

An Antipodean Imaginary for Architecture+Philosophy: Fictocritical Approaches to Design Practice Research

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As a collective of PhD researchers (past and present) provisionally gathered within the Architecture+Philosophy Research Group, RMIT University, we will present a series of design explorations that are representative of our design practice research.¹ With the conjunctive capacity of architecture and philosophy we emphasize the ongoing importance of the relay between these disciplines, also activated in our work through the productive relations between critical theory and practice. We assume an expanded definition of architectural design practice, which includes digital immersive environments, unbuilt (even unbuildable) architectures, installation and participatory performance-based works, and also, importantly, includes the critical and creative practice of writing-architecture, often through the deployment of fiction. These are all means by which other possible worlds, including new forms of subjective and collective expression are speculatively brought into existence through the conjunctive synthesis of the thinking-doing of architecture. These imagined worlds also allow us to frame speculative ethico-aesthetic questions. What this group does not engage in is the direct and unmediated reformulation of professional architectural project work into descriptive or anecdotal research.

While our collected research tropes are diverse, for the purposes of this essay we will foreground the critical and creative usefulness of fiction in the construction of other possible worlds. Specifically, a return to the literary theoretical methodology of

fictocriticism will be ventured and reframed for architecture. This approach will be elaborated by Hélène Frichot who has had the opportunity to offer supervisory guidance to researchers presenting their design research below. Fictocriticism for architecture assumes the constructive, creative and critical situatedness of the thinking-designer in the midst of their problematic field.² We place an emphasis on critical and creative invention and the structured indeterminacy that manifests in the wild association of images and ideas that procure innovative as well as politically engaged minoritarian architectures. There endures an engagement with minorities, and minor literatures (including sub-canonical architectures), feminist approaches, queer intertextualities, as well as teratological mixtures of the natural and the cultural. We argue that fiction is the powerful means by which we can speculatively propel ourselves into a future, and that criticism offers the situated capacity to ethically cope with what confronts us. The power of conjoining these terms across the linking punctuation of the hyphen, that is, as a fictocritical practice, manifests in diverse projects, as we will demonstrate below.

In his book *After Criticism*, Gavin Butt identifies a newly located critic, one who admits that an objective, external point of view cannot be achieved, but instead suggests that the critical location is always embroiled in the midst of a situation. From the vantage of a newly located critical point of view, Butt proposes to rediscover criticism and its agency 'within the very mode of critical address

itself'.³ By dismissing the fantasy of objectivity, new expressions of critical response that are more performative, that employ fiction and autobiography, that multiply voices and points of view, and that 'deviate from established modes of critical behaviour' can be fostered. The critic is in the midst of the work, contributes to the work, and even creates the work, for the critic is also the creative practitioner. As Australian theorist Anna Gibbs writes, in direct reference to fictocritical approaches: 'The researcher is implicated in what is investigated.'⁴ The critical stance in architecture is deeply embedded in the pedagogical and design research context; it is the means through which a project proceeds, that is, through critical interrogation. The critic, while brought in from the outside, can also be the creative actor undertaking research through design. As Brian Massumi argues, 'critique is not an opinion or a judgment but a dynamic "evaluation" that is lived out in situation',⁵ which is to say, critique should not be about imposing preconceived attitudes, opinions or judgements, but needs to respond immanently to the problem at hand. That the practitioner is also in turn the critic of her own work allows criticism its creative turn and purposively puts it to work immanently in the creative act. A productive elision is suggested in this argument between architectural design researcher and critic, which could be seen to operate much like the shuttle that scoots backwards and forwards between theory and practice. Practitioners as they proceed need to achieve both a close vision, as well as vision from a distance of their work, and this mobility across points of view, as their practice is assessed and further propelled forward, can manifest in the emergence of fictional and creative voices.

Fictocriticism can be associated with the influence of French thinkers, such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, and the rise of theory in the 1980s through to the 1990s, which infected the humanities, as well as architecture, in productive as well as destructive

ways.⁶ This was a halcyon period just prior to the onset of theory fatigue, before the end of the millennium when theory fell into crisis and even disrepute, especially in the discipline of architecture. I am wary then of what might appear to be an anachronistic, nostalgic return to a theoretical territory, but I proffer the fictocritical approach here as a mode of conceptual recycling that accepts that new methodologies can arise out of conjunctions of old concepts. Even more specifically, a story can be told of the emergence of fictocriticism out of a specifically Australian context, with the work of such writers as Stephen Mueke, Anna Gibbs, Gail Jones and others, which offers the term a peculiarly local inflection, giving rise to what can be called an Antipodean imaginary.⁷ Simply defined, fictocriticism enables the productive conjunction of fiction and criticism. It can evince a Barthes-like *jouissance* in the materiality of the text, a text which can be extended to include the live materials of architecture. Fictocriticism also assumes the disruption of the authority of the author, whose voice comes to be splintered across diverse points of view, or else who comes to be completed by his or her many readers.⁸ Fictocriticism is also inspired by the uptake of French feminist philosophers such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who powerfully called out for new modes of writing within which woman's voice, and I would add, women's spatialities could be recognized and heard. It is a hybrid form and methodology, which I would like to call Franco-Australian, but this would be to limit the heterogeneous voices that join the throng, and who can be associated by other calling cards.⁹

Gibbs writes: 'The heterogeneity of fictocritical forms bears witness to the existence of fictocriticism as a necessarily performative mode, an always singular and entirely tactical response to a particular set of problems – a very precise and local intervention, in other words.'¹⁰ So fictocriticism, as I have suggested above, owns a minoritarian voice, both queer and feminist, but is also localized, operating in response to immediate problems and places. In

addition, it accepts that even philosophy can be undertaken as a form of fiction, and here inspiration arrives from that notorious pair, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. By engaging in the creative philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, Eric Alliez explains: 'The concept thus becomes narrative and philosophy a new genre of story in which description takes the place of the object, in which the point of view replaces the subject.'¹¹ What becomes clear in Deleuze and Guattari's final collaborative work, *What Is Philosophy?*, is the constructive capacity of philosophy, and the productive relations that can be construed between philosophy, art (and architecture) and science.¹² The role of fiction and immanent critique is also explored in the series of essays Deleuze collects in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, where this mode of creation promises to inaugurate new kinds of worlds. Thought and art, when organized in certain ways, can also become sufficiently real that they disturb 'reality, morality, and the economy of the world'.¹³ Fictocriticism is not frivolous, but facilitates new critical imaginings.

In what follows I will orchestrate a number of such voices, all of which are engaged in design practice research in the Australian and New Zealand context, and all of which contribute to a collective Antipodean imaginary between architecture and philosophy. The representative projects will draw on PhD research by Julieanna Preston, Michael Spooner, Sean Pickersgill, Zuzana Kovar, Ceri Hann and Megg Evans. Each of these researchers, I suggest, have employed fictocritical devices of various means, from the seemingly random association of images towards the construction of tall tales of architecture, to the exploration of science fiction as a critical tool that enables ethical consideration of possible futures, to the power of horror in fictional architectural constructions. In the first instance none of these researchers have necessarily identified fictocriticism as a methodology, and so I risk undertaking a form of violence in curating their research according to this approach. And yet

when the work is gathered, what can be found are productive interlacings between theory and practice, both being supported by implicit and explicit uses of fiction. Preston's visual essay project, 'Airing', speculates on political events, real and imagined, using fictional writing and imagery, as well as sculpted objects. Preston's work has also developed as a series of site specific installations where she deploys her recreated performing body as one medium amid many. Spooner commences from an association of images that allow him to conjoin a well-known Melbourne architectural icon, Edmond and Corrigan's RMIT Building 8, and an ocean liner taking leave of its mooring. He proceeds into a queering of local architectural space through the appropriation of motifs from interdisciplinary sources. Pickersgill designs immersive digital environments based on computer game platforms, as well as simple montage sequences and installations to explore the affective relations between architecture and horror. He begins with the story of an Adelaide house in which a woman is said to have committed suicide, though the evidence suggests she may have been murdered. Kovar also turns to the power of horror and abjection in the assemblages formed between bodies and buildings, and further speculates on these relations by creating fictional architectural contracts supported by conventional sections that can be deployed in an instructional fashion. Hann uses participatory approaches to explore the intersubjective potential of public space, inventing games that disrupt expectations and which inspire collective storytelling. Evans deploys science fiction to speculate upon the ethical issues surrounding semi-living architectures and argues for the realism of fiction. It is evident that across these diverse projects, all following the relay between theory and practice, or else pursuing the interplay between philosophy and architecture, different preoccupations are made manifest. At the same time, the work gathered here shares an approach that foregrounds the powers of critical fictions. To summarize, when conjoined with

design practice research, fictocriticism enables the expression of minor voices, feminist, queer, other; it is performative in the employment of multiple voices and the expression of multiple points of view amid a world; it empowers fiction as a critical approach that can assist in the development of a design project; it allows for an expanded definition of what design can do.

‘Airing’, Latent Voices and Mute Surfaces, a Visual Essay in Three Part Dissonance

Julieanna Preston

This visual essay considers two supposedly unrelated and dissonant voices and finds a third. [fig. 1]

The first voice cites the occurrence of a 1971 feminist protest staged in Auckland by a group of activists rallying against the lack of progress in gender equity since winning the right to vote in 1893. This historic event casts a critical lens on the subject; it is one of the few on public record in recent decades to bring feminist issues into the New Zealand public arena. Yet the report of the protest lends an air more akin to a funeral than a political rally. Years later, the impact of the event remains questionable and the issues unresolved. Where is feminism today? What are its voices? Where can they be heard? What traces do they leave?

The second voice is found in the ongoing evidence GEONET produces as it measures New Zealand’s twenty-two active volcanoes. Seismic movement and pressure for each site is measured one hundred times every second and recorded on a drum chart. The data, described as noise, is being collected in anticipation, as a precaution, of what could be, of what might happen. An extensive network of scientists and machines stand alert to each rumbling, each grumbling. Though ‘heard’ by sensitive monitoring devices, these shifts of the

underground, these threatening eruptions often go unnoticed in everyday life on the surface.

