the unravelling of the clues, the mysteries which
kept the past so inaccessibly hidden in convoluted
texts on microfilm and old newspapers. Unravelling
also because the more I read and the more stories I
wish to work with, the less coherent, stable and

78 Wheatley, Dennis and Links, JG. Murder off Miami. Hutchinson and Co, London,
1936
understandable becomes the giant tome of histories in which and from which we create ourselves and our place.

I do not see my role as expunger of public guilt despite my methodology closely aligning with that of the detective.\textsuperscript{79} The accomplices in my art/stories are the viewers, whom I hope will realise their own complicity in the story I present.

For F.R. Jameson the detective represents a conduit - rather than living the experience himself.\textsuperscript{80} This fits my idea that each work is in some sense a passage, through which the viewer must travel and also aligns with my own picture of myself in the role of historical detective. My position is in-between and I believe that this improbable sitting is where I draw both the need and the competence to make my work.

\textbf{IDENTIKIT STORIES - a case study in surveillance and how the results are often other than we envisage:}

\textbf{Early 1995 -} With a forensic fingerprinting kit from the Tasmanian Police and a bottle of Windex in hand I prepared myself for the onslaught.

I expected imprints of peoples’ fingerprints, maybe even handprints if I was especially fortunate, across my three ground-floor studio window panes. These windows were on the wharf-front, the dockside, the space where tourists perambulate with icecreams on weekends.

I was going to construct from location, size, formation, pressure - the identities of those who left a trace of their self across my glass, who blurred my view of the world. I returned on the next Monday to find a multitude of prints. What I did not expect was that, as I dusted the glass, most prints were of nose ends and foreheads - hardly a fingerprint - people of many heights had

\textsuperscript{79} Zizek claims that “The guilt for the realisation of our desire will be “externalised” in the scapegoat (detective) and that, consequently, we will be able to desire without paying the price for it”. Zizek, Slavoj, 1993: 59

\textsuperscript{80} “The detective in one sense again fulfills the demands of the function of knowledge rather than that of lived experience. Through him we are able to see, to know, the society as a whole, but he does not really stand for any genuine close-up experience of it”. Jameson, F.R., “On Raymond Chandler” in The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory, ed. G.W. Most, and W.S. Stowe, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1983: 127
pressed their faces to the glass to peer deep into my room. Who was seeing what? Was I in the aquarium?

[which] with the transparency of its glass and the silent gaze of its aquatic dwellers, is an ideal metaphor for undermining the indisputable absoluteness of the viewpoint; to destroy the falsehood of any assumed primacy of the observing eye: who is watching whom cannot be established since what occurs is of an exquisite reciprocity, where the two roles of watcher and watched perfectly merge.81

And then one day a lady tapped on the glass. I heard her first, speaking with quite an unmistakable American accent. Talking, communicating, she asked me where was the door to my ‘shop’? She said she wanted a kitchen tool I had hanging (amongst 180 tools) on my studio wall. I said it wasn’t a shop. She and her husband left disappointed.

![Image](image_url)  
**Fig. 60** Image of my studio wall with kitchen tools (detail), 1996.

I felt guilty. I took the tool off the wall, it was a yellow pot drainer. I ran out of the building and found them 100 metres away. I handed the lady the tool. She was beautifully speechless, then she began to recount how the tool was identical to one they had when they were

---

first married (40 years ago). She described how she used it, and the company that made it (written in extremely small print on the side), and how that firm had operated in their State. She was reliving memory with the aid of the object in her hand. I had never seen a secondhand $1 kitchen tool give so much reflective happiness. She spoke through the object and the object allowed her to trace and track herself. These are the moments which inspire my practice, moments when the power of an object overtakes a person’s emotional state.

**Absenteeism and history: The cost of maintaining a Sacred Place.**
My work has often made me question what we mean by a Sacred Place and how we may ‘construct’ and treat such a place. Wollen says of the scene of a crime in detective fiction:

> Crime scenes should never be disturbed, they should never be contaminated. They should never be entered by unauthorised people. The crime scene should be controlled, guarded and protected; it should be preserved in its integrity, untainted, it should be treated exactly as if it were sacred.\(^\text{82}\)

I am interested in crime scenes because they seem to represent how institutions and their officers minister to indigenous material culture – in museums and so-called archaeological sites. The crime scene is analogous to the sacred place of memory and sites of cultural destruction. Crime scenes and the detective’s way of seeing the world go hand in hand.

Indigenous crime scenes are often reflected in stories of forced removal from our lands. Metaphorically, psychologically and physically distanced from the land, some Aboriginal people find themselves viewing their ‘country’ as a crime scene. We become agents of our own cultural dysfunction by fixing places in time and space, discouraging cultural practices to impact on these sites. This is the greatest irony, that Aboriginal people are unconsciously and inadvertently thinking forensically and archaeologically, rather than living culturally in unison with these places. The acute fear of the

destruction of the traces, the clues, the evidence of our ancestral past is preventing us from leaving any traces of ourselves in these places.\textsuperscript{83} We are living ghosts, we see but are afraid to be.

According to Wollen, a crime scene holds both a ‘surplus and a dearth of meaning’; it is a place where meaning is both ‘overwhelming’ and ‘insubstantial’ and a space which questions our sense of things and our received values.\textsuperscript{84}

The \textit{absent} has the capacity to tell us more than what is officially present. F.R. Ankersmit quotes Georges Duby who compared his historical work with the developing of a negative. When Duby spoke about evidence and the past, and was asked what constituted for him the most interesting evidence, he replied ‘this can be found in what is not said, in what a period has not said about itself.’\textsuperscript{85}

Fred Wilson employs the anonymous and overlooked to encourage his audience to reconsider the engagement of power and representation within mainstream institutions.\textsuperscript{86} I believe that suppressed material later manifests within incongruous details which I apprehend and reconfigure in my practice.

\textbf{The use of repetition:}

Repetition is an important operative element in most of my work. Visual repetition is about movement. Repeated things rarely stand still for the eyes; they demand acknowledgment. In my work I intend to draw attention to that which has often been marginalised.