‘Airing’ is a sculptural object that materializes a critical and fictive event that did not occur on the fortieth anniversary of the feminist protest and did not register on the seismograph. As a performative prop, it operates at the confluence of these two latently seething and quietly fuming mute forces to speak a story:

Fourteen pairs of slender spikes amble in black unison towards the cold and rigid monarch.

On a pedestal, with her head in the long white cloud, she watches over her colony with an unflinching gaze, monitoring the resistance of all things with cones and calderas.

The gaggle huddles amongst the folds of her unyielding bronze skirt against the prevailing gales of sheepish convention and apathetic comfort.

A wreath adorning the coffin that they carried suckles the moisture-laden air.

Without warning, it spews an ashen plume ripe with the heat of an interior toxic breath, a mixture of carbon, hydrogen and sulphuric gas.

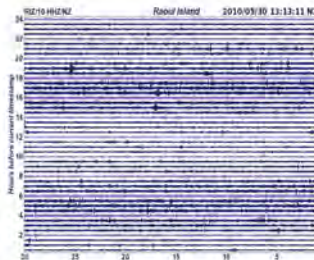
Particulates hang heavy as a fog that chokes visibility but eventually settles as a thin film in the aftermath, an afterbirth.

Though covered with oxides that threaten her robust stature, the Queen stands staunch. The marks on the drums go unheeded, unheard. The subjects wipe the soot from their eyes and, with affirmative tenacity, write this fiction upon her surface.

This visual essay engages fictocriticism as the ‘self reflexivity, the fragment, intertextuality, the bending of narrative boundaries, crossing of genres, the capacity to adapt literary forms, hybridized writing, moving between fiction (invention/speculation) and criticism (deduction/explication) of subjectivity (interiority) and objectivity (exteriority)’. It operates as a stimulus to affective-invested social relations represented in the objects and scenes and their

airing, latent voices and mute surfaces, a visual essay in three part dissonance

Julieanna Preston



"On 17 September 1971, hundreds of Aucklanders gazed in disbelief as forty women, all dressed in black and carrying a coffin, marched in a mock funeral procession to Queen Victoria's statue in Albert Park, to mark 'Suffrage Day' by mourning the lack of progress women had made since getting the vote in 1893.

This was the first widely publicised women's liberation protest, and the spectacle of female militancy, after several generations of quietude, seemed almost as shocking as what women's liberationists were saying.

Their message was a simple one, but it touched people's nerve ends, for it was aimed at the emotional foundations of society – the traditional relationship between the sexes, and male and female roles. There was no equality between the sexes they said, because the traditional sexual relationship was unequal and oppressive to women. Women were still expected, in 1971, as they had been last century, to subjugate themselves and their lives to men, and to exchange their sexual and domestic services in return for men's financial support.

New Zealand men still treated women as if they were an inferior and menial sex and mistook their male privileges and advantages for natural rights. This was why, although New Zealand had led the world in granting women the vote in 1893, ninety years later women still lagged behind men in every respect: politically, economically and socially. The aim of women's liberation was to change all that; to free women from the deeply embedded image of their own inferiority and from their immaterial dependence upon men.

This was a startling claim to make about a relationship between the sexes which had been accepted for centuries, much like the caste system of India, as if it were biologically based and theologically sound. So it is not surprising that many New Zealanders were as much dismayed by the message as they were by the messengers."

Kedgeley, Sue (1985). "In Queen Victoria's Shadow" in *The Sexual Wilderness: Men and Women in New Zealand*, Auckland [N.Z.]: Reed Methuen, p. 1.

New Zealand's North Island contains a number of active and potentially active volcanoes. Although the probability of an eruption affecting a large area of the North Island is relatively low in any one year, the probability of an eruption occurring in the future is high. The Institute cannot determine exactly when the next eruption will occur, but we can advise you on its likely effects. Our scientific analysis provides the vital information needed for thorough planning and will help minimise the impact of future volcanic eruption. We maintain permanent surveillance at active and potentially active volcanoes - the best way to detect the early signs of increasing seismic and volcanic activity. Scientists from the Institute have developed computer programmes to estimate the ash that may fall from a volcanic ash plume. To model these ash falls one has to know the eruption column height, volume of ash erupted and information on the wind at various altitudes. Each day at about 7 am, we are modelling a typical eruption from both White Island and Ruapehu volcanoes. They are made using wind data supplied by MetService. The eruption model includes the erupted volume, the maximum eruption column height, and the settling velocity of ash particles of different sizes.

GNSwebsite>
<http://www.gns.cri.nz/what/earthact/volcanoes/ash/index.html> accessed 14 April 2010



Fig. 1: Julieanna Preston, Airing, 2011

performed engagement through a hybrid script, a site-writing.¹⁴ Though it is posing fictocriticism as a spatial and materially-induced text, it is indeed what Kari Edwards names as a “haunted writing”: traced by numerous voices which work now in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord. The problem of haunted writing comes to the fore in academic discourse when disciplinary authority and discursive protocol function as the voice of the dead stalking the present so as to paralyse it with terror, or else as a kind of watchful superego as resistant to modification as if it were a text inscribed in stone.¹⁵ Intertwining these two matter-of-fact voices and projecting them into fictive suspension generates a space where the exterior site of gender inequity and the interior site of fear are enunciated and emancipated from their obligation to merely report what happened as if it were dead matter. It is a demonstration for feminism to find its contemporary voice in New Zealand and a criticism that it has not. It demonstrates cultural norms and geological anomalies figured at best as volatile stability.

A Clinic for the Exhausted

Michael Spooner

A Clinic for the Exhausted emerges from the midst of the idiosyncrasies of an Australian architecture by way of the local architectural scene of Melbourne. By means of design-based research it examines an exemplar of Melbourne architecture, Building 8 RMIT University designed by Australian architects Maggie Edmond and Peter Corrigan and completed in 1993.¹⁶ Building 8 is a prominent addition to Melbourne’s civic spine, and remains a significant built elaboration of Melbourne’s architectural discourse. It has acted as the benchmark for the further development of RMIT University’s central city campus,¹⁷ and remains the platform for design discourse in that it houses the School of Architecture and Design.¹⁸

This design research project, *A Clinic for the Exhausted*, claims its point of departure in a letter published in Leon van Schaik and Nigel Bertram’s monograph on Building 8.¹⁹ Written by one Melbourne architect to another, the letter, dated 22 December 1993, is addressed to Peter Corrigan from Howard Raggatt, the director of the Australian architecture practice Ashton-Raggatt-McDougall (ARM).²⁰ At the time, ARM was commencing the redesign of the now well-known Storey Hall, adjacent to Building 8, into a new university conference hub. The letter outlines Raggatt’s hopes for the extension and refurbishment to the late nineteenth-century building against the backdrop of Building 8’s own theoretical concerns and public notoriety. Raggatt, who admits the influence of alcohol in the letter, describes his nocturnal apprehension of Building 8’s illuminated interior from Swanston Street, and then tenders the image of Building 8 as it ‘began to lift off as though released from its anchors, or set free from its foundations, now departing like a P&O liner’.²¹

A Clinic for the Exhausted examines how the discourse of a lyrical subjectivity such as Raggatt’s might establish and cultivate an expression that could launch Building 8 from its concrete foundation upon an ocean of images and ideas. Raggatt’s letter is used as evidence of a difficult architectural knowledge that does not concede to empirical models of research production. This brief account will survey the conjunction of this letter, inspired by Raggatt’s drunken vision, with the series of projects that form *A Clinic for the Exhausted*. To aid the audience in the movement between these associations I will touch upon what Paul Zumthor has posited as the provisional territory of *mouvance*. Zumthor situates his term within the tradition of troubadour poetry. The lyrics of troubadours’ songs come down to us through multifarious translations by different scribes who collated their own transcriptions of lyrical works in song-books. In each case the scribe has prospected the lyrics of the troubadour



Fig. 2: Edmond and Corrigan, Building Eight, RMIT University, Melbourne

in such a way that they establish each version of the transcribed song, every resulting composition, as their own. It is only the impetus of contemporary scholarly examination which collects and collates known songs into groups based on each composition's digressions from or towards a constellation of possible variants, that a lone troubadour's voice can be attributed, by some degree of coherence, to any one collection of works. Zumthor stresses that *mouvance* displaces the intention of any scholar who would assign a particular individual lyrical identity to the production of a text produced well after the event of an identified troubadour's voice that it resembles. To recognize *mouvance* is to recognize the provisionality of the troubadour's own voice as that which displaces the authority of the original voice of a sole troubadour, allowing instead for a song to be transported and transformed through the varying intonations and alterations of a long lineage of troubadours. *Mouvance* exemplifies the drifting of the troubadour's voice as it is poised on the threshold of any number of translations, brought about by the work of incessant interpretation. Hence, while interpretation of the troubadours' oeuvre can be considered a scholarly activity, any interpretation cannot avoid the possibility of being overcome by the medieval voice of the troubadour, which eludes closure.²²

This project contends that the formulation of *mouvance* as a design stratagem that could allow for multifarious modes of spatial expression to be brought into both forced and serendipitous contact toward the generation of new architectural tropes, which first promise and then elude a singular point of authorial origin, is advanced in the conception of the clinic. As Michel Foucault states: 'Before it became a corpus of knowledge, the clinic was a universal relationship of mankind with itself.'²³ Hence, *A Clinic for the Exhausted* claims the pre-individuating void of a *mouvance* that exhausts not just the varied voices of the troubadours, but the community as a whole. The Clinic derives a *mouvance* that in the

very moment of its emergence seeks its dissolution in the image of its exhaustion. The 'exhausted', contends Gilles Deleuze, is not an image of tiredness, but an image that 'exhausts the whole of the possible.'²⁴ It is not a failure to reach one's potential. Exhaustion is a question of how the possible is exhausted; a radical sense of plenitude in the momentary state of living the very condition of being without, not just subjects or objects, but without all. Hence, the Clinic is pervaded by something like the troubadours' *mouvance*, which stretches it out to meet the edges of the possible, moves it along the horizon of the impossible, to claim an architecture in excess of any nameable condition, a creative voice that gathers *all* voices as its own.

Covertly, under the permanent guise of another's authority, this project ventures forward. The illicit implication of Corrigan's passing silhouette narrating the conditions by which Raggatt's associative powers gives way to the free play of the contraband bestowed in a letter back to Corrigan, the key testimonial as to the incarnational powers of Raggatt's convergence with the swell. Raggatt warns you from the outset that it is his inebriation that spills everywhere. But, let me pre-empt those who would understand Raggatt's moment of enthusiastic complicity with a liquid excess, or the humour that derives from it, as the result, quite literally of one too many drinks. No amount of liquor, however strong, would be, purely on its own, enough to push Building 8 from its foundations. It is as if he has excessively borrowed, or too frequently appropriated; his *incipit* an honest invitation to an exigent audience to join him, to partake of the same excess, to appropriate his aesthetic, his voice, his uneven gait, his gestures, with the same, if not similar conflicting sense accorded to a man impartial to the conviviality of an alcoholic beverage.²⁵

Thus, what was initially an unattributable sleight of hand in *A Clinic for the Exhausted* is ordained by Raggatt's conspiratorial wink. The *Clinic* estab-

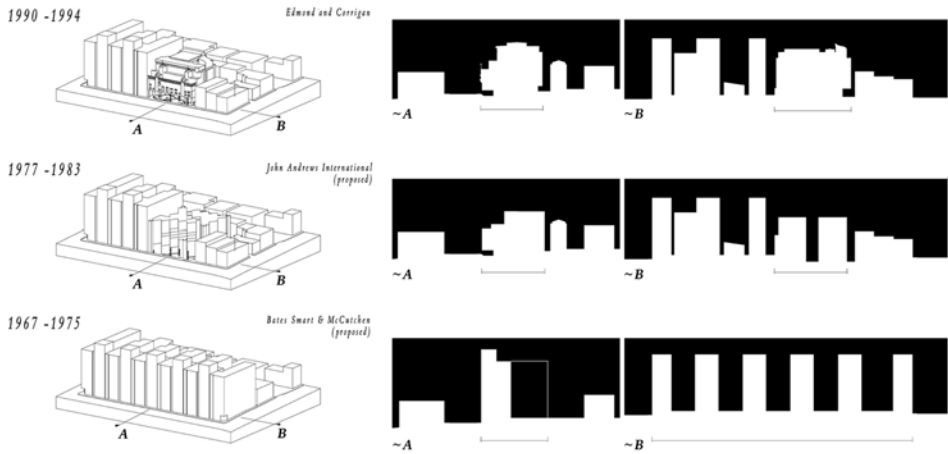


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

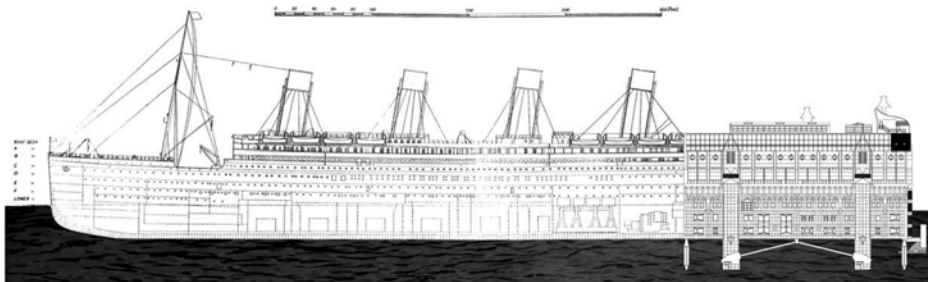


Fig. 5

Fig. 3: Michael Spooner, Building Eight genealogy, 2008.
 Fig. 4: Letter, Howard Raggatt to Peter Corrigan, 22 December 1993
 Fig. 5: Michael Spooner, Building Eight released from its concrete foundations, 2008.

lishes his letter as a sort of instruction and his vision as a sort of evidence of an intoxicating malady. That is, *A Clinic for the Exhausted* is not without reserve to any and all of the circumstantial evidence that might be traced across the dispersion of its images, but neither does it surrender its logic to Raggatt's letter or any other. At the same time, Raggatt's vision becomes but another subtle deceit sustaining the gestures of *A Clinic for the Exhausted* that place Building 8 and an ocean liner on the same page. In some sense, the impeding ocean is both the cause and result of the transfiguration of Raggatt's conceptual oedema; it is his liquid intake that exceeds him; it is his intoxication that keeps the narrative afloat and what spills out into the street, picking up Building 8 in his ensuing depiction of an ocean liner launch. It is Raggatt's letter that masks the considerable instability of his narrative vision, and his gestures. But, his letter is not a mirror *A Clinic for the Exhausted* can be held up to, nor from which can be drawn a referential correlation between boat and building that is materialized in his vision. The letter, as it is, gives the audience the satisfaction of knowing how Raggatt allowed himself to be deceived.

Ambiguous liaisons such as Building 8 and ocean liner constituted by Raggatt's letter, are in this project descriptive of not so much the carnivalesque body of the Medieval period regaled by the troubadours, but rather the appearance of a *corriganseque body*; a body wherein Building 8 and Raggatt cannot but be indulged a little further. We might think here of Raggatt's letter accompanied by the lewd gestures of Corrigan dressed in the garb of piety, briefly exalting not an abstinence, an architectural Asceticism, but the opposite, a claim to the over-indulgent, terrifically lusty, and perhaps profoundly accommodating of any and all excesses which may befall the architect Peter Corrigan. *A Clinic for the Exhausted* draws comparisons with the reported founding of 'a mock monastery of prostitutes, complete with abbes and liturgical song' by troubadour Guillaume IX at

Niort, in Western France, 'a real place that also means "no where" according to a playful etymology (ni-ort).'²⁶

Mouvance permits this research to operate in an improvised manner with the purpose of acknowledging an architecture that is yet to come, the limitless void of such an approach implicating the realm of the *Clinic* and the surfeit, or excess that the proposition encounters: exhaustion. A life underscores the intention of this project; to sequester a particular way of existing in excess of any particular architecture or any particular person: a no-where that is particular to no-one. In trying to do so the research contends that the task of those who claim the specularity of the clinic, that is an audience from which no-one is exempt, lies in extending the life such a practice and its procedures harbour. In doing so it articulates the importance of making in the present as concomitant to the realization of architecture in excess of the question of architecture or an architect. Furthermore, this research outlines how those who have yet to come could realize a share in our contemporary condition – the *corriganesque* was in this way the means by which we could all end up on the street as giddy conspirators soliciting unfathomable acts through as yet undetermined means. *A Clinic for the Exhausted* is set out with the intention of not only enabling an answer that is not complete, that still remains difficult, but also of generating the 'how' which we could minister to such an outcome; how we all might go on into the night on unsteady legs, voyagers intent on realizing the infinite expanse of our floating world. Might then the 'how' of an architecture that cannot forsake a passage *between* ocean liner and Building 8 be foregrounded in the *mouvance* of a drowning man? The proximity of Raggatt's enduring drunkenness, that which permits Building 8 and ocean liner to enter a becoming, grasps every untoward movement of the drowning man's vital oedema, a movement from which no-one is exempt. [figs. 2-8]



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Fig. 6: Michael Spooner, *The Swimming Pool Library, A Clinic for the Exhausted*, 2009

Fig. 7: Michael Spooner, *The Landscape Room, A Clinic for the Exhausted*, 2010

Fig. 8: Michael Spooner, *The Landscape Room, A Clinic for the Exhausted*, Stereolithographic print, 2010.

Architecture and Horror: Analogical Explorations of Archi- tectural Design

Sean Pickersgill

This PhD work resulted from the simple question of how to spatialize and represent horror. While there are a number of conventions for embedding the experience of horror within fictional environments as part of narrative conventions of cinema, the authentic engagement with this sense is more problematic when it encounters the still image or textual reproduction. It is even more complex when we consider what is the 'place' of horror, where is it enacted? Further, if we are to account for the way in which certain genre-conventions in visual media manage the *mise en scène* in which the un-'speakable' is shown, there is a clear sense in which these encounters are spatially managed. [fig. 9]

The relationship between the indexical experience of horror, the encounter with events that test the limit of ontological security and the preservation of the self have a complex genealogy. From the descriptions of the dehumanizing aspects of concentration camp experience to the presence of unidentified malevolent forces in narratives, the place of the event is, arguably, '(sus)stained' by its role as being the 'right there' where things occurred.

The project work for the PhD explored this relationship and proposed a series of environments that sought to make tangible the placed-ness of extreme events their objective. Often the actual event of horror was absent, leaving the designed work as a kind of functionless dividend of events. The work employed aspects of Derrida's ideas on the parergon from *The Truth in Painting*²⁷ in which his analysis of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* points to a *mise en abyme* at the centre of aesthetic experience. The PhD exegesis aligned this state with the encounter of horror.

Maelstrom

The project presented here concerns the exhibition and curatorial work done for the 2006 exhibition *Maelstrom: Gazes Into the Digital Abyss*.²⁸ The exhibition was co-curated with Greg More of RMIT University and exhibited work done by myself, Greg More and John Power, also of RMIT University. The shared interest of the three exhibitors or artists was in the creative use of game engines, the software employed to make computer games work within an apparent three-dimensional space, as a design environment. Having some experience in both the use of these spaces as locations for constructing environments to be explored and incorporating the environments into our respective teaching programmes, the exhibition sought to give form to a mode of practice that sequentially worked from the digital to the analogue.

The project involved the simultaneous screening of four game environments made by the exhibitors, three by Pickersgill (although only two were exhibited at any one time), one each by More and Power. These environments had been constructed to explore the qualities of digital media as a vehicle not just for an alternate or contemporary form of representation, but as a distinct aesthetic environment in itself. These environments could be interacted with by accessing controls in the gallery space, the user was then able to 'walk' through the environments and view them from a first-person point of view. Visitors were able to enter into the spaces, explore the breadth of the environments, triggering effects, interacting with sound and text-rich landscapes. In addition to the immersive game environments, there were exhibited, on a facing wall, a series of images. These were a series of small paintings by Power, three digital prints and a model by More, and three panoramic prints of digital environments by Pickersgill.