\textsuperscript{83} A side-effect of engaging with a forensic aesthetic is that it can turn the past away from memory and into history. John Fiske believes this is manifested in what S. Levine describes as ‘Sacred Inarticulateness’ or ‘the inability to explain one’s most sacred institutions in an objective discourse’. Fiske, John, ‘Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life’ in \textit{Cultural Studies}, ed. C. Nelson, L. Grossberg, P. Treichler, Routledge, New York, 1992: 154. Fiske cites Levine, S, ‘Art Values, Institutions and culture’, \textit{American Quarterly}, 24(2), 1972, pp131-165

\textsuperscript{84} Wollen, Peter, in Rugoff, Ralph, 1997: 25


\textsuperscript{86} Ira Berlin writes of Wilson’s strategy: ‘\textit{Mining the Museum} challenges the colonist’s vision of Maryland’s History. The exhibit looks for silences or, as Wilson graphically puts it, empty pedestals, and demands men and women who had been debarred from Maryland’s pantheon be elevated to places of honor. By shifting the focus of historical concern – in some cases literally moving the spotlight from the foreground to the background – Wilson demonstrates how the anonymous can gain visibility and a place in history’. Berlin, Ira, ‘\textit{Mining the Museum} and the Rethinking of Maryland’s History’ in Corrin, Lisa C, \textit{Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson}, The New Press, Baltimore, 1994: 43
Repetition is an often debated technique, giving emphasis to things seen as unnecessary or marginal.  

Repetition is also a way of ascertaining then articulating one’s own identity. It allows us to create an abstract world where, in Stewart’s words, ‘the text can appear and reappear despite the on-goingness of the “real world”’. It gives substance to the thing under consideration, the object; and it suggests the ‘difference that [allows] identity [to] be articulated’ for through repetition we create an ‘original’.  

Some repeated acts seem to be about remembering: anniversaries, birthdays, memorial parades: all surface as rituals of remembrance. But these occasions reveal more about the fear of forgetting, the need for communal engagements, the representative event itself, rather than its original impetus. These occasions can even serve as a sanctioned means of actually forgetting the original occasion. These reflective acts are distancing; their existence implies that the original action is receding in time and from memory; hence requiring forms of re-enactment.

Yosef Yerushalmi Zakhor believes that when collective memory is failing, other means are employed to take its place. I suggest that the amount of history writing in Australia today and alternative means of working with and through history, for example, my own practice, supports Zakhor’s views.

Iain Chambers writes of the violent act of writing memory into history, an act that recognises that once memory is in this realm beyond memory it is open to continual layers of renegotiations and increasing obscurity from its origins. Which, according to

---

87 Minh-ha, Trinh T., 1996: 11  
88 Stewart, Susan, 1996: 20  
90 Chambers continues: ‘Writing is re-presentation, a simulation of what has been lost to it...it deals with a memory that knows the impossibility of ever fully knowing either itself or the past. What are transcribed and translated are traces, residues, shadows and echoes. Here there is no obvious clarity to be narrated but rather a continual sorting through the debris of time. And as the accounting of the past constantly prefigures new questions, or else the most ancient of demands in new constellations, the chronicle is continually being re-written, re-viewed, re-presented. The resulting narrative can only be historical and fragmentary, structured and open, continuous and interrupted. For historiography involves both the re-membering and re-covering of the past: its temporary coherence simultaneously invokes disclosure and disguise’. Chambers, Iain, Migrancy.
David Middleton, is an inevitable result of the social practice of commemoration. 91

Writing of history, building of monuments and memorials, processions, anthems and marches emerge in lieu of the original act or its participants. Perhaps my own practice falls into this expressionistic fear of forgetting.

Paul Connerton agrees with the Freudian notion that repetition is a pathologically compulsive act to assist forgetting. 92 He speaks about two contrasting ways of bringing the past into the present: acting out and transference. Acting out is marked by a compulsion to repeat and transference is the main instrument for ‘curbing the patient’s compulsion to repeat and for turning it into a motive for remembering’. 93

I incorporate repetition in all its guises in my practice. There may be six spears or one hundred and seventy three kitchen tools in a piece but each item speaks of lack of closure - my own and that of the story they present. They reveal how I am searching amongst the almost identical for the elusive clues to tell me more. 94 Repetitious collecting and assembling is both a way to deal with a difficult situation and a way to remain

---

91 'The dilemmatic nature of collective memory as both marking continuity in the preservation of the past and altering the past in terms of the concerns of the present'. Middleton, David, Collective Remembering, ed. David Middleton and P. Edwards, Sage, London, 1990: 13


93 'Transference sets up an intermediate realm between illness and real life through which the transition from the one to the other is made. This intermediate realm consists to a very large extent of narrative activity which seeks to uncover the patient’s efforts to maintain a particular kind of narrative discontinuity'. Connerton, Paul, How Societies Remember, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1994: 25

94 Hannah Fink believes that repetition within my art-practice allows for an accretion or growth of meaning to occur without arriving at any final illumination: 'For Gough, the multiple represents an accumulation rather than reduction in meaning. Just as the piles of shoes and spectacles in the Holocaust museum in Washington necessarily fail to describe inimitable evil (although, through intimate connexion with the bodies of the dead, perhaps do so more immediately than any other material representation), so the meaning of the serialised object is cumulative but never definitive. Put another way, one might say that in endlessly repeating something it is never represented: the infinitely repeated object ceases to be descriptive... Repetition, for Gough, is a way of chipping away at the unknowableness of the past, but of also respecting its core of unknowability... an enactment of a continual approach, a desire to know without the presumption of knowledge'. Fink, Hannah: 1998: 7
embedded in that situation. Collecting is partly about unease, lack, loss, wanting to fill something, wanting to compensate. Collection and repetition are about time - the time taken to amass something; the time taken to consider the multitude; the time which a collection demands. Repetition is a reminder of the nameless and the dateless; it is an urge to counter anonymity by focussing on the unnamed and unacknowledged; and it is a means to state a position whilst manifesting personal or societal unease and discontent.