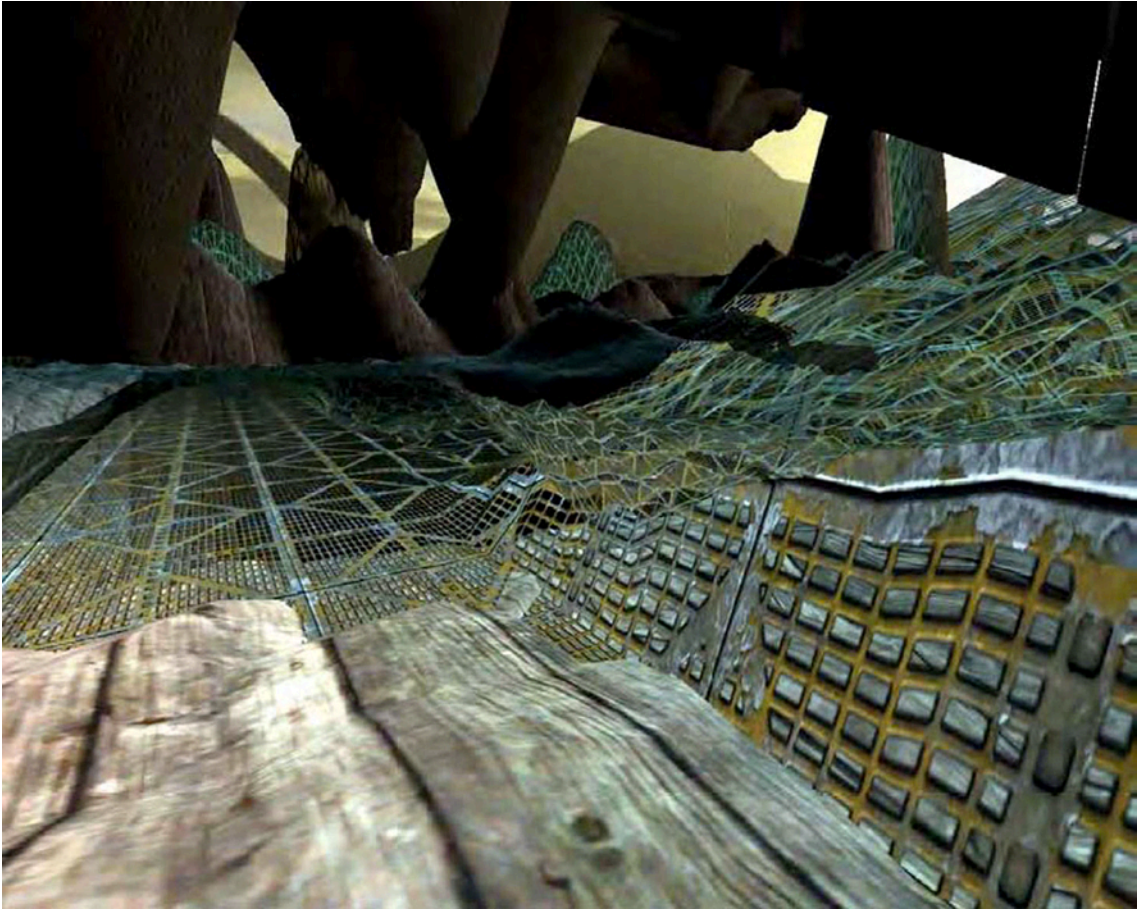


Fig. 9: Sean Pickersgill, Maelstrom: Gazes into the Digital Abyss, 2006

The text from which all three exhibitors were working was an extract from Edgar Allen Poe's short story, *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, describing a moment when the centripetal forces of the monumental whirlpool were holding the narrator, what remained of his boat and all manner of flotsam and jetsam in a stasis of apparently arrested motion.²⁹ The text was chosen because it described a physical effect in which apparent motionlessness and the threat of annihilation had come together. At this moment, the narrator looks down into the whirling void and sees the possibility of destruction within the nothingness of the maelstrom interior.

Mimetic Functions in Architectural Representation

In the quest for an increasingly vivid experience of the presence of architecture, digital means of representation have achieved significant successes. It is a matter of record that processes made available by the computational strengths of parametric modelling software and the use of dynamic animation have produced new models of the 'possible' in architecture. This mode of thinking remains enmeshed in the idea that modes of representation have the ultimate aim of being realized in a material form. Interestingly, there remains the opportunity to consider modes of digital realization as being sufficiently material within their mode of delivery, that is, as digital media. A more radical, but still robust, proposition might be that a mode of architecture that is principally delivered within the attenuated sensibilities of the digital might nevertheless be ontologically full in its apperception. It is tempting to think of the material of digital exploration as an imago of some ultimate realization in the real world, but that is to ignore the philosophical complexity of the digital and the fact that, courtesy of the territorializing processes of digital environments, the digital architectural model can exist *sui generis* in this location.

A parallel issue is the nature of the experience itself. Whether we consider the haptic content of augmented-reality (AR) and virtual-reality (VR) technology, pursued through the development of head-set, controller and other technology, or the optic issue of digital embodiment through forms of telepresence, the embodiment of the digital experience is considerably varied. For some, the nature of this question is pivotal as the search for seamless connectivity, whether by 'touching' the digital in some fashion or developing acute emotional sensitivity to the avatar, is paramount. Even the relationship between avatars, the philosophical question of sentience and sapience in digital actors, is crucial. In all of these instances the appetite for a 'full' kinaesthetic experience is intended to support a transition between normal bodily experience, a kind of empirical datum, and the incorporation of data sets that impart a spatialized experience.

Instead, it is important to concentrate on the relationship between the representation of architecture, the expectations of vividness that may emerge from this process and the opportunity to see unique thematic experiences in digital environments that may emerge and contest our understanding of the 'real', experiences that may be investigated and discussed independently of the debate concerning the digital body.

Game Engines

Game engines, as a form of code that traverses modelling, texturing, lighting and an animated scenographic view, rely on the workflow pipeline of 3D modelling applications such as 3DStudio Max, Maya, and so forth, but then place the content within first-person immersive environments. There are a number of questions that emerge from this process: How does this application differ, in architecture, from others in terms of its representative or mimetic role? How does it cater for issues of ontological vividness in comparison with AR and VR applications? How may the use of game-engine

software be of use for the creation of architecture as end location, a site, in itself?

In the material prepared for the *Maelstrom* exhibition, using the technology of first-person engines, the exhibitors explored the idea of what constitutes the presence of the self within the digital. Computer games consistently achieve levels of vividness that describe a position without precedent. And it was the intention of the *Maelstrom* project, and in the work created by me, to explore the degree to which this vividness could be conjoined to a sense of what might be termed a 'real' and ontologically rich encounter. In commercial games these spaces are influenced by narratological issues internal to specific tasks that are a part of a game, but in exploratory architectural work they are able to simultaneously act as a representation of a possible real and as a developed *mise en scène* of potential actions. They are both suffused with an aesthetic particular to the mechanics of the engine, how it delivers the idea of the 'real', and the potential to act within this space. It is this last condition, the relentless need to consider the environments as persistent and transitive, that indicates the genuinely novel potential for digital environments. Put simply, if one could inhabit Piranesi's *Carceri* or Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, how would one act? These alternatives are qualitatively different, and mark a shift between architectural representation as an obsessive development of the architectural process of form-making, versus the spatialization of experience within the montage logic of film.

Digital environments, gamespaces, have the capability to offer an experience of the real that has both the frisson of mimetic fidelity; they look and sound real, while also permitting a vast array of counterintuitive events that may question the unfolding of experience. In a manner similar to the structural opportunities of film, both diagetic elements and non-diagetic elements can occur. Beyond the debate of the interrelationship between

form and effect, and the subtext of where the autonomous effects of design practice take place, the experientially full opportunity of the Unreal world is one place for future architecture.

Productive Leakages: Architecture in Abject(ion)

Zuzana Kovar

Abject(ion), a term popularized by Julia Kristeva, has drawn little attention beyond considerations of dust, sewage and architectural detritus in the discipline of architecture. The term has been considered as the negative counterpart to the clean and proper body, fundamentally lacking its own language and any consideration in its own right. My research departs from these literal readings of abject(ion) in relation to architecture in order to explore the potentialities of abject(ion) at a productive level in design practice research. From this perspective I draw on further philosophical work, that of Gilles Deleuze's concept of *event*, which moves us away from individual expelling human or spatial bodies to *assemblages*, and also Bernard Tschumi's equation $space + event = architecture$, which enables an understanding of abject(ion) as an *event* that constitutes architecture. It is at this point that abject(ion) manifests a series of potentialities, that it climaxes in excess and leads to an affective intensity.

My current project work concentrates on the notion of abject(ion) as event. Where event is 'an indeterminate set of unexpected outcomes. Revealing hidden potentialities or contradictions in a program.'³⁰ This work is informed by architectural practice, and takes the form of an architectural contract. Each contract is composed of a program and a drawing(s), typically a section, as sections can be perceived as violent cuts. They dissect space, allowing us to probe the interior. The sectional drawing cuts open the whole, it opens up the boundary between the interior and the exterior,

and hence activates the potential for something to escape. This potential for escape is exactly what we find in Kristeva's analysis of *Holbein's Dead Christ*, where Christ's 'hand protrudes slightly from the slab'³¹ – it spills over the sectional cut. The methodology is thus directly architectural, the drawings are conventional yet expose the realm of the abject. A certain tension is set up between the clinical architectural drawing and the event that it describes. The aim here is to repurpose architectural methodology in order to contemplate abject(ion). [figs. 10-11]

What is critical to note is that abject(ion), through its volatile and leaky nature, inevitably comes to encompass more than one body. For the menstrual blood of a woman does not remain bound to her body but comes to invade adjacent bodies, whether human or spatial. As such, abject(ion) is a discussion of bodies in relation to assemblages. The contracts take the most violent of assemblages in order to attain an affective intensity – an expelling body in a decomposing space. Such juxtapositions or minoritarian architectures may be clearly seen in select filmic works of director Catherine Breillat and artist Matthew Barney, the paintings of Francis Bacon, and the novellas of Georges Bataille. Here the spaces are rotting, used and exhibit signs of degeneration at the same time as the human bodies within them are expelling themselves from the inside out. For it is precisely the moment where the event of the abjecting human body occurs concurrently with the abjecting body of space that a zone of indiscernibility is created and the assemblage of body and space becomes evident. Here something passes from one body to the other, 'something that is undecidable between them'.³² This for Deleuze is a *becoming*. Bodies violate space and space violates bodies.³³ It is the isolation of one body, which for architecture is the expelling building, that short-circuits the potential of abject(ion), which only reveals the full power of its workings within a larger assemblage. The condition of the spaces within the architectural contracts I have proposed is thus

highly specific. [figs. 12-13]

The project work draws heavily from the above exemplars, all of which work with fictional scenarios, and where fiction allows for a study of highly temporal events. Fiction, which has previously been fruitful for architecture (if we consider examples such as Archigram or Superstudio), has therefore become a way of exploring ideas about space and the event of abject(ion). Within the project work, each contract (but one) consists of a fictional event, the space however is actual, as an architect requires a physical site. This necessity of real space is likewise referred to by Tschumi in *The Manhattan Transcripts*: 'The architectural origin of each episode is found within a specific reality and not in an abstract geometrical figure.'³⁴ Each site is specifically chosen, documented and drafted. It then informs the abject event – this event is a potentiality of the space, it is one of a certain number of possible events. What the juxtaposition of a non-fictional space and a fictional event manifests, is an immediate and palpable threat to our bodily boundary, as it suggests that any number of real spaces have the capacity to support a violent act of abject(ion). Hence we may not only make a cup of tea in the kitchen but uncontrollably vomit on the floor, not only sleep upon our white bed sheets but menstruate on them, and not only walk across a public square but piss in it. This degree of fiction in the architectural contracts is productive, as it allows for the contemplation of transgressive scenarios that may not be planned and re-enacted in real life (without losing their effect), but that nevertheless have the possibility of occurring – of being provoked. Here architecture is pushed towards and over its limits, to the point that it is no longer architecture as we know it but an anticipation of an architecture to come.

What these contracts do not do is attempt to represent abject(ion). Rather they act as a medium that allows for its discussion. The actual process of abject(ion) resides in the physically enacted work.

the sewing room

"The Room: 1) A small room of odd proportions, no larger than a sleep-out or sunroom. Four large windows in the western wall - two operable, two fixed. The room must be on a western elevation, with the windows large enough for all the rays to penetrate through. 2) The room is hot. The dust pink paint is blistering. Before you even enter the room, turn the light on. Bring three different lamps in: a floor lamp with 2 adjustable heads, an old heat lamp and a small telescopic task lamp. These should be sat on the floor, all directed toward the workstation on the floor and turned on immediately. 3) Now place a table under the operable windows, hard against the wall and with it, bring a chair upholstered in vinyl. Open the two windows. 4) You will also need a sewing machine and sewing basket, place these on the table. First phase: 5) Your task, to sew one continuous curtain for the four windows. Layout the material on the floor, the room is precisely not big enough for this task, you will need to kneel on the material, mark it, hem it, pin it, then pull it under you and move onto the next section, mark it, hem it, pin it. The fabric is strenuously long. The light waves from the lamps and western sun overheat your body. You will have already started to sweat behind your knees and on the palms of your hands, rubbing it into the fabric as you work. And every so often you will brush against the pins you have put in place, as you are crawling on the fabric. Tiny perforations into your body. Your body oozing out of its skin onto the material - Now you go on to the second phase: 6) You sit on the vinyl chair, the sweat causing you to slide backwards and forwards, drape the material over your lap, so that it slowly starts to saturate with you - it extends to the floor, curled up like a massive shit. 7) You need to move the three lamps, two onto the table - direct them at your body, redirect the heads of the floor lamp. 8) Now add another light source, the sewing machine. 9) You start to sew. A stop and start motion. The material slides over your wet lap as it enters the machine. Sew along the length - stop - turn 90 degrees - sew - stop - run the machine forwards then backwards to finish the stitch - cut the thread. Next, leave a gap for the curtain hook, start again - sew - stop - turn 90 degrees - sew - stop - turn another 90 degrees - sew - stop - run the machine forwards then backwards. You repeat this motion from one end to the other. The machine running at full speed. 10) You sit in the one spot for the entire task, the material lapping up the oozing liquid as it slides past your body, through the machine and emerges a curtain at the other end. Soon there will be no excretions left to soak up. Stop and drink some water. There needs to be a constant input of liquid for there to be an output. Third phase: 11) Sliding on the vinyl chair, insert the curtain hooks into the holes. This will take awhile. 12) Now move the chair up to the window and begin hanging the curtain. Let your bodily excretions dry in place."

Fig. 10

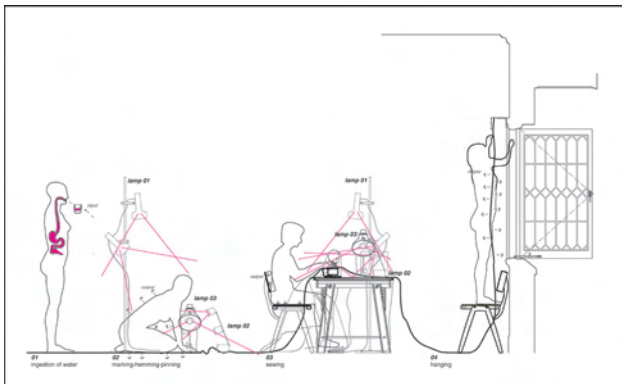


Fig. 11

the wall cavity

"The Room: 1) A simple white tiled bathroom within an expanded wall cavity. The bathroom is incredibly narrow, the width of a corridor. The fixtures are lined up, one next to the other, as if on a conveyor belt - the basin, the shower, the w.c.. The cavity remains intact - the existing skins of horse-hair plaster nailed into reused studwork and the opening to the roof void. Only the cross walls at either end, the new walls, created by the expansion of the cavity are tiled. Two new holes have been drilled into the pine floor; one for the w.c., the other for the sink waste. The gaps in and between the floorboards typically take care of the rest (make sure though to pull out the corks that fill the existing holes). Two bulbs light the room, one hanging above the w.c., the other, a batten holder within the roof cavity. 2) This is a space into which both you and the building expel your respective objects. Use the bathroom. First Phase: 3) Grab the scissors from the third noggling on the right and stand in front of the small wall hung basin. Fully extend the tarnished accordion mirror so that it hangs over the basin. Comb your fringe straight. You begin to cut, from right to left, the hair collecting in the basin. Cut about an inch (a single motion with the scissors) - stop - comb your fringe straight - cut another inch - stop - comb again. You repeat this motion from one end to the other. Now cut into the hair. Run the comb through several times to make sure you haven't missed any part, the cut hair floating through the air and settling on horizontal surfaces. Turn the tap and wet your hand. Move your hand over the entire basin, the hair collects on top of the waste. Turn the tap off, you can clean the waste later. Second Phase: 4) Take off your clothes. Shake them out and lay them aside. Naked, walk into the middle of the cavity and turn the simple brass taps. The exposed plumbing gives a shudder and begins to jerk as the first spits of water come down. Pull the shower curtain around, the full semicircle. Carefully and thoroughly begin to scrub away your dead skin cells from the top down. Often, before the steam begins to rise, the banging of the pipes as they expand causes the dust from the cavity above to float to the floor. (You might have to wash some parts several times). Eventually, the steam rises until it expands horizontally into the roof cavity, every night settling on the accumulated dust and dampening it. The house begins to sweat. And somewhere, under the cupped floorboards down there, you can hear the water full of dust, dirt and dead skin cells soaking into the ground. Grab the towel from the white powdercoated rail. (Shake the towel out and use the reverse side). Dry yourself and re-hang the towel. Repeat tomorrow. Tomorrow, cut your nails on the toilet bowl."

Fig. 12

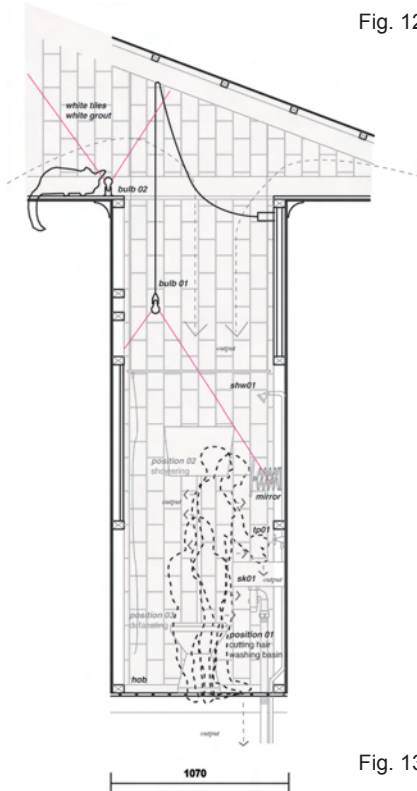


Fig. 13

Fig. 10: Zuzana Kovar, The Sewing Room (Instructions), 2011

Fig. 11: Zuzana Kovar, The Sewing Room Section One, 2011

Fig. 12: Zuzana Kovar, The Wall Cavity (Instructions), 2011

Fig. 13: Zuzana Kovar, The Wall Cavity, 2011

The drawings thus do not attempt to capture an event as in Tschumi's work. However, when read together in line with the programme, one is able to get a detailed description of not only the space but the event that is to occur. In this way, the contracts become instructional, with the possibility of realization, and find a foothold in both instructional art and the Deleuzian programme designed by a masochist for his or her master. The point of distinction that arises, however, is that if one was to realize any of the contracts, one would be engaging with a choreographed form of object(ion) that significantly differs from an uncontrollable and unexpected event of object(ion). It is only unplanned object(ion) that has the capacity to lead to excess and result in affect. For this reason, the contracts remain unrealized, fictional and serve purely to contemplate the possibility of such events. It is only the final contract that presents a point of difference, in that both space and event are non-fictional and it is included here to illustrate the physical potential of such events.