I place objects in formation to invoke this rhythmic ritualisation of the repeated form as a way into, and a way of telling, a story. It is an incantation to both the individual and the collective.

Repetition is a means of uttering something without or beyond words. To the individual and the collective the return to earlier events and memories may be traumatic. This revisiting of memory through assemblage is further conceded by Trinh H Minh-ha as an act of repetition, and she notes that it can be 'a process of memorisation rather than an individual technique of structuring'. It becomes then a way of denying or preventing any form of closure.95

The use of repetition in my work allows it to sit in flux between the orderly cohesion of a grouping of objects and the unsettled motion of objects hovering in formation demanding a closer reading of what they are intended to conceal/reveal. I acknowledge that repetition may interrupt a narrative - but simultaneously it may bring fresh attention to it. Anna Maria Morelli in discussion with Trinh T. Minh-ha suggested the use of repeated language can be a mode of defiance against being fixed by others.96

I utilise objects repetitiously which are not usually seen together in formation. By dislocating these objects from their former uses in the home, school, museum, I am drawing them (and the artwork of

95 Minh-ha, Trinh T., 1996: 11
96 '...You stubbornly face the verbal struggle not only as you continue to re-appropriate and reuse these words, but also when you reuse them time after time in different contexts, so that, repeating them in differences, their meanings continue to be mobile and shifting. I guess this might be one of the possible ways to prevent these words from becoming part of a fixed terminology.' Morelli, Annamaria, 'The Undone Interval' in The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, Routledge, London, 1996: 11
which they are part) into animating new dialogues and fresh understandings.

One danger with repetition is that it can 'saturate' an audience and become mechanical and uninspiring. Trinh T. Minh-ha calls for the introduction of slight changes or 'displacements' to punctuate repetition (within public speeches). This allowance of difference within the repeated is incorporated within my practice, e.g. the use of 173 kitchen tools in *My Tools Today.* 97

Repetition allows me to communicate with a viewer on different levels of perception, cognition and incorporation.

*The lost detective who didn't have a clue – me:*
The space within the detective novel shares with me the in-between space of the stories that I have apprehended and re-presented through visual means.

Some of my family had been diligently covering our coloured secret with the accumulation of more time and less vocalisation of our heritage. Our indigenous history had become much the same as a criminal past. Tasmanía became locked in my childhood mind as a place of original sin, of unspoken mystery. Nan's family were Tasmanian in the fullest possible sense - Tasmanian jokes were allowable and encouraged but no more than this. Brief and secret reflection directed that we came from the worst class of convict and surely more than one – I felt certain that we had many Tasmanian skeletons in our closets - but I didn't realise it was thousands of generations of Tasmanians my family were speaking *around.*

These retrieved stories and reawakened narratives, with which I work reflect my own processes of refiguring who I am and what I believe. The overturning of the everyday on one particular day of my life led me to rethink everything, to reconsider where and who I had been and what road I was travelling; how and how much things had changed.

I saw *concealment* within the apparently regular and everyday. I began reading detective fiction and have

97 Minh-ha, Trinh T., 1996:11
not been able to stop since my mother spelt out our
identity for me.

My family thought they were doing the best thing for
their children during this 1960's border zone between
extremist racism and the Age of Aquarius. In some
sense they were providing a less complicated road for
a displaced small family unit to follow, but by
denying the truth of heritage a terrible crime was
being perpetrated on the innocent - the denial of
choice.

I can now reflect upon the time before and after the
awareness of Aboriginality dawned on me. Before was
alienation, a certain sense of unease with everything, a
lack that could not be voiced, a nagging sense that
something was not right.

These fears sent me spiralling for answers - I was sure
I was adopted; then I was sure I wasn’t being told
something crucial because I had a terminal disease;
because it was too awful to tell; because it would
upset everything. I thought the secret was about me
alone; then about the Tasmanian side of the family;
then about the Scottish side of the family98, or was it
about my brother? I dreamt about it at night and
during the day I played alone in many schoolyards
and invented my own otherworlds from rocks and
twigs. I was strange; I was alone. I needed an answer
but I could not name the question and did not know
whom to ask.

Now I am ‘home’ in Hobart – and yet still essentially
a loner. I am unsure whether that can change. I have
returned to the ‘scene of the crime’ and am compelled
to rework the past. The past is somehow accountable
to (and for) me; fundamentally responsible for my
own lack of understanding of where I fit into this

98 This was the classic Hitchcockian MacGuffin - the false lead. In some sense I think
there was an overemphasis on my Father’s Scottish family and heritage to direct
the attention of my self and brother from my mother’s side of the family. As
children we were taken to the Brunswick Scottish Society each month where we
met Scottish children and danced and heard live accordion and Jimmy Shand
music and went to Burns Suppers. After high school I went to Europe to meet
my father’s Scottish relatives. Other narratives were built around my father’s
identity. There was talk that his family were Scottish Jews. This made sense to
me. I connected with a Jewish Identity. I had doubts but decided to undertake a
BA degree in prehistory at the University of Western Australia (1984 - 1986), with
a large component taught by Sandra Bowdler who had spent much time in
Tasmania. I finished the degree – still the penny didn’t drop. I went overseas and
wandered about for almost two years during which time my mother told me of
our identity over the phone line. I came home.
world. I need to purge the past and yet it binds me; this place and my people.

**Questions raised and problems resolved - parameters and challenges of the investigation:**
My project aimed to perform several functions for me, and to offer an alternative means for a viewer to experience and engage with concerns which are usually relegated to a history discourse.

Key questions and problems which this project has raised and to which I have visually responded include the following which I discuss in this chapter:

- Acts of Returning, recovering, remembering and forgetting
- Navigating the past - returning the absent to the remaining story
- Language, narratives, positioning, interstitial spaces and creative practices
- Recognising ourselves and others as historical and authorial players
- Redressing the balance of ownership of history and its documentation
- How to recognise and suggest the unresolved nature of history - the artist as agent of memory
- The inseparability of then and now
- Negotiating the representation of time/space in art
- Whose stories, whose voices?
- Indigenous narrative: international reception
- How to invite a viewer into a work – when they are comfortable just looking in

**Acts of returning, recovering, remembering - and acts of forgetting:**
I believe that everyone is compelled to return to the scene of the crime; to the site which in some way has represented them. For me the return to Tasmania was a necessary relocation to the site where my ancestors were almost annihilated. There is still much learning, working, understanding and sharing for me to do here in Tasmania - an island afflicted by massacres, wars, retaliation, resistance, survival and denial.