Performative Hermeneutics

Ceri Hann

The research I am conducting is based on project work that seeks to develop techniques for the collaborative interpretation of the subtle architecture of social relations, rendering its influence perceivable through performative actions in architectural space. [fig. 14]

There are multiple aspects to the art practice that has shaped the current research, in order to establish a context I will briefly outline the most influential. An ongoing collaborative practice with Lynda Roberts, known as 'Public Assembly', has so far ventured from site-specific video and sound installations to investigations of relational aesthetics through the production of wearable artefacts in highly public places. We have enabled what we describe as ephemeral social architectures through

the unscripted connectivity of people as they become aware of others also wearing our micro sculptures. The crafted object becomes the subject of conversation and the dialogical and performative process of producing these objects the genesis of a social construction that begins to design itself. Our favourite collaborative activity is wheeling the two vintage supermarket trolleys that we have converted into jewellery-making workstations down to the local trash and treasure market, finding objects to reconfigure, and striking up conversations with people who are drawn to what we are doing.

The affection I have for electronically generated sound has also led me to investigate an area that is popularly known as 'circuit bending', the basic principle of which is that through deconstructing and short-circuiting sound-producing kids' toys, it is possible to adapt the way they sound and claim a degree of control beyond their prescribed use. The method of 'hands-on' short-circuiting the electron flow affects an almost immediate feedback loop and provides a practical way of guiding an intuitive exploration of sound. By playing the 'mad scientist' role in delivering lectures I was able to approach the instruction of how this might be done in a form of didactic performance. Mixing mythological fictions with scientific fact has provided a way of drawing on the capacity of the imagination to actively construct a model of reality. The staging of performative lectures has been central to teaching what I know, but also a valuable process for learning more about what I teach. The key insight gleaned from the approach of 'doing as a way of thinking' has been the great potential of analogical models for explaining complex ideas; the learner literally completes the circuit in both a physical and psychological way.

Another strong precedent has been the development of group activities for the spontaneous comprehension of paradoxical ideas. My initial aspirations were to devise a suite of what might be described as experiential equivalents to zen koans

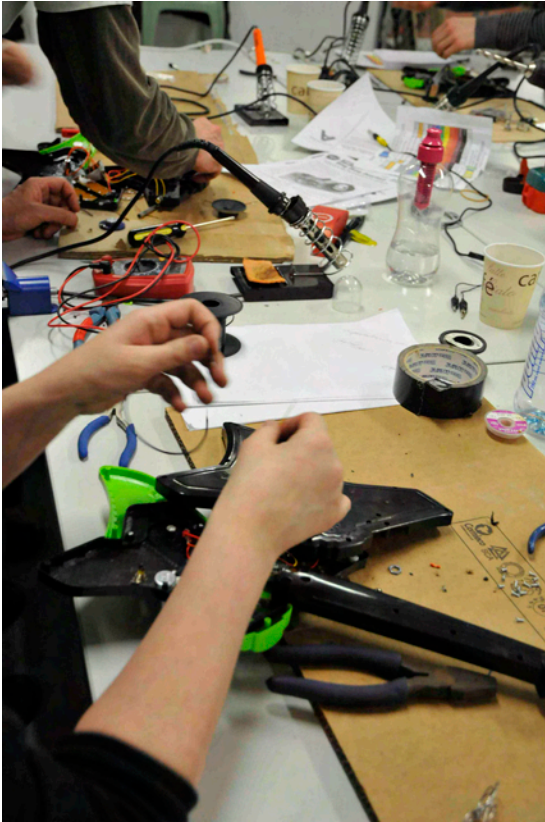


Fig. 14

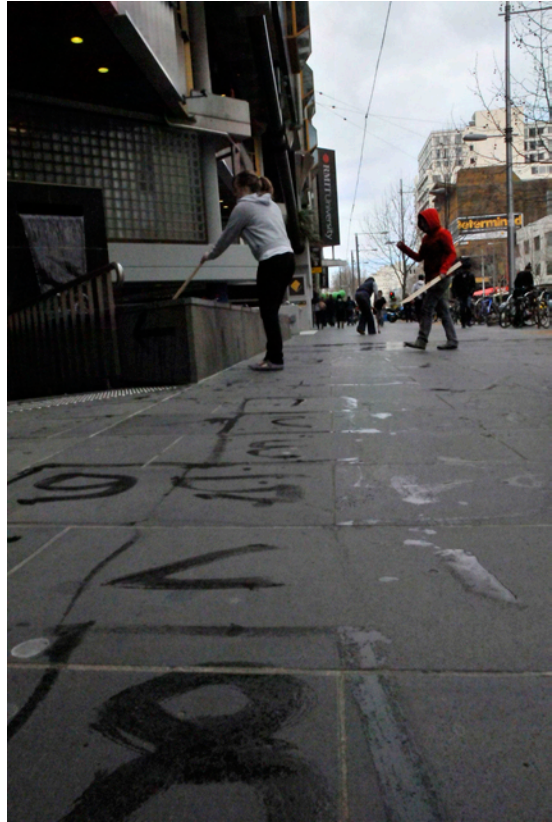


Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Fig. 14: Ceri Hann, Circuit Bending, 2011
Fig. 15: Ceri Hann, Watermark 2010
Fig. 16: Ceri Hann, Blank Check, 2012

intended to provoke a deeper reading of architectural, and more specifically public, space.

In an attempt to utilize the city as an expanded studio I have developed many group-orientated activities, these have enabled the enhancement of an awareness of public space and the relationship of people mediated through architectural space in preparation for making art in the public arena. Multiple iterations have been developed over time into specific learning activities intended to foster performative, collaborative and participatory actions in the constructed environment. With each successive activity I would seek to reduce the necessity for added material. The various sets of tools I have devised include large chalk compasses made from beach umbrellas, giant chalk pens using baby powder and a tea strainer, and water brushes each consisting of a simple stick with a sponge taped to the end, ready to be dipped into the nearest public fountain and used to mark up the city at 1:1 scale. It soon became apparent that the issuing of these tools and venturing into familiar space to perform an unfamiliar act was closely contouring the classic structure of a ritual. Removing a group from a stable social structure, flattening its hierarchy through a mutually agreed activity in unfamiliar territory, and returning with significantly greater awareness of the original structure were all findings that arose out of my practice. [fig. 15]

My current research project is housed in a thought experiment entitled 'Knowledge Casino'. Upon the questionable field of risky subjects the architecture of our imagination is (re)built by word of mouth. It may be that to win insight from others it is a requirement that we first risk our sense of certainty about what we really know. This might be best achieved through the collaborative questioning of assumptions in a playful yet challenging way. I intend to structure this research around the use of chance-based gaming operations as an organizing principle for the sharing of knowledge. Rapid changes in the

accessibility of information by electronic means calls into question the traditional processes of academic knowledge production and distribution. The title 'Knowledge Casino' is a name that I have applied to a group of works that use familiar gaming structures in an absurd and unfamiliar way to elicit spontaneous vocal formulations of tacit knowledge. I have used the term 'counter knowledge' as a way of simultaneously describing the gaming tokens and the semiotic loading already embodied in these counters as discrete objects. The game structures are intended to provoke a sense of partially stabilized uncertainty, a lattice across which complex ideas might be exchanged between participants by the use of metaphor. The use of metaphor enables makeshift semiotic assemblages to be used where knowledge systems have developed specialized language. Game play provides objects upon which the collective concentration of an audience can be entrained towards an alternative mode of comprehending abstract ideas. The game pieces, which might consist of small plastic toys and other such cultural artefacts, have an embodied meaning, which can be used to improvise conceptual inflection across the ebb and flow of rhythmic conversation. The game structure becomes an operational field of metaphor much like the tacitly understood structure of jazz where a mutually agreed theme defines a field in preparation for individually guided exploration of it. It is through the provision of many partial and deliberately unresolved patterns that the capacity of human imagination can be activated and expressed in a dialogical way.

The etymology of casino is derived from 'casa', meaning house; my aspiration is to house connections in the metaphorical tree of knowledge in the form of a social architecture based on the collaborative pursuit of mutual understanding and shared meaning. The use of fiction that inverts the orthodox and generally accepted interpretation of facts is one way of destabilizing the limiting influence of pre-conception. I intend to employ the aggrega-

tion of fiction into elaborate meta-narratives that closely parallel generally accepted scientific explanations of our world yet reveal logic paradoxes when analysed more closely. The function of these fictional webs is to draw on the intuitive desire of the human psyche to find resolution in patterns. I propose these gaming abstractions as dynamic inkblots for the collaborative questioning and refining of a consensus Gestalt. Is it possible that the human tendency to quest for pattern recognition is also the driver of innovative thinking and provides impetus to problem solving? Developing ways of accessing this tendency for the advancement of art and design creative processes is the key driver of this inquiry. This process bears similarities to the 'sand box' psychoanalytic technique developed by Carl Jung, which entails the physical movement of symbolic objects into different configurations within a defined space. The difference with the activities I am proposing is that the field be open to being simultaneously accessed by a larger number of people for the purpose of knowledge sharing. The use of randomly generated interaction procedures such as dice, shuffled cards or spinning wheels is intended to democratize participation. There are a number of antecedents that have shaped the development of this idea. My fascination with Marcel Duchamp and his influence on John Cage led to investigations of Zen and the philosophical parallels with deconstruction. Intrigued by the generative capacity of paranoid thought I have explored Dali's 'paranoid critical method', Rem Koolhaas's use of this method in writing *Delirious New York*, and I have subsequently traced the influence Jacques Lacan had on Dali's creative process. Ludwig Wittgenstein's theories of language and game structures are another significant influence on the development of this project. The *Glass Bead Game* by Hermann Hesse is possibly the closest description of what the 'Knowledge Casino' is aspiring to achieve. [fig. 16]

Is it possible that when life is considered a performance it reveals architecture as staging for an elaborate group repertoire scripted by mass media and articulated by the illusion of agency? How useful can questioning the limits of our individual autonomy be when so closely contoured by the risk of eclipsing the one's sense of self? Will the inter-subjective mappings of reality require a more dynamic system of reevaluation to avert a personal implosion of the global knowledge economy? Perhaps the acceleration of data flow is not as dangerous to the human psyche as slowing down too quickly. The development of performative ways to render perceivable the limits of personal knowledge by using fiction as a temporary formwork for mapping the structure of collective knowledge is the process through which I am attempting to address such questions.