---

99 See Appendix Three for an extract from Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* - a text which has influenced this project’s consideration of the place of remembrance and implications of forgetting.
A return is necessary in order to effect an awareness of the ways that the past is still lived, still potent within the people who are here; still potent in those who were not there but have experienced the event through their families; in their blood.

The following paraphrased stories helped me to articulate my own position, and to move forward.

‘The Humidicribs’: In the 1930s at Luna Park, Coney Island, New York, a German doctor who had invented the humidicrib could not raise medical interest. He displayed a tentful of premature babies from poor families in sideshow alley. These babies were a huge public success at a penny a view. The doctor saved hundreds of lives in one decade. These babies returned for ‘reunions’ as adults at Luna Park - the unlikely site and reason of their survival.¹⁰⁰

‘Mining the Museum’: In his 1994 exhibition, Mining the Museum, Fred Wilson enlarged a detail of a black figure from the background of a photograph, Picnic at Wye House. Wilson discovered that the scene depicted a reunion of former slaves and their owners and found that a man who had worked in the plantation kitchen, had later established himself as a caterer, returning to serve at the picnic, at the site of his former incarceration.¹⁰¹

Sites of pain – concentration camps, cemeteries, hospitals, schools, ‘homes’ - places of bad memory are revisited not only to self-heal those who have experienced pain associated with these places, but in order to regenerate a place itself which also needs to move beyond particular events. Sites and memories re-awaken and re-activate the past for us. Toni Morrison illustrates the ways that places site themselves in memory.¹⁰²

Our returns are linked to memory, commemoration and recovery as well as to loss, absence and forgetting. For

101 Corrin, Lisa G, 1994: 46
102 "You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it’s not flooding, it’s remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were... And a rush of the imagination is our ‘flood’. Morrison, Toni, ‘The Site of Memory’ in Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Culture, ed. Russell Ferguson et al., Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990: 305
Susan Stewart ‘The souvenir is destined to be forgotten when the personal connection dies’.\(^{103}\)

However, I believe that the souvenir can have a potent after-life in new hands. I wish to evoke and utilise that initial poignant and nostalgic sense of ephemerality of the aging souvenir; and to re-utilise the souvenir-as-object as a memory-catalyst for a viewer - and for myself. I endeavour to create a trigger reminding us of times and places, and of our behaviour.

Memory is living and evolving and this life allows my work to enter into the memory of a viewer. I, like Vera Zolberg, regard memory not only as autobiographical in nature but refashioned in the light of our continuing experiences; it is both archival and a shaper of our ‘personal myth’.\(^{104}\)

Forgetting and remembering are interesting companions - one cannot exist without the other. Remembering can be a deliberate act, when forgetting cannot. Forgetting may be imposed by one’s unconscious; as the result of an injury or illness; or because something does not seem important enough to remember. Then there is enforced forgetting - when something a person or group would otherwise naturally know or do and hence remember is deliberately not told or practiced; engendering its absence from the future of an individual or a people.

I would argue that forced forgetting cannot work. Something unsettled, unspoken, festering, burdens those who think they have concealed the past from themselves and silenced it forever for others. This form of forgetting will inevitably erupt - maybe not in one generation, but eventually. It may no longer know its name or what it once was exactly - but it will still demand its place in the living where it may be then laid to a proper rest.

\(^{103}\) Stewart, S, 1996: 151

In his 1968 Boyer lecture, W.E.H. Stanner made an explicit observation on ‘The Great Australian Silence’ - the general absence of Aboriginal people in historical publications:

What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.  

Only now, thirty years after Stanner’s comment is Australia beginning to draw open its curtains and look deep within its closets. Forgetfulness was our national pastime but indigenous Australia is now openly asking that national memory return. My work is my means of acknowledging and negotiating personal and national memory loss, or absence.  

My need to invoke both personal and national recall is perhaps a disavowal of my own loss, and thus death of parts of myself, my own identity before I could know or save them. I want stories and experiences to be retrieved and shared in order for everything and everyone to honestly move forward in this ‘nation’.

Language and Narrative: positioned by language, art is my alternative, interstitial space

Language:
As we all realise when we try to pin it down, language is a difficult concept to define simply. In contemporary usage we extend it to cover a range of things – sign language, words with cultural and national links and inheritances (Palawa Karni, the

106 Which Hannah Fink also suggests: ‘As much as Gough’s work is about bad memories – a misrepresented and misremembered past – it also centres on an absence of memory: the repressed knowledge of her Aboriginal heritage as a child and adolescent…. Gough’s work is about memory yet centres on memories she does not herself possess – the amnesia that, in terms of her practice, is the necessary missing piece that sustain the collection’. Fink, Hannah, 1998: 8
107 Roth concurs that memory substantiates one’s place in the present: ‘Memory can be manipulated, and the persistence of the personal past is dependent on the needs of the person remembering it in the present. So it would seem that memory, like history is always constructed in or is a response to the present. Memory promises immediacy, a kind of certainty about the existence of particular events in the past. It enables people to believe in the persistence of the past; as long as people are remembered they are, we are often told, still alive’. Roth, Michael S., 1995: 9
108 Palawa Karni is a language currently in development by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre’s Palawa Karni language program. It is a language retrieved and rebuilt from various written sources, and is intended to be used by the Palawa (Tasmanian Aboriginal) community today.
English language, Romance languages, etc); we refer to the language of music, of sculpture, or poetry, and, of course, all languages have local variations, idioms, jargon, ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of speaking the same language we may speak past each other or ‘over the heads’ of others.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that the language people speak determines the way they perceive the world. \(^{109}\) Can we grant this but still allow that there may be shades of difference in our perception, even when we have a language in common?