Semi-Living Architecture: Biological Possibility Meets the Architectural Imagination

Megg Evans

Semi-Living Architecture is concerned with exploring the application of biological techniques, knowledge and materials to the architectural arts. I am interested in challenging prevailing architectural acts that seek to defend against natural forces and instead turn attention to a world populated by architectures that grow, self-assemble, get sick, heal, die and may even reproduce. The work requires a novel approach to architectural research, one that involves both laboratory skills and a far-flung architectural imagination that can critically review its creations. In an effort to develop and grow semi-living architecture, care and caution must be taken for it is alive, or at least partly so.

Due to such an engagement, where the very material being manipulated for architectural use is living, many ethical, moral, social, cultural,

economic and even political concerns are raised. The creatures I create in the laboratory cannot survive the current architectural landscape; they're not conceived or designed for it. They need a different lifestyle sensibility, a shift in the way we think and interact with nature, and most importantly a new paradigm for thinking about architecture and design. Instead my semi-living architectures must exist, both for research and design purposes, within an altogether other world. This world is science fiction.

Science fiction is a written topography dealing with innovative, imaginary, but possible scenarios. Generally set in the future, science fiction considers alternative, scientifically plausible worlds where the technology, principles, social systems and abilities of its subjects are key elements in illustrating an alternative view or a critical response to the current predicament.

However, science fiction has also given birth to actual characters, products and scenarios. We may not have jet packs, ray guns or teleportation machines, but we do have 'video-phones', carbon nano-tubes, cyborgs and the atomic bomb. It is not unreasonable for the plausible to become real given time, and this is precisely where the power of science fiction has the ability to effect the present. It is also the safest place for the improbable to become possible. In this way science fiction becomes the crucible in which the research of semi-living architecture has room enough to grow and experiment and its progeny have a chance to leap from fiction into fact.

Part of the project is to distort time and space, fact and fiction, through manifesting proof of just such a leap. Science fiction is the 'literature of ideas' and is prone to developing its futurist worlds with the support of future histories. These are histories of the future, fictions in waiting, so to speak, employed as signs of proof for the science-fiction present.

The projects I bring to life in the laboratory are the future histories of the science-fiction landscape my semi-living architectures seek to populate. They are the stepping-stones that help the reader or viewer cross the imaginative waters that separate fact from fiction.

The semi-living architectures I am investigating employ cell and tissue cultivation techniques to produce living skins to grow over pre-engineered self-defining and self-assembling structures. The cell type I am currently working with is found in the tentacle skin cells of the Australian upside-down jellyfish native to north-eastern waters. This jellyfish is one of the rare animals that enjoy a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship at a cellular level; it has algae in its tentacle skin cells that produce carbohydrates upon which it feeds and oxygen as a by-product of photosynthesis. In return the jellyfish swims upside-down, effectively sitting on the bottom of the waterway to pump fresh water over the tentacles, to allow the algae access to sunlight and fresh nitrogen from the water.

The jellyfish has no brain; instead it uses a rudimentary nervous system to take in and respond to information about its environment. It has, as part of its normal skin cells, 'ocelli' which are light-sensitive cells that allow it to register light from dark. Since it cannot 'compute' the information its nervous system simply responds to ensure light is always kept away from its direction of travel, that is, to keep its tentacles directed towards the light.

These two cellular characteristics aid the imaginative possibility of an architectural skin that can grow, practice photosynthesis, regulate its position with regard to the sun, heal itself and produce both its own fuel and oxygen for its environment. The cellular genetics can also be engineered to express particular traits at different depths, ages, reproduction or metabolic rates. With the discovery of 'jumping genes', the architectural skin also has the



Fig. 17: Megg Evans, *Helix Tower*, 2011

ability to mutate, defend itself from possible biological attacks and, in response to stressors, create novel gene expressions of its own.

Other bio-architectural products of the future, for which I can cultivate proof-like examples now, include microbial-induced calcite precipitated sand structures, DNA chains that can lay themselves out to reveal the 'blueprint' of the structure they code for, and even structures biologically profiled from the bodies of their inhabitants. The architectural possibilities they offer are numerous.

Architecture has a responsibility to develop its imagination in response to burgeoning biological advancements and the biotechnologies currently under development. It has a history of challenging the future with visions beyond the present, asking for engineering beyond the understood, materials beyond the manufactured, and designs beyond the inhabitable or practical. Architecture has, as part of its canon, an imperative to extend its vision beyond the probable to the possible.

One of the key research outcomes that semi-living architecture offers up for consideration is the means to communicate the realism of fiction. In architecture such things as plans, models and renderings bring the reality of a design into focus. For biology, the test tube, petri dish, incubators, specimens and laboratory reports bring the potential of an experiment and its results closer to the real. Such things may be considered indexical, signs that are linked to their real occurrence or object. Indexicality is a kind of certificate of authenticity, a material trope that ushers belief through the double doors of doubt. For if things have their architectural or biological fragments and records preceding them, it is not hard to make a transhistorical leap to their reality. Just as painters in the fifteenth century produced impossible still lifes, paintings that defied nature, time and logic, so too can the bio-architectural communication and mediation strategies I'm developing disrupt, influence and persuade my audience to not

only suspend disbelief, but go so far as to believe in the inevitability of semi-living architecture.

Jens Hauser calls this 'hyperskindexicality'. He understands the indexical role of the cipher to act as a skin between the signifier and the signified, connecting them through a material presence or representation of which prints, traces and fragments can stand as records of the real. For example the hyperskindexicality of my *Helix Tower* [fig. 17] is the test-tube and the performance of a sterile and mediated environment for the semi-living architecture to 'live' in.

Semi-living architecture relies on a transdisciplinary platform from which to strategically realize this thesis. Architecture and biology meet in the land of science fiction and assume the identity of new media; new media that ethically, morally, socially, culturally and economically find a home in each other's company. The object of this thesis is to draw the architectural imagination and design thinking across the threshold of this skin and to tread carefully in a world where architecture doesn't defend humans from nature and the biological, but becomes a mediator and responsible educator of our symbiotic relationship with it.

Notes

1. Architecture+Philosophy began as a public lecture series in 2005, co-curated by H el ene Frichot and Esther Anatolitis, and developed into a postgraduate research stream in the School of Architecture and Design, RMIT University in 2009. H el ene Frichot has subsequently left RMIT University and now holds a position in Critical Studies of Architecture, in the School of Architecture and Built Environment, KTH, Stockholm, Sweden. See <<http://architecture.testpattern.com.au>> [accessed 1 November 2012].
2. With respect to a relation between fictocriticism and architecture, Rendell also touches briefly on this approach in her book *Site-Writing*. Jane Rendell, *Site-*

- Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p. 16. The conference, *Writing Architecture*, the second of two similarly themed events convened by Naomi Stead, listed fictocriticism as an area of research engagement. *Writing Architecture: A Symposium on Innovations in the Textual and Visual Critique of Buildings*, Thursday 22 and Friday 23 July 2010, The State Library of Queensland and the Gallery of Modern Art Brisbane, Australia. See <<http://naomistead.com/2010/03/10/call-for-papers-for-second-writing-architecture-conference/>> [accessed 17 July 2012].
3. I would like to thank Jane Rendell for drawing my attention to this reference. Gavin Butt, 'Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism', Gavin Butt, ed., *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (London: Blackwell, 2005), p. 6.
 4. Anna Gibbs, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences', unpaginated.
 5. Brian Massumi, 'On Critique' in *Inflexions 4: Transversal Fields of Experience* (December 2010), pp. 337,8. <www.inflexions.org> [accessed 13 February 2011].
 6. Michael Speaks has spoken ill of the relationships that were generated between architectural theory and literary theory, and thence the importation of 'watered down' philosophical contexts. Michael Speaks, 'Which Way Avant Garde', in *Assemblage*, no. 41 (April 2000), p. 78.
 7. Muecke in particular argues that fictocriticism is a peculiarly Australian approach to the combination of fiction and non-fiction, including forms of creative non-fiction. He suggests that examples are frequently to be found in the Australian journal *Cultural Studies Review*, of which he is an editor. In her PhD thesis, undertaken at Murdoch University, Western Australia, Helen Flavell also argues, following Muecke, that fictocriticism is a specifically Australian term. She cites Scott Brooks who claims 'it's no secret FC [fictocriticism] was first employed in Australia in Stephen Muecke and Noel King's 1991 ABR essay-review'. Discussions and examples of fictocritical writing are also common in the Australian journal *Text*. See Anna Gibbs, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences', University of Western Sydney, *TEXT*, vol 9, no. 1. <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm>> [accessed 28 November 2011]; Stephen Muecke, 'The Fall: Ficto-Critical Writing, in *Parallax*, 8:4, 2002, pp. 108-16; Helen Flavell, *Writing-Between: Australian and Canadian Ficto-criticism*, PhD manuscript (Murdoch University, Western Australia, 2004), p. 4. See Scott Brook, 'Does anyone know what happened to 'fictocriticism'?': Toward a fractal genealogy of Australian fictocriticism' in *UTS Review*, 8.2 (2002), pp. 104-18; See <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/>>.
 8. Anna Gibbs, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences', in *Text Journal* (April, 2005), <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm>>.
 9. In *Architecture and Field/Work*, for instance, J  r  mie Michael McGowan discusses the 'critical potential of fiction writing for architecture' when introducing an essay by Catharina Gabri  lsson. He presents this in relation to ethnographic fiction and fieldwork fiction, both of which operate with the assumption of the embedded researcher who transforms her field at the same time as her field transforms her. See J  r  mie Michael McGowan, 'Field/work Practice: Introduction', in Suzanne Ewing, J  r  mie Michael McGowan, Chris Speed, Victoria Clare Bernie, eds, *Architecture and Field/Work* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 9.
 10. Anna Gibbs, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences.' Unpaginated. See also the work of Katja Grillner, for instance, where the specificity of subject position (even in the transformative midst of becoming) and place are crucial. See Katja Grillner, 'A Performative Mode of Writing Place Out and About the Rosenlund Park, Stockholm, 2008-2010,' in Mona Livholts, ed., *Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011).
 11. Eric Alliez, *Signature of the World: What Is Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy?* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 5.
 12. Muecke also discusses the creative role that concepts take up in philosophy, as well as the role of the percept as it pertains to art. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that both Muecke and Gibbs make reference to