In a poetic passage Luce Irigaray expresses the dilemma for us: that in ‘speaking sameness... we’ll miss each other, fail ourselves’. \(^{110}\)

Mark Poster believes that language constructs versions of the past. \(^{111}\) One central danger of my position, my ways of negotiating the world and my practice, is that its foundation is unavoidably found in a framework of colonialism. I call this the trap of the colonised subject. This means that although I may think I am working against colonialism, bringing its

---


110 Irigaray muses: ‘If we keep on speaking the same language together, we’re going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don’t you think so? Listen: all round us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same attractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same...Same...Always the same.

If we keep on speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we’ll miss each other, fail ourselves. Again... Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads. They’ll vanish, and we’ll be lost. Far off, up high. Absent from ourselves: we’ll be spoken machines, speaking machines. Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own. Withdrawn into proper names, violated by them. Not yours, not mine. We don’t have any. We change names as men exchange us, as they use us, use us up. It would be frivolous of us, exchanged by them, to be so changeable’. Irigaray, Luce, This sex which is not one, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, (1977), 1985: 205.

111 ‘Because language is a material mediation and not a transparent tool, historians need to acknowledge that they create facts by manipulating materials from the past, and they need to ponder all the implications of this creation’. Poster, Mark, Cultural History and Postmodernity – Disciplinary Readings and Challenges, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997: 115.

Gabrielle Spiegel agrees with Poster that texts reflect the world of which they are part. She elaborates that this may extend to the worlds of which they object—the same world, different perspectives: “All texts occupy determinate social spaces, both as products of the social world of authors and as textual agents at work in that world, with which they entertain often complex and contestatory relations. In that sense, texts both mirror and generate social realities, are constituted by and constitute the social and discursive “formations which they may sustain, resist, contest, or seek to transform, depending on the case at hand’. Spiegel, Gabrielle, ‘History, Historicism’, in The Postmodern History Reader, ed. Keith Jenkins, 1997: 198
activities to light, making it accountable – perhaps ultimately I am just part of its structure, a necessary critical indigene to balance the colonial or post-colonial agenda. I similarly suspect that many museums, galleries, symposiums seek indigenous artists to be present/to present or represent, to embody and bestow the feel-good politically correct aspect on to the proceedings.

Chakrabarty, drawing on Homi Bhabha’s term the ‘mimetic’, notes that positions [such as the one I take] are unenviable, with often small hope of doing anything more than mimicking the language and positions of those in power; that the history of Europe, whether we like it or not, casts a shadow over all of us and sets patterns for our history narratives. 112

Stuart Hall has examined in detail the positions of ‘post-colonial’ thinking and has critically pinpointed the many and varied responses to, and writing about, post-colonial situations. Astutely, he recognises that self-positioning sometimes inadvertently takes one out of the margins into the centre.113 And elsewhere he wryly muses that the entanglement between the West and Other administers to the west’s identity crisis, and serves to multiply and disperse the possible positions we might take.

This dangerous position is more than being locked into the figure of a colonised subject, it encourages we indigenous people to depend on and exist through the colonial past; to see ourselves through colonial eyes.

112 Chakrabarty states that Indian history ‘even in the most dedicated socialist or nationalist hands, remains a mimesis of a certain “modern” subject of “European” history and is bound to represent a sad figure of lack and failure. The transition narrative will always remain “grievously incomplete”’. She continues: “This subject (colonised Indian) can only be spoken of and by the transition narrative that will always ultimately privilege the modern (i.e. Europe)...There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe” – one can only articulate subaltern positions in the name of this history.” Chakrabarty, Dipesh, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History’, in The Postcolonial Studies Reader, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, Gareth Griffiths, Routledge, London, (1995) 1997: 383, 384


82
Hall warns us to remember the way desire plays across power and knowledge in the dangerous enterprise of thinking at or beyond the limit.\textsuperscript{114}

Rogoff speaks of the struggle to enunciate ‘position’; \textsuperscript{115} and acknowledges that current creative practices often inhabit a border zone which is in the process of figuring its own language, its means of articulation. She refers to writers such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha.\textsuperscript{116}

Bhabha discusses how interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – create the opportunity for new negotiations to arise, but recognises that these may be fraught with conflict and perhaps deny any resolutions. Bhabha sees more questions raised than answered by inhabiting this intermediary zone.\textsuperscript{117} Elsewhere Bhabha perceives displacement as one means of reconciling self between place. \textsuperscript{118}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Hall, Stuart, ‘When was the “Post-Colonial”? Thinking at the Limit’ in The Post-Colonial Question – Common Skies, Divided Horizons, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, 1996: 260.
\item Hall states: “Sometimes the only purpose which the post-colonial critique seems to serve is as a critique of western philosophical discourse... The Postcolonial state is like merely [taking] a detour to return to the position of the Other as a resource for rethinking the Western Self,” Hall, Stuart, 1996: 248
\item ‘Trying to find both articulation and signification for that constant unease between efforts at self-positioning and the languages and knowledges available for us to write these into culture.’ Rogoff, Int, 2000: 15
\item ‘Part of the work that seems to face us at present is the need to articulate the specific intellectual and cultural discourses that reflect those states that Homi Bhabha names “inbetweenness”, and Edward Said describes as never being “of” anything, or that Paul Gilroy (following Du Bois) terms “double consciousness”’. Rogoff, Int, 2000: 7
\item ‘It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed “in between”, or in excess of, the sum of the “parts” of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, and even incommensurable?” Bhabha, Homi, ‘Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation’, in Whitney Biennial of Art 1995, ed. Elisabeth Sussman, Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N Abrams, New York: 63
\item “Between” is a very interesting place of enunciation, because it’s also the place “in the midst of”. It’s not only between two polar positions, it is also in a new place – formed when these two positions somehow ignite, incite and initiate something that, in my own work, I’ve called a “third space”. One of the characteristics of this place “in between” is that there is always that moment of surprise, that moment of interrupting something...from that moment of interruption emerges something new, something different, a displacement’. Bhabha, Homi, ‘Family Romance’, in Visualising Theory, ed. Lucien Taylor, Routledge, New York, 1994: 460
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
This is how I see the world, how I uncover aspects of particular stories to enunciate visually, and how I ascertain the means to express these stories. My whole world of engagement and expression and my ‘language’ stems from my position of active displacement.

Gordon Bennett considers that self-questioning led to his practice and his strategies for self-positioning – a process and journey which I am also undertaking. And Mary Anne Staniszewski writes about zones of repression, margins and borders as displacements which Dennis Adams calls threshold positions - his means to preserve newly edited pasts in his art-practice.
In his work *Kunstinsel*, Adams unsettled viewers by positioning Turkish immigrant working women enlarged and elevated on an outdoor, heavily floodlit billboard. Adams literally ‘highlighted’ the existence of a marginalised and silenced group of people in Germany.

Stuart Hall describes his Black Afro-Caribbean British position as ‘ruptured’ from the perspective of African people. A position from which he needed to articulate himself into a new whole being.

What they felt was I have no voice, I have no history. I have come from a place to which I cannot go back and I have never seen. I used to speak a language which I can no longer speak, I had ancestors whom I cannot find, they worshipped gods whose names I do not know. Against this sense of profound rupture, the metaphors of a new kind of imposed religion can be reworked, can become a language in which a certain kind of history is retold, in which aspirations of liberation and freedom can be for the first time expressed, in which what I would call the imagined community of Africans can be symbolically reconstructed. 122

viewer off guard”. These marginal “threshold locations are appropriate sites for revealing the ellipses of collective memory, or...the political unconscious of a location.” Staniszewski, M.A., *Dennis Adams – The Architecture of Amnesia*, Kent Fine Art Inc., New York, 1990: 12, 10

Hall, Stuart, *Myths of Caribbean identity*, Walter Rodney Memorial lecture, Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, 1991: 10
Again and again, the same words and phrases are used by various writers and artists as we fumble for a language to speak ourselves into being, and a narrative that will speak to others.

The place of narrative:
Michel de Certeau speaks of the Schema - a whodunnit narrative form in which the past, by coming back, overturns an established hierarchical order.\(^{123}\) He continues:

Narration is not description, it is an art of saying. The story does not express a practice. It does not limit itself to telling about a movement. It makes it...

... When someone asked Beethoven the meaning of a sonata, it is said, he merely played it over.\(^{124}\)

That is what I want my work to do...to be in itself an experience, not just to be about something. Like Catherine Hall, I believe that new tools to revisit old questions will provide some fresh answers to our relationships with the past. She suggests that fiction could be a fresh tool for constructing new myths and identities.\(^{125}\) I tell my story through objects and relationships.

I see my visual art practice as undertaking a similar role and as constructing its own narrative. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, I, 'unfocus [and] read crookedly, the historical text'.\(^{126}\)

I undertake narration through the multiple assemblage of many objects. Together, they make a visual rhythm - sometimes a cacophony. En masse they challenge the viewers' eyes asking them to travel the work; to follow the story through the materials and their placement; and to notice how the work embodies a story. The project has been driven by an urge to create open and unfixed visual narratives.

---


\(^{124}\) Certeau, Michel de. 1984: 80


\(^{126}\) Ricoeur argues that narrativising the past offers: 'An enormous advance over previous ways of reading history because it spotlights the innumerable choices that must be made at every turn; to emphasize the choices that must be made and rejected is to unfocus, to read crookedly, the historical text.' Ricoeur, Paul cited in Kellner, Hans, 'Language and historical Representation', in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Routledge, London, 1997: 135
Thomas Schlereth suggests that ‘Material culture is a more democratic and less subjective means of accessing a past than a written or oral accounting of people and events’.\(^{127}\) The use of objects to retell parts of a story has been a liberation and a form of ‘returning’ for the objects, myself and the original account. It is a way of communicating and reflecting beyond formal language and seeking an initial understanding instead through emotive memory.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton believe that objects work to support identity.\(^{128}\) And Allan Radley expands upon this idea by suggesting that through objects our relationship with our past is ‘embodied and organised in socially significant ways’.\(^{129}\) All human beings hold significant relationships with objects – even objects no longer in material possession hold a powerful place in personal memory.

The objects within my work are often overlooked, discarded, damaged, mass-produced. They rarely perform their original function, nor seek attention in themselves, for themselves. Their position is as unexpected as the once-textual narrative running beneath the surface of these works.

**Recognising ourselves and others as historical and authorial players:**
My intention within this body of work is to combine the mythical and the factual, the familiar object and the alien viewpoint, the scientific laboratory and the domestic environment.

I set out to examine how to evoke a reaction the unexpected by disturbance and through a continuation of the non-settled blurring of the truths/fictions of identity, authenticity and historical facts. There will always be more questions than answers.

In part, I envisage my art-practice as a type of comparative study, examining the means by which

\(^{127}\) Schlereth, Thomas, 1991: 13

\(^{128}\) ‘A study of people’s personal possessions shows, as would be expected, that objects are used to establish a link with the past which helps to sustain identity, and this increases as individuals become older’. Csikszentmihalyi, M and Rochberg-Halton, E. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981: 3

history is recorded, maintained and changed by its interaction with time and what we all bring to it.

In my work, the final factor necessary for a renegotiation of history to occur is the invitation to viewers and audiences to bring their own cultural baggage to a story. By this means the past becomes the present.

I aim to reach an audience visually, those who were unlikely to read the published text and I alert them to the notion that we are all players in and a result of historical narratives. This is partly an investigation of systems and structures by which we are dominated; of the potential for visual art to depict history, whilst undermining and subverting the usual act of anonymity of the authorial presence in history texts.

Whilst suggesting that we are all players in history, I insist that we have not all been the writers of these histories. As artist of these works, in re-claiming the past which is as much my own terrain as anyone’s, I have attempted a coherently recognisable 'style' to openly reassemble and unsettle what is usually a concealed authorial presence.