- the philosophy of Deleuze, so demonstrating a strong connection between fictocritical practices and the methodologies of a creative philosophy as discussed by Deleuze and Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*. See Mueke, 'The Fall: Fictocritical Writing', p. 108.
13. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 60. See also Daniel W. Smith, 'Introduction: 'A pure Life of Immanence': in Deleuze's 'Critique et Clinique' Project,' in Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), p. xxvii.
 14. <<http://www.aawp.org.au/what-can-fictocritical-writing-do-workshop>> [accessed 1 November 2012].
 15. <<http://transdada3.blogspot.com/2006/06/fictocriticism-affect-mimesis.html>> [accessed 1 November 2012].
 16. Edmond and Corrigan worked in conjunction with Demaine Partnership, a Melbourne based practice founded in 1938. Peter Corrigan had gone through the University of Melbourne Architecture course with a director of Demaine, Dominic Kelly during the early 1960s.
 17. This development is ongoing. Significant projects currently under construction include Building 80 by Lyons Architects due for completion in 2013 and the Design Hub by Sean Godsell Architects due for completion in 2012.
 18. The School of Architecture and Design includes the disciplines of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Fashion Design, Industrial Design and Interior Design. See: <<http://www.rmit.edu.au/architecturedesign>> and <<http://www.architecture.rmit.edu.au/>> [accessed 1 November 2012].
 19. Leon van Schaik and Nigel Bertram, eds., *Building Eight: Edmond and Corrigan at RMIT*, 3 volumes (Melbourne: SchwarzTransition Monographs, 1996). The three volumes document the procurement and design development of Building 8, include specially commissioned essays examining Building 8, and collect the writings of both Maggie Edmond and Peter Corrigan. The fullest documentation of Edmond and Corrigan's contribution to architectural discourse can be found in: Conrad Hamann, *Cities of Hope: Australian Architecture and Design by Edmond and Corrigan, 1962-92*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993). A reissue and update of this important publication entitled, *Cities of Hope Revisited* and *Cities of Hope Rehearsed* is currently being prepared by Edmond and Corrigan.
 20. Howard Raggatt, Ian McDougall and Stephen Ashton are the founding members of the Melbourne architecture practice of Ashton Raggatt McDougall. ARM came about in 1988 as the result of the various early partnerships between the respective directors. ARM has produced some of the most controversial public buildings in Australia, most notably Storey Hall at RMIT University in Melbourne, The National Museum of Australia in Canberra, and more recently, the Melbourne Recital Hall. Both Raggatt and McDougall completed their Masters of Architecture in the initial Masters by Invitation programme inaugurated by Professor Leon van Schaik at RMIT University to facilitate a critical review of work undertaken in practice. This was a major turning point in architectural education in Australia, and also directed an emerging stream of architectural practices to engage and prospect the causes of their respective practices. Both Raggatt and McDougall were instrumental in furthering the early architectural culture in Melbourne. Most notably, McDougall and Richard Munday founded the Australian architectural journal *Transition*, published from 1979 to 2000. *Transition* was named after the eleventh chapter of J.M. Freeland's *Architecture in Australia: A History*. As van Schaik tells us, the early editions of *Transition* were put together in a kitchen in St Kilda where both McDougall and Munday were 'forced to wash up in order to work on it, all the while taking phone call messages from Peter Corrigan [who featured on the editorial board] relayed as often as not by Norman Day, from some more salubrious spot. (The house in St Kilda belonged to Peter Corrigan's mother, a territorial fact which has given rise to debate about the genesis of 'Australia's Journal of Architectural Discourse').' While the role of Peter Corrigan's mother in the advent of *Transition* and the discourse on architecture in Australia from the mid-

- 1970s remains circumspect, there can be no less a conspiratorial plot for *A Clinic for the Exhausted* than that achieved by relaying McDougall in an interview: 'At least the first cover [of *Transition*] was also inspired by those of the medical journal *Lancet*.' Raggatt's thesis is published as: Howard Raggatt, 'NOTNESS: Operations and Strategies for the Fringe', in *Fin de Siècle? and the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Leon van Schaik, (Melbourne: 38South Publications, 1993). McDougall's thesis is published as: Ian McDougall, 'The Autistic Ogler' in *Transfiguring the Ordinary*, ed. Leon van Schaik (Melbourne: 38South Publications, 1995). For notes regarding *Transition* see, Leon van Schaik, 'Ten Years of Transition,' *Transition*, No. 29, (1989), pp. 29-33; Melinda Payne, 'Reading the Journal: Moments in the History of Transition', *Transition*, No. 59/60, (1998), pp. 6-27.
21. The letter is published in volume 2 of Schaik & Bertram, eds., *Building Eight: Edmond and Corrigan at RMIT*, pp. 10,11.
 22. Paul Zumthor, *Towards a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennett, (Minneapolis & Oxford, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). See also, Simon Gaunt, 'Orality and writing: the text of the troubadour poem', in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, eds. Simon Gaunt & Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Laura Kendrick, *The Game of Love: Troubadour Wordplay* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1988).
 23. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 55.
 24. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 152.
 25. As Deborah N. Losse points out, Medieval writers found ways of outlining to the reader their relationship to authorial figures, and to their appropriation in the text. In the prologue to *Gargantua & Patagrue*, Rabelais makes clear that he addresses and dedicates his writing to his friends, 'Most noble boozers' parodying the traditional dedication to the lords of the land. Further into *Gargantua & Patagrue*, there is the suggestion that: 'Every honest boozers, every decent gouty gentlemen, everyone who is dry, may come to this barrel of mine, but need drink only if he wishes. If they wish, and the wine is to the taste of their worshipful worships, let them drink frankly, freely, boldly, and with stint or payment.' The author Guillaume Bouchet, in the prologue to his compilation of dinner conversations believed that there was enough in the title of the publication, *Les Serées*, 'to suggest why this book smells more of wine than of oil'. For an examination of the shift in authorship from Medieval to Renaissance texts see, Deborah N. Loose, *Sampling the Book: Renaissance Prologues and the French Conteurs* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994), pp. 22, 65, 70.
 26. Kendrick, *The Game of Love: Troubadour Wordplay*, pp. 15,16.
 27. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
 28. *Maelstrom: Gazes Into the Digital Abyss*, Greg More, Sean Pickersgill, John Power, SASA Gallery, University of South Australia, July 2006. Curated by Greg More and Sean Pickersgill.
 29. Edgar Allen Poe, 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', in *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allen Poe* (London and New York: Doubleday, 1984).
 28. Bernard Tschumi, *Event Cities 2* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 13.
 29. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 110.
 30. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, pp. 19,20.
 31. Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 123.
 32. Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), p. 8.

Biographies

Megg Evans, a Masters graduate of RMIT, is currently researching her PhD on Semi-Living Architecture in Melbourne and at SymbioticA in Perth. She has been an educator in design at RMIT University and Monash University, and has taken up projects and collaborations in both Australia and Europe. She has published in the areas of spatial poetics, the psychology of space, social theory and the responsibility of architecture to architecture.

Hélène Frichot is an Assistant Professor in Critical Studies of Architecture, School of Architecture, KTH. She is co-curator with Esther Anatolitis of the Architecture + Philosophy Public Lecture Series, which commenced in 2005 and developed into a research group in the School of Architecture and Design, RMIT University. She is an editor of *Deleuze and Architecture*, forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press.

Ceri Hann is a Melbourne based arts practitioner with a specific interest in the social conditions of public space. Ceri is based in RMIT's Post Graduate Art in Public Space program and also lectures in Media Arts, Interior and Industrial design and has a collaborative practice with Lynda Roberts known as PublicAssembly.

Zuzana Kovar (B.Des, B.Arch Hons I) is a PhD candidate at RMIT University, Melbourne. She teaches architectural design and theory at the University of Queensland and The Queensland University of Technology. She is a co-director with her partner of a small architectural practice in Brisbane called concretePOP.

Sean Pickersgill teaches Advanced Architectural Theory, Contemporary Design Theory, Theories and History of Architecture and Theories of Modernity in the University of South Australia. Sean's PhD artefact and thesis focused on the interrelationship between aspects of German critical theory and the idea of renovation/redemption in architecture. Currently he is exploring the use and implications of game engines in the ontology of digital architecture.

Julieanna Preston is a spatial designer recognised internationally for her trans-disciplinary creative practice research on the politics of interior environments and material surfaces. Her research navigates between theoretical inquiry and material invention explored through sculptural objects, performative installations, visual images and scholarly-based publications. Her design-writing practice includes two edited books, *INTIMUS: Interior Design Theory Reader* (2006 with Mark Taylor) and *Interior Atmospheres* (2008).

Michael Spooner completed his PhD in the Program of Architecture at RMIT University in 2011, where he is now a lecturer with a focus on teaching design across the Masters and Undergraduate. In partnership with Peter Corrigan of the Melbourne architectural Practice Edmond and Corrigan, he exhibited "A City of Hope" at the 2010 Venice Biennale as part of the Australian Pavilion.