Authorship is crucial to how history is written and then received, visual art allows me a presence, a space to reveal my position, sources, beliefs and reconstructions; to divulge a located honesty which may seduce viewers to (re)consider their own place within engagement or dialogue. This work is about a particular vernacular - the act of siting self in this country.

Redressing the balance of ownership of history and its documentation:
Historical stories are largely received as written texts; usually transmitted as closed and non-negotiable and they become less like evolving stories. History is not the past, it is a construction of the past. It is an ordering of events to suit the people and time who are

130 As Edward Countryman proposes: 'Whether academic or fictional, filmed or written, any reconstruction of the past is a cultural artefact reflecting its own time and intervening in the world in which it is produced'. Countryman, Edward, 'John Ford’s Drums along the Mohawk: The Making of an American Myth', in Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public, ed. S. Benson, (et al), Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1986: 87
retrieving it. Pierre Nora believes that memory and history are in conflict, one living – one incomplete. It is the tension bringing these two forces into play in one artwork which directs my practice.131

My aim is to uncover a part of a story, a portion of an event not previously isolated. Using a variety of source material, I expose some aspect which resonates unresolved into the present.

My work aims to reveal the systems which govern our encounters with what we think is the past but is in fact the permanent veil of history. I seek to redress the imbalance in ownership of narratives of the past by reworking them from another perspective.

This act of recovery is problematic because it places me in a temporary position of power - allowing my work to aggregate the false credibility of a history text; a replacing of one story and author by another. But this is a movement, a progression, and as such a useful intervention into an apparently ‘settled’ narrative; at the very least it suggests another version and another reading of all versions.

To recognise and suggest the unresolved nature of history - the artist as agent of memory:
Perhaps my desire to reanimate historical stories derives partly from the tangible sense of the past in Tasmania; a sense that the very air I breathe, the water I drink and the earth I walk, witnessed my ancestors for millenia before me. The absence of so much of that history in my received world of language and data is possibly the motivation for my search for stories close to my own time of conception. This project arises from an urge to understand how that past has come to exist for me today.

The inseparability of then and now:
Perhaps this immersion in history appears as my avoidance of the present. Australia's current racial

131 ‘Memory and history, far from being synonymous, are thus is many respects opposed. Memory is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of the distortions to which it is subject, vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer’. Nora, Pierre, ‘Between memory and history’, in Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, ed. Pierre Nora, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996: 3
crisis is a reflection of those histories I am unravelling, an unrest borne from the genocidal strategies with which this nation grew up and, which built a crumbling foundation, an unrest ever promising to surface. The work whilst seeming to address the historical is also reflecting the contemporary.

Henry Reynolds insists that remembering is a necessary way forward:

White Australians frequently say ‘all that’ should be forgotten, but it will not be. It cannot be. Black memories are too deeply, too recently scarred. And forgetfulness is a strange prescription coming from a community which has revered the fallen warrior and emblazoned the phrase ‘Lest We Forget’ on monuments throughout the land. If Aborigines are to enter our history ‘on terms of most perfect equality’, as Thomas Mitchell termed it, they will bring their dead with them and expect an honoured burial. 132

The return of the once apparently historical as living memory is usually rapidly intercepted and deflected out of the personal and into the realm of politics and current affairs, and thus out of the hands of those whom it affects most. Such removal of power compels me to step forward, to say my piece and state my position.

This stance has particular relevance to the pieces She loves me, She Loves me not..., mOTHER and Pedagogical (Inner Soul) Pressure, which were made in 1995 and 1996 before the issue of the Stolen Generation became widely publicised in the press. These works address this ‘subject’ through the incorporation of photographic images of the ‘witnesses’ – the children and adult participants of this Government program. I believe that the repetitious use of portraiture suggests (as does the use of repeated objects in my work) that an apparently historical sequencing of events still resonates and holds ongoing repercussions through our present.

I gauge the success of my recovery process (of the past) by the intuitive connection/proximity of some artworks to public resurfacings beyond my own private realm. I aim to forewarn, somehow announce

and, perhaps even sometimes, effect the open return of the past. An early warning system.

Some of my pieces are made because as I encounter their stories they appear to vibrate. This project has been about points-of-crossing, of bridging and perceiving connections between the personal and the external public Australia. By recognising the place and time for a retelling; an opportunity has arisen within this body of work for the continuation and alteration of an event previously ascertained as fixed. The impetus to retell these stories is derived from the detection of isolated clues which refuse to sit still in their found, current and often historical-text structure.

**Negotiating the representation of time/space in art:**
A central consideration of my work is figuring how to address ideas about the marking and crossing of time and space within my practice.

*Shadow of the Spear* enacts time through the use of the shadow, and the unused eggs and spears to suggest that yesterday is proximate to now. The shadows cast upon the text also serve as reminders of these concealed promises in the past still impacting on the identity of the Australian nation today.

In the work *Magnum as Cook* ... the presence of our family portraits of 1970, alongside Melbourne’s 1970 phone book, places my family in various times - in 1970 within the phone book, encapsulated, assimilated and identified as subjects of Cook’s colonisation, and in the 1980s perceiving Hawaii through the Magnum PI tv series - in much the same way that people learnt of the Pacific via Captain Cook, the western cultural purveyor of his time.

People are not only the products of their own time, but are constructed from the upheld histories of the past, such as the discovery and exploration trope - which successfully prevented Aboriginal people being recognised as sentient land-holding and land-occupying human beings until very recently.

**Whose stories, whose voices?**
Indigenous Australians in the 19th century did not recognise the western writing of history as a significant act of power. This procedure locked future Australian constructs of land ownership and identity politics
directly into the unquestioned authorless authority of the *historical*. I wish to return an indigenous person’s visual perspective to stories of this nation’s shared past.¹³³

My own directed gaze has arisen from many non-indigenous representations of overlapping pasts. It is important to remember with this project, that it is only one Aboriginal person’s perspective and we are not a frozen homogenous mass of people with only one viewpoint.

**Indigenous narrative: international reception¹³⁴**

All but two pieces in this body of work¹³⁵ are stories emerging from Australian subject matter, and yet I suggest that these accounts have underlying universal themes which are not nation specific; these include race, identity, heritage, memory, power, knowledge.

When four pieces from this project: *My Tools Today, She loves me, She loves me not,... mOTHER* and Pedagogical (*Inner Soul*) Pressure, were exhibited in Germany in 1996 they unexpectedly demonstrated how work, apparently culturally specific, can cross borders and awaken other people’s memories.

In conceiving and constructing these works, I had assumed my viewers would mostly consist of Aboriginal people or middle-class Australians of European origin who experienced the 1950/60s in suburbia. I suspected the installations would only work in Australia. Taking them to Köln tested these assumptions. And at Köln, I realised that the work was as unfixed and non-closed as the resolutions of most of the issues I have worked with under the guise of a 1960’s backdrop. This was an unintentional experiment with an unexpectedly satisfying result. For me it is important that a work remains *alive*; continuing to resonate, awaiting its next reading.

---

¹³³ In performing this act perhaps I am concurrently denying my European heritage an open role in my practice... But, of course, all parts that make up who I am must be directing how I work. This potential for duality or multiplicities within myself may be partly accountable for a similar tension both propelling and underlying my practice.

¹³⁴ Photographs reproduced here of my work at Köln (with the public in the frame) were kindly given to me by Georg Volerius, Fotodesign, Köln.

¹³⁵ *Bad Language* and *HOME sweet HOME*.
Michel de Certeau notes:

The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in texts something different from what they 'intended'. [He] detaches them from their lost or accessory origin.... One literature differs from another less by its text than by the way in which it is read. 136

I was fortunately able to be present for the duration of the exhibition at Köln, and heard much commentary and opinion (often in English) about many exhibiting artists' works – including my own.

Fig.63


The 'public' who encountered My Tools Today spoke openly of how they thought the work represented the sites and material culture of their own past. One person was convinced that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery was an institution in his home town!

Exhibiting She loves me, She loves me not...., mOTHER and Pedagogical (Inner Soul) Pressure resulted in repeated commentary that the works referenced the Holocaust and stories of forced adoption and displacement in their own nations.

Several people cried in response to these works and for this I was truly unprepared. I think this emotional response may have occurred because these visitors did not expect work of this nature in a giant impersonal Art Fair.

136 Certeau, Michel de, 1984: 165
Julie Gough, *She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not...* 1996. Thirteen plastic roses, thirteen synthetic slippers, thirteen Government images of non-Aboriginal foster/adoptive mothers holding Aboriginal children with no happy expressions. Variable dimensions. * 

This was alarming but also simultaneously heartening, as it demonstrated what the work ‘did’ in a situation beyond my control, beyond readings, critiques, kindnesses of friends and peers. The work effected a human response beyond the aesthetical concerns of its construction.

Julie Gough, *Pedagogical (Inner Soul) Pressure*, 1996. Forty pairs of used-school shoes (Twenty black/Twenty brown), old stilts, shoe shine box, Government photographs of Aboriginal children on Sydney’s Luna Park Rotor Ride in the 1960’s, simulated (Education Department USA) typical child behaviour slides, internal lights. * 

These multiple readings or ‘ownerships’ from multiple audiences could be seen as a positive or a negative factor in exhibiting this type of work elsewhere and in showing it to other than expected Australian audiences. The work is *let loose* and its borders are truly ruptured in an international context.
I am not convinced that a viewer is willing to work hard to sustain two readings of a work – their own and mine. Thus, they may leave a particular artwork without knowing it is about Aboriginal children being removed from their parents. My question from this experience – one that I am continually and ambivalently reassessing is whether a deep emotional response from a viewer, however displaced from its intended originary story and people, may be close enough or too far from my intention; from the response which I wish to engender?

In Germany, the audience viewing the work, often approached and asked me for more details of the pieces and I provided further narrative information which relocated the work back into an Australian context. The work was exhibited adjacent to a gallery showing Australian Aboriginal Art, which I believe encouraged viewers to ask about the 'stories' of the pieces.137

This active process raised questions of my own presence and absence at the site of the work’s interception by an audience. A viewer’s dissatisfaction is an interesting problem with work based on non-

---

137 I was granted a space by the jurors of Köln Art Fair as part of their Förder program in which ‘Twenty-five Young, emerging artists’ were offered an exhibition space. This space was adjacent to Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, a Melbourne-based gallery with whom I exhibit, and which exhibits Aboriginal Art.
fiction accounts; where people know there is more that they can ask, they want to engage, speak, think further about the work. That lack of closure is the nature of the historical beast and of my work, and explains why a viewer may feel discontented, and want more.

**How to invite a viewer into a work – when they are comfortable just looking in:**
Mike Crang relates how the narrative structure of many museum exhibits actually distances a viewer from the originary tale in the act of inviting them forward:

> Within the museum system, the structure of alterity/domestication of the past is being bridged narratively. And these narrative structures allow visitors to both ’relive’ the past and then distance themselves from it. The museums provide a coherent account of time in which to insert personal knowledge. Perhaps a less linear narrative would invite visitors to retell history from different perspectives.\(^{138}\)

It is my intention to both provide and subvert the familiar object and story. A narrative approach enables the new to be explored within the apparent safety of the old. I do not think that the viewer is distanced beyond the initial moment of invitation by this form of work. The structural considerations in these pieces do not allow for a regular linear reading, instead there is an endless repetition to transfixed the viewer, or the endless movement between various elements which also does not permit the eye or viewer to lapse into stasis or distance.

***

Part Four has addressed strategies, questions and problems. My investigation has addressed debates about positioning, in-between, centre and periphery in order to develop a language to communicate self; a language to move forward with and through. It is evident that ideas relating to narrative are central to my work: history narratives, cultural, personal, oral and written narratives; narratives of the semi-concealed, narratives of encounter.

\(^{138}\) Crang, Mike, ‘Spacing Times, Telling Times and Narrating the Past’ in *Time and Society*, 3 (1), Sage, London, 1994: 42

96